

BEYOND TRADITIONAL LITERATURE:
TOWARDS ORAL THEORY AS AURAL LINGUISTICS

by

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ABSTRACT

Oral Theory, which is the discipline that studies the oral tradition, has been characterized as a literary anthropology, centered on essentially two notions: tradition on the one hand, literature on the other. Though emphasis has moved from an initial preoccupation with oral-textual form (as advocated by Parry and Lord) to concerns with the oral text as social practice, the anthropological / literary orientation has generally remained intact. But through its designation of a traditional 'other' Oral Theory is, at best, a sub-field of anthropology; the literature it purports to study is not literature, but anthropological data. This undermines the existence of the field as discipline. In this study it is suggested that the essence of orality - as subject matter of Oral Theory - should be seen not in the origins of its creativity (deemed 'traditional'), nor in its aesthetic process / product itself ('literature'), but in its use of language deriving from a different 'auditory' conception of language (as contrasted with the largely 'visualist' conception of language at least partly associated with writing). In other words, the study of orality should not be about specific oral 'genres', but about verbalization in general. In terms of its auditory conception, language is primarily defined as existing in sound, a definition which places it in a continuum with other symbolical / meaningful sounds, normally conceptualized as 'music'. Linguistics, being fundamentally scriptist (visualist) in orientation, fails to account for the auditory conception of language. To remedy this, Oral Theory needs to set itself up as an 'aural linguistics' - implying close interdisciplinary collaboration with the field of musicology - through which the linguistic sign of orality could be studied in all its particularity and complexity of meaning.

Vir Toby, Lucky en Xoli
In herinnering aan Wakker, Spiros en Kôki

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Five years ago I hardly knew that the field of Oral Theory existed. The interest in orality that I have developed since then, and of which this study is the - initial - culmination, is in many ways the result of the example and encouragement of Prof. Edgard Sienaert from the Department of Oral Studies at the University of Natal, Durban, who supervised this study.

I have also benefitted from other examples, the most important of which has been a life-long one. In the long - and not so long - discussions that I have over the years shared with my father, Prof. Cornie Alant, I have been given a measure, not only of the value and necessity of logical argument, but perhaps more importantly, of its weakness and relativity. I can only hope that the following pages offer some idea of this intellectual *integrity* which I have not achieved, but continue to admire.

The main ingredient of this work is, quite simply, time, which I have had in abundance. For this I would like to thank my colleagues and students at the Department of Modern European Languages, University of Durban-Westville, who over the last year gracefully accepted my not infrequent absence from work, while encouraging me throughout.

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INTRODUCTION

ORALITY WITHIN ORAL THEORY

- * I wish to confirm that this study is entirely my own, as are the ideas expressed in it, except where explicitly indicated otherwise.

The word oral quite simply refers to use of the mouth, and in this sense figures happily in a variety of human activities. I can administer medicine orally, I can pass an oral examination, I can have oral sex...

The adjunct -ity takes away this variety. Orality weds the oral to a particular field of human activity: vocal communication, hence language. As a consequence the oral's application to the mouth *per se* is at once narrowed down and broadened. On the one hand it pertains to the most specialized function of the mouth, namely that of the production of speech; on the other the meaning of the word comes to extend beyond the mouth so as to imply the totality of the 'speech-making apparatus' (extending all the way from the trachea up to the nasal cavity¹) if not, in fact - to believe those who see in orality the condition for a certain kind of rhythm and gesture - to the whole body².

But the term orality generally remains distinct from speech. Phoneticists do not talk about the apparatus of orality. In fact, orality has been of relatively little relevance to the study of language. Instead, it has been the focus of largely two fields, one essentially concerned with the study of societies not regarded as 'Western' or 'industrialised': anthropology, the other generally concerned with a certain 'aesthetic' use of language: literature (literary studies). This dual association has led orality, in so far as it has come to be associated with an actual field of study, to be most frequently represented either as 'oral tradition' (emphasizing the anthropological perspective) or as 'oral literature' (the emphasis being on the aesthetic). John Miles Foley in this regard justly talks about a *literary anthropology*³. The term folklore, also sometimes used in this context, broadly relates to both these strands, though, perhaps, generally slanted towards the traditional.

This interchange of orality with oral tradition on the one hand and oral literature on the other broadly describes the conceptual field of *Oral Theory*. Oral Theory has been conceptualized as such by Foley⁴. On an immediate level it presents itself, quite obviously, as a theory: the *oral-formulaic theory* devised in the writings of Milman Parry and Albert Lord⁵. From a slightly wider perspective, however, it is the discipline that Foley sees as

having come about in the wake of the oral-formulaic theory, following the 'expansion of [Parry and Lord's] pioneering efforts... from ancient Greek, Serbo-Croatian, and... other traditions to more than one hundred separate language traditions'⁶. Foley characterizes the field as fundamentally interdisciplinary⁷, noting, in addition to the numerous 'language traditions', the fields of literary studies, linguistics, folklore, history and anthropology as having contributed to its formation. Walter Ong, in an article entitled 'Orality-Literacy Studies and the Unity of the Human Race'⁸, adds metaphysics and 'theory and use of electronic communication' to this list.

Not surprisingly, depending on the researcher's particular emphasis within this broad interdisciplinary domain, the discipline of Oral Theory has tended to go under a series of appellations that we can regard as broadly synonymous, reflecting differing degrees of attachment to the oral-formulaic theory as theoretical origin: 'oral studies' (within which this study is formally situated), 'orality-literacy contrasts'⁹, 'orality-literacy studies'¹⁰, 'oral literature research', 'studies in oral tradition'. (Foley has himself also made use of the last two appellations)¹¹.

In the present study 'Oral Theory' will generally be used as name for the discipline in question. But although we shall, like Foley, consider the oral-formulaic theory to constitute the general theoretical foundation of Oral Theory - the *discovery* which led, in Ong's words, to our 'new understanding of orality'¹² - we shall also come to include under the broad cover of 'Oral Theory' studies of orality taking relatively little account of the oral-formulaic theory, even overtly rejecting it. In other words, the oral-formulaic theory is assumed to be the basic theoretical *impetus* for Oral Theory, an impetus which, whatever the disagreement it gives rise to, continues to serve as a basic counterpoint - and in that sense as foundation - to subsequent theoretical perspectives¹³.

But why accord the oral-formulaic theory such special status? Quite simply because it provides - or claims to provide - the *discipline* in which this study situates itself with at least a relatively specific, more or less well-defined *object*. The oral-formulaic theory (also called the Parry-Lord thesis) asserts that a certain kind of linguistic expression is worthy of study not for its historical interest *per se* (important as that may be), nor for the insight it so obviously provides into a given culture, but - most profitably - for the fact that it is *oral*. In other words, where historical or cultural particularity may previously have been the main factors in attracting our attention, our interest now comes to focus on *modality of expression*,

the latter being all the more enlightening for the obvious - and yet frequently ignored - ways in which it forces us to consider the relativity of what we have so frequently regarded as the *norm* of linguistic expression - especially of the kind reflective of a certain 'culture', not to mention of civilization itself - namely our deeply ingrained habit of representing language graphically, of *writing*. In its revealing assertion of a specific mode of oral *composition*, a specific kind of oral *form*, the Parry-Lord thesis turns orality from being broadly synonymous to pre- or non-literacy into something definitive of a particular mode of linguistic production important in its own right, and that cannot be properly studied without due recognition of the centrality it affords the human voice and the means it employs to sustain and support it. In short, in its assertion of a peculiarly oral mode of creativity moulded by the resources of an on-going oral *tradition*, the Parry-Lord thesis shows orality to be *irreducible*.

The oral-formulaic theory, deriving in the main from research into ancient Greek poetry on the one hand and Balkan folk songs on the other, has however relatively little to offer with regard to the majority of the world's oral 'literatures', not the least of which that of Africa. The particular features of form Parry and Lord postulated as characteristic of the oral 'text'¹⁴, not to mention their insistence on composition-in-performance as *the* mode of oral composition, are far from being attested in the vast number of oral traditions documented and studied in recent decades. In addition to - and flowing from - this lack of empirical support the Parry-Lord thesis has also been questioned on the grounds that its attention to form and textuality is, in fact, a remnant of the kind of literary attention accorded the *written* text. Oral-literary production has been increasingly recognized as a process *per definition* resistant to the notion of the text-as-object on which the oral-formulaic theory largely depends. These criticisms have been particularly strongly enounced by Leroy Vail and Landeg White¹⁵. But there is more to this criticism than a largely literary-theoretical debate about what constitutes textuality and what does not, and by which criteria its aesthetic import should be appreciated. For the oral-formulaic theory's statement on oral textual form has also, within a particularly influential line of oral-traditional research, come to be seen not so much as a statement on an oral *aesthetics* as such, than as a statement on an oral process of cognition or - to use Ong's term - an oral *mindset*. And it is here that we see Oral Theory - generally concerned with literature - making a strong anthropological statement that, while certainly deriving from its view of the oral as grounded in *tradition*, also extends way beyond it: orality henceforth suggests itself as the latest - and most viable - 'criterion' by which to account for a number

of developmental features attributed to some of the world's 'non-Western' societies. After anthropology gave us logical vs pre-logical, scientific vs magical, domesticated vs savage and abstract vs concrete, Oral Theory presents us with literate vs oral. From denoting a mode of aesthetic creation, orality essentially becomes indicative of a stage of social and cultural *evolution*. In other words, it becomes a measure for accounting for anthropological difference.

Against this background the main aim of this study can be phrased as follows: how can the notion of orality retain the kind of originality justifying that it be studied as such (as the privileged object of interest of an academic discipline) *without* it being but another variable in humanity's supposed march towards the progress and enlightenment we associate - as theorists and researchers working in the kinds of institutions that have made a thing like Oral Theory possible in the first place - with ourselves? Two considerations, going to Oral Theory's presumed status as 'literary anthropology', seem to me pre-eminent in this regard.

- 1) As long as Oral Theory continues to see orality against the background of a *certain type of society* (qualified 'traditional'), it is to all intents and purposes a sub-branch of anthropology.
- 2) The 'literature' at issue in this context is not really literature at all, but essentially anthropological data¹⁶. It is rather significant that Oral Theory researchers do not appreciate or criticize what they term oral literature, but instead 'collect' it. Where we may read written literature in order to be entertained or amused or to gain insight into our own experience, thoughts and feelings, we expect from oral literature to provide us with something much more specific but also much more mundane: how people in a particular society live and think.

Assuming that Oral Theory is *not* anthropology and that its researchers do not necessarily think (or want to think) of themselves as anthropologists, we may well be tempted to address the question presented as the aim of this study by reducing (or denying) the anthropological in favour of the literary, saying something like 'literature is literature, some of it is written, some of it is oral'. This would imply that the difference between oral and written text is merely a difference in *medium*, much as our differentiation (including for academic purposes) between, say, theater and film has little to do with questions of artistic merit *per se* but rather with matters of mode of production and technology. And would this not refute the second of our 'considerations' formulated above?

This argument has to a greater or lesser extent been put forward by researchers anxious to set themselves apart from the tendency towards 'othering' inherent in the oral-formulaic theory, particularly in so far as the latter has drifted from the area of textuality towards cognitive process. (Vail and White in this respect have talked of a 'psychologizing literary theory'¹⁷). But while the insistence that the oral can be literary in the same way as the written¹⁸ is certainly a convenient argument - we do, after all, want to play our role in breaking down racist stereotypes - it is also, perhaps, a superficial one. For a start, it to a large extent denies the point of view of the typical Oral Theory researcher ('critic'?) who is generally far less familiar with the oral as mode of literary expression than he is with the written, an unfamiliarity that reflects not merely lack of experience but also a form of cultural conditioning: the oral *resists* appreciation in terms of the criteria the researcher's experience of writing has accustomed him to. By comparison, his appreciation of other fields of artistic activity employing divergent media of expression is much more unified. On a purely technological level live performance (theater) and on-screen performance (film) may be as far removed from each other as the oral from the written, but theater and film are much closer to each other in terms of our culturally determined appreciation of what constitutes 'art' than are the written word to the oral (oral being not merely spoken - theater and film are after all spoken as well - but fundamentally *unwritten* or, perhaps more precisely, unmediated by some or other technological *instrument*¹⁹). Moreover, Oral Theory has overwhelmingly been concerned with certain types of societies or cultures rather than with others. Even if we take our qualification of these societies as 'oral' to refer to modality of communication or expression *only*, the fact remains that at different levels of our thinking these same societies have also been 'primitive', 'simple', 'archaic', 'less developed' etc. We may well not enjoy making this kind of differentiation explicit, but it would seem rather glib to pretend it was never really there.

What this study is to argue, then, is not for Oral Theory to be tilted towards the literary or aesthetic any more than it should towards the anthropological, but that it should, rather - while retaining essentially the same subject matter, i.e. orality - redefine itself along different lines. To paraphrase the title: Oral Theory must move beyond the notions of tradition and literature towards situating itself fully within the field of language and language study. What we are saying is this: the essential *difference* of orality, warranting its isolation as specific object of study, lies not in the society it represents nor in its mode of composition (i.e. that

it is 'traditional'), nor does it lie in the particular model of creativity it presents us with (as 'literature'), but in the fact that it reflects a certain *use* of language deriving from a different *conception* of language.

What would be the advantages of such a shift in emphasis? Perhaps the most obvious one is that the study of orality comes to replace the study of oral *genre* (the study of a particular kind of oral 'text' or performance) with the study of oral verbalization in general, thereby doing away with a whole range of definitional problems that have long beset Oral Theory. Foremost amongst these have been the relation between composition, improvisation and performance, where to draw the line between performance and 'ordinary' use of language, the relative emphasis to be placed on the text-as-aesthetic *object* on the one hand and on the text-as-social *practice* on the other. In short, we basically circumvent the controversies that have opposed those generally favouring a formalist / textualist approach (such as Foley and Ong), to those more inclined to an approach termed context- or performance-centred²⁰ (Vail and White, Karin Barber, Dennis Tedlock, to name but a few).

But no doubt the biggest gain to be made in placing language (as opposed to text - be it as literary 'object' or as social action) at the centre of our perspective, is that it enables us to define the *difference* we are ultimately concerned with in such a way as to avoid - at least to some extent - what we may call the evolutionist temptation. As Jack Goody has remarked, social change (difference) is inevitably described not only in terms of process but as *progress*, implying a value judgment on our part²¹. However we may choose to think of the oral text, and even if we insist on describing it 'on its own terms', this kind of evolutionist perspective is never far off: the formalist description of an oral text all too easily invites comparison with a certain type of written text, which will in all probability show greater complexity of form, variety of theme etc²². A definition of the oral text as social practice lends itself to the same pitfall, albeit in a different way. We may plausibly argue that the oral aesthetic is, in relation to the written, inextricably part of a social or historical dynamic, but does this not come uncomfortably close to reviving the evolutionist notion of an oral art that is *per definition functional*, only literate culture being sufficiently 'detached' to be able to cultivate 'art for the sake of art'²³? The hackneyed dichotomies of collective vs individualist, concrete vs abstract are floating just below the surface.

The advantage, in these circumstances, of locating the essential quality of orality in its conception of language, stems, in fact, in no small way from what is frequently considered

to be one of the most frustrating aspects of the science of linguistics, namely its inability to fully define what it is about. 'The history of modern linguistics', Roy Harris tells us, 'is not the history of new discoveries about previously unknown languages... [but of] conflicting views as to how we should set about the analysis of language'²⁴. Given our own theoretical orientation, we can think of language as being essentially signs (Ferdinand de Saussure), or sentences (Noam Chomsky), or acts of communication (John Searle). We may reject the one conception and favour the other - no doubt in accordance with the intellectual fashion of our times - but it will be a brave person who makes such a choice on the basis of some kind of evolutionary criterion related to levels of complexity, generality or abstract organization. Of course, even if we can have some idea of the kind of experience people in an oral culture have of language, it is extremely difficult for us to know how they would conceive of this experience. We can at the very best speculate about it on the basis of our own research into orality, but we shall most certainly have no reason to believe that their conception of language should necessarily be more 'primitive' than our own. We know that all the people of the world possess at least one language, and we also know that all languages are extraordinarily complex, including those of societies that we may have been tempted to call 'simple' or 'primitive'. We all have an intimate experience of using a language, and from that point of view we all have a certain linguistic conception, whether conscious or not. The relation between the languages of the world can only be characterized by extreme relativity; so, for that matter, must the relation between different *conceptions* of language.

What can we take, for the purposes of Oral Theory, to be the definitive characteristic of an oral conception of language? In a word: that it is *aural*. If our study of what we call 'orality' is to have any justification, it seems to me most usefully derived from the assumption that oral people do not see or visualize language, but that they hear it and represent it to themselves *as sound*. More fully than our own *visualist* experience of language could ever lead us to imagine (we most readily think of - even define - words in terms of their constitution in graphic marks²⁵), language in its oral conception - which is an *auditory* conception of language - is language that exists in sound, language that *is* sound.

Hence the appeal in the title of this study to an 'aural linguistics'. The qualification 'aural' is vital, of course, because linguistics is *not* about sound; if it is, it is about sound *abstracted*, so to speak, to its differential minimum (the kind of sound you 'pick up' - perhaps more than actually *hear* - in distinguishing say, *bin* from *pin*, *stick* from *stuck*). Notwithstanding its oft-

quoted 'doctrine of the primacy of speech', modern linguistics has, if not totally ignored, certainly succeeded in marginalising sound²⁶. So we cannot say Oral Theory should primarily be the study of language and leave it at that. Once again, we have to be rigorously interdisciplinary, but instead of looking towards anthropology or literature (or psychology), we need to fundamentally incorporate into our reflection the one science dealing with meaningful sound (meaning not in the narrow sense linguistics has accustomed us to, but in a broader 'symbolical' sense): musicology. This brings us to what is perhaps our main assumption with regard to the oral 'auditory conception' of language: that it departs from a close association of the concepts 'language' and 'music' - an association linguistics, deriving from an essentially visualist conception of language, *denies* - which, on the level of meaning, actually amounts to an interdependence. Linguistic meaning as we think of it does not account for the meaning of orality. It is only reconceptualized as *aural*-linguistic meaning that it might do so. To this end Oral Theory, perhaps more than any other discipline, is in a position to give realization to the kind of cooperation between linguistics and musicology that has frequently been advocated - significantly not so much by linguists, it is true, but by musicologists²⁷.

A brief note on terminology may be appropriate here. Throughout the study I use the word aural only as a qualificative of *linguistics*, using 'auditory' in other contexts - auditory sense, auditory conception etc. Certainly, there may well have been other candidates for qualifying the kind of linguistics we are talking about, such as - most simply - 'oral', not to mention what, in the light of the collaboration between linguistics and musicology envisaged above, would no doubt have seemed perfectly logical, namely 'musical'.

But quite apart from the fact that music as a concept is extremely difficult to apply across cultures (on these grounds I in fact frequently talk of 'symbolical sound' or 'meaningful sound'), I have been particularly wary of the common association of music with emotion which, in relation to orality, could all too easily lead to a kind of Rousseauian view of a 'noble savage' to whom speaking and singing are all of a kind because his only needs are the ones 'to which the heart gave birth'²⁸. The kind of *complexity of meaning* that I regard as distinctive of the aural-linguistic is eons removed from the 'passion' or 'feeling' which has been the hallmark of orality under Romanticism and its more recent guises²⁹.

As far as the word oral is concerned, there is no real reason - though it misses the direct connotation with hearing or sound - why it could not serve the same purpose as the one

reserved for 'aural', especially, of course, in languages where the opposition oral - aural does not exist. As for the choice between 'auditory' and 'aural', it is by and large an arbitrary one. In the end the latter seemed to me slightly more elegant, while it also seems to convey something *more* than purely 'of the ear' or 'related to hearing', which I would like to think of as sound itself³⁰.

The study can be seen as consisting of two parts, the first (Chapters 1 to 3) giving an overview of some of the major theoretical issues of Oral Theory in its basic guise of 'literary anthropology', the second (Chapters 4 and 5), setting out how the literary anthropology (the 'traditional literature' of the title) can be reconceptualized as aural linguistics. Some of the main points covered are the following:

- *Chapter 1*: a reflection on the origins of Oral Theory in the light of the Parry-Lord thesis and its view of oral tradition and oral-textual form. This is followed by a broadly hermeneutic attempt at re-interpreting the Parry-Lord thesis in terms of what could, in the light of it, be defined as oral *literature*.
- *Chapter 2*: the relation between anthropology and orality is explored, first in terms of general anthropological approaches to the study of oral texts, second in terms of more specific conceptions of the notion of tradition as it relates to orality within the framework of Oral Theory. The role played by the notion of tradition in Oral Theory's designation of a cultural 'other' is emphasized.
- *Chapter 3*: the viability of the notion of oral literature in terms of contributing to literary theory is discussed on two levels. The first level is termed 'modernist' in view of its concern with an oral *aesthetic*. Conceptions of the latter is reviewed both from a formalist (relating to the text-as-object) and performance-oriented (defining the essence of the oral text in terms of historical and sociological considerations) point of view. On the second level, the 'post-modernist', the concern is less with an aesthetic of the oral text *per se* than with ways in which the oral text can be incorporated, alongside texts of literate culture, into a literary paradigm reconceptualized as study of *signifying practice*, largely circumventing the modernist distinction between literary and non-literary text.
- *Chapter 4*: The consequences of isolating sound as the essential feature of orality are discussed in the light of certain psychological associations with vocal sound, which translate into the postulated interdependence of thought and language. This association,

which underscores the notion of orality as mode of cognition, is questioned from a variety of perspectives.

- *Chapter 5:* The notion of an aural linguistics is explained in terms of its underlying assumption of an auditory conception of language, as well as its interdisciplinary exploration of the language / music interface. There is, finally, a reflection on the characteristics of the aural-linguistic sign and its relation to meaning.

As will be clear from this overview the present study covers fields that lie beyond those most commonly associated with Oral Theory. In addition to anthropology and literary studies (both dealt with in Chapter 1, and respectively in Chapters 2 and 3), it touches on cognitive psychology (Chapter 4), as well as the disciplines of linguistics and musicology (Chapter 5). I cannot lay claim to a degree of specialization in any of these fields, and it goes without saying that much that has been said in relation to these areas could be far better motivated, and probably advanced with more conviction, than I have been able to manage here. In the end, however, Oral Theory, as many have stated before, is a fundamentally interdisciplinary field. Normally, of course, this interdisciplinarity is thought of as the collective contribution of scholars working within a given area of expertise. Occasionally, however, a single work covering a variety of fields in a relatively superficial manner can, at the obvious risk of offending the specialists, lead to a certain synthesis which may also be an insight. It is my hope that the present study can, on this basis, make some kind of contribution, not only to Oral Theory, but also to the way in which we think of those different to ourselves by virtue of their being 'less developed'. It has perhaps become more necessary than before to study - and value - what is oral not for its spontaneity, its concreteness, and its warmth of feeling, but for its organization, its abstraction, and its logic of analysis.

At the end of a decidedly virulent attack on Jacques Derrida, particularly in regard to his 'deconstructionist' notion of a primary *writing*³¹, Robert Hall names Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* as one of the 'best antidotes' against what he terms the 'Derridian aberrations'. Ong's work, he points out, 'contains a sound and well-argued discussion of the relation between orality and oral-based culture, on the one hand, and writing, with its cultural and intellectual results, on the other'³². Certainly, one has difficulty imagining Derrida finding theoretical justification for a discipline dedicated to the study of an orality defined as such by reference to at least the *relative absence* of writing. At the same time, however, large parts

of this study (in Chapters 2, 3 and particularly Chapter 4), constitute what is very much a critique of Ong's influential version of the relation between oral-based culture and the culture of writing or, as he phrases it himself, of orality and literacy. Of course, nowhere does Oral Theory find greater theoretical validity, a more clearly defined subject matter, than in the writings of Ong. His willingness to go beyond questions of expression and language to ascribe to the object of our interest distinct processes of cognition sets it apart as never before. But whereas Derrida rather imperially effaces the line, Ong meticulously overdraws it. The oral does constitute a modality of expression fundamentally different from that of writing, but this difference *conveys* - rather than determines - the mental process. In the end the Oral Theory we are trying to formulate can no doubt be thought of as lying somewhere between the extremes marked out by Derrida and Ong.

Endnotes

1. West, 1975:92.
2. See Jousse, 1990.
3. Foley, in Foley (ed)., 1986:4.
4. See Foley, 1988:4.
5. Foley, 1988:1.
6. Foley, 1988:57.
7. Foley, in Foley (ed)., 1986:2.
8. See Ong, 1987.
9. See Ong, 1986.
10. See Ong, 1987.
11. See Foley, in Foley (ed)., 1986:1-9.
12. Ong, 1986:17.
13. See Finnegan, 1977:72.
14. See Foley, 1990:5.
15. See Vail and White, 1991.
16. See Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:59.
17. Vail and White, 1991:xi.
18. See especially Finnegan, 1988.
19. Ong refers to 'primary orality' in this regard. Characteristic of this type of society is not only that the spoken word constitutes the main channel of communication - this is the case in literate societies as well - but that it also offers the essential means of storage and transmission of knowledge. (See in this regard Havelock, 1963. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, Massachussetts: Harvard University Press).
20. See Finnegan, 1986:74.
21. Goody, 1977:3.
22. Ong, 1986:23.
23. This has been refuted in Finnegan, 1973. See also Okpewho, 1983.
24. Harris, 1988:ix.
25. See Ong, 1986:12.
26. See Harris (Roy), 1980:7-18.
27. See in this regard particularly Seeger, 1977:43-4.
28. Rousseau, in Gode (ed)., 1966:50.
29. See Finnegan, 1977:30-41.
30. A second meaning of 'aural', deriving not from the Latin *auris* - ear - but from an original Greek meaning of 'breeze' or 'breath' is perhaps significant in this regard.
31. See Derrida, 1967:16. Aspects of Derrida's thought - and the criticism of it - are dealt with at various points in the study, especially in Chapter 3.
32. Hall, 1987:121.

CHAPTER 1

CONCEPTUALIZING THE ORIGINS OF ORAL THEORY

1.1 *Oral Theory and Tradition: the Oral-Formulaic*

In *The Singer of Tales* Albert Lord¹ makes the following point:

after all that has been said about oral composition as a technique of line and song construction, it seems that the term of greater significance is traditional. 'Oral' tells us 'how', but traditional tells us 'what', and even more, 'of what kind' and 'of what force'.

This remark, given the widely recognized status of *The Singer of Tales* as 'one of the classics in the study of oral literature'² amounts, in a sense, to no less than an affirmation of the broad theoretical outline of Oral Theory as a 'new field of its own'³, as *discipline*.

What are the intellectual origins of Oral Theory? The so-called 'Parry-Lord thesis' has been widely seen as constituting its 'founding moment', bringing about, in the words of Ong⁴, 'our new understanding of orality'. Ong traces this development in the history of the 'Homeric question': by what method was the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* created, and how, given their near-universal reputation as 'the truest and most inspired secular poems in the Western heritage', does one account for their 'received excellence'⁵? As Ong points out⁶, 'each age [had] been inclined to interpret them as doing better than what it conceived its [own] poets to be doing or aiming at', the point being, of course, that 'its poets' *wrote* their poems. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were seen, somehow, as constitutive of our Western literary heritage, a heritage entirely dominated by what is written. In this regard it is perhaps not surprising that the question of single as opposed to multiple authorship tended to dominate debates concerning the Homeric question, debates that were rendered obsolete⁷ by the 'revolution' that followed.

In the early 30's the American classicist Milman Parry comes to the 'startling'⁸ conclusion that 'virtually every distinctive feature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition'⁹. It is the theoretical insight behind this discovery that is subsequently 'interpreted and popularized'¹⁰ in Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, which offers a comparative study of the songs of *guslari* (illiterate¹¹ Serbo-Croatian singers accompanying themselves on a one-stringed fiddle or *gusle*) and poems of ancient and Byzantine Greek, Old English and Old French¹².

What is this theoretical insight, and what does it say about tradition? The Parry-Lord thesis

hinges on Parry's discovery that the ancient Greek poet had at his disposal, in the words of Foley¹³, a 'diction' or 'poetic language consisting of substitutable "formulas" that enabled [him] to make his verses extemporaneously without having to depend on rote memorization'. This poetic language is further 'specialized' to the extent that it reflects a variety of dialects and archaisms¹⁴. The formula, defined as 'a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given idea'¹⁵, is therefore part of a pre-established repertoire of expressions, and is selected by the poet in accordance with the rhythmic requirements of the poem. As such the formula constitutes the main ingredient of Homeric poetry. The offshoot of this insight is equally important. The long-held view that the oral poet obviously had to memorize his poem prior to its performance can now be rectified. Thanks to the ready repertoire of formulas he disposed of Homer was able, Parry tells us, to compose the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in performance.

The oral-formulaic theory draws attention to the availability, independent of the initiative of the poet, not just of poetic form in a purely rhythmic sense, but indeed of poetic content in so far as the formula (pre)determines actual combinations of words. What lies 'beyond the initiative' of the poet is, of course, tradition. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as Parry theorises, 'were the collective creations of many generations of bards working not individually but within a poetic tradition'¹⁶. As such, the main contribution of Parry and Lord's oral-formulaic theory (apart from proving that the production of lengthy oral poetry need not require vast efforts of memorization or rote learning) lies without a doubt in its reformulation of the relation between originality and tradition. As Ruth Finnegan¹⁷ explains:

[the] model of written literature with its emphasis on *the* text¹⁸, *the* original and correct version, has for long bedevilled study of oral literature, and led researchers into unfruitful and misleading questions in an attempt to impose a similar model on *oral* literature.

Through the Parry-Lord thesis, however, originality and tradition can now be seen as, in a sense, complementary, in so far as the oral poet is seen to make use of 'traditional patterns' (formulas) in expressing his own individual insights. Finnegan¹⁹, on the basis of Lord's research amongst the Serbo-Croate, puts this principle succinctly:

The oral poet in Yugoslavia is always the 'author' of the epic he performs, by virtue of his simultaneous performance / composition. But in another sense, there is also a multiplicity of authors: all those who contributed to building up the traditional patterns, the store of formulae and themes which the oral singer has at his disposal.

The oral-formulaic theory presents tradition, not just as a kind of *background* for creative acts, but as something basically creative in itself. It is in this sense that Lord²⁰ can see Homer as not so much immersed in the tradition he is part of but as actually *being* the tradition. To paraphrase the remark by Lord on which we opened this discussion, 'tradition' becomes, in Oral Theory, the term of *greatest* significance.

What are the limitations of this notion in so far as our understanding of orality as object of Oral Theory may be concerned? This question will be considered in detail in Chapter 2. For the purpose of the present discussion, we shall limit ourselves to those aspects of tradition that receive particular attention in terms of the oral-formulaic theory. These could be described as presenting a dual view of tradition as, on the one hand, *basis for creativity* (transcending the ordinarily conceived boundaries between individual / original and collective) and, on the other, of tradition as *mechanism* which, in the etymological sense of the term, allows for information to be 'handed on' or 'transmitted'. (The latter aspect would in particular explain the oral-formulaic theory's preoccupation with *technique* and *form*).

Finnegan²¹ situates the pervasiveness of the notion of tradition within the broad sphere of Romanticism, which provides, in a sense, the original impetus for interest into oral poetry. At issue is what she terms 'the Romantic stress on the significance of the "other" and the "lost"'²², which 'glamourizes' the oral to the extent that it is seen as manifestation of these notions. 'Oral tradition', 'oral literature', 'oral art', 'oral culture' (often under the collective labels - amongst others - of 'folk' or 'primitive'²³) are some of the most privileged characterizations of this Romantic yearning for what is perceived as different and exotic.

To the extent that Parry and Lord's research engages the Romantic notions of 'other' and 'lost' (the philological origins of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had been 'lost' to Western culture, the South-Slavic *guslari* are 'other'), it would be difficult to deny the influence of Romanticism on Oral Theory itself. It is easy to imagine the seductiveness (in a 'Romantic' intellectual atmosphere already, in a sense, favourably disposed to it) of Parry and Lord's conception of tradition as 'a living, ongoing process'²⁴. It may just have validated in a new way what was already fascinating. Many assertions as to the importance of Parry and Lord's research can be read in this light. Foley²⁵, for example, mentions as one of the (subsequent) fruits of Parry and Lord's pioneering work the demonstration that 'oral cultures are by no means primitive'. He continues:

we cannot anymore smile benignly and admire the simplicity of the noble savage. In

the enormous era preceding the relatively recent evolution of writing, cultures stored and transmitted all available knowledge orally, and they did so with *considerable sophistication*.

As far as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are concerned, this new line of research has, to again quote Foley²⁶, awoken the academic world to complexities previously unknown:

we have learnt that the Homeric epics served the society that perpetuated them as a set of oral encyclopedias, a digest of attitudes, beliefs, behavior patterns, and customs encoded in the exemplary actions of their heroes. *Far from being simple folktales*, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* chronicled the oral culture's observations about itself, the kinds of observations that written cultures store in a shelf of reference books...

So much for the meliorative dimension of oral tradition as seen against Parry and Lord's oral-formulaic theory. But in this 'new' conception of oral tradition there is also, in a sense, a downside. And it has, as we shall see, the effect of bringing into question this very *complexity* of oral culture that Parry and Lord's discovery seems to have uncovered.

We have come to appreciate the ingenious means oral tradition devised, not just to transmit culturally important information from one generation to the next, but indeed to stimulate and facilitate individual creation. (The oral poet expertly composes his creation in the course of performance). At the same time, however, the form through which this creativity becomes apparent to us (the formula), being part of what is essentially a ready-made repertoire of expressions (the 'diction' or 'specialized poetic language' discussed above) is, at best 'standardized', at worst, as Ong²⁷ wickedly calls it, '*devastatingly* predictable'. Why devastating? Because Milman Parry's discovery has the effect of unceremoniously cutting our most classic poet down to size. Ong, perhaps more ruthlessly than most authors, emphasizes this anti-climax, in the process touching upon another very important 'principle' of Romanticism, namely 'that the way of putting the accepted truth had to be original':

For the extreme Romantic, the perfect poet should ideally be like God Himself, creating *ex nihilo*: the better he or she was, the less predictable was anything and everything in the poem. Only beginners or permanently poor poets used prefabricated stuff²⁸.

All modern notions about 'good' poetry lead us towards expectations of originality if not (as has become a cultivated ideal in twentieth century movements like Surrealism) *surprise*. For all his previously assumed greatness, Homer reveals himself, in the light of the oral-formulaic theory, not as a *creator*, but as an *assembly-line worker* with 'some kind of phrase book in

his head', 'stitching together prefabricated parts'²⁹. So much for glamour, so much for good. And we see Parry's discovery (which, as we saw, was able to feed into romantic notions about the 'lost' or the 'other'), as in effect mirroring the paradox *at the heart* of Romanticism:

... the paradox - often noted - that the [romantic] movement which laid such stress on the *individual* artist and his freedom should also be led to such deep belief in, and romantic respect for, 'tradition' and 'collective'³⁰.

In the *Preface* to their *Power and the Praise Poem*³¹ Leroy Vail and Landeg White draw attention to '[the] *debate* following Lord's persuasive presentation of Parry's theories', a debate which has been 'enormously influential, generating a large bibliography and encompassing many literatures, both ancient and modern'. That the field of Oral Theory is a *debate* is often obscured by the sheer domination of the oral-formulaic theory as its 'founding moment'. Significant in this regard is the experience of one of the most widely travelled and critical researchers, Ruth Finnegan. She, as Martin Mueller³² points out, has more than any other researcher:

[proved] that the Parry-Lord theory in its rigid form is a myth that does not fit the facts. She surveyed a wide range of oral literature, differing in genre, social function and geographical origin, and demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that it is impossible to identify a set of traits common to all oral literature.

Yet, as reported by Vail and White³³:

[she] repeatedly acknowledges [that] she has no new theory to put forward and in that sense remains constrained by the tradition [the oral-formulaic theory] she is questioning'.

At the heart of the debate amongst researchers of Oral Theory is what Vail and White refer to as 'ambiguities in Parry's original elaboration of his ideas', ambiguities which have given birth to 'two strikingly different - but not necessarily wholly mutually exclusive - schools of interpretation, each claiming direct descent from Parry's work as interpreted and popularized by Lord'³⁴.

We have, in our discussion, drawn attention to a certain paradox in the oral-formulaic theory, which, simply put, pits the idea of an ongoing (creative) tradition against that of the rigidity (stifledness) of its expression. I believe that this 'paradox' overlaps with, and indeed accounts for, the 'ambiguities' referred to by Vail and White, which Foley³⁵ describes as 'the

gamut [run by Oral Theory] of utility versus context-sensitivity - in other words, of convention versus originality'. More about this later. We also need to look at some of the forms this debate may take and, crucially, what could be said about oral *tradition* in the light of these. This will be the subject of Chapter 2. But before considering these divergences within Oral Theory, it is important, at this point, to deepen our understanding of its origins. This is particularly necessary in so far as the oral-formulaic theory *itself* (as opposed to the way in which it may be interpreted) is open to contestation. (We have already noted at least one author's discomfort in this regard).

In treating of the validity of the oral-formulaic theory³⁶ Finnegan broadly identifies the following areas of concern:

- 1) To what extent is an oral-formulaic style indeed indicative of oral composition?
- 2) Can the formula be sufficiently precisely defined so as to reliably constitute a (distinctive) *feature* of the oral text? (With regard to my use here of the word text see note 18).
- 3) Must the oral text of necessity be 'composed in performance'?

If the oral-formulaic theory provided *the* breakthrough in terms of our previously inadequate understanding of the mode of composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (as suggested by the debate concerning the issue of single versus multiple authorship), it does not necessarily provide a criterion for determining whether or not a particular written text indeed derives from oral composition. Finnegan quotes two examples in this respect, the one from old English, the other from Xhosa and Zulu. While the form of *Beowulf*, an epic of the old English oral tradition, is highly formulaic, Benson³⁷ has shown the same to be true for many *written* compositions of old English that show an equally high percentage of formulas. Closer to home Jeff Opland³⁸ has found some examples of poetry written in Xhosa and Zulu to be as formulaic as the traditional oral poetry performed in the two languages. How seriously do examples such as these damage the validity of the oral-formulaic theory? Ong, who, like Foley, has insisted upon the oral-formulaic theory as theoretical framework of his 'orality-literacy studies', finds Opland's observations to be perfectly *in accordance* with the oral-formulaic theory. In connection with the reportedly formulaic style in which some Xhosa poets *write* their poetry, he remarks that '[it] would in fact be utterly surprising if they could manage any other style'³⁹. (We can draw attention, at this point, to Ong's 'psychologizing'

interpretation of the oral-formulaic theory, which brings him to see the formal aspects of the oral text as reflective of a certain oral 'mindset' or mental disposition. This orientation lies at the heart of his differences of opinion with Finnegan and will frequently come to the fore in the following discussion. More about this in Chapter 2). The second of Finnegan's concerns, namely that of the definition of the formula, is without a doubt the more fundamental. We have already mentioned Parry's definition of the formula as 'a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea'. The difficulty with this definition lies in its failure to provide a precise 'unit of measurement' for the formula. As Finnegan⁴⁰ explains:

Even if 'repetition' is taken as basic in defining a 'formula', there are differences between analysts as to whether the repetition is, for instance, of metrical, syntactic or semantic elements, differences also about how long a 'formula' can or must be.

Of course, as any high school pupil knows, repetition is also an element of written poetry. Finnegan coins the phrase 'aesthetics of regularity'⁴¹ in this respect. This aesthetic, whether in the guise of parallelism, of 'paratactic duplication of incidents', or of, last but not least, 'formulas' (however defined), is a constant of *all* poetry, not just the oral. Vail and White⁴² to some extent echo this idea. Quoting Finnegan, they remark that 'the Greek hexameter line for Homer has no equivalent in Africa'; what is repeated in African oral poetry is not determined by 'metrical conditions'⁴³ (as Parry's definition of the formula would have it), but by a variety of considerations that make repetition 'useful'. This apparent deviance from the Parry-Lord thesis is further complicated by the fact that these considerations are not necessarily a matter of style or aesthetics, but may result purely from the *physical conditions of performance*. The repetitions (formulas) in an African work song, for example, are there for no other reason than to 'provide a rhythm for communal labor, and the song [repetitions] lasts as long as the task does or until a different work song is taken up'⁴⁴. We are faced, at this point, with one of two options. We can, with Finnegan⁴⁵, come to the conclusion that, rather than being 'differentiated by a single crucial feature', the 'reality is far more interesting than if there were one special oral style'. (Even if this meant 'disappointment to those eager for large generalizations or abstract models applicable across a wide field'). Or we may obstinately refuse to be thus disappointed and, while not exactly in a position to formulate a clear-cut formal distinction between the written and the oral text, at least settle for a strongly tilted sliding scale between the two. The latter kind of reasoning is well illustrated

by Ong. Forever ready to extend the formula beyond its primary definition of 'group of words' so as to loom in on its 'wider implications', Ong⁴⁶ is quick to seize on the apparent parallel, mentioned by Lord⁴⁷, between, on the one hand, the 'standardized formulas' of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and, on the other, its 'standardized themes': 'the army, the challenge, the despoiling of the vanquished, the hero's shield, and so on and so on'. 'A repertoire of similar themes, affirms Ong, is found in oral narrative and other oral discourse around the world'. And then the sliding scale, as an afterthought, appropriately in brackets:

(Written narrative and other written discourses use themes too, *of necessity*, but the themes are infinitely more varied and less obtrusive)⁴⁸.

But how valid does Ong find Parry's definition of the formula? After briefly exploring Bynum's⁴⁹ assertion that the 'essential idea' expressed in the formula is subject to 'a kind of fictional complex [cluster] held together largely in the unconscious', Ong concedes, following Foley⁵⁰, that 'exactly what an oral formula is and how it works depends upon the tradition in which it is used'. Yet, in the same breath: 'but... there is ample common ground in all traditions to make the concept valid'. The ideal of 'large generalization or abstract models' is evidently not easily discarded.

Or is it? After a vehement attack on what they see as 'the notion of oral man' (to which the oral-formulaic theory - notably as interpreted by Ong, amongst others⁵¹ - would be central) Vail and White⁵² bluntly deny the relevance of this theoretical construct to the African oral poetry they have been studying:

The oral poetry of south-central Africa is not, in general, composed in performance, and its essence cannot be understood through an investigation of the mechanics of its performance. *It is not dominated by the 'formula'....*

Contrary to the formula (the existence of which we can by now assume - to a greater or lesser degree - to be a matter of 'the eye of the beholder'), its corollary 'composition in performance' comes across as far more susceptible to empirical observation. There are indeed numerous examples of oral poetry, particularly in Africa, in which composition and performance are clearly separated, necessitating, on the part of the performer, at least some effort of memorization. Finnegan refers, amongst others, to the extensive study of the different genres of Somali oral poetry carried out by Andrzejewski and Lewis, who report Somali poets to 'spend many hours, sometimes even days, composing their works'⁵³ prior to performing

them. Vail and White, whom we have already quoted in this regard, mention the Chopi *migodo* and Zambian *kalela* dance, together with a host of other songs 'that are well known over wide areas or over long periods of time precisely because they have become popular'⁵⁴. Ong⁵⁵, for his part, in addition to the above example of Somali oral poetry, also quotes evidence from other parts of the world, the traditional Japanese *The Tale of the Heike* and the Vedic hymns of India, both of which are said⁵⁶ to make extensive use of verbatim oral memorization.

Once again examples of oral texts not conforming to those on which Parry and Lord based their theory give rise to varying assessments of the validity of the oral-formulaic theory. Of the authors considered here Vail and White's position is apparently the simplest; they reject the oral-formulaic theory and find it regrettable⁵⁷:

that scholars have been willing to work with a definition of oral literature [in terms of the oral-formulaic theory] that, through its stress on extemporaneity, must necessarily result in the exclusion of so much African oral material.

Yet the nature of Vail and White's rejection needs to be seen in a broader context. While it is true that their own field work provides them with ample evidence contrary to what the oral-formulaic theory would lead them to expect (this is certainly Finnegan's case as well), one does get the sense that their rejection of the oral-formulaic theory in particular (and, in fact, of the formalist approach in general) in the final analysis derives *less* from an actual conviction as to the irrelevance of form and style in relation to the oral text than from their profound *horror* with the notional oral man they claim to have encountered in the theoretical postulations of Oral Theory. This broader context will be discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

Finnegan⁵⁸ entertains the possibility of the oral-formulaic theory being less than *conditional* upon the simultaneity of composition and performance:

[the] demonstration that rote-memory need not be important in oral poetry has sometimes led students of the subject (myself included) to assume that it is *never* important. Parry and Lord did not go as far as this....

Yet she immediately provides full evidence 'that their works can be read as implying it', to wit Lord⁵⁹:

Oral... does not mean merely oral presentation... what is important is not the oral performance but rather the composition *during* oral performance.

Ong⁶⁰ is content to concede that '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 [Croatia and Bosnia]...' (on which Parry and Lord based their conclusions). But the oral-formulaic theory holds true all the same in so far as composition, notably where it implies 'verbatim memorization' (the actual realization of which, as clearly illustrated in the history of the Vedas, is extremely difficult to prove anyway⁶¹) *remains* 'formulaic', even if, in order to prove the latter, 'formula' is actually better rendered by 'constraint'⁶². According to Rutledge⁶³, the compulsory musical accompaniment of *The Tale of the Heike* acts as a 'constraint to fix [its] verbatim oral narrative', while Francesco Antinucci⁶⁴ has shown the troublesome pre-composed Somali oral poetry to be similarly restricted, not by music this time, but by 'syntactic constraints'. Asserts Ong⁶⁵:

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 Parry and Lord worked with].

Is this not a sleight of hand on Ong's part? We do seem to have moved some distance from Parry's original 'group of words... regularly employed under the same metrical conditions'. At any rate, Ong's conception of the formula as *constraint* clearly illuminates that side of the oral-formulaic 'paradox' mentioned earlier he sees as most important: rigidity of expression, which takes precedence over flexibility of tradition. A significant pointer in this respect, of which his discussion of the question relating to composition-in-performance versus *prior* composition offers us a glimpse, is Ong's transposal of matters of expression (which is what Parry and Lord's research was concerned with in the first place) to matters of thinking. Where oral poetry involves verbatim memorization, it is, in fact, not so much the oral *expression* which continues to be dependent on formulas (or constraints) as the 'oral noetic processes'⁶⁶. From oral text to oral intellect. In Ong's hands the oral-formulaic theory has indeed become a 'psychologizing literary theory'⁶⁷.

Finnegan says sometimes, Ong says yes, Vail and White say no. To this we may add Foley⁶⁸ who, in a work published in 1990, regrets the simplistic way in which the oral-formulaic theory has been applied, necessitating it '[to] be abandoned (at least in its present form)':

The formulaic test *as it has generally been carried out* cannot prove oral provenance, for as long as scholars commit the egregious philological sin of importing models and definitions directly from ancient Greek to other poetries without taking account of

necessary differences in prosody and versification, nothing can be proved. By counterposing Homeric phraseology to the diction of Old English, Old French, or whatever other poetry one chooses as comparand, without making adjustment for the individual characteristics of each poetry, one simply calculates the extent to which the compared work is composed of Homeric Greek formulas, obviously a useless index.

All of these strands of thought would claim to find an intellectual home under the heading of Oral Theory. But where does this leave the contention, dealt with earlier, that the oral-formulaic theory constitutes the latter's 'founding moment'? In advancing their thesis that 'the oral poetry of south-central Africa... is linked by a common aesthetic, a shared set of assumptions concerning the nature and purpose of poetry'⁶⁹, Vail and White⁷⁰ claim to have '*set aside* the theories that have dominated the study of oral poetry for the last three decades'. No general appraisal of forms of expression encountered, no proffered insights into oral style; these are obviously, to them, not what the study of oral literature (Oral Theory?) should be about. This raises the question: have authors like Foley and Finnegan, who - unlike Ong - have been more than prepared to admit to the inadequacies of the oral-formulaic theory, not grossly overrated the importance of the latter as conceptual impetus for modern research into the oral tradition? While Foley⁷¹ unambiguously qualifies as 'the making of a discipline [called 'Oral Theory'] the 'seminal work of Parry and Lord' and its 'expansion... from ancient Greek, Serbo-Croatian, and, to a lesser degree, other traditions to more than one hundred separate language traditions', he nonetheless concedes⁷² that, notably in the case of Africa, 'only a relatively small percentage of the enormous amount of research and scholarship on that continent's oral traditions falls under the shadow cast by Oral Theory'. Is it a coincidence that some of the strongest critics of the oral-formulaic theory (such as Finnegan, Vail and White) have worked in Africa? And does this not, in a very real sense, undermine the idea of a *discipline*, at least in so far as the basis of this discipline is considered to be the oral-formulaic theory? Should Parry and Lord's theory, in the face of an apparently infinite variety of oral forms and techniques, not by now have been declared, if not actually redundant, at least to be limited to the description of a relatively small (and, depending on the particular tradition studied, relatively peripheral) number of oral traditions? Finnegan may well be unnecessarily generous in thus closing her reflection on the validity of the oral-formulaic theory⁷³:

these ['disagreements'] are mostly detailed controversies *within the oral-formulaic school*. The basic insights remain stimulating and fruitful, and the demonstration that

the oral bard composes with and within traditional patterns of various kinds will stand as a landmark in the study of oral literature. Provided that the more ambitious claims of some exponents are treated with caution, the Lord-Parry school provides a body of work which cannot be ignored by any student of comparative oral literature.

Of course, we did remark earlier on in this discussion (primarily in reference to Foley and Ong, but also - and not least - to Vail and White), how Parry's discovery of the oral composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was innovative and 'startling', and we saw Foley acclaiming subsequent elaborations (by Ong and Havelock) as providing proof that 'oral cultures are by no means primitive'. The temptation to seize upon this kind of assessment in our search for a fundamental consensus at the heart of Oral Theory is obviously strong. Yet once again Vail and White, as we shall see in more detail later on, will be loathe to go along with it. As far as they are concerned, the construction of a 'notional oral man' (on the basis of the oral-formulaic theory, and notably by those giving it a 'psychologizing' interpretation) ends up by presenting oral in exactly the same dichotomous relation vis-à-vis written (or more specifically, literate) as primitive vis-à-vis civilized⁷⁴.

The tendency amongst theorists (Ong in particular), to characterize the oral-formulaic theory in psychological terms has been highly influential; a large part of it is also concerned with transposing these ideas on to the level of the societal / cultural. Eric Havelock is perhaps most often referred to in this regard. He argues that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, composed through the extensive use of formulas, were instrumental, within pre-Platonic education, in 'putting the whole community into a formulaic state of mind'⁷⁵. Indeed, we may well ask ourselves how much of the enthusiastically acclaimed *renewal* the oral-formulaic theory is said to have brought about actually stems from what it has to say about the oral text *per se*, as opposed to what it *could be extended* to say about associated matters oral, from oral *mentality* to oral *society* / oral *culture*. The balance between the adjectives in the following remark by Ong⁷⁶ is, perhaps, illustrative of this:

[this] discovery [by Parry] was *revolutionary* in literary circles and would have *tremendous* repercussions elsewhere in cultural and psychic history.

If Milman Parry's discovery, *prior* to its (rather problematic) hypotheses on oral composition and form, is to be regarded as providing a conceptual basis for a new field of study, we need to consider it as far as possible for what it is; within, so to speak, its original terms of

reference. The notions of oral *art* or oral *literature* are cardinal in this regard.

1.2 *Oral Theory and Literature*

It is important to stress that I have no intention, at this point in our elaboration of the theoretical origins of Oral Theory, to problematize the notion of literature *per se*. I want to consider the notion of oral art / literature purely in so far as it may constitute, in relation to Parry's discovery, the kind of conceptual basis we have set ourselves the task to uncover. As such the key to the literary *theory* against which I want to consider the possibility of an *oral* literature is provided, not by literary studies, but, in fact, Oral Theory, or, more precisely, its central problematic of 'conventionality versus originality'. Crucial to my conception of art / literature is, therefore, the notion of creativity or even 'genius', placing my conception of the artistic or literary within a humanist ('modernist') paradigm (much maligned, of course, in 'post-modernist' literary theory), at least in so far as I shall be led to a relatively strong distinction between the literary and the non-literary. A more general discussion of the extent to which Oral Theory has, in fact, realized the idea of the oral text as 'artistic' or 'literary', as well as the theoretical consequences this may hold, will be entered upon in Chapter 3. It is also then that we shall have occasion to revisit the notion of oral literature in the light of more recent 'post-modernist' perspectives on literature.

If, in the wake and on the basis of Parry's formulations, to use Foley's⁷⁷ words:

hundreds of books and articles have demonstrated striking similarities among ancient, medieval and contemporary oral traditions, giving us reason to think, at least in the most general terms, of an enormous body of 'oral literature' as opposed to the written texts on which most of us have cut our critical teeth,

the most definitive contribution by Parry to the field of Oral Theory would simply be that oral texts *are* artistic, *are* literature. But how does one promote such a 'foundation' in face of the view (of which Vail and White's 'notional oral man' is perhaps the most logical elaboration) that Parry's theories actually '[represent] a *dismissal of Homeric art* in favour of a mechanistic model for the composition of poetry'?⁷⁸ A prerequisite, I would think, for locating the significance of Parry's discovery at its most fundamental level, is to avoid the temptation of simple equations or sliding definitions. This means that we need to remind ourselves that art of the *tradition* is not necessarily art of the *performer* which is not necessarily art in the sense of a *work* of art. In other words, 'creative tradition' should not be taken to simplistically *imply* 'creative artist' or, for that matter, 'art'. We need to consider carefully exactly *where*

in the broader field of orality (if anywhere), Parry's insight located oral *art*.

Lord⁷⁹ writes as follows about this art:

We realize [now] that what is called oral tradition is as intricate and meaningful an art form as its derivative 'literary tradition'. In the extended sense of the word, oral tradition is as 'literary' as literary tradition. It is not simply a less polished, more haphazard, or cruder second cousin twice removed, to literature. By the time the written techniques come onto the stage, the art forms have been long set and are already highly developed and ancient.

Earlier on, assessing the significance of a particular song undergoing changes in its transmission from one oral performer to the next⁸⁰, Lord clearly has the oral performer *share* in the creativity of the tradition he is part of:

... the picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of preservation of tradition by the *constant re-creation* of it.

What Lord argues for is the creative character, the literary content inherent in the oral tradition, which makes the oral performer artist in his own right. More about the 'oral artist' and 'creativity' later. But to get back to tradition: can its being regarded as 'creative' suffice to fulfill the expectations of an audience concerned with 'art'? This seems to me an important question. 'Tradition', it must be remembered, no matter how 'real' or 'alive' we consider it as *phenomenon*, is, after all - as I shall argue in Chapter 2 - a *conceptual tool* used to 'make sense'. This is especially true within the framework of the academic discipline. Oral *tradition* is, then, essentially an abstraction, an *ex post facto* reconstruction postulated by the researcher (who by and large excludes himself from the tradition) in order to account for particular aspects of a performance, if not for the very fact that the performance has taken place. 'Tradition' is therefore an explanatory term, developed by people who are by the very nature of their trade far more concerned with the resolution of *problems* related to an oral performance or 'text' (problems which they have formulated themselves - the Homeric question would be an excellent example), than with the actual *appreciation* of the latter. To qualify art as *traditional* is, in this sense, to have turned it into scientific data. Writing about the relation between the oral poet and his academic critic, Olabiyi Yai⁸¹ puts it as follows:

No communication seems to exist between the production / consumption of oral poetry and its criticism. More precisely, communication is unidimensional. When the creator of oral poetry and his academic critics are contemporaries the terms of the critical

exchange are unilaterally set by the critic. The poet is thus degraded from his status of creator to that of an informant. He can only make such contributions as required by the initiatives of the critic.

One may of course counter, as regards the possibility of tradition being the medium of art, that the audience (who, unlike the researcher, is *part* of the tradition) is not, for all its lack of an outside perspective, *unaware* of the tradition. The spectators of an oral performance know that the performer / performance forms part of something greater than what they see in front of them, something whose meaning endures over generations and which, in a very real sense to them, is constitutive of their society⁸². Werner Kelber's notion of tradition as *biosphere*⁸³ comes to mind in this regard. Yet can *our* idea of tradition (as elaborated in Oral Theory) be the same as *theirs*? I believe not. For the scholar of Oral Theory, wherever he may come from, can never conceive of tradition *in itself*. 'Traditional' always exists at a counterpoint to the experience of the researcher, to the 'Western', the 'modern'. Were the tradition furthermore to be termed 'illiterate' or 'oral', the contrast with the researcher's own *literacy* is immediate and inevitable. This is surely a *presupposition* of Oral Theory⁸⁴ and is borne out by all its commentators, irrespective of which side of the convention versus originality debate they may align themselves with. To say, therefore, that 'the oral text is art because the oral tradition is artistic' is, if not to hijack, to at least undermine the scope of appreciation of the *traditional* audience.

A further point needs to be made here concerning the relation of audience to art. The *only* judgment on whether something constitutes 'art' is, in my view, that of the audience, an audience which *excludes* the researcher. Within this perspective, and seen in the light of our preceding observations on the question of the 'artistic content' of tradition, the following remark by Foley⁸⁵, made within the framework of possible future orientations of Oral Theory, is, perhaps, a little idealistic:

Of course, oral and oral-derived texts will not reveal precisely the same underlying aesthetic as such fully literary works as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* or James Joyce's *Ulysses* - nor, indeed, should they. For the coming years I would emphasize the importance of defining oral traditional art *sui generis*, that is, of understanding its aesthetics on its own terms. Oral Theory, as it turns out, is well equipped to accomplish that goal; having adumbrated the structure of such works in terms of formula, theme, and story-pattern, we need now only identify the *meaning* of these units for the given work and tradition. I submit that this meaning must be found in tradition, in the continuing, extratextual presence of which any given performance is but one perishable avatar.

While Foley's caution to deal with the oral text on its own terms, to refrain from making it into something that it is not, is obviously appropriate, the fact remains that the 'aesthetic' uncovered following Foley's directive will not be *our* aesthetic, and, in that sense, will not be aesthetic in our judgment (in so far as we may at least be considered a *potential* audience of the text concerned) at all. Yet is it not *our* aesthetic, *our* conception of creativity and of art that has been underlying the conventionality versus originality debate? Also, determining the 'meaning' of a formula, theme or story-pattern smacks more of an anthropological (functionalist⁸⁶) endeavour - what does this particular textual element tell me of the society within which it is found? - than of the artistic: how do I / we relate to it⁸⁷? Not all meaning is necessarily artistic meaning. Instead of confronting the convention versus originality debate (or rather, as is our attempt at present, trying to find some area of agreement beyond it), the debate is, in a sense, skirted by recasting its major concerns in different terms. We are, in fact, invited to find that oral 'art' is art, *on condition* that we agree to substitute our own long-held criterion of individual originality and 'genius' (this is not the place to consider the validity of the latter) in favour of a to-be-elaborated criterion of convention-based harmony. A lot of interesting insights may be gained from this process, but they will not be artistic ones.

Given the ambiguity of the notion of tradition, with regard to which the perspectives of researcher and audience are, then, particularly far apart, it could be advanced that the measure for an oral 'art' must clearly lie in the *performance* rendered by the *performer*. At issue, in other words, are an actual *work* of art and an actual *artist* (or rather, of course, the *possibility* of a work being art and a performer actually being an artist, depending on the audience's appreciation).

We have termed the performance 'text' in the sense used by Foley (see note 18): 'an entity that exists both as a thing in itself and as a directive for its perceivers'. This text is *heard* (and, of course, seen) as an actual performance (such as the songs of the *guslari* collected by Parry and Lord) but also, closer to the common use of the term, *read* as the more or less faithful⁸⁸ *transcription* of a performance (what Foley defines as 'oral-derived texts'⁸⁹). Research done in Oral Theory (not to mention Parry's original doctoral thesis on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) has of course been overwhelmingly concerned with oral texts for which it would be impossible to posit any individual artist. As put by Foley⁹⁰:

the usual notion of context as a set of verifiable authorial facts enabling effective criticism proves largely impertinent to oral and oral-derived works of literature.

This problem is, of course, bypassed in the Parry-Lord view of *oral tradition* in so far as the latter provides us with a model of collective authorship within which the individual (at least when compared to the Romantic notion of the artist) can be regarded as relatively unimportant. Yet this assertion, important as it is, can all too easily mask the obvious truth that the individual performer is not so much unimportant as he is *unknown*. The audience of a particular oral performance may well know the identity of the person performing in front of them, but a previous or different version of the text of which they are aware will in all probability be without such an individual reference. The literate person reading an oral-derived text is, by and large, similarly in the dark⁹¹. The oral text, in fact, overwhelmingly appears unaccompanied, its 'artist' being to a large extent subject to conjecture. This idea of an 'absent artist' as far as orality is concerned, is further enhanced when we consider the 'truly' (in terms of the oral-formulaic theory) oral text, which is composed in performance, composed *in text*. Through the conflation of act of creation and object of creation, of composition of the text and existence of the text, the entire process of creation (revolving, *per definition, around a creating artist*) is, in a very real sense, *collapsed into the text*. The oral text can therefore be said to come across as an 'entity in itself' in ways inconceivable for the written text, clearly abstracted from its act of composition⁹². In the case of the latter, factors external to the text (such as the 'artistic process', the identity of the artist, etc.) to some extent impose themselves upon the artistic appreciation of the reader (who may, of course - as could be presumed for the radical structuralist - choose to overlook them). Whatever 'art' may be conceived of with regard to an oral text, however, could logically not be located anywhere else *but* in the text.

Of course, formalist or structuralist literary theorists will say the same thing of the written text. A (written) text owes its literary / artistic character to the fact that it is *constructed* as a 'special use of language'; the task of the literary critic is to lay bare the forms or techniques that bear out this construction, *devices* that are of necessity 'in the text'⁹³. This formalist aesthetic is implicitly echoed by Finnegan⁹⁴:

One of the qualities of literature is that it is in some way 'set apart' from common speech or writing. This applies above all to poetry, where style and structure are a kind of end in themselves as well as a signal to the audience of the type of

communication intended.

But the oral text, in the perspective set out above, no doubt offers a better illustration of the formalist insight than its written counterpart. This is ironic, of course, for it so obviously lacks the spatial dimension by which a written work is *already* 'set aside' as artistic text - the novel, the short story, the poem - all, at root, *typographically defined*⁹⁵.

An alternative way of describing this pre-eminence of oral art *as text* can be formulated on account of Jean-Jacques Nattiez's⁹⁶ model of the 'symbolic phenomenon'. The latter (for our purposes, the text) is described as having three 'dimensions', namely - to summarize very briefly - the *poietic* (relating to a process of creation that may be described or reconstituted), the *esthesis* (relating to the construction of meaning on the part of a 'receiver') and, finally, the *trace* or 'neutral level' (which involves the physical and material embodiment of the symbolic form). The oral text merges *poietic* (creative process) and *trace* (object of creation) into a single dimension alongside the *esthesis*, which is the appreciation of the oral performance by the audience. As such, the oral symbolic act turns out to be two-, rather than three-dimensional.

What implications does this 'collapse of the *poietic*' hold for the idea of creativity, crucial to 'art'? Creativity had, of course, long been regarded as fundamentally lacking in the various manifestations of oral linguistic expression encountered by Western researchers on their travels through illiterate societies, which meant that these societies possessed no verbal art, let alone any literature. Depending on the extremity of such a view, the texts produced in such a society would be regarded as simply unworthy of study, whether from a 'literary' or 'sociological' perspective. This approach is termed 'dismissive' by Finnegan⁹⁷. We have however also noted, in connection with the Romantic influence detectable in different approaches to oral tradition, how such perceived artlessness, far from being scorned, could in fact be 'glamourized' as reflective of 'the quintessence of emotional expression and natural spontaneity'⁹⁸. But in a contemporary context (perhaps especially the South African one within which I am writing) even the most well-intentioned⁹⁹ affirmation regarding the relative emotionality of the non-Western comes across as paternalistic to say the least. The difference between the 'glamourizing' approach to oral tradition and the 'dismissive' one, in terms of which the oral tradition / text falls outside the evolution of 'civilization' (the latter being *per definition* associated with writing and literacy¹⁰⁰), is therefore by and large one of emphasis.

The general standpoint remained that the oral text lacked art, lacked creativity. Finnegan¹⁰¹ explains this assumption as follows:

On the extreme view, 'folklore' or 'traditional poetry' is a 'survival' from an earlier stage, a fossil preserved by unchanging tradition, not a part of functioning contemporary society or affected by conscious and individual actors. Even the less extreme view still tends to envisage oral poetry (under its categorization as 'folk literature' or similar terms) as communal or 'traditional', unaffected by ordinary social conventions and differentiation. This relates to the whole idea that such literature represents 'nature' rather than 'society'.

If, as we assumed above, Oral Theory has at its core the idea of oral texts as *literature*, how does one conceptualize the innovation, against a background of broad dismissiveness (at least in so far as the study of the oral text for its own sake is concerned), Milman Parry brought about? On the basis of our stated assumption we could say something like this. The original insight by Parry concerned a particular kind of text and the kind of consideration (or status) that should be its due. The text was oral, the consideration 'literary' or 'artistic'. But this would at best be an abstraction legitimated, perhaps, by our theoretical concern. In reality the process was quite the opposite. Parry's breakthrough came by virtue of his study of a work, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, whose universal academic prestige¹⁰² left no room for disputing its received status as literature. After careful philological analysis, particularly of the noun-epithet formulas used in its descriptions of gods and heroes, Parry was able, in Foley's words¹⁰³:

to show with precision how these relatively large and unchanging elements were systematized by tradition and so made available to Homer and his fellows as part of a special traditional idiom.

Having thus, in his two 1928 doctoral theses, highlighted the *traditional* nature of the Homeric poems, he finally came to formulate the vital link¹⁰⁴ (*vital*, that is, to the field of Oral Theory) between the traditional and the oral in his two 'Harvard essays' respectively published in 1930 and 1932. Parry himself mentions the decisive role played by Matija Murko and Antoine Meillet (under whom he had conducted his doctoral research) in leading him to this insight¹⁰⁵. The link between traditional and oral is provided by the *proof of necessity*¹⁰⁶: the traditional is, in fact, of necessity oral in so far as the *formula* (for which the doctoral theses provided the theoretical grounding and which Parry has by now extended to the notion of *formulaic system*) 'serves the versificational and tale-telling *needs* of the poet *composing in oral performance*'¹⁰⁷. This can bring us to the following conclusion: Parry looked at a

particular literary / artistic text and found it to be of oral provenance. The *written* text he had analysed turned out to be merely a transcription of an earlier, 'truer' oral text / performance.

This is, of course, an exaggeration. It is nevertheless important, for our present purpose, to consider Parry's renowned breakthrough in terms of, as it were, its fullest logical impact. With this emphasis on the *originality* of the oral text (in terms of Parry's findings), I am, of course, to some extent reflecting what has been the broad evolution of the field. As Foley explains, studies in oral tradition have of necessity been constructed on the model of 'orality versus literacy', oral text *as against* the written. In agreeing with Kelber's critique of this 'great divide'¹⁰⁸ between oral and written text, he nevertheless concedes (as does Kelber) that:

such a powerful thesis *was needed to break ground*, to fracture the sinecure of textual-chirographic thinking that reflexively dominated earlier scholarship¹⁰⁹.

We are equally concerned, at this point, with 'breaking ground', and I am therefore deliberately setting aside, at least for the moment, the finer points of subsequent controversies relating to what, to a large extent, can be said to constitute the *fallacy* of a 'great divide' between the oral and the written. In this regard we have already noted the unhappiness surrounding a 'notional oral man' - more about this in the Chapter 2.

There is another way of interpreting Parry's insight. We can relegate to a secondary level what he tells us about the traditional mechanisms of oral composition / formulaic character of the oral text (which appear so strikingly different to the mode of composition or form of the literate / written and have, therefore, tended towards controversy), and focus, instead, on what he says about literature and art. This amounts, in fact, to revisiting what was earlier referred to as the 'downside' of Parry's discovery, yet not so much to refute what was stated in relation to it (see Ong's description of Homer as an 'assembly-line worker', as 'stitching together prefabricated parts'), as to reconceptualize it in the light of what I have called above the pre-eminence of oral art as *text*.

It is true, as Ong¹¹⁰ puts it, that Parry succeeded 'more than any earlier scholar' in putting paid to the 'cultural chauvinism' inherent in the general tendency amongst scholars, prior to his discovery, to 'impute to primitive¹¹¹ poetry qualities that their own age found fundamentally congenial'. But does this mean that the 'received excellence' of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is part of this cultural chauvinism? Must the fact that Homer's mode of production (if not his identity¹¹²) turns out to be radically different to what we conjectured it to be preclude us from considering the actual *text* as literature, as art?

Parry does not seem to have addressed the question of oral art in these terms, neither, for that matter, does Lord¹¹³. Both of them situate the artistry of the oral clearly within the formulaic conception of tradition. While the actual art of the latter is obviously unconnected to the input of a particular 'creative' individual (if there is indeed question of *genius* it is very much *genius confined* by '[pre-]established limits of form'¹¹⁴), its most important ingredient would seem to lie in the fact that the 'artist' has, by way of the formulaic mechanism Parry and Lord's research has brought to the fore, been more or less liberated from the dire, mechanistic process of verbatim memorization. It is in this sense, I would venture, that he is 'artistic', that he creates 'art'. But on this basis we can at best derive a negative definition of oral art: would be regarded as artistic / literary those oral texts in whose production memorization by rote plays either no role, or is at the most a minor element. What is crucial, as we already saw in our discussion on the validity of the oral-formulaic theory, 'is not the oral performance but rather the *composition* during oral performance'. (See note 59).

An altogether more satisfactory conception of art to be gleaned from the oral-formulaic theory situates the artistry of the performer in his ability, as Parry explains it (by way of an analogy with the mode of operation of the Greek sculptor Phidias¹¹⁵), to '[fill] his work with the spirit of a whole race'. Homer may well be the 'assembly-line worker' that Ong makes him out to be, but he combines the 'ready-made parts' of oral formula in such a way as, to quote Foley's¹¹⁶ presentation of the sculptor in Parry's analogy, to:

take into account the aesthetic heritage that inheres in convention. The patterns within which the sculptor works, far from being restrictive or even handicapping, are by their very nature filled with meaning, that meaning which they have achieved through the ages and which they encode in the present creation.

The conception of oral art as a collective heritage could, I suppose, bring us more or less towards what Tony Bennett¹¹⁷ calls 'the *universalising disposition* of [our own] bourgeois concepts of art, literature and the aesthetic'. It can be argued that the oral performer, shackled by convention and, therefore, devoid of individuality, is *for these very reasons* well placed to assume the 'disinterestedness' which Kant elevates to a 'defining attribute of the aesthetic'¹¹⁸. The following characterization of aesthetic judgment¹¹⁹ could in this way be seen to describe the position, not just of Homer, but also of his (traditional) audience:

For when one is conscious that his delight in an object is with him independent of all interest, it is inevitable that he should look on the object as one containing a ground of delight for all men. For, since the delight is not based on any inclination of the

Subject (or any other deliberate interest) but the Subject feels himself completely *free* in respect of the liking he accords the object, he can find as reason for his delight no personal conditions to which his subjective self might alone be party. Hence he must regard it as resting on what he may also presuppose in every other person...

Quite apart from the criticism that Marxist literary theory in particular has levelled at the idea of a universal aesthetic¹²⁰, it is of course extremely doubtful that Kant was in any way thinking of oral tradition when he wrote these lines. The extent to which a conception of oral literature / art could be accommodated within the categories (universalist or otherwise) of modern literary theory will be considered in somewhat more detail in Chapter 3. Suffice it, at this point, to reaffirm what we said earlier with respect to the 'explanatory nature' of the notion of *tradition* and the inherent inability of the '*non-traditional*' to conceive of tradition as a thing in itself. We may never quite have access to the *universality* the oral performer aspires to.

Whither oral art? Our attempt at formulating the 'real' contribution made by Parry in elevating *oral* to oral *literature*, worthy of constituting a *discipline*, turns out to be destined to anti-climax, if not actually to failure. For the 'solution' was there right from the start, from the very moment, in fact, that Parry was able to conceive of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as the fruits of a *tradition* and (of particular importance to us) that he could therefore turn his back on its presumed literate origins. But instead of amazing ourselves at the *characteristics* of the art thus revealed (which is, to paraphrase Ong, devastatingly *formulaic*), and theorising about the (problematic) consequences of these characteristics as regards the (apparent) artistry of other texts of similar origin, we can follow a different route. We can take as our point of departure the fact that, at the time of Parry's analysis, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had *already been proved* to be art. Moreover, it had acquired this status within our *own* (Western) culture through the very fascination that it exerted upon scholars and critics of *literature*. Within this cultural framework (which is also the cultural framework within which Oral Theory needs to be defined), a certain conception of literature has dominated, whereby the latter is associated, if not necessarily with the extreme Romantic conception of creation *ex nihilo*¹²¹ (structuralism and its various 'post'-configurations have made such a conception seem ridiculously naïve), at least with some kind of *initiative* on the part of an individual who is seen to *author* a specific text and is also exclusively *recognized* in this capacity. It is surely only within such a conception of literature that there can be a notion like plagiarism¹²², not to mention the legal

construct of copyright¹²³. Against this background Parry's argument as to the totally *different* compositional basis of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* has the effect of unshackling literature and art from this association. As such, his revelation opens up the possibility of these categories being much wider than thought before.

The question may rightly be asked whether the attention accorded the formula as indicator of oral composition (Lord's stated aim of 'quantitative formulaic analysis'¹²⁴ comes to mind in this regard) has not tended to obscure what was, after all, the real 'startlingness' of Parry's insight, namely that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were the product of an *oral* tradition. Oral in the sense of *not written* was overtaken by oral in the sense of *oral-formulaic*, a shift commensurate, no doubt, with Parry's own initiatives to test his conception of Homeric oral tradition in the 'laboratory of South Slavic oral epic tradition'¹²⁵. Of course, no-one will argue that these initiatives were not theoretically called for. Foley¹²⁶ draws attention to the likes of Friedrich Krauss, Gerhard Geseman and in particular Matija Murko (to mention only researchers working on the South-Slavic oral tradition) as having been instrumental in orienting Parry towards testing his hypotheses concerning the oral-traditional origins of a classical 'dead-language' text against the observable reality of actual performances in a living tradition. But in introducing this comparative technique, which sees him move from the positing of orality on a basis of formulaic form towards the derivation of formulaic form from an observed basis of orality, Parry crosses an important threshold: the philological gives way to the anthropological. Parry's 1933 article on whole formulaic verses in Homeric and South Slavic epic, in which he 'shows how a verifiably oral traditional phraseology operates in much the same way as does Homeric phraseology' and which can be regarded as 'the first visible sign of [his] engagement with the living analogue', is consequently of special significance. Foley¹²⁷ summarizes its procedure as follows:

The investigation is at root philological, in that it takes its cue from an analysis of the two traditional idioms, but the comparative dimension adds considerable weight to the argument, and soon the anthropological aspect behind that comparison would figure importantly in Oral Theory.

We have interpreted Parry's breakthrough as consisting in his implied assertion that art / literature *could also be oral*. The *possibility* of a category of texts regarded as 'literature' having a much broader compositional basis than previously considered is opened up in the process. Of course, reversing the argument, one could also take this as meaning that texts

previously excluded from literature (on the grounds of deriving from a hitherto ignored basis of composition) could in fact come to be regarded as such. This is patently not the same, though, as saying that such texts *should* be thus qualified. Why not? Because any attempt at (re-)categorizing a text in terms of aesthetics would need to take into account, aside from its compositional origins (important as these may be), the actual way in which the *audience* of the text relates to it, appreciates it, 'gives it meaning'. In other words, one has to be sensitive to the text's 'horizons of expectations'. These, according to Selden¹²⁸:

describe the criteria readers use to judge literary texts in any given period. These criteria will help the reader decide how to judge a poem as for example an epic, or a tragedy or a pastoral; it will also, in a more general way, *cover what is to be regarded as poetic or literary as opposed to unpoetic or non-literary uses of languages*.

It is in the light of this consideration that Parry's foray into the anthropological becomes problematic. Whatever the 'proof' furnished by the Serbo-Croate oral epic regarding his earlier hypotheses concerning the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, this could center on the perceived relation between oral composition and formulaic style *only*. The researcher (Parry was joined by Albert Lord in his South-Slavic field-work in 1934, who was to pursue it after Parry's death the following year¹²⁹) could no doubt *imagine* the conditions of reception of the Serbo-Croate epics to be broadly similar to those of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, at least prior to the latter being committed to writing. (Who makes up an audience and what actually occasions a performance may have been important indicators in this regard¹³⁰). But there was surely no way to suspect that these epics could be subject, from the point of view of their audience, to '*horizons of expectations*' even remotely similar to those that, throughout the ages and most notably in ours, had bestowed upon the Homeric poems their 'received excellence'. Pierre Macherey has followed the same line of argument, observing that the *Iliad* was so different for us to what it must have been for its contemporary 'readers' (audience) that 'it was as if we ourselves had written it'¹³¹.

In making this point I am, of course, reaffirming the opinion of Yai quoted earlier: 'no communication seems to exist between the production / consumption of oral poetry and its criticism'. But the distinction between the *oral-derived* text (see note 89) and the *oral* text, a distinction of little relevance to our argument thus far, now becomes important. For while their method of composition may be virtually identical (as is advanced for the oral-derived

Homeric poems and the oral epics of Serbo-Croatia and Bosnia), the horizons of expectation to which the oral and oral-derived texts are subject in all probability differ radically. I shall not attempt here to describe the meanings and associations built around the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in Western society, other than to point to the fact that these have tended, with the passage of time, to be overwhelmingly formulated in the context of *study* (defined by Ong as 'extended sequential analysis'¹³²) and, what is more, *institutionalised* study. This is a far cry from the gatherings at the village home, in the coffee house or in the tavern which continued to serve as the *only* context in which the epic texts of Serbo-Croatia / Bosnia were 'received' at the time of Parry and Lord's research.

These gatherings took place 'during a period of leisure from the work in the fields'¹³³ with the objective of entertainment. But where scholarly study of a classical text turns out to be entertaining it is pretty much an unforeseen bonus. One may well feel a certain satisfaction at having 'struggled through it' (we shall return to the notion of pleasure in Chapter 3), but the objective is inevitably tied up, not merely with the idea of personal advancement, but indeed *measurable* personal advancement: the mark in the upcoming examination or the material for the forthcoming article or publication.

Lord¹³⁴ evaluates Parry's discovery against the background of us having been *mised* '[f]rom ancient times until the present... about the true nature of Homer's art and greatness', the reason for this misconception being 'that we have tried to read him in our own terms, which we have labelled "universal terms of art"'. This assessment can no doubt be regarded as a constant of Oral Theory: authors like Foley, Ong and Finnegan have said more or less the same. Yet this insight, properly considered, is more an anthropological one than a literary. 'Homer' lived at another time, in another, vastly different, 'traditional' social context, enjoining on him particular modes of composition. To project upon him what we would expect from artists in our own society would be to condescendingly ignore an *anthropological reality*. Having conceded this, however, have we not the right to read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and respond to it in our own terms, *as text*? Are we not, as readers, and *particularly* modern readers, entitled to contribute to the 'horizons of expectations' of these texts?

In asking this question we are, of course, exposing ourselves to the bewildering possibility that the anthropological, the concern with the 'other' (with that which can only be perceived as being at a - in the final analysis - *insurmountable* distance), has *displaced* the philological (and with it the literary) to the extent that the oral / oral-derived text is *denied* any kind of

(modern) reader-orientation. The researcher is not part of the audience; he is *per definition* not the 'possible reader' of whom, as explained by Umberto Eco¹³⁵:

[the] author has... to foresee a model... supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them.

If the horizons of expectations of the oral text are definitively out of our reach (which would be another way of saying that they do not exist), then our presentation of Parry's discovery as a theoretical basis for the oral *as literature* (conceived of as the 'founding moment' of Oral Theory) is perfectly absurd. Yet for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to be seen and read, thought about and analysed, and still to have no 'horizons of expectations' would be a contradiction in terms. This is precisely the kind of contradiction that a rigidly anthropological view of the oral text gives rise to. But if, on the other hand, we accept the 'horizons of expectations' of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and - flowing from this - that *our* qualification of these texts as literature or art is *as valid* as that of any 'traditional' audience, have we not once again swept the 'anthropological reality' that Parry confronts us with under the table?

It is significant that Lord, in the passage quoted above (see note 134), talks about 'reading Homer'. *Even if we know* how Homer composed his work, we (still) cannot 'read' him: the anthropological gulf between his world and ours makes it impossible for us to even attempt appreciating whatever 'artistry' he may (or may not) have had. To argue whether Homer is a 'genius' or an 'assembly-line worker' is therefore to misdirect the 'expectations' of our own 'horizons' in this regard. The *only* basis upon which the oral could be appreciated as oral *literature* / oral *art* is in its manifestation as 'an entity that exists both as a thing in itself and as a directive for its perceivers': as *text*. To paraphrase what we stated earlier (on the basis of Nattiez's model) with regard to the artistic appreciation of the oral 'symbolic phenomenon': the compositional (*poietic*) dimension of the text is subsumed into a combination of the interpretative (*esthesis*) and 'thing-in-itself' (*trace*) dimensions. Whether an oral text is art is therefore determined by the reader / perceiver, or, more precisely, by the latter's *response* on the basis of his *expectation* of the text. To what expectations does the text give rise? What kind of a response do these call upon on the part of the reader / perceiver? It is only at this point that the notion of creativity becomes at all relevant: can the reader / perceiver's response be *creative* as well? The oral text is literature if it allows for a creative / original *response*, if the response is not perceived by the reader / perceiver as, in a sense,

pre-determined. In other words, the determining factor in distinguishing the literary from the non-literary is not, to paraphrase Ong, whether Homer (the composer or poet) is an assembly-line worker, but whether *the perceiver of the text* is one.

Given the prestige they have enjoyed in Western society the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are, of course, particularly 'privileged' oral texts in so far as their appreciation as art is concerned. While their particular reception as 'classical' texts indicative of a certain 'cultural heritage' is an obvious factor in this privileged position, there is a much more mundane and more immediate reason: they had been written down before they were (finally) discovered to be oral.

The same reasoning should, of course, also apply to oral-derived texts in general, particularly those that were written down a long time ago and have therefore been received as part of a large corpus of written texts (the case of the 'literate culture'). It is this factor more than anything else which accounts for the greater prestige enjoyed by the 'dead-language traditions' as opposed to the 'living oral traditions' within Oral Theory¹³⁶. The texts produced in a contemporary oral tradition are invariably received as written texts by the researcher or field-worker. The latter may of course qualify the text thus received as 'oral literature' *by analogy* with the (written) literary text, and generally does. Excluding himself from the text's audience and therefore blind to its horizons of expectations, analogy is, in fact, the only option left to the researcher concerned with oral *literature*. We shall further consider this unsatisfactory solution in Chapter 3. Suffice it to conclude, at this point, that Oral Theory broadly understands the 'literature' of the oral in the following terms: the stronger the anthropological, the weaker the literary.

As manifested in the duality of 'dead-language' tradition / 'living oral' tradition, the question of oral versus oral-derived is not without relevance to the conception of tradition. More about this in Chapter 2. In conclusion to this chapter we are, however, now in a position to relate the preceding remarks on oral art / literature to the elusive 'founding moment' of Oral Theory. My argument in this regard has boiled down to the following:

- 1) Given the controversial nature of the oral-formulaic theory's attention to form, the conceptual basis of Oral Theory should rather be formulated around Parry's recognition that we regard as literature / art *can actually be oral*.
- 2) The determining factor for art as far as the oral is concerned is the text (which is also the performance) as *object* and the horizons of expectations it gives rise to. This

implicates the perceiver to the extent that he considers his response to the text as 'creative'.

- 3) The oral-derived text is more susceptible to being art / literature than the (purely) oral text, in so far as the researcher of Oral Theory is more sensitive / amenable to its horizons of expectations.

Ideally this 'literary' conception of the origins of Oral Theory should provide us with a theoretical standard against which all oral texts could be defined in the same terms. The anthropological distance at which Oral Theory operates, particularly in relation to the comparative study of contemporary oral traditions, however clearly precludes it from doing so. But to what extent does this conception of the theoretical origins of Oral Theory constitute an advantage in comparison to the oral-formulaic theory as its 'founding moment'? The attraction of the oral-formulaic theory lies, in a sense, in the criterion it addresses itself to: that of stylistic *form of expression*. In so far as it is able to provide a rigorous definition of the latter (which, as we have seen, is becoming more and more difficult), hypotheses that are made on the basis of the oral-formulaic theory can be objectively 'tested', hence 'quantifiable formulaic analysis'. It is no doubt this verification the theory allows for, more than anything else, that has given it the kind of far-reaching influence associated with the idea of 'founding a discipline'.

Art lies in the eye of the beholder. No matter how rigorously we may try to demarcate its area of influence within a larger process of production (as the above summary should reflect), the quality of the postulated *response* will always defy measurement. But if we take seriously Ruth Finnegan's view as to what is truly an *unfathomable variety* of oral texts coming from an ever-increasing number of oral traditions being brought into the realm of Oral Theory, this very vagueness may, in a sense, be an asset. We cannot say, as justification for what we are doing, that all oral texts are artful and literary and therefore at least as worthy of contemplation and study, indeed as 'prestigious', as the art and literature of *our own* society has been held to be (at least before the assault of 'post-modernist' literary theory). But the image of the ultimately *privileged* oral text Milman Parry (rather than Albert Lord) presents us with, opens, at least, the *possibility* that other oral texts, from other, less prestigious oral traditions, could, given different circumstances of reception, *also* be literature, *also* be art.

There is a further advantage to this view, relating to what we may call the 'theoretical

coherence' of research done into the oral tradition. An adherence to the oral-formulaic theory as conceptual basis of Oral Theory means, as we have seen - particularly in the case of research done in Africa - that a large percentage of research and scholarship into oral tradition falls *outside* the scope of Oral Theory. Yet if we see Parry's breakthrough as essentially providing a kind of theoretical space for the notion of oral literature, then *all* research that deals with oral texts can be brought into line with Oral Theory, irrespective of the texts' formal properties or the researcher's (lack of) concern with the latter.

In this sense the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, texts of 'received excellence' in Western society and not literate, but oral, serve as a kind of master metaphor for all other oral texts, whether oral-derived or 'purely' oral. The comparison it invites does not confer certainty. But at least we are left with a *virtual* oral literature. This is a definite theoretical improvement on the common reflex to call oral texts 'literature' by mere analogy with *our* written (literary) texts. The oral text is, after all, original¹³⁷.

Endnotes

1. Lord, 1968:220.
2. Finnegan, 1977:69. Foley (1988:41) qualifies Lord's work as 'the bible of Oral Theory'.
3. Foley, in Foley (ed)., 1986:4.
4. See Ong, 1986:16-27, from which I largely derive my own understanding of the intellectual origins of modern Oral Theory. For a brief overview on the history of this field, see Foley, in Foley (ed)., 1986:2-6, and, for a particularly detailed and critical account, situating the field within a strongly anthropological perspective, Vail and White, 1991:1-33. In so far as the intellectual influences anticipating and contributing to Milman Parry's 'discovery' are concerned, see Foley, 1988:1-18, on which this study draws heavily.
5. Foley, 1988:17-8.
6. Foley, 1988:18.
7. Vail and White, 1991:16. For a fuller description of debates on the 'Homeric question' prior to Parry's discovery, see Ong, 1986:16-20, and in particular Foley, 1988:1-25.
8. Vail and White, 1991:16.
9. Ong, 1986:21. Emphasis added.
10. Vail and White, 1991:17.
11. I am using the terms 'illiterate' / 'non-literate' and even 'oral' (in the sense where - used as a qualificative adjective in front of plural or collective nouns like 'people', 'society' etc. - the three terms are frequently interchangeable) in their most, to me, unproblematic sense of 'being unable to write as we know it'. This means the inability to use, as Ong (1986:84) puts it, 'a coded system of visible marks... whereby a writer could determine the *exact words* that the reader would generate from the text. (Emphasis added).
12. Lord, 1968:xi.
13. Foley, in Foley (ed)., 1986:3.
14. Foley, 1988:31.
15. See Parry, A. 1971. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 272. (All quotations from works or articles written by Milman Parry refer to this work compiled by his son, Adam Parry).
16. Reported in Foley, in Foley (ed)., 1986:3.
17. Finnegan, 1977:69.
18. Finnegan is obviously talking about the *written* text. I am stressing this distinction in the light of my own use of the word 'text' (as will be seen later on) as including, depending on the situation, what is performed orally without the intervention of writing. See in this regard Ong (1986:13), who draws attention to the word's etymological meaning related to 'weaving'. See also Foley, 1990:5, where the text is defined as 'an entity that exists both as a thing in itself and as a directive for its perceivers'.
19. Finnegan, 1977:66.
20. Lord, 1968:147.
21. Finnegan, 1977:30-41.
22. Finnegan, 1977:34.
23. Finnegan, 1977:36.
24. Foley, 1994:170.

25. Foley, in Foley (ed)., 1986:1. Foley specifically refers to the contributions of Walter Ong and Eric Havelock.
26. Foley, in Foley (ed)., 1986:5. Emphasis added. Foley specifically refers to the work of Havelock.
27. Ong, 1986:23. Emphasis added.
28. Ong, 1986:22.
29. Ong, 1986:22.
30. Finnegan, 1977:34.
31. Vail and White, 1991:17. Emphasis added.
32. As quoted by Vail and White, 1991:27.
33. Vail and White, 1991:27.
34. Vail and White, 1991:17.
35. Foley, 1988:58.
36. Finnegan: 1977:69-87; for a detailed discussion of the specificity of an 'oral style' see pp.88-133.
37. Benson, L. 1966. The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry. *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 81. Quoted in Finnegan, 1977:70.
38. Opland, J. 1971. 'Scop' and 'imbongi' - Anglo-saxon and Bantu Oral Poets. *English Studies in Africa* 14. Quoted in Finnegan, 1977:70.
39. Ong, 1986:26.
40. Finnegan, 1977:71.
41. Finnegan, 1977:131.
42. Vail and White, 1991:27-9.
43. This African evidence has, in fact, as Vail and White (1991:28) point out, caused Lord to 'dispense with the need for "metrical conditions" and to redefine formulas as "any repeated word groups"'. (See Lord, A. 1974. Perspectives on Recent Work in Oral Literature. *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 10:187-210).
44. Vail and White, 1991:28.
45. Finnegan, 1977:132-3.
46. Ong, 1986:23.
47. Lord, 1968:68-98.
48. Ong, 1986:23. Emphasis added.
49. Bynum, D. 1978. *The Daemon in the Wood: A Study of Oral Narrative Patterns*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. Quoted by Ong, 1986:25.
50. Foley, J. 1980. 'Beowulf and Traditional Narrative Song: the Potential and Limits of Comparison', in J. Niles (ed). *Old English Literature in Context: Ten Essays*. London: Boydell, Rowman & Littlefield, 117-36, 173-8. Referred to by Ong, 1986:25.
51. The creation of this 'notional nonliterate - or "oral" - man' is also attributed to Marshall McLuhan and Eric Havelock, as well as the anthropologist Jack Goody. (Vail and White, 1991:18-25).
52. Vail and White, 1991:320. Emphasis added.
53. Andrzejewski, B. and Lewis, I. 1964. *Somali Poetry. An Introduction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 45. Quoted in Finnegan, 1977:74.
54. Vail and White, 1991:30.
55. Ong, 1986:62-8.
56. With regard to *The Tale of the Heike*, Ong (1986:63-5) refers to Eric Rutledge's (1981) 'The Lessons of Apprenticeship: Music and Textual Variation in Japanese Epic

Tradition', paper read at the ninety-sixth annual convention of the Modern Languages Association of America, New York, 27 - 30 December. Concerning the Vedic hymns, he quotes, amongst others, Louis Renou's (1965) *The Destiny of the Veda in India*, ed. Dev Raj Chanana. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 25-6, 83-4.

57. Vail and White, 1991:30.
58. Finnegan, 1977:73.
59. Lord, 1968:5. Quoted in Finnegan, 1977:73.
60. Ong, 1986:64.
61. Ong, 1986:66. Finnegan (1977:73) makes essentially the same point: '... one needs to be cautious of statements that a piece has been "repeated exactly" on a different occasion or "handed down word for word" through a time'.
62. Ong, 1986:64.
63. Rutledge, 1981. Quoted in Ong, 1986:63.
64. Antinucci, F. 'Notes on the Linguistic Structure of Somali poetry', in Adam, H. (ed). 1979. *Somalia and the World: Proceedings of the International Symposium... Oct. 15-21, 1979* vol.1. Mogadishu: Halgan. Quoted in Ong, 1986:64.
65. Ong, 1986:64.
66. Ong, 1986:64.
67. Vail and White, 1991:xi.
68. Foley, 1990:4.
69. Vail and White, 1991:319.
70. Vail and White, 1991:320. Emphasis added.
71. Foley, 1988:57.
72. Foley, 1988:88.
73. Finnegan, 1977:72. Emphasis added.
74. Vail and White, 1991:14.
75. Havelock, E. 1963. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 100. Quoted in Vail and White, 1991:21.
76. Ong, 1986:21. Emphasis added.
77. Foley, 1988:109.
78. Foley, 1988:21.
79. Lord, 1968:141.
80. Lord, 1968:28. Emphasis added.
81. See Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:59. Quoted in Vail and White, 1991:324.
82. See Cauvin (1980:7): '[f]rom the point of view of *tradition*, sender and receiver are aware of belonging to the same social group which has its history, its unity. Through using the same language (that of the group), they are reminded of their belonging. But more or less consciously and voluntarily they accept, over and above the language, a way of thinking and a way of doing which is common to this group'. (My translation).
83. See Kelber (1994:159): 'Tradition in this encompassing sense is a circumambient contextuality or biosphere in which speaker and hearers live. It includes texts and experiences transmitted through or derived from texts... [It]... is largely an invisible nexus of references and identities from which people draw sustenance, in which they live, and in relation to which they make sense of their lives'.
84. This point is well made by Ong in the introduction to his *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*: '[w]e - readers of books such as this - are so literate that it is very difficult for us to conceive of an oral universe of communication or thought

- except as a variant of a literate universe* (Ong, 1986:2. Emphasis added).
85. Foley, 1988:111.
 86. Isidore Okpewho (1983:20) thus defines the main preoccupation of functionalism: 'the tendency was towards seeing human culture in terms of related *forms* as an aid to the understanding either of social organization, or of cultural thought, or else of creative activity'.
 87. See the New Criticism conception of literature 'as a form of human understanding'. (Selden, 1985:7).
 88. Indeed, probably less. Okpewho (1983:130) criticizes Daniel Biebuyck's method of transcribing oral tales (the tales in question are from the Nyanga territory in Zaire) 'in the heat of performance... How could the various subtleties of voice, let alone movement, be caught by this technique?' This method of recording is reflective of 'literary virtues of the texts... [being] sacrificed to functionalist haste'.
 89. Foley, 1990:5.
 90. Foley, in Foley (ed.), 1986:8.
 91. See Foley, in Foley (ed.), 1986:6-9. There are, of course, exceptions to this anonymity of the oral performer / composer. Composers of Rwandan praise poems are 'remembered by name' by those who perform their poems. (See Kagame, A. 1951. *La poésie dynastique au Rwanda*. Brussels: Institut Royal Colonial Belge, referred to in Finnegan, 1977:79). See also the individual identities of the Eskimo poets described in Rasmussen, K. 1931. *The Netsilik Eskimos. Social Life and Spiritual Culture*. Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition. New York: Putnam. The most famous examples of known oral performers are no doubt those featured in Lord's *The Singer of Tales*. (See the detailed individual account of the oral poet Avdo Mededovic, pp.99-123). Finnegan (1977:201) argues persuasively - with examples from numerous traditions - that oral poetry is *not* 'necessarily anonymous and somehow communal'. (See Finnegan, 1977:201-6).
 92. Essentially the same point is made by Finnegan (1970:2) in the introduction to her monumental *Oral Literature in Africa*. The 'most basic characteristic' of oral literature is 'the significance of its actual performance'. Where, in written literature, 'there is a distinction between the actual creation of a written literary form and its further transmission', in oral literature 'the connection between transmission and very existence is a much more intimate one'. Further reflections by Finnegan on the differences and similarities between written and oral literature will be highlighted in Chapter 3.
 93. Selden, 1985:8-9.
 94. Finnegan, 1977:89.
 95. Finnegan, 1977:25. This 'typographical definition' through which the book or oeuvre is 'set apart' or 'identified' (in relation to a particular author) is problematized by Foucault (1976), who (p.34) sees the 'unity' thus presented as 'variable and relative'.
 96. See Nattiez, 1990:10-6.
 97. Finnegan, 1977:39.
 98. Finnegan, 1977:32.
 99. Africans have also been guilty, the most celebrated example being Leopoldt Senghor with his 'Emotion is completely Negro as Reason is Greek'. For a detailed discussion of some of the underpinnings of Senghor's thought in this regard, see J.M. Ita's 'Frobenius, Senghor and the Image of Africa', in Finnegan and Horton (eds.), 1973.

100. See McLuhan, M. 1970. *Counterblast*. London, 13-14. (Quoted in Vail and White, 1991:25).
101. Finnegan, 1977:39.
102. Foley (1988:110) remarks on the 'academic prestige' enjoyed by the literatures of the 'dead-language traditions'.
103. Foley, 1988:23.
104. As shown in Foley (1988:22), Parry had earlier, in his Master's thesis submitted in 1923, anticipated this link, even if he would have at this point considered the oral tradition as actually '*preceding* Homer and serving as the crucible for the gradual creation of his phraseology'. (Emphasis added).
105. See Parry, 1971:439. Quoted in Foley, 1988:15.
106. Foley, 1988:30.
107. Foley, 1988:28. Emphasis added.
108. See Kelber, 1994a:159.
109. Foley, 1994:169. Emphasis added.
110. Ong, 1986:18.
111. 'Primitive', no doubt, in the *unchauvinistic* sense of original or primary.
112. As Foley (1988:1-10) reflects, the idea of a 'single genius author' (Unitarian school) had been discredited in favour of one of 'many Homers' (Analyst school) from as early as Friedrich Wolf's publication, in 1795, of *Prolegomena ad Homerum*. While the debate between the Analysts and the Unitarians (single versus multiple authorship controversy) was to continue throughout the nineteenth century right up to Parry's era, the Unitarians 'never developed the kind of school or methodological sophistication that characterized the activities of the Analysts, being mostly content merely to assert their views and to offer opinions based on subjective apprehensions'. (Foley, 1988:5).
113. In relation to the *guslari*, Lord (1968:141) makes mention of 'true artists' as somehow distinct from the 'panorama of individual singers' who form the basis of his and Parry's Serbo-Croate research. Given that all of these singers are *per definition* traditional and therefore equally subject to the forms and mechanisms of their tradition, this particular distinction seems of little theoretical interest in terms of situating oral 'art'.
114. Parry, 1971:421. Quoted in Foley, 1988:20.
115. Parry, 1971:424-5. Quoted in Foley, 1988:21.
116. Foley, 1988:21.
117. Bennett, 1990:31. Emphasis added.
118. Bennett, 1990:158.
119. See Kant, E. 1957. *The Critique of Judgement*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 50-1. Quoted in Bennett, 1990:159.
120. See Bourdieu, P. 1979. *La Distinction: Critique social du jugement*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 54-5. Bennett (1990:159) summarizes his argument as follows: 'disinterestness constitutes a particular form of posturing on the part of the subject which, while serving specific social interests, simultaneously masks those interests as well as its own use in their service'.
121. Ong, 1986:22.
122. See the following description of a poetic tradition on which Parry opens his 1923 Master's thesis: '[j]ust as the story of the Fall of Troy, the tale of the House of Labdakos, and the other Greek epic legends were not themselves the original fictions

of certain authors, but creations of a whole people, passed through one generation to another and gladly given to anyone who wished to tell them, so the style in which they were to be told was not a matter of individual creation, but a popular tradition, evolved by centuries of poets and audiences, which the composer of heroic verse might follow *without any thought of plagiarism, indeed, without knowledge that such a thing existed*'. (Parry, 1971:421. Emphasis added). Quoted in Foley (1988:20).

123. While broadly agreeing with this, Finnegan mentions examples of societies (the Dinka of Southern Sudan, the Dobuan islanders, various Polynesian communities) where some kind of 'ownership' of poetic creations - attached either to the person of the poet or the person or family to whom the creation is dedicated - is explicitly recognized. (See Finnegan, 1977:201-5).
124. See Lord, A. 1968. Homer as an Oral Poet. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 72. Quoted in Finnegan, 1977:69.
125. Foley, 1988:36.
126. Foley, 1988:11-8.
127. Foley, 1988:33.
128. Selden, 1985:114-5. Emphasis added. See in this regard Jauss, H. 1982. *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, transl. T. Bahti. Brighton: Harvester Press.
129. Foley, 1988:32.
130. See Lord, 1968:12-7, where some of these 'conditions of reception' of the Serbo-Croat epic are described. With regard to audience appreciation, he mentions (p.149) the ability of the traditional audience to value 'ornamentation' *for its own sake*, making the audience relatively unconcerned with 'a preconceived idea of structural unity' as applied to a work of art in a more modern sense. The meaning of a particular theme also 'involves its (the audience's) own experience of it'.
131. See Macherey, P. 1977. 'Problems of Reflection', in *Literature, Society and the Sociology of Literature: Proceedings of University of Essex Conference, 1976*, ed. Barker, F. *et al.* Colchester: University of Essex, 41-54, p.45. Quoted in Easthope, 1991:59.
132. Ong, 1986:9.
133. Lord, 1968:14.
134. Lord, 1968:147-8.
135. See Eco, 1979:17.
136. Foley, 1988:110.
137. Exactly in what this 'originality' consists - a question which, it can be argued, is perhaps not fully accounted for in the conception of oral literature set out here - will be further investigated in Chapter 2 and especially - with regard to the notion of oral literature - in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 2

ORALITY / ORAL TRADITION

2.1 *Introduction*

Of greatest significance to the field of Oral Theory is the notion of tradition. It was from the primary insight that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were traditional texts that Milman Parry was able to postulate that they were (also) oral. The idea of oral composition, which, in Lord's¹ words, distinguishes the (truly) *oral* from the 'oral in any except the most literal sense', only came about because of its appropriateness to the *traditional* mode of composition / creation formulated by Parry on the basis of the formal characteristics of the Homeric poems. If the traditional text is *of necessity* oral, it is because the oral is (pre)determined by the traditional. In other words, there is no orality that is not traditional². As the traditional is *already* oral, the term 'oral tradition' is, in fact, a tautology.

We opened Chapter 1 with Lord's observation that oral tells us 'how', traditional tells us 'what'. 'Tradition' can be said, then, to denote *more* than the actual *oral* text which it serves to 'explain'. It indicates a *mode of being*, a 'way of life', of which the text will be a reflection. Beyond the traditional text lies the traditional *artist*, the traditional *culture*. The traditional text is *oral* because the oral *medium* best lends itself to expressing its *traditional* essence. The juxtaposition of tradition and orality in the title of this chapter can therefore justifiably evoke the relation of substance to vehicle. Vital to the tradition (even exclusively so), the oral voice is at the same time secondary to it. It is this aspect of the relation between tradition and oral medium that underlies Lord's³ reflection on the inadequacy of the written medium for the oral poet. The oral voice *best* serves the tradition:

In putting a pen into Homer's hand, one runs the danger of making a bad poet out of him. The singer not only has a perfectly satisfactory method of composition already in the highly developed oral technique of composition, but is actually hampered and restricted by writing. *The method he knows came into being for the very purpose of rapid composition before a live audience...* Writing is a slow process even at best, and the oral poet would find it annoying, indeed, not worth the bother.

Thus goes the oral-formulaic theory. In Chapter 1 we noted a range of doubts as to the applicability of this theory in regard to its hypotheses on the specifics of oral form or technique, hypotheses which fail to address the ever-increasing variety of form exhibited by the oral text. Significantly, however, criticism of the oral-formulaic theory has tended to be

confined to the latter's affirmation of the formula as compositional basis of the oral text. The overt interdependence the theory establishes between the oral and the traditional (in a sense the two are, in fact, equated - Lord asserts that Homer *is* the tradition) has gone largely unchallenged. Foley's description of the growth of Oral Theory as 'extending to more than one hundred separate language traditions' (as opposed to, say, one hundred separate *languages*) is something of a truism of Oral Theory.

As a starting point for our assessment of the theoretical implications - for orality - of the notion of tradition, it may be helpful to consider a more or less 'general' (in so far as it addresses itself to the broad sphere of 'human sciences') definition of tradition. Michel Foucault⁴ provides the following description:

It [the concept of tradition] is intended to provide a determinate temporal status for a set of phenomena that are at once successive and identical (or at least similar); it [therefore] makes it possible to reconceptualize the scatteredness of history within the form of sameness; it allows for the reduction of the difference inherent in all beginnings, so as to extend without any discontinuity towards the ever indefinite assumption of origin. As a result of it [literally: 'thanks to it'] one is able to isolate all that is new against a background of permanence, and to attribute its merits to the originality, the talent and the initiative that pertains to the individual.

We can readily make out the essential assumptions of the oral-formulaic theory in the light of this definition. What is given a 'definite temporal status' within oral tradition is, of course, oral poetry (or oral *texts*). These constitute a 'set of phenomena' which are, on the basis of particular formal characteristics (the formula), seen as identical / similar in their successiveness. In the process all that could be conceived of as *divergent* can be (re)interpreted as manifestations of a certain 'sameness' - an *essence* which, we may advance here (we shall return to this point in more detail), tends to center around cultural stability. Parallel to these conceptions is the idea of the continuous pursual of undefined roots or origins extending ever further back into the past (*remonter sans discontinuer dans l'assignation indéfinie de l'origine*), through which is absorbed whatever could be conceived of as 'new beginnings' or 'different'. Is it a coincidence that Parry's insight (he was a classicist, remember) came about through his preoccupation with this *original* of Western civilization that is the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*? The original, the 'classical', can only be conceived of in relation to tradition.

The one element in the above definition that might, to some extent, seem to be at odds with

the specifically *oral* tradition, is no doubt Foucault's view of tradition as providing a backdrop of stability and permanence, against which to offset the genius of the hero. The notion of 'author', let alone *individual* author, becomes largely untenable not just with regard to the oral-formulaic theory, but indeed with regard to the oral text *as such* (as was argued in the second part of Chapter 1). Creative genius cannot be 'shown up' within oral tradition as something specific or individual; instead, the tradition *itself* is conceived of as 'creative'. Oral tradition can be *about* heroes, but it would *per definition* have little room for a Rimbaud or a Baudelaire (to name only examples from French poetry) who can be said to have 'revolutionised' or 'changed the course' of a particular type of literary expression. Literary heroes are written. (See Chapter 1, note 91).

Foucault, the philosopher of exclusion, of course questions the very validity of the notion of tradition. He suspects the latter, along with the other notions⁵ by which (Western) man makes sense of his knowledge, to have become unreflective, a 'ready-made synthesis' obviating prior analysis. His objective of (re)theorising these notions requires a radical break with the very organization or coherence that these notions have come to imply, and engages us, instead, to consider them on a basis of 'scatteredness' and 'discontinuity' which may well be their true conceptual content⁶.

*My concern in this chapter is by comparison extremely modest. The validity of the notion of tradition as descriptive of a field of information (relating to the form, content and mode of generation of a certain type of text) is not in question. What does make Foucault's conception of particular interest to our analysis, however, is his branding of 'tradition', beyond the information / knowledge it purports to characterize, as instrument used by the researcher for his own purposes. Instead of saying what 'tradition' means (or is), Foucault talks about what is intended by it (*elle vise à*), what is made possible by it (*elle permet, elle autorise*), what can be done thanks to it (*grâce à elle, on peut*). 'Tradition' offers a convenient means of classification of data, it is, as was already advanced in Chapter 1, a 'conceptual tool'.*

If this insight is to guide our exploration of *oral* tradition, the following question needs to be considered. What 'functions', apart from the general ones mentioned in the above definition, does Oral Theory *specifically* attach to the notion of tradition, and further, why is the notion of *particular* use to Oral Theory?

The answer to the first part of our question is straightforward enough. Oral implies

(spoken) language, language implies communication; the oral tradition is concerned with *transmission* by means of the spoken word (as opposed to, say, transmission by imitation⁷). The primary function of tradition is, therefore, 'the transmission of the verbal elements of culture by oral means', conceived by Jack Goody and Ian Watt 'as a long chain of interlocking conversations between members of the group'⁸. But this view of tradition (or rather, this emphasis on a particular verbal / oral kind of tradition) may well appear somewhat trivial. Communication (transmission) in 'face-to-face contact' is surely a defining element of all social activity⁹ and in that sense can be focused upon by any number of the 'human sciences'. The 'tradition' of interest to the discipline of Oral Theory must necessarily be of a particular type. To say that the tradition is subject to transmission via the spoken word is not enough. The face-to-face contact that constitutes it must be a special face-to-face contact, a special 'chain of interlocking conversations'.

This brings us to what may, on the face of it, appear to be a circular statement, theoretically non-sensical: the transmission via the spoken word that delimitates the field of interest of Oral Theory is a transmission via the spoken word *that is oral*. But the picture changes if we insist on 'oral' as having a special meaning *not* intended for 'spoken', a meaning that would take it beyond being the (mere) *vehicle of tradition* as characterized earlier in this chapter. Lord's much quoted "'Oral" tells us "how", but traditional tells us "what"' can, in fact, be misleading. The orientation given the term 'oral' within the oral-formulaic theory relates 'oral' as much to 'traditional' as to 'spoken', if not, in fact, more. 'Oral' does not only tell us that we are dealing with a tradition (exclusively) subject to the spoken word, it also elucidates the specific context (society) in which that tradition is found. It tells us 'how' *and* it tells us 'what'.

A special meaning of 'oral' was of course already discussed at some length in Chapter 1. The 'truly' oral is what is composed orally (composed-in-performance). The oral tradition can be understood, to paraphrase Goody and Watt's definition referred to above, as 'a series of interlocking *performances* / compositions'. (The performance is a *conversation* in so far as it provokes participation from the audience). But to regard this definition of oral tradition as constitutive of the object of study of Oral Theory would be wrong on two accounts. First, to limit the field of interest of Oral Theory to the relatively restricted number of oral traditions / texts lending themselves to the rigid application of the oral-formulaic theory implied in this definition would be self-defeating in so far as the constitution of Oral Theory as *discipline*

is concerned. (A more 'encompassing' view of Oral Theory was proposed in Chapter 1, based on Parry's Homeric research yet avoiding the oral-formulaic theory *as such*). Second, it is impossible to postulate oral composition-in-performance on the basis of the observation of a particular performance (not to mention on the basis of the analysis of a particular written - transcribed - text, the formula also being a feature of much poetry composed in writing). The person performing in front of you may well *not* be part of the composition-in-performance tradition. Lord¹⁰ is clear about this:

The collector... must be wary; for he will find singers who have memorized songs... In spite of authentic manner of presentation, in spite of the fact that the songs themselves are often oral poems, we cannot consider such singers as oral poets. They are *mere* performers. Such experiences have deceived us and have robbed the real oral poet of credit as creative composer...

Oral composition-in-performance can only be advanced with anything approaching certainty *after* the study of a number of performances / texts, many of which may turn out not to fit the theory. Yet - and this is where the real 'special meaning' of 'oral' comes into play - *something* would have attracted the researcher to the performances he observed or the texts he analysed *before* he considered their appropriateness to the theory in question. They are oral, yes, and they serve as the transmission of a tradition. But most important of all, they are expressions of what the researcher has *pre-defined* as a 'traditional' *society / culture*. The tradition of interest to Oral Theory is not so much a process of cultural transmission within a society / culture, as something (a particular set of data) by which a society / culture is *qualified* as traditional. If the substance of this qualification relates to both the terms 'oral' and 'tradition(al)', how, and on what level, is this relation envisaged? We shall attempt an answer to this question later in this chapter. First, however, we need to consider more pertinently the question of Oral Theory as study (theory) of the 'other'.

In Chapter 1 we spoke about what we can now term a certain anthropological *bias* in Oral Theory, at least as it became formulated in and through Parry's (and especially Lord's) comparative research. (See Foley's description of Oral Theory as a 'literary anthropology'). The horizons of expectations of the oral text remain inaccessible to the researcher in so far as he regards himself as outside the tradition he is investigating. Our remarks above now enable us to take this exclusion a step further. The researcher is also outside the society, outside the culture in which the tradition is observed. If this society / culture is conceived of as *inherently* 'traditional', it stands to reason that the society / culture of the researcher is not.

In short, the one is different to the other, and it is this very difference that becomes the *raison d'être* of the discipline. The researcher of Oral Theory turns out to be an anthropologist studying 'alien cultures'¹¹; the discipline of Oral Theory is subsumed into the discipline of anthropology, 'dedicated to describing and explaining "their" cultures to "us"'¹².

I have taken what I identified as the 'anthropological bias' of Oral Theory and, to use a well-worn phrase, 'drawn it through to its logical conclusion'. This is not entirely fair. Quite apart from important changes of emphasis *within* anthropology itself, tending towards the dissolution of the us:them dichotomy (if not completely so), the 'new understanding of orality' brought about by Parry's discovery has more often than not been interpreted as nothing less than a statement on the unity of man: 'Orality-Literacy Studies and the Unity of the Human Race'¹³, reads the title of a well-known article by Walter Ong. Of course, the very same Walter Ong is castigated by Vail and White for the role that he would have played, within Oral Theory, in the theorization of a 'notional oral man' which, as far as they are concerned, *epitomizes* the hackneyed us:them opposition. Nothing better illustrates the complexity of the relation between Oral Theory and anthropology (or, more accurately, between Oral Theory and the conception of certain societies / cultures as 'alien') than this contradiction.

It is through an exploration of this contradiction that we shall come to a fuller characterization of 'oral tradition'. But there is a more obvious (and, in a sense, less problematic) link between Oral Theory and anthropology, which becomes apparent when we disassociate Oral Theory from its oral-formulaic 'basis' so as for it to refer to the study of the oral text in general. A brief detour of some of the major theoretical approaches to the study of the oral text will clarify this link.

2.2 *Oral Tradition as Anthropology*

Ruth Finnegan, as we saw in Chapter 1, sees Romanticism as central to the study of 'oral literature', on which it has 'a profound and continuing influence'¹⁴. Given the fascination of Romanticism with the 'lost' and the 'other' it is also strongly reflective of the *evolutionist* approach, in terms of which 'societies progress up through set stages with "survivals" from earlier strata sometimes continuing in later ones'¹⁵. In terms of Finnegan's analysis two elements of Romanticism stand out:

- A certain dissatisfaction (within Western intellectual history) with the 'externally-

imposed, mechanical and rationalist forms of the contemporary world', and the subsequent yearning for 'the world of organic and emotional unity' - echoes, in fact, of Rousseau's 'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains';

- The fact that the Romantic fascination for the 'lost' or 'other' is often accompanied by the assertion of a perceived national identity, broadly tracable to the French Revolution:

The outburst of nationalism in Europe following the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars has often been remarked as one of the strands of Romanticism. Along with this went an emphasis on local origins and languages, accompanied by an enthusiasm for the collection of 'folklore' in various senses - what would now be called 'oral literature' (ballads, folk songs, stories) as well as 'traditional' dances and vernacular languages and 'customs'. The political and ideological implications of this return to 'origins' are obvious...¹⁶.

Alongside 'romantic and evolutionist theories' as approach to oral poetry, Finnegan also discusses the 'historical-geographical' school¹⁷ (concerned with the tracing of the historical and geographical origins of the oral text), the sociology of literature¹⁸ (concerned with the relation between the oral text and the society in which it occurs), and what we may call the 'dichotomous model' approach¹⁹ (in which the oral text is seen as reflective of a particular *primitive* 'ideal type' society understood in relation to a *modern* 'ideal type' society).

In a detailed overview of 'the oral narrative theory' in relation to the African myth, Isidore Okpewho deals with the following:

*Evolutionism*²⁰, which regards 'traditional tales' as reflective of 'an earlier world-view or set of ideas about man and his environment' (what Finnegan refers to as a 'survival');

*Psychoanalysis*²¹, which understands the myth as a manifestation of 'sexual wishfulfilment' (Sigmund Freud) or conversely, as a manifestation of the 'collective psychic substratum' (Carl Gustav Jung);

*Diffusionism*²², which studies myths with a view to finding traces of cultural similarities resulting from historical contact and geographical contiguity between different peoples (see Finnegan's 'historical-geographical' school);

*Functionalism*²³, in which the myth is seen as a particular societal *need* forming part of the 'functional unity' of the society (see Finnegan's reference to the sociology of literature);

*Symbolism*²⁴, which considers the myth as a *reference* 'for a different and larger order of reality', a reflection of 'archetypal phenomena of mental activity' (Ernst Cassirer, following

Jung);

*Formalism*²⁵, concerned with the classification of tales according to their 'morphology', i.e. their 'component motifs' or 'functions', and regarded as crucial to any properly historical study of the origins of an oral tale (Wolfgang Propp);

*Structuralism*²⁶, in which the myth is conceived as 'unit of communication' within an unconscious cultural *system* analogous to Ferdinand de Saussure's formulation of the linguistic system (Claude Lévi-Strauss).

These approaches are reflective of three broad 'traditions of scholarship'²⁷, namely the *ethnological* (focusing on 'the nature of human society in terms of the forms and ends of social activity' so as to 'draw conclusions about man as a cultural being'), the *cognitionist* (concerned with 'questions about the thought processes of man both individually and collectively'), and finally, the *taxonomist* (in terms of which 'the tale is picked to pieces to find out the units of ideas from which it has been put together and the order... of relations into which these units fit'). While it stands to reason that none of the approaches surveyed owes exclusive allegiance to a particular field of scholarship²⁸, a broad categorization according to predominant assumptions is nonetheless possible in most of the cases. The ethnologist field can be seen as chiefly represented by evolutionism and functionalism, the cognitionist by psycho-analysis and symbolism, the taxonomist by diffusionism and formalism.

Okpewho also draws attention to a further distinction, relating to two 'generations' of theorists²⁹. The first generation, which groups together evolutionists, psychoanalysts and diffusionists, sees human culture 'from the perspective of *individual* units of ideas that [are] more or less disembodied virtues': evolutionists focus on 'elementary ideas', psychoanalysts on 'mental symbols', diffusionists on 'motifs'. The second generation comprises functionalists, symbolists and formalists, and sees human culture in terms of '*related forms*' with a view to understanding either 'social organization' (functionalism), or 'cultural thought' (symbolism), or 'creative activity' (formalism). In other words, the ethnological, cognitionist and taxonomist fields of scholarship all broadly reflect the same movement. The myth / tale, first focused upon and analysed as isolated 'element' or 'unit' (phenomenon), subsequently tends towards being perceived as 'form' and analysed in terms of its relation to the society as a whole. Structuralism represents the fullest realization of this process.

How can Oral Theory as *theory* - deriving from Parry's discovery - be related to these approaches? Okpewho, unlike Finnegan, pays relatively scant attention to Parry and Lord, making no overt mention of the oral-formulaic theory in the work in question³⁰. He describes as the 'burden'³¹ of Parry's research into the formula and theme of the Homeric poems (which he aligns to Propp's formalist endeavour of 'tracing the mode of arrangement of motifs within a recognizable class of tales') the demonstration that 'the oral narrator works with a limited body of material' (or - adopting a more structuralist turn of phrase in regard to the myth - that 'the bewildering diversity of mythical motifs can be reduced to a very small number of schemes'³²). Elsewhere³³ he appreciates that Parry's philological concern 'for the subtleties (stylistic and otherwise) of a language' (despite 'the limitations of his statistical interest'), makes for a 'loyal' transcription of the oral text, and Parry is credited - perhaps³⁴ - with showing a certain sensitivity to the aesthetic quality of the oral text.

The association of Parry's philological method with that of formalism is, indeed, not without justification. Of course, the level of analysis generally differs. While Parry is drawn to questions of style, the *form* in which the tale is cast, its rhythmic properties as presented in the particular deployment of lexicon and syntax, Propp is concerned with the *content* of the tale, the identification of its constituent motifs as well as how they relate to each other in the development of the plot³⁵. But the formulaic nature of Parry's oral expression also forms part of a more general *formulaic system* serving not just the 'versificational', but also the 'tale-telling needs' of the oral poet. The *themes* of the narrative are 'formulaic' as well, an insight that the formalist should find eminently useful.

There is, of course, also the related matter of working with the text *as text*. The taxonomist enterprise of 'picking the tale to pieces' should be broadly applicable to the view of the oral text as 'thing in itself' elaborated in the second part of Chapter 1. It is significant, in this respect, that Okpewho talks about 'creative activity' as object of understanding of formalism (when ethnologist and cognitionist enterprises respectively aim at an understanding of 'social organization' and 'cultural thought'). From this point of view formalism would no doubt come closest to establishing the kind of aesthetic *horizons of expectations* required in order to break down what we can now justifiably call the traditional 'otherness' of the oral text. (Let us not forget, moreover, the influence of formalism in modernist literary theory). This 'traditionality' lies at the heart of Oral Theory's anthropological bias, a bias which we of course to some extent tried to circumvent in our attempt at locating the theoretical basis of

Oral Theory in its implied proclamation of the oral text as (virtual) *literature*. (See Chapter 1). The initial impetus of Parry's research was of a philological or literary (formalist), *rather than* an anthropological (tending towards the ethnologist or cognitionist) nature.

'Anthropological bias' can most certainly be the watchword for the 'oral narrative theory' Okpewho examines. One could argue, in fact, that the issue is less one of narrative theory than of *anthropological theory based on narrative data*. What unites the various perspectives is their neglect of what Okpewho terms the 'aesthetic principle' of myth in favour of an almost exclusively 'cultural' focus.

Okpewho's book essentially concerns an elaboration of this (alternative) aesthetic approach, in regard to which he draws on G.S. Kirk's 'criteria' of *fantasy* and *ingenuity*³⁶. His approach to the aesthetic / artistic character of the oral text follows a different path to the one elaborated in Chapter 1, and seems to take little account of the Parry / Lord conception of what we earlier described as the 'ongoing process' or even 'creativity' of the oral tradition. Perhaps illustrative of this divergence is his assertion that 'myth is the result of the *individual whim of the artist* resisting the constraints of time-bound reality or the *hackneyed resources of tradition*'³⁷, a view and a turn of phrase which - taking myth as oral poetry - it would certainly be difficult to imagine shared by Albert Lord. Did he not demonstrate that there was no such thing as a 'hackneyed' oral tradition? More about this later. Suffice it to remark, at this point, that the perception of a so-called 'primitive imagination' manifested in the anthropological approaches surveyed by Okpewho is at best one of ambivalence, with the ultimate stress being very much on lack of creativity. Where a particular 'anthropological' reading of a tale does, in fact, point to creativity on the part of its originators / performers (Sir James Frazer's naturalist³⁸ construction of the Egyptian god Osiris as a 'corn spirit' implied, for example, that 'the "primitive" mind... [had created] a fictive entity out of nothing and [endowed] it with the dimensions of observable life'³⁹), such creativity is never integrated into a conception of the tale as *art*. This failure to take the aesthetic seriously is perhaps best summarized in the position held by structuralism. On the one hand structuralism can be praised⁴⁰:

by uniting a concern for the vivid details of life (ethnography) with an interest in the abstract structure of activity (taxonomy) in its search for the basis of human behaviour (cognition), it [structuralism] has provided by far the most challenging understanding of the most fundamental issues in cultural scholarship.

On the other hand, however, Okpewho agrees with Henri Wald⁴¹ that

[by] reducing men to the station of a thing structuralism reduces time to the present and thus abolishes man's most human property: *the freedom to contest and to create*.

Let us now turn to the 'cultural' aspects of myth as reflected in the various anthropological perspectives. Most outstanding amongst these would be the particular community's 'way of life' (ethnology) and its 'way of thinking' (cognition). Of course, the anthropological preoccupation shared by these approaches does not necessarily lead to the 'cultural aspects' supposedly illustrated by myth being evaluated in the same way. Appraisals of the 'other' vary considerably. Crucial in this respect is the balance⁴² between, on the one hand, the 'parochial (or historical) imperative':

the tendency to see cultural history in terms of individual societies or cultures and thus to explain cultural similarities across the world... in terms of progressive historical contacts between one society and another,

and, on the other, the 'universalist conscience':

the understanding that human beings all over the world are united by one psychic or spiritual bond.

The parochial and the universalist are identified by Okpewho as the two 'contending thrusts' within anthropological theory, at least since the nineteenth century. They tend, to a large extent, to override the particular theoretical perspective adopted by the researcher. The ethnological cannot be regarded as *per definition* predominantly 'parochial', nor, for that matter, the cognitionist as predominantly 'universalist'. Even more confusingly, the two contrasting 'thrusts' (assumptions) do not necessarily give rise to similarly contrasting appraisals of the 'other'. We see, for example, the parochial (evolutionist) Herbert Tylor's⁴³ interpretation of what 'the history of civilization teaches', namely:

that up to a certain point savages and barbarians are like our ancestors were and our peasants still are, but from this common level the superior intellect of the progressive races has raised their nations to new heights of culture,

finding an undeniable echo in the universalist Jung's (he elaborated the idea of a *collective* unconscious) qualification, on a visit to America, of people of African descent as the 'lower races' and 'barbaric'⁴⁴.

Our appraisal of those we perceive as different to ourselves is not determined by the theoretical school we subscribe to, nor by our fundamental assumption as to the essence of human culture, at least as explained above (lying either in the universality of man or in the particularity of historical experience). Is there a determining factor in this respect, and,

perhaps more importantly, does Oral Theory bring any particular insights to the question? The pervasiveness, within Oral Theory, not just of the notion of tradition but indeed of *traditional culture / society*, obliges us, at this point, to take specific account of ways in which Oral Theory either confirms or modifies anthropological appraisals of the 'other'.

2.3 *Oral Tradition within Oral Theory*

The existence of Oral Theory as discipline is most often justified on the basis of the field of research inaugurated by its assertion of the particular nature of the oral text. This field of research would *before* either have been ignored as unworthy of study (Finnegan's 'dismissive approach'), or otherwise submerged in chiefly the fields of anthropology or classical studies, where the respective 'distinctive features' for purposes of academic interest would have been 'cultural difference' and 'historical' *rather than* 'oral'. Given its variety of research interests (as reflected in Foley's 1988 overview of the history and methodology of Oral Theory - see Chapter 1), any 'brief summary' of the field would no doubt be guilty of over-simplification. Yet, narrowly adhering to the much-heralded 'discovery' and its implications (i.e. the Parry-Lord thesis), I believe one could highlight two main areas of interest within the broader field, namely:

- the compositional basis of the oral text in so far as it relates to a distinctive / alternative 'traditional' model of creativity, and, flowing from it;
- the ways in which the stylistic forms of the oral text (deriving from its compositional basis) regulates or facilitates audience appreciation and hence, integration or 'uptake' into the oral tradition of a society, conceived of as its 'store of knowledge'.

At the risk, once again, of over-simplifying, the former of these concerns would be predominantly aligned to the literary orientation of Oral Theory, the latter to the anthropological. (The approach implicit in these concerns is, of course, questioned by those authors emphasizing the oral text as social practice - this will be discussed in Chapter 3). Most of the work of at least some of the best-known authorities within the field of Oral Theory (such as Ong, Foley and Havelock) addresses itself to both of the above 'areas', which would seem to cover whatever theoretical justification Oral Theory may require. Yet there is a further justification, relating specifically to the perception of the 'other' (or what we earlier called the us:them dichotomy). Ong has been particularly adamant in this regard.

We have already noted how he characterizes Parry's discovery as an *undercutting* of

'cultural chauvinism'. This relates, on a primary level, to the fact that Parry enables us to 'get into' (appreciate?) the Homeric poetry 'on this poetry's own terms, even when these ran counter to the received view of what poetry and poets ought to be'⁴⁵. But Parry's demonstration has much wider implications. In his 1967 *The Presence of the Word*, while not exactly relating this insight to an actual (new) discipline (in later works he will talk about orality-literacy studies), Ong is already in no doubt as to the enormity of the stakes. He notably qualifies Parry's work - as passed on through Lord and Havelock - as having the result 'that our entire understanding of classical culture... has to be revised - and with it our understanding of later cultures up to our own time...'⁴⁶. In short, at stake is a new conception of the 'other', whether it means those that have gone before us or those that are culturally different from us. (This distinction echoes the 'Romantic fascination' with the 'lost' or 'other' mentioned earlier). The qualification 'oral' therefore comes to extend far beyond the oral text or oral performer that were the primary object of Parry and Lord's initial research.

I would like, for purposes of clarity, to isolate two more or less distinct elements in Ong's thinking in this regard, even though Ong himself will probably argue that the two 'elements' are interdependent to the point of being the same. First there is the idea of the oral (or oral-aural) *culture*, in which the word, detached from any kind of visual representation or support (this conception will be looked at in more detail in Chapter 4) functions 'in its original habitat of sound'⁴⁷. The most important effect that this 'state of the word' has for the culture in question, and which also lies at the root of its being *different* to *our* culture, bears on the relationship to time, and hence, memory. The 'purely oral' word cannot function (as it does when it has been committed to writing) as an 'aid to recall'; an oral culture possesses no actual records:

In an oral-aural culture one can ask about something, but no-one can look up anything. As a result, in an oral culture there is no history in our modern sense of the term. The past is indeed present, as to a degree the past always is, but it is present in the speech and social institutions of the people, not in the more abstract forms in which modern history deals⁴⁸.

Taken at face value (in direct relation to the oral-formulaic theory as discussed earlier), this passage does little more than provide an explanation for the formulaic nature of oral texts. If the past can only be accessed through 'speech and social institutions', people should obviously find ways to make their speech in this respect as 'memorable' (or *mnemonic*) as

possible. Under these conditions the expression of 'given essential ideas' (about, for example, the past) by means of groups of words 'regularly employed under the same metrical conditions' (Parry's definition of the formula) is hardly surprising. The formula serves the same purpose as the written record, and, in that sense, is broadly analogous to it. The 'standardized themes' so characteristic of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which form part of a general 'formulaic system' favouring, in Parry's parlance, versificational *as well as* 'tale-telling' needs, could be accounted for on the same basis, particularly where, as is common, they are accompanied by striking visual imagery. The latter is equally susceptible to recall, the 'ocular equivalents of verbal formulas'⁴⁹. The particular kind of speech (text) Ong has in mind here is, of course, the epic (more precisely, the ancient Greek epic), which has been shown by especially Havelock to contain mnemonically patterned 'enclaves of contrived speech'⁵⁰ through which, as Foley⁵¹ puts it, 'the learning necessary for the society as a whole is encoded'.

What Ong tells us in the above-quoted passage is that the oral culture's different conception of history (and, to some extent, of knowledge) is attributable to the oral way in which its knowledge is stored. This is certainly an important ethnographic statement which, as Goody⁵² has argued, may well be *the* crucial factor in the organization of society. However (and this brings us to the second 'element' in Ong's thinking), is it also - and, in fact, predominantly - a cognitionist one?

This is the crux of Ong's argument. Ong builds on Havelock's thesis with regard to the 'rhetorical structuring'⁵³ of speech in Greek oral culture, seeing it, however, not so much for its evocation of particular (oral) social practices as for its implication of a particular oral *thought*:

In an oral culture the mnemonic procedures which we today ordinarily associate with verse are not only part of ordinary extrapoetic verbalization but actually determine thought structures as well⁵⁴.

After reminding us that the 'economy of storage' requires 'orally conditioned knowledge to be relatively rigid or typical', the link between thought and formula is made clear:

The formulary character of oral performance is responsible for the development of the doctrine of the commonplaces or *loci communes* which dominated skilled verbal performance from oral-aural times until the maturing of the romantic age. The *loci communes* were essentially formulaic modes of expression derivative from oral practice and perpetuating oral psychological structures⁵⁵.

In Ong's 1982 *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*, a chapter dealing with the 'psychodynamics of orality'⁵⁶ brings the idea of peculiarly oral thought to explication by advancing the following 'characteristics': oral thought is *additive rather than subordinative*⁵⁷; *aggregative rather than analytic*⁵⁸; *redundant or 'copious'*⁵⁹ (it does not have an externalized "'line" of continuity'); *conservative or traditionalist*⁶⁰ (oral thought lacks the freedom 'to turn itself to new speculation'); *close to the human lifeworld*⁶¹ (it does not 'structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience'); *agonistically toned*⁶² (rather than what one might call 'disinterested' or 'neutral'); *empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced*⁶³; *homeostatic*⁶⁴ (rather than retentive of - let alone actually cultivating - what might be considered 'archaic' or somehow 'deviant' or 'curious'); *situational rather than abstract*⁶⁵.

The 'oral man' against whom Vail and White have been warning us since the first section of Chapter 1 has finally arrived. The issue is not, however, to accept or reject him (depending on whether we agree that he exists), but rather whether - reality or illusion - he should have been allowed to board Oral Theory in the first place. If Ong opens the work in which the above argument is crystalised by a section entitled 'Milman Parry's discovery', it is that he sees his own arguments as a logical development of the *theory* for which Parry is credited. But at least one eminent researcher, frequently drawn upon by Ong in the work in question, arrives at conclusions very similar to his, without according Parry anything like the prominence given him by the likes of Ong and others within the oral traditional field⁶⁶ (although he discusses Parry's research in connection with the 'oral' origins of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). Author or editor of, amongst others, works like *Literacy in Traditional Societies* and *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*⁶⁷, the anthropologist Jack Goody does not feature in Foley's overview of the history and methodology of Oral Theory⁶⁸. It may however be useful, at this point, to make yet another brief incursion into anthropology so as to place Ong's argument in a broader (and perhaps more satisfactory) context, and with it, the general question of Oral Theory's appraisal of the 'other' (not to mention its understanding of 'tradition').

Towards the end of his *Orality and Literacy*⁶⁹, Ong suggests that the 'less invidious and more positive term "oral"' should replace the anthropological characterizations 'inferior' (Lucien Lévy-Bruhl), 'primitive' (Franz Boas) and 'savage' (Claude Lévi-Strauss), which denote 'well-meant, but essentially limiting approaches'. Lévi-Strauss's famous 'the savage mind totalizes' should become 'the oral mind totalizes'⁷⁰. In his 1987 article referred to earlier

he repeats this plea:

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 synchronically⁷¹.

Ong starts with what is essentially a corrective of a 'misreading' of literature (Parry's discovery) and ends up by suggesting what amounts to new anthropological categories. Where Ong explicitly motivates his suggestion by reference to the 'unity of the human race', Goody, however, sees his own emphasis on the anthropological importance of the emergence of writing more specifically as a basis from which to rework previous anthropological oppositions between 'us' and 'them'. Cast in less idealistic, generally more 'low-key' terms, Goody's ideas reflect a mixture of his own observations made during extensive field-work (notably in Africa), as well as a strong interest in classical Greece, which he terms the first 'literate'⁷² culture and (consequently) regards - linking up with Havelock⁷³ - as offering *the* illustration of the 'implications' of literacy in a society.

'Implications' as opposed to 'consequences'. In the introduction to his 1968 *Literacy in Traditional Societies* Goody thus 'corrects' the title of the seminal article written by himself and Ian Watt in 1963, noting that they had considered literacy as a 'potentiality' as regards changes in behaviour and social order rather than as a 'sufficient cause'. A recurring motive in Goody's work - one that is also recognized by his critics⁷⁴ - is, in fact, his regular *caveats*⁷⁵ against the 'liberating effect' of writing (through the spread of literacy in a particular society) being seen as a kind of *technological determinism*. '[V]arious social, economic and technological factors' (unrelated to literacy) could *assist* this potentiality⁷⁶, just as many such factors could lead to it *not* being realized⁷⁷.

In the opening pages of his 1977 *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Goody unambiguously states the object of his concern as '[the] way in which modes of thought have changed over time and space'⁷⁸. Crucial to our conception of change in this respect is the emergence of science, which (whether situated in Renaissance Europe, Ancient Greece, or Babylonia) 'is held to follow a pre-scientific period, where magical thought predominated'. The framework⁷⁹ adopted to characterize this process is however generally flawed in that 'it is either largely non-developmental or else simplistically so'. Goody's criticism recalls Okpewho's differentiation between the 'parochial' and 'universalist' perspectives. The latter

has to some extent gained the upper hand over the former, in so far as, departing from 'the appealing premise that all men are equal'⁸⁰:

anthropologists and sociologists... have tended to set aside evolutionary or even historical perspectives, preferring to adopt a kind of cultural relativism that looks upon discussions of development as necessarily entailing a value judgement on the one hand and as over-emphasising or misunderstanding the differences of the other.

At the same time, however, while earlier evolutionist and historical perspectives (such as those held by Tylor and Frazer mentioned earlier) have (rightly, one assumes) been set aside in favour of 'functionalist and structuralist critiques... [which imply] the necessity of proving rather than assuming difference', dichotomies of the evolutionary kind have persisted all the same:

... we nevertheless fall back upon a mode of discourse, a set of categories, such as primitive and advanced, simple and complex, developing and developed, traditional and modern, pre-capitalist etc. which implies change of a more or less unidirectional kind. Any resort to comparative work necessarily raises the evolutionary issue. Even specific field studies of contemporary social life in the Third World cannot dismiss the question of short-term and long-term change⁸¹.

Having thus explained his own preoccupation with change (or, for that matter, difference), Goody sets about the task of justifying the development of writing / literacy as important anthropological variable. This he does by to some extent juxtaposing it with Lévi-Strauss's ostensibly *non*-developmental distinction between 'two strategic levels at which nature is accessible to scientific inquiry [as opposed to what the evolutionist may call two different *stages* in scientific *thinking*]: one roughly adapted to that of perception and the imagination ["Neolithic"]; the other at a remove from it ["modern"]'⁸². The Neolithic level, Lévi-Strauss argues, is as 'positive' as that of 'contemporary science', to the extent that it presupposes a 'theory of the sensible order... which continues to provide for our basic needs'⁸³. At the same time, however, the Neolithic is distinct from the modern. The former 'proceeds from the angle of sensible qualities' (the concrete), the latter from that of 'formal properties' (the abstract). Abstract vs concrete, concept vs sign, domesticated vs wild⁸⁴. Whatever Lévi-Strauss's insights as to the fact that 'primitive peoples' are *also* 'scientific' (that they, as Brian Street⁸⁵ phrases it, 'do not simply construct words and meanings in relation to felt needs of everyday life [an idea attributed to the functionalist Bronislaw Malinowski] but *classify according to more general intellectual interests and concerns*'), in the final analysis his non-evolutionary

conception of 'alternative' levels of science falls into the same dualistic trap as earlier, explicitly evolutionist, dichotomies. Recalling his own field-work amongst people of 'other cultures' (notably the LoDagaa of Ghana), Goody claims to 'have never experienced the kind of hiatus in communication that would be the case if [he] and they were approaching the physical world from opposite ends' (as Lévi-Strauss's opposition of *abstract* to *concrete* could have led him to expect). He continues⁸⁶:

That this experience is not unique seems apparent from the contemporary changes occurring in developing countries where the shift from the Neolithic to modern science is encapsulated into the space of a man's lifetime. The boy brought up as a bricoleur becomes an engineer.

The key-word in all of the above is no doubt 'classify'. Goody seizes upon Lévi-Strauss's assertion as to the classificatory practices of *both* Neolithic and modern man in order to introduce the concept of *language* into the debate. '[The system of] classification, he advances, is surely inherent in the use of language itself and whatever potentialities existed in the primate world, it was this new instrument of communication that vastly extended the process of conceptualization'⁸⁷. Noting that '[m]any writers have seen the development of languages as a prerequisite of thought itself'⁸⁸, the specific system of classification / conceptualization *constituted* by language provides, then, a more 'particularistic level' at which differences in modes of thought can be assessed.

But there is a second key-word, equally important: communication. *Prior* to its conceptual function, language 'is basic to all social institutions, to all normative behaviour'⁸⁹. Fundamentally it serves to communicate. It is with this principle in mind that the conceptual function can be seen as equally inherent in *all* languages, and that Benjamin Lee Whorf's *relativist* notion, linking aspects of the world view and cognitive processes of a linguistic group to the actual grammatical structures of their language (this notion will be re-examined in Chapter 4), can be 'deliberately [set] aside':

Human languages appear to display few differences in their potentiality for adaption to development. Whatever differences there may be in the language of 'primitive', 'intermediate' and 'advanced' peoples, apart from vocabulary, these factors seem to have little effect in inhibiting or encouraging social change⁹⁰.

At this point the relation of classification / conceptualization to communication becomes clear. Thinking is a social thing⁹¹, it happens in the process of communication. Changes in mode

of thought can therefore be studied, not in the light of differences between languages, but of differences between the *means of communication* of linguistic groups. To study the means of communication is to study the 'technology of the intellect', a technology in which writing, as a means of communication distinct from the oral - and particularly in its most systematized *alphabetic* form - represents the potential for *change* that Goody has been at pains to come to terms with:

For those studying social interaction, developments in the technology of the intellect must always be crucial. After language the next most important advance in the field lay in the reduction of speech to graphic forms, in the development of writing. Here we can see not one single leap but a series of changes, many of them spread through a process of diffusion that can be reconstructed in broad terms and which culminated in the relatively simple form of alphabetic writing in widespread use today...⁹².

With the cognitive advance represented by writing (more specifically: writing having become both 'internalized' on an individual level and 'widespread' on the level of society *as literacy* - a process greatly facilitated by the 'relative ease' of the alphabetic system), firmly in place, we can now revisit our earlier definition - provided by Goody and Watt - of tradition as a 'series of interlocking conversations'. We are in a position, in other words, to provide a more or less specific answer to the question, posed earlier, as to the specific interplay of 'oral' and 'tradition(al)' in attracting the attention of the researcher of Oral Theory.

Goody and Watt's characterization, in fact, only becomes equal to *oral* tradition if we attach to it the further qualification 'in the general absence of writing' - or, for that matter, 'in a largely non-literate society'. But we can also say: 'series of interlocking conversations in a traditional society / culture'. We have reached the point where Lord's "oral" tells us how, but "tradition" tells us what' can, at least to some extent, be stood on its head. For where 'oral', in so far as it constitutes the (necessary) *vehicle* of the tradition, can be seen as more or less 'determined' by the latter, we now see 'oral' clearly transgressing onto the 'what' (the actual substance) of the tradition. The face-to-face conversations that define the oral (or 'spoken') tradition *function differently* according to whether the society in which the tradition occurs is literate or not, literate or 'oral'. Goody puts it as follows:

In non-literate society... the cultural tradition functions as a series of interlocking face-to-face conversations in which *the very conditions of transmission* operate to favour consistency between past and present, and to make criticism - the articulation of inconsistency - less likely to occur; and if it does, the inconsistency makes a less permanent impact, and is more easily adjusted or forgotten... In literate society, these

interlocking conversations go on; but they are no longer man's only dialogue; and in so far as writing provides an alternative source for the transmission of cultural orientations it favours awareness of inconsistency⁹³.

'Goody's main concern', Vail and White tell us, '[is] with the impact of writing itself... His primary concern is *not* with assessing nonliterate, oral man'⁹⁴. Goody would, then, to a greater extent than Ong, see 'oral' and 'non-literate' (illiterate) as largely synonymous. (More about this later). What Goody says regarding the 'consistency between past and present' in an oral society is, of course, not new to us. It strongly recalls Ong's affirmation of the different conception of history in an oral society, of its past being very much 'present'. Of particular interest, however, is Goody's integration of this idea into the concept of tradition. First - and this is a point easily overlooked - is his implication that cultural tradition (*oral* in so far as it depends on face-to-face conversation) is also a feature of literate society. But the very 'conditions of transmission' obtaining in the non-literate society causes this tradition to, in a sense, *behave differently* (in so far as it particularly favours consistency between present and past) to the tradition in the literate society.

Of course, this difference between literate and non-literate traditions can only be a matter of degree: the notion of tradition generally allows for 'the isolation of what is new against the background of permanence' [*isoler les nouveautés sur fond de permanence*] (Foucault's definition), a permanence that is temporal, the past continuing into the present, also as far as we are concerned. But - and this is where Foucault's conception shows itself to be particularly useful - in the case of the (non-literate) oral tradition there is, simply, *nothing that is new*, nothing to juxtapose against the tradition, nothing to isolate against the background of permanence. The oral tradition is, quite simply, all-embracing.

Until the advent of writing. In 'reducing speech to graphic form' (thus providing man with the possibility of *records* - see Ong's earlier point), writing makes it possible to actually *scrutinise* discourse, favouring 'the increase in scope of critical activity'⁹⁵. In other words, what is inconsistent (or 'new') to the oral tradition is made explicit and, crucially - given tradition's reliance on a conception of permanence - *given actual durability*. The new, at least (especially) once literacy has been achieved, earns the capacity of becoming sufficiently strong, sufficiently permanent, to effectively rival the old. When this happens (*if*, actually, because there are - as Goody and Ong acknowledge - other factors to be considered), the present becomes distinguishable from the past. The tradition loses its orality, the chain of

interlocking conversations becomes (merely) the *spoken* tradition of literate society. The following would now serve to describe the way it functions:

The content of the cultural tradition grows continually, and in so far as it affects any particular individual he becomes a palimpsest composed of layers of beliefs and attitudes belonging to different stages of historical time. So too, eventually, does society at large, since there is a tendency for each social group to be particularly influenced by systems of ideas belonging to different periods in the nation's development; both to the individual, and to the groups constituting society, the past may mean very different things⁹⁶.

In terms of its *actual definition* the most salient aspect of the oral tradition which is the subject of this chapter is, therefore, its relative predisposal towards consistency. By contrast to the literate tradition which, at the very least, can be said to allow for 'layers of beliefs and attitudes belonging to different stages of historical time', the oral tradition maintains a conceptual cohesion. It is in this sense that is best understood the 'tendency of oral cultures towards cultural homeostasis'⁹⁷ asserted by Goody. In this regard Ong uses the term 'structural amnesia', which refers to 'the homeostatic process of forgetting or transforming those parts of the tradition that cease to be either necessary or relevant'⁹⁸. We shall return to the concept of homeostasis further on in our argument.

Much of the criticism directed at Ong has (somewhat unfairly perhaps) also reverberated on to Goody. Vail and White, while to some extent setting him apart as 'an anthropologist with a record of field-work in Africa'⁹⁹, and drawing attention to the fact (noted earlier) that Goody is concerned 'with the impact of writing itself' (as opposed to characterising those without writing), nonetheless integrate his arguments fully into the intellectual lineage of the 'notional oral man' which, through McLuhan, Havelock and Ong, they see as 'rooted in the unlikely field of literary criticism'¹⁰⁰. In his critique of what he terms 'the autonomous model'¹⁰¹ of literacy, Brian Street devotes a separate chapter to Goody for the apparent reason that he regards Goody's version of the autonomous model as the 'most influential'¹⁰². This chapter follows a first entitled 'Literacy and Rationality' in which Street, primarily with reference to the field of education, strongly criticized general conclusions as to the cognitive advantages of literacy. Somewhat surprisingly, he does not mention Ong at all. Yet he concedes that 'other authors [to the ones dealt with]¹⁰³ could have served the purpose equally well' and that his criticism should not be seen as specific to them¹⁰⁴.

The criticism against Goody and Ong is, at root, relatively simple. A developmental model

centred around the perceived evolution from the oral to the written (from the non-literate to the literate) is merely a continuation of 'anthropology's decades-old preoccupation with defining boundaries between us and them'¹⁰⁵. The basis of comparison it introduces amounts to nothing but a rehash of previous (discredited) dichotomies and perpetuates the perceptions served by these, namely the division of the world between what is 'Western' and superior (civilized, modern, rational) and 'non-Western' and inferior (savage, traditional, emotional). Not just does it identify an 'other' in relation to an 'us', but it continues to term 'other' the very same people previously typecast as such¹⁰⁶. The 'other' has not as much as changed seats.

From this point of view the issue is not so much the *implied* new literate vs oral dichotomy as *all* developmental / evolutionist anthropological models, which *per definition depend on* a 'value element'. We already know Goody's response. Change is inevitably described, not just in terms of process, but *progress*¹⁰⁷. All comparative work *necessarily* raises 'the evolutionary issue', irrespective of the terminology used to cushion the harshness of the judgment. Popular oppositions of the type *developed vs developing*, *First World vs Third World* come to mind. While sensitive to the dangers of a 'simplistic' developmental model, Goody, at various points in his work, disapprovingly refers to the denial of differences thus encountered as the result of either a 'diffuse relativism' or 'sentimental egalitarianism'¹⁰⁸. 'The challenge', Goody asserts, '... is not merely to criticize the existing framework (*that is never very difficult*) but to offer an alternative account that explains more'¹⁰⁹. Although, one feels, very much intended as criticism, the following appraisal by Vail and White¹¹⁰ gives quite an accurate assessment of Goody's position:

— Although critical of the long tradition of binary oppositions between us and them, his [Goody's] criticism [is] primarily directed, not at the fact of oppositions, but only at their absolute nature - their inflexibility - which [has] resulted in a neglect of dynamic social changes...

In contrast to Goody (not to mention Ong, whose views on the shift from orality to literacy as a 'fundamental turning point in human history'¹¹¹ they clearly consider as particularly extravagant), Vail and White adopt a strongly anti-developmental, and indeed, 'relativist'¹¹² position. Predominantly appreciating oral literature for the insight it provides into how societies 'cope with change, whether brought about by the presence of economically powerful Europeans or by other causes', some of their reflections in this regard come across as a virtual

defence of the 'other':

... we have found the notion of oral man useless. Instead, we have been struck with the flexibility of these societies, not their changelessness, with their openness and sense of history, not their conservatism...¹¹³.

Equally critical of the 'great divide' established by 'traditional representations of the differences in thinking between members of different cultures'¹¹⁴, Street's analysis nevertheless manages to go beyond it in so far as he addresses the *specific* underpinnings of Ong and Goody's orality-literacy paradigm - what he calls the 'autonomous model' of literacy. In relation to Goody the following points of criticism stand out:

- 1) The kind of 'purely oral' society envisaged by the 'autonomous model' (even if by implication), hardly exists. Quoting Finnegan¹¹⁵:
 ... there are few, if any, historical cases where we have detailed and solid (as opposed to speculative) evidence about the processes of communication in a purely 'oral' society. It is in practice the 'mixed' rather than the 'pure' type that in one form or another provides the typical case and - furthermore - the available evidence for analysis.
- 2) The process of 'forgetting or transforming those parts of the tradition that cease to be either necessary or relevant', which Goody associates with the homeostasis of oral society, is far from absolute¹¹⁶. Many aspects of communication in an oral environment point to the 'fixing' of definitions, meanings and historical knowledge: formalized patterns of speech, recital under ritual conditions, the use of drums and other musical instruments, the employment of professional remembrancers¹¹⁷. The very basis of Goody's larger assertions (more about these later) as regards the logic of literate society being related to the latter's relatively greater capacity for *storage* (and hence, for deriving 'abstract' meaning as opposed to the 'immediate' or 'concrete' meaning in oral society), can therefore be questioned.
- 3) To see writing as favouring 'the articulation of inconsistency' (and hence, the development of scepticism or the ability to re-interpret historical fact - in short, the ability to be 'objective'), is to underestimate the role played by ideological self-interest. The distinctions between myth and history reputedly made by the historians of classical Greece (Goody's 'defining example' of the value of literacy) are not of themselves reflective of objectivity¹¹⁸.
- 4) 'Goody's claims for changes in perceptions of the past as a result of the development

of literacy in classical Greece appear to refer specifically to scholars and intellectuals rather than to the society as a whole¹¹⁹. This links up with an important point Street makes in regard to Olson, Hildyard and Greenfield, namely their tendency to ascribe to *literacy* the properties of 'analytic thinking' and 'explicit argument', when the latter are, in fact, ostensible *ideals* (as opposed to actual realities - see point 3 above) only in the restricted ideological context of certain (academic) institutions¹²⁰. The essay-text, for instance, is less representative of literacy than it is reflective of 'certain social, political or ideological functions' within a specific context¹²¹.

Goody is himself very much aware of these limitations to his argument - a fact readily acknowledged by Street - but nonetheless 'proceeds to base fundamental and far-reaching aspects of human reasoning and achievement on the distinction between oral and literate cultures'¹²². Once again, we are drawn into a contestation of the developmental model *per se*, reminding us of Goody's opinion (quoted above) that the criticism of such a framework 'is never very difficult'. If we could regard Street as more or less in agreement with the oral - literate paradigm (at least in so far as the latter may be an advance on previously formulated developmental paradigms), then his 'criticism' would, of course, amount to a refinement of Goody's argument. But there seems little justification for such a view. Street's criticism of the 'great divide' appears, at closer inspection, to be a criticism of the *very notion* of divide, of difference. His alternative 'ideological model' of literacy, which

... assumes that the meaning of literacy depends upon the social institution in which it is embedded;... [and that] literacy can only be known to us in forms which already have political and ideological significance...¹²³.

is primarily intended to make us understand the relative value of literacy, the importance of the latter having been exaggerated in the pursuit of ideological objectives¹²⁴. To the extent that this is *always* the case (here we get back to the 'value element' Goody talks about), literacy ends up being disqualified as anthropological *variable*. However, had Street shared Goody's project of 'making sense' of difference, this 'disqualification' may well, one feels, have been less absolute.

✕ Lets return, at this point, to Ong's 'psychodynamics of orality'. To what extent does Parry's discovery authorise them? Vail and White, as we already saw in Chapter 1, argue cogently that the 'oral man' elaborated on the basis of Parry's discovery (by McLuhan, Havelock and Ong), owes his existence to 'ambiguities in Parry's original elaboration of his ideas'. On the

one hand, Parry stressed the formal exclusivity of the oral text and conceived of style as 'the form of *thought*'¹²⁵. On the other, he could describe his field-work amongst the South-Slavic oral poets (which, in our terms, represents the origins of Oral Theory's anthropological bias) as 'a starting point for a comparative study of oral poetry which sought to see how the way of life of a people gives rise to a poetry of a given kind and of a *given degree of excellence*'¹²⁶. This leaves us with an oral poet or narrator who, in the words of Vail and White¹²⁷:

... is seen no longer as a mere 'memorizer', but as an artist, improvising brilliantly within the formulas of his or her tradition.

Rather than explore the 'brilliant' improvisational skills of the oral poet, Ong and others seized upon the particularity of oral form, equated it with oral 'form of thought', and made the jump from oral formulaic expression to oral formulaic thought. While ostensibly indebted to the oral-formulaic theory, one of the main consequences of this procedure is that the very notion of the formula as 'building block' of oral composition (which, on the strength of Parry and Lord's authority, is *vital*) is considerably watered down, sometimes to the extent of retaining very little of its original formulation. From 'words repeated under the same metric conditions' it has moved to 'unconscious pattern [or cluster] of narrative and imagery'¹²⁸. From philological rigour to psychological 'insight'. While Parry and Lord's definition of the formula is far too narrow to account for oral poetic expression in general, some of its subsequent definitions have been less inspired by the need to account for new philological data, than by a preoccupation to reflect the supposed characteristics of 'oral noetic processes'. This is to some extent illustrated by the 'psychological' application enjoyed by Ong's definition of the formula. As pointed out by Opland¹²⁹, Ong does away with 'the nebulous and subjective concept of "usefulness"' (crucial nonetheless to Parry and Lord) and makes no reference to meter. Finding little evidence in the Xhosa oral poetry he surveys of Lord's 'strict' definition of the formula (the latter is not as *necessary* to the Xhosa izibongo as it is, for example, to the South-Slavic epic poets), Opland comes to apply Ong's (much extended) definition and makes a significant distinction:

Xhosa izibongo... seem to satisfy far more happily Ong's criteria for *primary oral noetic processes* than Lord's criteria for *oral poetry*¹³⁰.

Parry's discovery provides an extremely tenuous theoretical basis for the kind of

psychological theorising that Ong engages in. At the same time, however, it would be simplistic to contend that the 'alternative' interpretation of Parry (strongly favoured by Vail and White) should necessarily make the spectre of 'oral man' go away. In so far as we may take at all seriously Lord's emphasis on the notion of tradition, it seems to me inescapable that the field of interest he and Parry have opened up revolves around an 'other' perceived as *distinct* from ourselves. But does this 'other' necessarily have to be the 'dehumanized stereotype known as "oral man"'¹³¹?

At this point we may usefully reintroduce what we conceived of in Chapter 1 as the *paradox* at the heart of the oral-formulaic theory. An ongoing tradition, serving as a basis of continuous creativity, is set against the restricted nature - or 'stifledness' - in which it is expressed. Whereas Parry and Lord's oral tradition *liberate* creativity from its narrow association with the solitary individual pensively waiting on his Muse (to use a Romantic image that is still current), it at the same time *confines* it to a largely preset expressivity. On the one hand we have what Foley calls a 'diction' or 'specialized poetic language', on the other the 'substitutable formulas' out of which it consists. The one eddies and flows, the other repeats.

It is from the latter aspect - from the comparative restrictiveness of orality - that 'oral man' has been derived. The formula has served as theoretical framework for the 'psychologizing literary theory' developed by McLuhan, Ong and others, and the formula alone. Comparatively little is said about tradition, other than that it is something collective or communal by which individual behaviour is regulated, and, in fact, sanctioned. As such, the notion remains very much within the conception of a 'folk psychology'. Even if it is a means of transmitting knowledge and values, tradition is first and foremost an instrument for enforcing codes of behaviour. Little attempt is made, in fact, at distinguishing 'tradition' from 'custom'; even if tradition is a means of communication (Goody's 'chain of interlocking conversations'), it is, above all, an *instrument of censure*. We are left with an image of tradition which is perfectly consistent with the restrictiveness of the formula.

Yet this was most certainly not the framework adopted by Parry. He started from a certain manifestation of creativity: a text (which had moreover been attributed to an individual) and tried to explain how tradition had brought it about. What was demonstrated was how tradition serves as a basis of creativity, a creativity, it must not be forgotten, recognized *as such* by the long-held prestige accorded the Homeric poems within *modern* society. As such, the Parry

/ Lord view, while not necessarily contradicting the basic tenets of a 'folk psychology' (the demonstration is, after all, that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were *not* created by an individual 'author'), certainly provides a *corrective* of Wundt's concept, at least in so far as the latter's extreme emphasis on restriction and constraint is concerned.

'Oral man' could just as easily, and - from the point of view of Oral Theory, far more productively - be derived from the *notion of tradition as basis of creativity*. But while 'oral man' thus conceptualized is, I would contend, far from a 'dehumanizing stereotype', he is still very much 'other'. It is in understanding what this otherness consists of that Goody's formulations - at least those specific to tradition - come in helpful.

The otherness in question relates, in fact, less to what may be considered as characteristic of oral people, than to what may be considered as characteristic of oral society. What is 'other' to us is social, *not* cognitive deportment. If we accept the implication of an 'other' by Oral Theory (through its insistence on 'tradition'), then Goody's qualification of oral society as 'homeostatic' comes closest, I would advance, to presenting Oral Theory with an object of interest which - while different - is nonetheless within reach of the *aesthetic appreciation* from which the discipline originally drew its inspiration.

* It can, of course, be argued that Goody, albeit implicitly, uses the 'model' of two traditions, one oral and veered towards homeostasis, the other literate and accentuating divergence, to account for the associated occurrences of individualism and logic, both of which he sees as originating in classical Greece 'soon after the existence, for the first time, of a rich urban society in which a substantial portion of the population was able to read and write'¹³². It is at this point, I would argue, that Goody parts company with Oral Theory, at least in as much as, from the relative individualism or logic attributed to literate society, we may be led to *infer* the 'collectiveness' or 'illogicality' of the oral. Admittedly such an inference would be quite undesirable from Goody's own point of view - it would be 'drawing the line too sharply'¹³³. Yet does Oral Theory even *need* to preoccupy itself with notions like individualism and logic? I believe not. In so far as Goody's detailed description of tradition may serve as a kind of 'conceptual background' for the 'creative' conception of tradition developed by Parry and Lord (not to mention as a corrective to the idea of a 'folk psychology'), Oral Theory has much to gain from him. But in admitting that Oral Theory has an anthropological bias orienting it around a certain conception of the 'other', we should be careful not to overstate this bias to the extent that it becomes a barrier to our appreciation of

the 'other' (i.e. of the other *text*) from the equally important literary / artistic point of view. The researcher who imports notions like individualism or logic into the mainstream of oral theoretical speculation runs the real risk of falling into the very trap that Parry has enabled us to avoid, namely that of seeing the oral text as the product of a 'folk psychology' denying the *very possibility* of individual creativity, or - at an even further remove from what we perceive ourselves to be - as the product of an illogical or irrational mind. This would be contrary to the project of Oral Theory. Speaking, relative to Goody, from very much *within* Oral Theory, this is of course a risk that Ong has been prepared to take.

What does it mean to say that the 'other' (oral society) is homeostatic? Not that the people living in that society interact with and make sense of the world in any less logical or rational fashion than literate people living in a literate society do, nor that they are - by reason of their orality - any less individualistic. Oral people may be just as wont to assert individual interests and ambitions, and to exhibit and cultivate peculiar and socially 'deviant' quirks or eccentricities. As such, the oral society should exhibit as much of what could be termed 'marginal' as the literate society.

A particularly interesting example of this kind of individuality, which to a large extent contradicts the view of oral tradition as an inherently conservative mode of cultural storage, is found in the folklore of the Ju/'hoan, a hunter-gatherer society encountered in a broad area around the northern part of the Namibia - Botswana border. As reported by Megan Bieseke¹³⁴, Ju/'hoan culture abounds with accounts of 'otherwise ordinary people' who have been 'inspired' (in a religious or mystical sense) to perform certain songs which they then communicate to the people as revelations from the 'great god'. The people who have been thus inspired are known by name, and are widely seen as the originators of the songs or stories concerned, even if there may be difference of opinion as to the origins of a specific song as well as considerable variation in different versions. Richard Lee¹³⁵ relates the 'high tolerance for individual contributions' found in Ju/'hoan culture to the 'egalitarian nature of their society, whose norms are enforced not by dogma but by the creative participation of all members'.

While the marginal may be equally present in both, oral and literate society will, however, not necessarily accommodate it in the same way. The marginal will tend to be juxtaposed or 'highlighted' in the literate society (here, following Goody, we can see the relative durability of writing as a crucial factor), while the oral society will tend to absorb or integrate it (see

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the 'tolerance' of the Ju/'hoansi mentioned above), establishing the cultural equilibrium that Goody speaks of. An important qualification needs to be made here. To say that the oral society tends to absorb where the literate society tends to accentuate should not necessarily mean that oral people are more 'conservative' than literate people, a distinction commonly made alongside other dichotomies. In fact, what is 'highlighted' in the literate society may also be what is *ostracised*. Literate people do not cultivate or applaud what is different to the norm any more than do oral people, and oral society's tendency to integrate marginality could justifiably be interpreted as the lesser conservative of the two. To say, as we saw Goody strongly imply earlier, that literate society 'favours', or 'is relatively disposed' to 'inconsistency' (what we have now come to describe as the marginal), relates to the *facilities* at the disposal of literate society, not to its taste or judgment.

~~X~~What the notion of the homeostatic oral society boils down to, in the final analysis, is that the latter, in comparison to literate society, is less susceptible to *change*. We can briefly summarize our earlier characterization in this respect. In so far as inconsistency (whatever comprises potential for change) can be given physical form (can be 'objectified') through writing, it acquires the kind of *durability* needed to effectively impact on and rival the permanence of the on-going tradition. In other words, writing favours change in so far as it makes it possible for the marginality to which social inconsistency has been relegated to be overcome *in time*. If sufficiently durable (which will depend, obviously, on a host of social and historical factors by which it may gain in acceptance and prestige), the marginal will eventually take possession of the mainstream; change will have occurred. In all of this writing and literacy may well turn out to be a relatively minor element, but in radically transforming the relation of linguistic expression to time, its role, at least in so far as it presents Oral Theory with a picture of its elusive 'other', is crucial. ~~X~~

An 'other' who is, by implication, relatively changeless. This is clearly a dangerous thing to say. Many, particularly those critical of Goody and Ong, will tend to align it with the kind of racist contention Hegel makes about the futility of studying African history, seeing that Africa 'is not a historical continent; it shows neither change nor development'¹³⁶. We can, in defence, further refine our argument by pointing out that 'change' refers, at any rate, only to the kind of change that is visible to the researcher. The criteria by which change can be 'measured' in a literate society may well not apply to an oral society, for which such criteria are in all probability not as yet properly conceptualized. Of course, this does not mean that

change does not occur in those societies. (Jan Vansina¹³⁷ has clearly demonstrated how the oral tradition can serve as a source of recoverable history). While I believe that the conception of the 'other' I have set out above is far less reified than that proposed by Ong (and, to some extent, Goody), it seems to me unavoidable that Oral Theory, for as long as it conceives of the oral text in relation to a specific *tradition*, will continue to be vulnerable to accusations of this type. This is far from an ideal situation, and one for which we shall attempt to find some kind of solution in the latter part of this study.

For the time being, however, we need to face up squarely to the 'other' designated by Oral Theory. 'Any study of a comparative nature [and the researcher of Oral Theory cannot approach the oral text but vis-à-vis his own - literate - textual experience] raises the developmental issue', says Goody. Vail and White affirm with no less certainty that 'anthropology's decades-old preoccupation with defining boundaries between us and them [has] waned'¹³⁸. While it is true that the framework for research into the oral tradition, in the light of developments particularly in anthropology (see note 138), has become generally relativist - the emphasis being on understanding the texts of a particular community within the specific historical and geographical context in which that community operates - it remains in many instances subtly connected with the question of economic / technological development (or the lack of it). The ghost of evolutionism is still with us, even if its influence could, to a large degree, be described as metaphorical. Two recent appraisals, made from different theoretical viewpoints, yet of the same 'other' - southern African hunter-gatherer societies - may provide some sense of this.

We have already referred to Bieseke's research amongst the Ju/'hoansi of Botswana and Namibia. While clearly placing her study within an evolutionist framework¹³⁹, she is nonetheless sensitive to the impression of 'changelessness' this approach might create of the hunting and gathering society she is concerned with. After reminding us that the hunter-gatherer type of economic organization dates back to the Paleolithic Era of ten thousand years ago, she immediately places us on guard against the implications of this view¹⁴⁰:

Recognition of this fact should not blind us... to the historical experience of contemporary hunting and gathering cultures. These cultures have evolved, just as that of Europe has, and great care should be taken in generalizing from present-day hunter-gatherers back to the European Stone Age.

The alternative to this kind of generalization is however not set out. The point is, of course, that even though Bieseke is not overtly engaged in a comparative study, the economic

resemblance¹⁴¹ between the Ju/'hoan of the twentieth century and the Paleolithic ancestors of modern Europe is simply too strong to overlook, even if the historical and geographical conditions are so obviously different. Under the circumstances the above-quoted 'warning' can hardly be more than an expression of the kind of 'sentimental egalitarianism' Goody finds so unsatisfactory, which is less the result of actual experience or analysis (*how* the culture of the Ju/'hoansi has evolved 'just as that of Europe has' is not discussed any further) than the result of feelings of discomfort brought about by - inevitable - evolutionist juxtapositions of 'us' and 'them'.

Yet another hunter-gatherer society is subject to an evolutionist perspective in Johan van Wyk's recent article 'Dream Writing'¹⁴², albeit in a more indirect way. Similar to Biesele, Van Wyk sees a contemporary hunter-gatherer society, the !Kung of Botswana, as illuminating aspects of the remote past. As an example of the kind of 'semiotic practice' illustrative of what he regards as the 'mythological' and 'archaeological' *origins* of 'poetry, drama and narrative in South Africa', he discusses a particular kind of 'somatic energy', called *num*. The latter is cultivated by the 'medicine owners' of !Kung society for the power it supposedly bestows upon them (notably of healing, rain-making and control of animals), and provokes a 'rhythmic response' in the body, which Van Wyk, drawing on Julia Kristeva, equates with 'the rhythmical aspects of poetry and poetic language'. These rhythmic responses, he observes:

... [are] rooted in the infantile and in the period before language acquisition. It relates to the pleasure and pain experienced especially in the oral and anal regions of the body when the infant interacts with the mother and other family members¹⁴³.

In this case the evolutionary distance between us and them is couched in the terminology of psycho-analysis. *Their* poetry (which is, of course, an oral poetry), relates to a particular psychoanalytic stage of the development of the child, a stage that has been largely surpassed in *our* poetry. The evolutionism apparent here is all the more noteworthy in that it forms part of what is very much a 'progressive' (relativist) project, namely to unshackle the notion of South African literature from its written bias and broadly Eurocentric orientation¹⁴⁴, in other words, to *break down* the barriers between 'us' and 'them'.

Oral Theory's conception of tradition emphasizes the latter's relative changelessness, which, all relativist apologies made, also becomes a characterization of perceived otherness. This has been the main thrust of the present chapter. The preoccupation with otherness has been

related, on one level, to the basically anthropological nature of studies of the oral text *in general* (as we discovered through Okpewho), and, on another, to Oral Study's *particular* 'oral-traditional' view of the oral text. With regard to the latter, we are left with a 'definition' of tradition which says as much about creativity (Parry and Lord) as it does about stability or homeostasis (Goody). This is as close as we could get, I believe, to the actual 'functions' which Oral Theory attaches to the notion of tradition, functions which can only be understood in relation to each other.

Why is the notion of *particular* use to Oral Theory? The obvious answer, which is also the answer of the oral-formulaic theory, is of course that it allows for a different conception of literary creativity. But the arguments we have reflected upon have brought to the fore a second answer, more mundane, but troublesome at the same time: 'tradition' or 'traditional' are notions through which the researcher of Oral Theory is allowed to *set apart from himself* the objects of his attention as relating to people who are *different*. We do have tradition (just like them), but we are not defined (i.e. *confined*) by it. We speak, but we also write. We have literacy, they have orality.

In his ultimate justification for Oral Theory, the already-mentioned 'Orality-Literacy Studies and the Unity of the Human Race', Ong suggests that, at least where 'applied to an entire culture', the term 'oral' be preferred to 'illiterate' (non-literate), in so far as the latter '[designates] a culture by something it lacks that we have'. He goes on:

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 forms¹⁴⁵.

Concerned with proving unity, Ong momentarily suspends his psychologizing interpretation of Parry's discovery, allowing 'oral man', as it were, to open his mouth: he talks, we talk. But orality, to Ong, is not really about talking, it is about thinking. His 'orality-literacy' is about actual differences in mode of communication or expression only in so far as the latter 'reflects' the differences in *thinking* he lays claim to. In this sense Ong's view of the age of 'primary orality' (the spoken word with no written representation) '[forming] a continuum' with the age of 'secondary orality' (the spoken word in the context of the 'electronic age' - the telephone, radio, television and the computer) would perhaps be better conceived of as the continuum between ages of primary and secondary *speaking*. For, if anything, 'secondary orality', in representing a further technology to that of writing and print, has *increased* the

gap in thinking between 'us' and 'them':

This age of secondary orality has maximized oral utterance... 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...¹⁴⁶.

Of course, I have disagreed with Ong in so far as his 'psychodynamics of orality' characterizes the 'other' in terms of ways of thinking. But in breaking the link between 'orality' and 'tradition', as is suggested by his conception of a wholly *modern* 'secondary orality', he is, in my view, guilty of the very kind of conceptual confusion criticized by Foley; orality becomes 'a typology that unfairly homogenizes much more than it can hope to distinguish;... a false and very misleading category'¹⁴⁷. Orality within the conceptual framework that Parry and Lord elaborated may well *not* be about thinking (as I have suggested), but it is not, for that matter, about speaking either. We speak, but we are not oral.

Once again, this is a dangerous thing to say: the 'great divide' looms large. But I am not suggesting that characteristics of oral texts are not also found in written ones, that features of oral society are not also found in literate society, that traditions in oral and literate societies do not function in very much similar ways. But for the oral and the literate to co-exist in such a way as to minimise the us:them dichotomy, it seems to me more useful, instead of saying that we also speak, to say that *we are also traditional*. In that way, to paraphrase Lord, it is not just the 'how' that may be shared by 'us' and 'them', but *also* the 'what'.

In his *Interface between the Written and the Oral* Goody remarks - somewhat casually perhaps - that

we sometimes speak of an oral and a literary tradition being present in the same society, identifying the former with popular culture and the latter with art¹⁴⁸.

Finnegan¹⁴⁹ has pointed out that, '[t]hough... initially directed to rural and supposedly "traditional" forms in Europe and America' (these being largely analysed in terms of 'an evolutionary and romantic model'), the study of *folklore* has, in fact, come to concern itself far more with the 'urban context': industrial songs, protest verse, etc. These observations imply a certain identification of the 'modern' (as 'popular') with the 'traditional'; to what extent can Oral Theory account for this identification? If the relative 'changelessness' we have uncovered at the root of the notion of oral tradition amounts, indeed, to a reification, a 'dehumanizing stereotype', the next step in breaking down the barrier between 'us' and 'them' should be to consider tradition, not so much for what it *does*, namely to regulate and stabilise,

but for what it *is*: popular. This will be an important area of reflection in Chapter 3, in which we shall attempt to assess the notion of (traditional) *oral literature* against what has become known as (modern) *popular culture*, the latter having to some extent become part (it would seem - although this is also open to question) of a revised theoretical paradigm of 'post-modernist' literary theory.

We can conclude with a few brief remarks on some further perspectives on the notion of tradition which, though not specifically relevant to the issue of the traditional as 'other' we have highlighted in this chapter, are nonetheless worthy of consideration. Towards the end of Chapter 1 we noted the 'greater prestige' enjoyed by the 'dead-language traditions' relative to the 'living oral traditions' within Oral Theory. Apart from distinguishing between the oral tradition 'proper' (occurring in oral society) and the oral tradition that is 'spoken' (occurring in literate society), I have regarded the notion of tradition as basically indivisible, and there certainly would be little, at least in the work of authors considered here, upon which to found a *theoretical* distinction between a 'dead-language' and 'living' oral tradition. The explanation I advanced in Chapter 1 pointed to the texts of the 'dead-language tradition' being inevitably received as *written* texts, making their 'horizons of expectations' more accessible, at least from the point of view of the researcher. Foley himself¹⁵⁰ points to the obvious fact 'that the field [Oral Theory] began with the Homeric epics'. But the difference in prestige could, no doubt, also be explained in terms of the us:them dichotomy; that the 'other who has gone before' (the dead-language tradition) is somehow regarded as *closer* to 'us' than the 'other who is culturally different' (the living tradition). Put differently: the anthropological bias of Oral Theory has been less prominent in the philological studies of classicists working with texts of dead-language traditions (what - to recall Finnegan's terminology - has been 'lost'), than in the obviously anthropological orientation of studies of contemporary oral traditions (what is - genuinely? - 'other').

This would to some extent be supported in the light of differences of emphasis regarding a 'great divide' between 'literacy' and 'orality'. The arguments considered in this chapter, whether more or less in favour of - or at least resigned to - an evolutionist paradigm (Ong, Goody) or totally against it (Vail and White, Street¹⁵¹), were generally preoccupied with a 'great divide' in the world *as it is*, in other words a division between 'us' and 'them' on the grounds of synchronically perceived cultural differences. But the debate surrounding the 'great divide' has also taken a more specifically diachronical / historical form, which relates

specifically to the distinction between the (purely) oral and 'oral-derived' text¹⁵². This debate, largely the preserve of researchers working in 'dead-language' traditions, to some extent implies a reformulation of Parry's original discovery of the oral origins of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

As we already saw in Chapter 1, the basis of Parry's demonstration has been freely accepted in so far as it was regarded as necessary to, in Foley's words, 'fracture the sinecure of textual-chirographic thinking that dominated earlier scholarship'¹⁵³. But from having been concerned with the originality of the oral, the focus of scholarly attention has shifted towards a consideration, not of the difference, but of the actual *point of contact* between the oral and the written text. Kelber sums up this concern as follows:

[i]ts impressive explanatory powers notwithstanding, the thesis advanced by Parry and Lord is not without its problems. Media rarely present themselves in essentialist purity. If it is claimed that the Homeric epics were composed without the aid of writing, what impact did dictation and writing have on this oral, traditional civilization? Are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* conceivable simply as graphs of what the bards had recited? What caused these narratives to be wrenched from a history of centuries of oral compositional performances and transposed into [written] textuality?¹⁵⁴

The upshot of these considerations has to a large extent been to problematize Lord's original conception of the compositional *exclusivity* of the oral artist / text:

[Homer] is not a split personality with half of his understanding and technique in the tradition and the other half in a parnassus of literate methods. No, he is not even 'immersed' in the tradition. He *is* the tradition.... His vividness and immediacy arise from the fact that he is a practicing oral poet. Those who would make Homer a 'literary' poet, do not understand his 'literariness'; he has none of the artificiality of those who use traditional themes or devices for nontraditional purposes¹⁵⁵.

After a detailed comparison between the Homeric poems and West-African epics or 'legendary stories', Goody comes to the conclusion that the epic, contrary to what he terms 'long poems' or myths whose content is generally more 'sacred',

seems to be characteristic not so much of purely oral cultures,... but of those more complex situations... where writing was employed in restricted ways and yet had some influence both on the content and the form of such compositions¹⁵⁶.

While he concedes that Homer was in all probability not literate, Goody sees the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as examples of an 'early literate' genre, 'affected in form and content by the

existence of writing'¹⁵⁷.

In an article published in 1986 Lord similarly comes to accept the idea of 'mergings' of oral tradition and literacy¹⁵⁸. Kelber, for his part, warns against the notion of tradition 'as exclusively textual processes of production, transmission, and transformation, depersonalized and diagrammatically traceable through space'¹⁵⁹. Recent views on the Gospel, for example, point to writing and speech being interlinked in ways 'that our typographic apperception of textuality will never let us know'. He continues:

Our text-centrism has blinded us to imagining ways in which speech could emanate from chirographs or in turn generate writings. But once we think of tradition as an interactive process, we concede the presence of a dynamic that is other than either orality and literacy, for which we have no name and about which we have little experience¹⁶⁰.

From an initial fascination with the oral provenance of a text (in the sense of it being part of an oral tradition), one can therefore discern a movement towards defining the conditions under which the *oral* becomes *oral-derived*, where the traditional is 'taken up' in writing. But if concern with this particular complexity – which is of a textual as well as compositional nature – has tended to be the province of historical studies, we can also draw attention to a 'political' approach to oral tradition which is firmly planted in the here and now and on occasion even looks to the future. As Finnegan has already told us, concern with the oral is often tantamount to a 'return to origins'. In this case the interest in oral tradition does not so much envisage a better 'understanding' of an oral 'other' (whether from a universalist or parochial standpoint), as that it seeks to assert a certain cultural and political identity with which the researcher would like to identify. Jean-Pierre Makouta-Mboukou, for example, regrets that in the cause of anti-colonialist struggle, 'Black writers... [have] preferred to use more direct [i.e. written] literary forms like poetry, the novel, and the political pamphlet', and sees a rekindling of interest in the oral tradition as the means through which '[t]hey will be able to verify the wealth of their own heritage and make use of it to clothe the heart of their people in a new pride'¹⁶¹. This affirmation of identity offers a framework for much current research into oral tradition, notably on the African continent.

But it also offers the possibility of manipulation, in which the role of research should not be underestimated. The ideological effect of tradition I have tended to focus on in the course of this chapter has been its function as differentiating factor between 'us' and 'them'. That is the point of view of Oral Theory. But what is invented as epistemological category by the

academic (at least ostensibly), can be reinvented as political category by the politician: as bearer of identity tradition is often a trump-card in the exercise of power. Nowhere has this been better illustrated than in Swaziland where loyalty to the throne of King Sobuza II became the major rallying point for Swazi nationalism¹⁶². Central to this process was the 'formulation of a set of Swazi 'traditions''¹⁶³ which, as Vail and White hypothesise, coincides with the lack of continuity between praise poetry (*tibongo*) of the pre-Sobuza era (Sobuza II acceded to the throne in 1921) and the songs later performed in his honour. So significant is the change in content of these praises that they can, in fact, be seen as *neo-traditional*¹⁶⁴. What is more,

the surge of specifically academic interest in Swazi history and customs on the part of white anthropologists, many of whom were South African liberals in search of evidence demonstrating that Africans could rule their peoples rationally in accordance with 'traditional' principles¹⁶⁵

was a crucial factor in this (political) resurgence of traditionalism: Sobuza knew how to identify 'powerful allies'. Not only this: Sobuza also, through ample use of the tape recorder, managed to 'correct' the oral accounts given by indunas of the role of their chiefdoms in the history of the Swazi nation¹⁶⁶. The invention of tradition (neo-traditionalism) is also a *conscious*¹⁶⁷ reinvention of history.

Endnotes

1. Finnegan, 1977:73.
2. The phenomenon of 'secondary orality' (see Ong, 1987) would seem to contradict this. Yet the theoretical relation between 'secondary orality' and the oral-formulaic theory (on which this discussion is based) can to a large extent be questioned, as will be seen later. (See note 147).
3. Lord, 1968:149. Emphasis added.
4. Foucault, 1976:31. My translation.
5. The notions of development, evolution, mentality (culture?), spirit, as well as the *grands types de discours* of 'science, literature, religion, history, fiction, etc'. (Foucault, 1976:32-3).
6. 'Rather than allowing them [these notions] to apply as of their own accord [*les laisser valoir spontanément*], it should be accepted, for the sake of method and as a first step [*en première instance*], that at hand is nothing but a population of scattered events' [*population d'événements dispersés*]. (Foucault, 1976:32).
7. See Goody and Watt, 1968:29, where 'cultural tradition' is characterized as follows: '[the] society passes on its material plant, including the natural resources available to its members. Secondly, it transmits standardized ways of acting. These customary ways of behaving are only partly communicated by verbal means; ways of cooking food, of growing crops, of handling children may be transmitted by direct imitation'. Of primary concern to us here is the verbal communication of 'ways of acting'.
8. Goody and Watt, 1968:29.
9. Goody and Watt, 1968:58: '[f]or, even in a literate culture, the oral tradition - the transmission of values and attitudes in face-to-face contact - nevertheless remains the primary mode of cultural orientation'.
10. Lord, 1968:14.
11. See Darnton, 1984:3.
12. Vail and White, 1991:4.
13. See Ong, 1987.
14. Finnegan, 1977:40.
15. Finnegan, 1977:30.
16. Finnegan, 1977:34.
17. Finnegan, 1977:41-4.
18. Finnegan, 1977:44-6.
19. Finnegan, 1977:46-51.
20. Okpewho, 1983:1-7.
21. Okpewho, 1983:7-15.
22. Okpewho, 1983:15-20.
23. Okpewho, 1983:20-26.
24. Okpewho, 1983:26-30.
25. Okpewho, 1983:31-5.
26. Okpewho, 1983:36-44.
27. Okpewho, 1983:1.
28. Two examples will suffice. Diffusionism, taxonomist in its methodology (compiling 'tale-types and motif-indexes'), makes strongly ethnologist claims in so far as indexes are seen as reflective of a particular 'culture area'. (Okpewho, 1983:19). Many functionalists, diverging from the 'structural-functional' model of society so as to

- concern themselves with the *conflict* of social interests, interpret tales as psychoanalytic *symbols* (cognitionist) rather than as expressions of 'functional need' (ethnologist). (Okpewho, 1983:23-4).
29. Okpewho, 1983:20.
 30. We have already noted how research done into African oral traditions generally falls outside the scope of Oral Theory (at least as based on the oral-formulaic theory). Okpewho has however on various occasions paid specific attention to textual form. In an article published in 1977 he discusses the presence of the formula and related forms or stylistic devices (themes, ornamental structures, ring-composition) in the *Kambili* and *Mwande* epics, respectively from the west-African Mande and the Banyanga from Zaire. (See Okpewho, I. 1977. *Principles of Traditional African Art. Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 35, 301-13). This research is later continued in comparative reference to notably the Homeric poems and the South Slavic *guslari*. (See Okpewho, I. 1979. *The Epic in Africa*. New York: Columbia University Press. Referred to in Foley, 1988:89. See also Vail and White, 1991:27).
 31. Okpewho, 1983:102.
 32. See Lévi-Strauss, C. 1977. *Structural Anthropology*, vol.2. London: Allen Lane, 58. Quoted in Okpewho, 1983:103.
 33. Okpewho, 1983:130-1.
 34. This is, to be truthful, very much an implicit compliment, which I read in the light of his reference, later on in the same paragraph, to Lévi-Strauss's belief 'that the aesthetic claims of any cultural act are secondary to its structure of concerns'. Okpewho, in fact, as will be seen later, frequently criticizes the underestimation of the aesthetic qualities of the African myth on the part of scholars.
 35. See Propp, W. 1968. *Morphology of the Folktale*, transl. L. Scott. Austin: University of Texas Press. In fact, Propp explicitly states (p.113) that 'the style of a tale is a phenomenon that must be studied separately'. (Quoted in Okpewho, 1983:35). According to Okpewho, however, this 'underestimation of style' is largely invalidated, notably by Alan Dundes. (See Dundes, A. 1964. *The Morphology of North-American Indian Folktales*. (Folklore Fellows Communications, 81(195). Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia).
 36. See Kirk, G. 1970. *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 37. Okpewho, 1983:263-4. Emphasis added.
 38. Okpewho divides the evolutionist perspective on the myth into *euhemerism* (underlying the tale are the experiences of important historical personalities), *solarism* (the tale linked to perceptions of the sun, moon, etc.) and *naturalism* (the tale as manifestation of agricultural concerns such as vegetation and harvest).
 39. Okpewho, 1983:4.
 40. Okpewho, 1983:44.
 41. Wald, H. 1969. Structure, Structural, Structuralism. *Diogenes* 66:15-24, pp.23-4. Quoted in Okpewho, 1983:43.
 42. Okpewho, 1983:265.
 43. See Tylor, E. 1881. *Anthropology. An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization*. London: Macmillan, 75. Quoted in Vail and White, 1991:5.
 44. See Brill, A. (ed). 1938. *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*. New York: Random House, 29. Quoted in Okpewho, 1983:11.

45. Ong, 1986:18.
46. Ong, 1967:18.
47. Ong, 1967:22.
48. Ong, 1967:23.
49. Ong, 1967:25.
50. See Havelock, E. 1978. *The Greek Concept of Justice. From Its Shadow in Homer to Its Substance in Plato*. Cambridge, Massachussetts: Harvard University Press, 30. Quoted in Bieseke, 1993:48.
51. Foley, 1988:94.
52. See Goody, 1986. Goody, in fact, stresses the development in *communication* from the oral to the literate (as opposed to the development in ways of conserving knowledge - the one, however, surely implies the other) which he considers in relation to the legal, economic and religious organization of society. Some of these considerations will be looked at further on.
53. Foley, 1988:94.
54. Ong, 1967:30.
55. Ong, 1967:31.
56. See Ong, 1986:31-77.
57. Ong, 1986:37.
58. Ong, 1986:38.
59. Ong, 1986:39.
60. Ong, 1986:41.
61. Ong, 1986:42.
62. Ong, 1986:43.
63. Ong, 1986:45.
64. Ong, 1986:46.
65. Ong, 1986:49. Ong refers extensively to the Russian psychologist Aleksandr Luria in this regard. (See Luria, A. 1976. *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, ed. M. Cole, transl. M. Lopez-Morillas and L. Solotaroff. London: Harvard University Press). More about his work in Chapter 4.
66. For a similar indebtedness to Parry, see McLuhan, M. 1962. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; also Havelock's *Preface to Plato*. Ong leans heavily on both these authors in elaborating his 'psychologizing' interpretation of Parry's ideas.
67. See Goody, 1968 as well as Goody, 1987.
68. Foley does, however, mention him in his *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research*. (See Foley, 1985:287-9).
69. Ong, 1986:174-5.
70. Lévi-Strauss, C. 1966. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 245. Quoted in Ong, 1986:175.
71. Ong, 1987:375.
72. Goody highlights the city states of Greece and Ionia as the first society 'which as a whole could justly be characterized as literate', implying '[a]nything like popular literacy, or the use of writing as an autonomous mode of communication by the majority of the members of society'. (Goody, 1968:40).
73. See Goody 1968:3-4.
74. See in particular Vail and White, 1991:21-3, as well as Street, 1984:44-65. Some

aspects of this criticism will be considered later on.

75. A fact readily conceded by his critics. See in particular Goody's concluding remarks to *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. (Goody, 1986:171-85).
76. Goody, 1986:41.
77. Goody, 1986:4.
78. See Goody, J. 1977:1.
79. Goody, 1977:2. This 'framework' had been stated as the emergence of either 'rationality from irrationality', or of 'logico-empirical from mythopoeic thinking' or of 'logical from pre-logical procedures'. There have also been more 'positively phrased' dichotomies, such as 'wild and domesticated' or 'cold and hot' (Lévi-Strauss) and Robin Horton's 'closed and open'.
80. Goody, 1977:2. In addition to this *premise* as 'motivation' for moving away from the evolutionist / developmental model, Goody also mentions the difficulty inherent in the analysis of a particular set of data within a developmental sequence, in terms of which the tendency to see such data as a 'survival' may well override the need for it to be examined 'in relation to the existing social system'.
81. Goody, 1977:2.
82. Lévi-Strauss, 1966:15. Quoted in Goody, 1977:6-7.
83. The 'sensible order' relates to the 'arts of civilization': 'agriculture, animal husbandry, pottery, weaving, conservation and preparation of food, etc'. (Lévi-Strauss, 1966:279). Quoted in Goody, 1977:7.
84. Goody, 1977:7.
85. Street, 1984:48. Emphasis added.
86. Goody, 1977:8.
87. Goody, 1977:6.
88. Goody, 1977:9.
89. Goody, 1977:9.
90. Goody, 1977:9.
91. This notion is generally attributed to Emile Durkheim. (See Goody, 1977:21).
92. Goody, 1977:10.
93. Goody, 1968:48. Emphasis added.
94. Vail and White, 1991:22.
95. Goody, 1977:37.
96. Goody, 1968:57.
97. Goody, 1977:14.
98. Goody, 1968:67.
99. Vail and White, 1991:21.
100. Vail and White, 1991:15.
101. The autonomous model, as Street (1984:2) characterizes it, 'assumes a single direction in which literacy development can be traced, and associates it with "progress", "civilization", individual liberty and social mobility. It attempts to distinguish literacy from schooling. It isolates literacy as an independent variable and then claims to be able to study its consequences. These consequences are classically represented in terms of economic "take off" or in terms of cognitive skills'.

As far as our own discussion of the presumed cognitive benefits of literacy are concerned, it would be safe to say that the above characterization certainly fits the position adopted by Ong. While Goody's adherence to the autonomous model is in many ways more debatable (see note 75), he most definitely regards literacy as at least

an isolable variable (if not necessarily a dominant one) in the process of social development.

102. Street, 1984:44.
103. Street (1984:19-43) deals specifically with the work of Angela Hildyard, David Olson and Patricia Greenfield.
104. Street, 1984:43.
105. Vail and White, 1991:15.
106. While other societies invented pictographic and syllabic forms of writing, it is *in the intellectual heritage of the West* that the phonetic alphabet was first invented (by the ancient Semites) and perfected (by the Greeks). (See Ong, 1986:90). It is to this kind of writing that the cognitive advantages associated with writing are generally attributed, as well as, to a large extent, the very notion of literacy. (See in particular Havelock, E. 1976. *Origins of Western Literacy*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education).
107. Goody, 1977:3.
108. See respectively Goody, 1977:26 and Goody, 1968:67.
109. Goody, 1977:10. Emphasis added.
110. Vail and White, 1991:22.
111. Ong's argument is, in fact, 'only a slightly more sophisticated version' of McLuhan's 'preposterous' elaboration in this regard. (Vail and White, 1991:23-4).
112. The American structuralist anthropologist Franz Boas was the prime influence for the 'modern pluralist and relativist view of culture [becoming] dominant in America after World War I'. This *relativism* came about through the 'methodological "revolution"' of intensive field-work (as opposed to 'abstract theorising'), insisting on 'seeing non-Westerners on their own terms' as well as on the *coherence* of their societies (A.R. Radcliffe-Brown). Vail and White no doubt share this position. In Britain this school of thought was largely represented by Bronislaw Malinowski. However, as a result of his particular adherence to Wilhelm Wundt's concept of a 'folk psychology', whereby creative acts are seen as 'the product of the group, which [cooperates] actively both to transmit its traditions and to constrain individuals to accept them', (British) cultural relativism, while '[weakening] the stigma that earlier anthropological work had placed upon being primitive,... nonetheless continued the basic dichotomy between them and us'. (See Vail and White, 1991:10-3).
113. Vail and White, 1991:xii.
114. Street, 1984:24.
115. See Finnegan, R. 1981. 'Orality and Literacy: Some Problems of Definition and Research'. Unpublished manuscript, 5. Quoted in Street, 1984:46.
116. This notion, which he attributes to Goody and Watt, is also criticized by Vansina: '[i]t is not sufficient to claim... that an oral society automatically erases from its collective memory everything that is liable to be prejudicial to it'. (Vansina, in Ki-Zerbo (ed)., 1990:56).
117. Goody, 1968:31. Quoted in Street, 1984:48.
118. Street, 1984:53-6.
119. Street, 1984:53.
120. See in this regard the research by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole on literacy in the Vai script of West Africa. As reported by Harvey Graff (1987:388-9), they found certain cognitive skills frequently associated with literacy to be less the result of literacy *per se* than of formal schooling.

121. Street, 1984:41. See Olson, 1977, in which the 'explicit' meaning of the 'essay-text' (*text*) is contrasted - as a prime example of the decontextualisation of language attributed to writing - with the 'context-based' meaning of the 'oral-language statement' (utterance).
122. Street, 1984:47.
123. Street, 1984:8.
124. Literacy campaigns can, for example, be seen as a means of creating a market for goods that otherwise would not be in demand; this would be literacy subject to 'crude commercial exploitation'. See in this respect Berggren, C. and Berggren, L. 1975. *The Literacy Process: A Practice in Domestication or Liberation?* Writers and Readers Publishers Co-operative. Referred to in Street, 1984:13.
125. Parry, 1971:440. Emphasis added. Quoted in Vail and White, 1991:17.
126. As reported in Lord, 1968:3. Quoted in Vail and White, 1991:32. Emphasis added.
127. Vail and White, 1991:27.
128. Vail and White, 1991:24.
129. See Opland, 1983:183. For a definition of the formula used by Opland, see 'The Literate Orality of Popular Culture today', in Ong, W. 1971. *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology. Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 285.
130. Opland, 1983:192. Emphasis added.
131. Vail and White, 1991:xi.
132. Goody, 1986:55.
133. Goody sounds this particular warning in addressing the question of logic, drawing attention to its complexity: '[w]hile writing helped to develop new types of formal logical operation, it did so initially by making explicit *what was implicit in oral cultures, which were neither pre-logical nor yet alogical except in a very narrow sense of those words*'. (Goody, 1986:182. Emphasis added).
134. See Bieseke, 1993:67-81.
135. Quoted in Bieseke, 1993:67.
136. See Fage, in Ki-Zerbo (ed)., 1990:12.
137. See Vansina, 1985.
138. Vail and White, 1991:15. After the general movement towards cultural relativism set off by the work of Boas and Malinowski (see note 112), the most significant challenges to anthropology's dichotomous approach came, first, from significant reappraisals of relations between Africa and colonial Europe followed by Vansina's demonstration of oral tradition as source of recoverable history, and, second, from the collapse of colonialism as a result of African countries' political independence. (Vail and White, 1991:14-5).
139. This much is apparent in the following: '[c]omparative studies of many different primates suggest parallels to the prehuman situation of our evolution and the steps by which social, intellectual, and even ethical traits came into existence in an ecological context, associated with the human animal's niche, and more particularly, his place in the Paleolithic food webs. These studies are slowly delivering a picture of the human mind as an adaptation to the physical environment, to band, clan, and tribal organization, to the division of labor in hunting and gathering, to long life and delayed maturity - in short, to the environment and the way of the Pleistocene hunter'. See Shepard, P. 1972. 'Introduction', in Ortega y Gasset, J. *Meditations on Hunting*. New

York: Scribner's. Quoted in Bieseke, 1993:8.

140. Bieseke, 1993:39.
141. 'Orality' is, of course, another common ground. In this respect Bieseke, leaning strongly on Havelock, draws parallels with ancient Greece, which may be questioned in the light of the totally different social and economic structures of the latter. (See Bieseke, 1993:51-62).
142. See Van Wyk, 1994.
143. Van Wyk, 1994:29. See Kristeva, 1984.
144. The terms 'poetry, drama and narrative' are preferred to 'literature', which is 'too specific to the written letter and the book'. (Van Wyk, 1994:35).
145. Ong, 1987:374-5.
146. Ong, 1987:376. Emphasis added.
147. Foley, 1994:170.
148. Goody, 1987:82.
149. Finnegan, 1977:6.
150. Foley, 1988:110.
151. To whom should also be added Finnegan. More about her arguments in this regard in the context of oral literature.
152. Foley, 1990:5.
153. Foley, 1994:169.
154. Kelber, 1994b:199.
155. Lord, 1968:147.
156. Goody, 1987:105.
157. Goody, 1987:108.
158. See Lord, A. 1986; also Lord, A. 1986. 'Perspectives on Recent Work on the Oral Traditional Formula'. *Oral Tradition* 1:467-503.
159. Kelber, 1994a:158.
160. Kelber, 1994a:158.
161. See Makouta-Mboukou, 1973. Also, in very much similar vein, Cauvin (1980), who constantly stresses the role played by oral tradition as carrier of African identity and values. (See Chapter 1, note 81).
162. See Vail and White, 1991:155-97.
163. Vail and White, 1991:169.
164. Vail and White, 1991:156.
165. Vail and White, 1991:169-71. Vail and White particularly highlight the work of Hilda Kuper in this regard. See Kuper, H. 1978. *Sobhuza II, Ngwenyama and King of Swaziland. The Story of an Hereditary Ruler and his Country*. London: Duckworth.
166. Vail and White, 1991:178-9.
167. Goody and Ong's 'structural amnesia' (see note 98) to a large extent denies the idea of conscious intervention in the oral historical process. (See however note 116).

CHAPTER 3

ORALITY / ORAL LITERATURE

3.1 *Introduction*

Compared to its written counterpart, which has seen the flourishing of a virtual academic industry ('literary theory') almost entirely devoted to its ever-elusive definition, oral literature has rarely been given a *specific* definition - specific, that is, outside of its (obvious) relation to *tradition*¹. Okpewho's 'universalist' and 'parochial' anthropological orientations come to mind in this regard, through which, as we saw in Chapter 2, the oral text is generally given a functional as opposed to an *aesthetic* (if for the time being we take 'aesthetic' as broadly definitive of literature) interpretation. We can also - perhaps somewhat generously - explain this lack of definition by the fact that academics who 'read' (i.e. encounter) oral literature, generally come from disciplines other than literary studies (anthropology, history, linguistics etc.), and may not want to define something in which they are not specialized.

The crux of the matter is that the oral text, though quite commonly called 'literature', has tended not to be *appreciated* as a particular kind of (aesthetic) text, but, rather, *collected* as evidence of a particular type of culture. This point is well made by Karin Barber. Reflecting specifically on African oral literature², she decries the lack of any 'developed criticism' in regard to the latter, as a result of which 'scholars [who have trained in the tradition of 'mainstream criticism']... have tended to abandon the attempt to criticize oral literature and have fallen back instead on the mere collection and annotation of texts'³. The reason for this, she advances,

is to be found in the political situation of oral literature in general... Oral literature everywhere has been or is being marginalized with the displacement and impoverishment of its bearers, the illiterate peasantry⁴.

In relation to oral societies, then, the term 'literature' has by and large taken on a different meaning to the one associated with it relative to literate societies. Looked at from the 'mainstream' (i.e. 'modernist' - more about this presently) point of view, the idea of literature as consciously constructed *object* may either have been completely denied (as would be the case in a wholly 'romantic'⁵ approach to the oral as 'close to nature' - the term 'folklore'⁶ has been particularly prevalent in this instance), or else (within the perspective of oral *tradition* - as, for example, set out in Chapter 2) more or less underplayed. Allowing for variances with

regard to 'tradition' (on the basis of Parry's revised idea of tradition as 'on-going' and 'flexible' rather than 'unconscious' or 'communal' - the latter being generally associated with folklore), the common identification of 'oral literature' with 'oral tradition'⁷ has by and large denied oral literature the kind of *critical differentiation* to which written literature has been subject.

A noteworthy attempt at defining the oral text not as 'text', but as *literature*, has been made by Ruth Finnegan. In a 1973 article⁸ she describes literature as

that part of culture which we would normally regard as among the most valuable parts of our intellectual heritage and perhaps the main medium through which we can express and deepen mankind's intellectual and artistic insight.

Having thus highlighted what she sees as the literary 'function' of 'intellectual expression'⁹ - broadly defined as 'communication of insight'¹⁰ - Finnegan considers a wide range of oral texts, from Zulu praise to Mozambican satirical songs, from a song by a Yukagir girl from northern Siberia to the dirges of the Sea Dyaks of North Borneo¹¹, and asserts that these, by virtue of the insights they communicate, are 'at least analogous to our (written) literature'¹². Recognizing the insufficiency of this statement (much as we did towards the end of Chapter 1: the fact that they are 'analogous' does not necessarily make oral texts 'essentially "literature" in our own sense of the term'¹³), Finnegan extends her conception of intellectual expression to 'the more tangible aspects of thinking like self-awareness, detachment [and] intellectual probing'¹⁴, and broadly reaches the following conclusions:

- 'Detachment' can be as validly ascribed to the oral as to the written text, both from the point of view of the performer in relation to his subject matter (the idea of 'standing back and seeing things intellectually'¹⁵), as from the point of view of the performer in relation to his audience. Through the various means by which the performer can set himself apart from his audience¹⁶, his discourse achieves a certain *privilege* that distinguishes it from ordinary communication.
- The 'individual's vision and urge to create'¹⁷ informs the oral text as it does the written, albeit in a different way. While inscribed in a tradition, each performance is unique; the narrator of traditional tales '... becomes not only a "repeater" but also a "creative" originator of each story'¹⁸.
- While the oral aesthetic text may well have a wider *use* than the written in so far as it is produced within and for particular social situations¹⁹, there is nothing to suggest that its function is *per definition* 'pragmatic'²⁰ - and therefore relatively less aesthetic.

(See Okpewho's criticism - referred to in Chapter 2 - of the exclusively 'cultural' approach to the African myth).

Finnegan proves, then, that oral literature exists. It shares with written literature the same intellectual functions of self-awareness and probing, the same aesthetic ones of being, somehow, 'privileged' - it has a certain objectivity *vis-à-vis* those to whom it is addressed and that of which it speaks. These are all conventional ('modernist') considerations. But assuming that the oral text can be as 'literary' as the written, can it not also make as strong a contribution as the written to theoretical discourse, to *criticism*? For, on the face of it at least, there is no reason why Finnegan's definition, given the intellectual categories she employs, should not only be of relevance to the commonly held conception of 'literature', but, indeed, *challenge* - if not change - it: oral literature, recognized as such, also shows important *differences* - already encountered previously - to the written model:

- Within the context of their delivery *in performance*, the textuality of oral literature is particularly marked by repetition and 'well-known formulaic phrases and runs'²¹.
- Given the immediacy of the audience, the latter is 'more involved, more imbued with literary creativity than is possible when communication is through the more remote medium of writing'²². Or, to put it differently: 'participation by the audience... is integral to the artistic style of a given oral poem'²³.
- In the absence of a written record to act as 'yardstick of accuracy' there is, on the whole²⁴, a lesser concern with 'verbal fixity' in oral literature than in written literature. In an oral context where originality and tradition are, in fact, *complementary* to one another (their relation having been reformulated by Parry and Lord - see Chapter 1), the idea of a 'correct version' of a text is considerably watered down.

These points raise expectations as commonly associated with literature as the need on the part of the author or poet to avoid clichés, the interpretative role of the reader, as well as, at least to some extent, the emphasis (particularly associated with New Criticism) on verbal precision within the context of the literary text as 'well-wrought urn'²⁵. What is the position of oral literature with respect to these assumptions? In her earlier *Oral Literature in Africa* Finnegan makes a strong case for the appropriateness of the notion of literature to the oral text, not just in so far as such texts obviously exhibit literary qualities, but

because it has been found that to approach instances of oral art [oral texts] as *literary*

forms and thus proceed to ask about them the same kind of questions we might raise in the case of written literature, has in fact been a productive approach leading to both further appreciation of the oral forms and a deeper understanding of their role in society²⁶.

Yet if such a comparative approach has benefitted our understanding of the oral text, has it similarly rebounded on to the written text, on to what has been considered, in our own culture, as literature? The answer has to be no: a challenge to the most taken-for-granted aspects of the general notion of literature *on the basis of insights provided by oral literature* has generally failed to take place. Literary studies has been questioned and profoundly shaken by a variety of theoretical paradigms (we shall see some of these later), but Oral Theory has not been one of them. Whereas 'post-modernist' literary theory has come to engage the notion that literature may, after all, *not* be the consciously constructed object conventional theory made it into, its complete disregard of oral literature has in this respect been particularly ironic: could the interpretation of oral literature not, in many ways, have *led* the challenge against the modernist paradigm? What particular form this challenge could take (or, rather, *could have taken*) will be hypothesised at a later stage in our discussion. But the crucial point is that, no matter how widely the notion is accepted and the terminology used, irrespective, even, of how frequently the oral is projected as literature 'in its own right', oral literature has by and large remained excluded from literary-theoretical discourse.

Finnegan's 'specific' definition quoted earlier does not escape this. As is made clear by the title she gives her article: 'Literacy versus Non-Literacy: the Great Divide? Some Comments on the Significance of "Literature" in Oral Societies', she uses the applicability of the notion of literature to oral societies primarily as a counter-argument to the idea of an 'oral mindset' à la Walter Ong. What oral literature tells us about thinking is stressed at the expense of what it tells us about literature:

... the implication that non-literate societies do not have 'literature' turns out to be without foundation. This literature, furthermore, can achieve the same range of things we expect from written literature, *with all that this means for the mode of thinking in such contexts*²⁷.

The use of the notion of literature to illustrate a certain mode of thinking brings us to what is, perhaps, the fundamental problematic of oral literature within Oral Theory, namely that it is not really studied as literature but as anthropology. This ambiguity can be usefully explained in terms of the interplay of notions this study has so far insisted upon: orality *as*

oral tradition / oral literature. The fact that orality - *per definition traditional, therefore 'other'* - is *also* literature, casts the very *difference* ascribed to the oral in the light of actual similarity. Strange and exotic in relation to the written and the literate, the oral - by virtue of its literariness - turns out to be reassuringly familiar. We can therefore - a bit ironically no doubt - define the aim of the present chapter as follows: if Chapter 2 focused on how the notion of tradition sets orality apart, the present chapter will look at how the notion of literature brings it back. 'Tradition' defined the divide between 'us' and 'them'; 'literature' will break it down...

The question has to be, of course, how far? But this is also an ironic question, for as long as 'literature' presents itself as a counterweight to the anthropological bias of Oral Theory, as long as it comes across as a defence against the typecasting of the oral as traditional 'other', as an attempt at *rehumanizing* the 'dehumanized stereotype known as oral man', it will not be literature at all. As was the case with Finnegan above, it will be anthropology. Once again, the oral artist or poet will be an informant, the oral 'literary' text nothing more than data. In fact, once we have accepted that 'oral man' possesses literature 'just like us' - in other words, once our universalist view of a common humanity has been justified - we may well forget oral literature altogether and continue talking about literature in total ignorance of it. How to break oral literature out of this '*defensiveness*' so as for it to become fully appreciable not just as text, but as literary text, indeed, as literary *theory*, must be the real objective of our discussion.

Amongst the researchers dealt with in this study Walter Ong stands alone in his rejection of the notion of oral literature. It will be appropriate, at this point, to briefly review his critique in this regard²⁸ which, while ostensibly focusing on the relatively straightforward matter of terminology, actually goes way beyond it. Right at the outset Ong draws attention to the 'ideological consequences' of 'the scholarly focus on texts'²⁹. Of course, Marxist literary theorists have long insisted on the fundamentally ideological character of literature, but it can be argued that this ideological 'embeddedness' receives at least a peculiar twist in the case of oral literature. 'Literature' is always a loaded term, but given the added - and obvious - connotation of oral literature as 'literature of the "other"', it can no doubt be said that 'oral literature' is loaded in more ways than one. (See Barber's reflection on the 'political situation' of oral literature earlier). Ong's perspective in this regard differs from my own in important ways (as can be expected given our disagreement on the matter of orality as mode

of cognition), but it offers a useful point of departure.

'Literature' derives from the latin *litterae* (letters). Finnegan sees this as inconsequential: '... the term ['oral literature'] is now so widely accepted and the instances clearly covered by the term so numerous, that it is an excess of pedantry to worry about the etymology of the word "literature"...'³⁰. Counters Ong: 'concepts have a way of carrying their etymologies with them forever'. Furthermore '[w]riting... is a particularly pre-emptive and imperialist activity that tends to assimilate other things to itself even without the aid of etymologies'³¹. This 'pre-emptiveness of literacy' makes it virtually impossible for the literate person to arrive at a proper conception of a *text* (my term, not Ong's³²) solely dependent on the spoken word. The term 'literature' compounds this difficulty by reinforcing the pre-emptiveness of literacy; a self-explanatory circumlocution such as 'purely oral art form'³³ would be more appropriate.

What is a purely terminological (and, as such, trivial) issue to Finnegan, is clearly much more to Ong. On one level we may choose to dismiss Ong's argument in so far as it restates his view, criticized in Chapter 2, of the cognitive differences between literate and oral people. Drawing on Havelock's notion of the oral text as repository of cultural values and knowledge, Ong sees the *need* of oral societies '[to] invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages...' as establishing 'a highly traditionalist and conservative set of mind that with good reason *inhibits intellectual experimentation*'³⁴. His overwhelmingly functional perception of the oral text (inspired by his insistence on the pervasiveness of the formula as mnemonic device) leaves little possibility for the oral text to escape the above 'need'. In other words, oral texts will generally be characterized by a lack of intellectual experimentation. Add to this the 'aggregative rather than analytic' (to mention but one of the 'oral psychodynamics') nature of the oral mind - '[o]rally managed language and thought is not noted for analytic precision', says Ong³⁵, the latter being essentially the fruit of writing (see Chapter 2, notes 58 and 143) - and relatively little remains of Finnegan's 'intellectualist' definition of oral literature. Apart from the odd reference to the 'wisdom' of oral cultures, which he relates to 'a total [totalizing?] and relatively infrangible social context'³⁶, Ong's 'psychologizing literary theory' is hardly preoccupied with Finnegan's literary functions of self-awareness, detachment and intellectual probing. While it would be wrong to assimilate his views to the romantic / evolutionist idea of orality as 'close to nature' (Ong freely talks about the beauty and complexity of oral *art*), he ultimately has a rather reductive view of the cognitive processes of people in an oral culture. We are left with the

suspicion that the *real* reason why we should not talk of 'literature' in regard to their linguistic creations has less to do with the distortion that the term may impose on the latter, than with the fact that oral people *lack* the intellectual means to produce anything as 'creative', as 'meaningful' or as 'sophisticated' as literature. (We shall deal extensively with the question of orality and cognition in Chapter 4).

If, as is very much the gist of Vail and White's critique, the ideological overtones in the above reasoning could justifiably be called 'racist', it would nevertheless be unfair to seize upon Ong's argument solely for its concern with cognitive difference. On a more 'progressive' note, there is, of course, as we briefly saw in the previous two chapters, his concern with *undercutting cultural chauvinism*, which he to a large extent presents as Parry and Lord's most lasting contribution. Was our application of the term 'literature' to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (as reflective of their canonised status in our society) not at least partly responsible for our (rather arrogant) *misreading* of these texts 'as if we ourselves had written it?' (See Chapter 1, note 129). A large part of Ong's insistence on the literacy vs orality dichotomy can no doubt be *justified* against the background of a modern scholarship that glibly understands, explains and appreciates the products of another culture in the light of its own - limited - experience. We take the model we built in our own backyard, we extrapolate from it, generalize from it, and more or less ruthlessly apply it until it becomes the model that *everybody* built in their own backyard. One such model has been constructed from our experience of reading and writing a *certain* kind of text, and called 'literature'. Yet if contemporary literature were to come about in the same way as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, would we recognize it as such? Chances are we will *not* call it 'literature', but 'popular culture' or 'folklore'. Surely our newly found humility obliges us, as far as the oral is concerned, not only to explicitly recognize what we tended to ignore all along, but, moreover, to abandon the 'literature' framework of that ignorance?

It may be useful to recall here what was the major point of our earlier discussion on oral literature (Chapter 1), namely that the literariness of a text depends on its 'horizons of expectations'. I argued then that the earlier 'misreading' of the Homeric poems, derived from our familiarity with the *written* literary text with which these poems - having been received as writing - had been assimilated, was *valid* in so far as it resulted from - and pointed towards - changing 'horizons of expectations'. This view obviously contradicts the very idea of a 'misreading', at least in so far as the latter might have been attributed to

cultural unfamiliarity. No matter how 'unknown' or 'foreign' the origins of a text, once it is received as 'literary', the 'horizons of expectations' upon which such a reception is based must stand. (If cultural unfamiliarity does *not* pose a problem - a situation that hardly applies to Oral Theory - the way in which a text is received may well be less relative. We shall attempt to circumscribe a literary reading - at least in the 'modernist' sense - later on). I also asserted, however, that in the case of a given oral text (particularly the contemporary text that does not exist in written form), a literary reception / reading could *not* be taken for granted. (Such would be the case if the oral text is conceived of as 'literature' *by analogy* with the written). Rather, given the example set by the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as literary *model* of the oral text (of the text that Oral Theory engages with), the *possibility* of such a reception is opened up. As such, we are left with a 'virtual' oral literature.

Hopefully my reluctance to talk about an oral literary text by analogy with the written would make this particular conception of oral literature less prone to the charge of cultural chauvinism. One point of criticism that can be levelled at it, however, is that while it recognizes the distinctiveness of the oral text to the extent that the latter's reception as literature is postulated as 'virtual', it does not explain why, apart from the obvious factor (in so far as the oral constitutes the traditional 'other') of cultural difference, oral and written text should be distinguished from each other *as such*. A similar reasoning to the one outlined in Chapter 1 could also be applied to the *written* texts of any hypothetical (literate) culture completely unfamiliar to the researcher (and of which one particularly 'privileged' text has been given a literary reception in the researcher's own culture). Not being in a position to ascertain the ways in which the texts he comes across can be read as 'literary' (and not wishing to proceed by analogy with what is thus considered in his own culture), he will see in the texts merely the *possibility* of literature. As Finnegan³⁷ has argued, the question of whether a particular culture has literature or not does not necessarily have anything to do with the presence or absence of writing:

It is very hard hard to believe that people very different from us can really have anything approaching the depth of understanding or grace of expression that we know in our society and its literature. *This barrier cuts us off to some extent from all other cultures.*

Of course, the failure of the above appraisal of 'oral literature' to pinpoint what is *specifically* oral appears, on the strength of recent scholarship (Ong's view of 'cultural chauvinism'

aside), to be of relatively minor importance anyway. Foley (see Chapter 1, note 107) has told us that a 'great divide' between oral and written text was needed, at least at first, to 'fracture the sinecure of textual-chirographic thinking', the implication being that Oral Theory is, by now, sufficiently well established to fruitfully *deny* this divide. Finnegan, for her part, has from the outset - in spite of her stated admiration for Lord's *The Singer of Tales* and her recognition of the importance of the oral-formulaic theory - steadfastly maintained the position that 'it is misleading as well as unfruitful to attempt to draw a strict line between the verbal art of literate and of non-literate cultural traditions'³⁸. Further criticism of the literate vs oral dichotomy, notably that of Vail and White, was noted and discussed in Chapter 2. The following characterization by Karin Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias³⁹ neatly encapsulates the fundamentally contradictory reputation the literacy vs orality paradigm (attributed to Parry and Lord's 'notion of the sheer incompatibility of written and oral modes of literary expression') has enjoyed in recent times:

On the one hand... our writing-centred view of the world goes deeper than most oral literature specialists acknowledge. It is not just a question of our habit of ignoring the musical or vocal aspects or the expressive functions of body movement, so often a significant feature of the 'performance' of a 'text'. Our scriptocentrism may blind us to the most fundamental constitutive principles of the texts' literariness: a blindness made inevitable by the way we define the literary object under scrutiny. On the other hand, however, this very writing-centred scholarly tradition has also produced an extreme notion of a gross cultural and psychological dichotomy between 'oral culture' and 'literate culture': divided by a gulf whose existence is by no means confirmed by the empirical evidence.

As Goody told us earlier, '[t]he challenge is not merely to criticize the existing framework,... but to offer an alternative account that explains more'. (See Chapter 2, note 107). Whether such an alternative account, justifying the study of oral literature as *oral*, has, in fact, come to the fore, will need to be considered. But before moving beyond Ong's objection to 'oral literature' - an objection premised, as we have seen, on the 'originality', 'distinctiveness', *difference* of what it means to be 'oral' - it is useful to remind ourselves of what is, after all, the aim of this study, namely to offer a view of orality that is sufficiently *distinct* for it to serve as basis of Oral Theory as *discipline*. From this perspective the tendency, as reflected in Barber and De Moraes Farias' comment, to take note of (and, indeed, appreciate) the work of Parry and Lord (if not, also, that of Ong⁴⁰), only to reject it afterwards - with more or less force - is obviously self-defeating, however justified it may be from the point of view of

empirical research. (We earlier noted the reluctance⁴¹ of a researcher like Finnegan - who to a large degree exemplifies the position of 'empirical research' in this regard - to put forward new theoretical models to rival that of Parry and Lord, remaining 'constrained by the tradition she is questioning'. See Chapter 1, note 31).

What is at stake, ultimately, is precisely the 'undercutting of chauvinism' that Ong talks about, of which the most noted consequence is no doubt the opportunity it offers to abandon - or at least to correct - this model of written literature which 'has for long bedevilled study of oral literature, and led researchers into unfruitful and misleading questions in an attempt to impose a similar model on *oral* literature'. (See Chapter 1, note 16). One can, in fact, see the relative setting aside of the Parry-Lord paradigm, with the consequent diminution of the oral text as something specifically and *positively* oral (tending, instead, towards being merely 'spoken' or 'unwritten'), as a retrogression: Oral Theory is subsumed into its original areas of research (anthropology and classical studies), where, as I put it earlier, the respective 'distinctive features' for purposes of academic interest are 'cultural difference' and 'historical'.

Yet this is clearly, given the sheer proliferation of variously named fields all centred around the qualificative 'oral' (oral traditional research, oral narrative research, oral studies), not the intention. What can be envisaged, instead, is a more or less selective approach to the criteria for orality formulated by Parry and Lord, in respect of which the oral text, even if relatively less distinctive, retains a certain autonomy. Two possibilities come to mind:

- 1) The general preoccupation of the Parry-Lord thesis with style or form (particularly its emphasis on the formula) is set aside in favour of an approach seeking to determine how the text relates to the social / historical conditions in which it arises. In other words, there is, in regard to the interpretation of the oral text as *literature*, a movement away from the formalist aesthetic.
- 2) Lord's famous dictum: 'traditional tells us "what"' is suspended in favour of a perspective on the oral text as something 'modern', i.e. as an integral part of what could also be the expressivity of *literate* society. (See Goody's remark, at the end of Chapter 2, about the association, in a literate culture, between 'oral tradition' and 'popular culture'⁴²).

In the first instance the association between text and tradition is more or less left in tact (at

least in so far as 'tradition' is interpreted in the Parry-Lord perspective as something 'on-going' or 'flexible'; 'tradition' also - as we saw in Chapter 2 - *implies* oral: at issue is the literature of 'oral societies'), while in the second the oral is broadly considered for its predominantly formulaic character. Of course, a third possibility could be envisaged, in which both the 'traditional' and 'formal' aspects of Oral Theory are rejected, roughly equating orality with *speech*. As such, Oral Theory would be a branch of linguistics, its object of interest being the utterance. We shall have more to say on this possibility in Chapters 4 and 5. From the point of view of orality in relation to 'oral literature', however, the notion of a *text*, as linguistic expression somehow *set apart* from 'ordinary extrapoetic verbalization'⁴³ or 'everyday speech forms'⁴⁴, seems to me of fundamental importance, no matter how problematic it may be (as we shall see). Is it not, indeed, on this notion (oral *text*) that the argument of the Parry-Lord thesis concerning the formal properties of oral expression *depends* - at least before it was incorporated into the 'psychologizing literary theory' of McLuhan, Havelock and Ong?

A further clarification needs to be made in regard to our above division of research into oral literature. Broadly speaking, we can assimilate '1' (the text is traditional but its formal properties are not emphasized) to a 'modernist' approach to literature, and '2' (the text is assimilated to the 'modern' but the presumption that it is 'formulaic' continues to be significant) to a 'post-modernist' approach. In so far as modernism (the 'conventional' approach to literature) strongly foregrounds textuality and form, our association of '1' (characterized as a movement *away* from the formalist aesthetic) may seem particularly odd. Similarly strange would be the association of an approach which retains a qualification such as 'formulaic' (an obvious association with textual form) with post-modernism. The categories modernism and post-modernism are, however, relevant to the division in question in so far as they relate to the inherently controversial nature of the notion of literature itself, a controversy, I believe, that should also be confronted from the point of view of orality.

Literary studies, as Anthony Easthope explains⁴⁵, has conventionally taken its cue from the Aristotelian notion of the tragedy as an imitation of 'an action whole and complete'. The modernist reading has, therefore,

continued to think of the literary text as seeking a self-consistent unity and as something to be valued according to this implicit criterion⁴⁶.

This characterization is obviously at odds with the idea, formulated in '1', of moving away

from the formalist aesthetic in order to determine how the 'text relates to the social / historical conditions in which it arises'. But what is even more important than the preoccupation with textual unity *per se*, is the underlying assumption that there is such a thing as a literary text (conceived of as 'aesthetic'), and that the latter can be readily opposed to a non-literary one. The approach formulated under '1' is associated with modernism not on the basis of any particular textual consideration, but merely in so far as the oral text is regarded as 'literary' in the more or less narrow sense defined by Finnegan of 'standing back and seeing things intellectually'. (The implication is, obviously, that there are oral texts that do not conform to this). At issue is the oral text as something specifically *aesthetic*; not just the oral text but the oral *literary* text. We shall further define this aesthetic (or rather the 'reading' it requires) later on.

A similar reasoning underlies the association of '2' with post-modernism. The modernist paradigm of literary studies has come under severe pressure notably in the second half of this century⁴⁷ (some of these factors will be briefly reviewed in the second part of this chapter), opening the door towards a *post-modernist* literary studies Easthope refers to as 'cultural studies'. What is particularly relevant to us as far as post-modernism is concerned is the basic fact that it undermines the conventional opposition between the 'literary' and the 'non-literary'. Specific arguments with regard to textuality are, for our purposes, secondary. Of vital importance in respect to '2', then, is not so much whether the oral text can be considered as literature (that question becomes largely irrelevant), but rather, whether the notion of oral literature can function in - and contribute to - the post-modernist literary paradigm.

Obviously, this methodology in no way suggests that the two 'categories' of investigation I have proposed are fundamentally distinct. Notions like objectivity, textuality and ideology are applicable to both. What makes this approach useful, however, is that it purports to analyse interest into the oral text along lines more or less mirroring those of what has arguably become the major source of controversy in contemporary literary theory, namely the opposition between 'high culture' or 'literature' on the one hand and 'popular culture' or 'popular fiction' on the other. If 'oral literature' is to have any chance of becoming an integral part of our general theoretical discourse on literature, it would be self-evident that it be considered in relation to *both* of these polarities.

Crucial to this process will be the need, also, to assess these approaches to oral literature in terms of their preconceptions concerning that most ambiguous of notions: the

'distinctiveness' of the oral. The duality we highlighted in Ong's rejection of oral literature can be summarized as follows. There is his 'progressive' concern with undermining cultural chauvinism, at the same time his 'racist' explication of these differences - which are, to a large extent, the very differences which *justify* his injunction against chauvinism - in terms of a 'notional oral man'. The degree to which this duality can be resolved in favour of the 'progressive' side of the ideological scale (as more or less reflected in our own 'universalist' view of a 'common humanity') will determine whether oral literature - in the light of either one of the two approaches considered - can truly be a literary theory.

3.2 *Oral Literature as Aesthetic*

Let us begin our inquiry with some brief remarks on the notion of *text* (both oral and written) which, as we have so far insisted, is foundational to the notion of literature. (Foundational, that is, from the modernist point of view). An important point to make, at the start, is that the word 'text' in oral *text* / written *text* do not necessarily have the same *value*. Whereas 'written text' is commonly analysed as *literary* text on the one hand and *non-literary* text on the other (in other words, 'text' can be opposed to *literary* text), such a distinction has only rarely been the subject of speculation in the case of the oral. The notion of oral text - just like oral literature - has been generally used and is, as such, valid (which does not mean that it is not problematic - difficulties relating to orality as text will be duly considered), but the notion of an oral *literary* text is, by comparison, relatively unfamiliar. We have already hinted at this. The conventional differentiation between the literary and the non-literary - the object of a considerable body of theory - has by and large been restricted to written literature. 'Oral literature' is not just founded upon the notion of text, but is, indeed, to a large extent *defined* by it. This is a surprising discrepancy between written and oral literature (between written and oral text), which raises, once again, the issue of oral literature as literature of the 'other'.

In Chapter 1 I equated the oral text with performance. A more detailed version of the brief definition - provided by Foley - may now be appropriate. Foley⁴⁸ again:

In using this term ['text'] I mean to indicate a real, objective, and tangible score, an entity that exists both as a thing in itself and as a directive for its perceivers. In this second sense I take advantage of current critical notions of the 'activity' of a text, the dynamics of chemistry of its parts when brought together and to life by the reader. Both senses of the word are important... : the text serves as an object and as a libretto for the reader's or listener's personal 'performance' of the work.

Given my particular view of the 'collapse of the poietic dimension of the (oral) text' as

central to the appreciation of the 'art' associated with the latter, I to a large degree insisted on Foley's 'first' sense of the text as thing in itself (Nattiez's 'trace' dimension). Yet through the 'esthetic' dimension (the construction of meaning on the part of the 'receiver' of the text), Foley's 'second sense' - the text as directive for its perceivers - was consistently present: the 'response' of the reader / perceiver on the basis of the 'horizons of expectations' of the text fully coincides with Foley's view of the text serving as a 'libretto' for the reader / listener's own 'performance' of it.

Foley goes on⁴⁹ to insist, 'in addition to the dual nature of the text as objective and subjective', on 'its special identity in relation to the oral tradition from which it derives'. It is in the tradition - as Parry and Lord showed - that are generated the 'levels of generic form' insuring the recurrency of the text over time and space. But it is at this level - the oral text seen as deriving from a tradition-based generic *form* - that the idea of the oral text / performance *as literature* runs into trouble. In this respect it may be illuminating to briefly review what, to some extent at least, amounts to a discrepancy between our perception of what is, on the one hand, fundamental to literature (as set out here), and, on the other, fundamental to being oral⁵⁰. Admitting that at the heart of literature lies the text / performance, the latter (as performance) may well, from the strict Parry-Lord position of *composition-in-performance*, not be 'oral' (at least in a definitional sense) at all. (See Chapter 2, note 10). This 'discrepancy' is at least to a degree reflected in the difference in emphasis evident in Finnegan's treatment of the term 'oral' in her *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970) and *Oral Poetry* (1977). The former⁵¹, in which Parry is not at all referred to and Lord only by means of a footnote, sees performance confidently asserted as the 'basic characteristic' of the 'oral aspect of African unwritten literature'⁵², composition (presented largely as improvisation) and transmission being introduced in relatively secondary fashion as 'related' aspects⁵³. In the latter work this order is reversed, largely, one assumes, in the light of the oral-formulaic theory. (See the overview of Finnegan's analysis of the validity of the oral-formulaic theory in Chapter 1). 'The three ways in which a poem can most readily be called oral, Finnegan asserts, are in terms of (1) its composition, (2) its mode of transmission, and (3) - related to (2) - its performance'⁵⁴. Of course, Finnegan duly problematizes these notions and can in no way be said - her hesitancy as regards the formulation of a 'new' theory notwithstanding - to 'follow' the oral-formulaic theory. Yet it is significant that the emphasis the latter places on the specific nature of oral *composition* (which both necessitates the notion of traditional

'generic forms' and derives from it) in a sense - and inevitably - *de*-emphasizes the text, so crucial from a literary point of view.

We earlier reviewed Vail and White's disagreement with the oral-formulaic theory in the light of - primarily - their criticism of a 'notional oral man' as derived from the 'psychologizing' interpretation of Parry's notion of a specifically *oral* textuality. From this initially 'broader' view, we can now narrow our focus towards their alternative suggestions regarding the aesthetics of orality. The oral poetry of south-central Africa which is the subject of their book is - as we have already seen - generally *not* composed in performance (also the case, indeed, of African oral poetry at large), and an investigation of the 'mechanics of its performance' (i.e. the generic forms - formulas - facilitating its composition) cannot reveal its essence as literature. (See Chapter 1, notes 51 and 56). Instead, Vail and White see the oral text (at least in Africa) as having a 'common aesthetic' reflecting 'a shared set of assumptions concerning the nature and purpose of poetry' (see Chapter 1, notes 68 and 69). To what extent does this constitute an alternative literary paradigm to the particular brand of formalism of Parry and Lord?

A 1987 conference held at the Centre of West African Studies at Birmingham University (the proceedings of which - including a paper by Landeg White - were published under the title *Discourse and its Disguises: the Interpretation of African Oral Texts*⁵⁵), provides an interesting vantage point from which to begin our assessment of this question. In their introduction Karin Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias⁵⁶ thus describe the 'problem' addressed by the conference:

On the one hand, literary critics and folklorists have taken up a stance which combines a limited contextualisation (the emphasis being on 'performance' and the immediate conditions of performance) with a formalist analysis of texts (with emphasis on the incidence of wordplay, repetition and other literary devices): thus ignoring what the texts actually *say*. Historians, on the other hand, seem increasingly to be regarding oral texts either as raw material which, subject to a certain amount of processing, will yield historical information; or as the unmediated voices of an alien past. The 'Let the texts speak for themselves' approach tacitly denies the properties of a text *as a text*...

Quite apart from the lack of empirical evidence their own research uncovers for the idea of an exclusively oral *form*, the main reason why Vail and White do not accept this 'determinacy of form' is - as put by White in his contribution - precisely because, in formulating his theory, 'Parry broke the link between performance and history'⁵⁷. In this regard he finds the conclusion reached by Svetozar Koljevic in his review of Parry and Lord's *South-Slavic*

research 'profoundly relevant':

Oral epic singing at its best was both a way of coming to terms with history and a means of getting out of it. That is why its ultimate significance cannot be grasped in the analysis either of the technique of its composition or of the diverse historical sources of its social concepts, motifs and themes⁵⁸.

That oral epic is both a way of coming to terms with history and a means of getting out of it interestingly echoes what Okpewho - within the context of his 'aestheticist position' emphasizing 'fantasy and ingenuity' - has to say about the African myth⁵⁹:

In the oral tradition the recourse to fantasy is essentially a flight from the constraints of time-bound, objective reality [history] in the search for something more fulfilling or reassuring. For whether we tell a lie (as in the popular derogation of the term myth), or we put a historical ancestor in an exaggerated romantic light, or else we assign an aspect of our social morality or ecology a genesis that is not measurable by the laws of physics or conventional logic, we are simply preferring to escape the rather uncomfortable facts of objective truth in order to embrace truth of a more metaphysical design.

It is precisely the modalities of this 'escape' - in the light of which the oral text comes across as inherently evasive or ambiguous - which, as we shall see later, provide a kind of common ground for the perspectives surfacing at the above-mentioned conference. Yet to say that the 'ultimate significance' of a text cannot be understood by reference purely to the formal aspects of the text is clearly not the same as saying that the formalist approach is entirely without value. Neither, for that matter, can Barber and De Moraes Farias' position quoted above be described as a *rejection* of the formalist aesthetic. In fact, looked at closely, the 'requirement' that Barber and De Moraes Farias speak of in relation to the literary study of the oral text probably has less to do with the reformulation of a - generally dominant - formalist aesthetic, than with the reformulation of what has been an equally dominant definition of the *oral text*. Instead of - or rather, apart from being - thing in itself (as argued earlier), the text is - should be - *inseparable from history*. In short, what needs to be recognized is that the text is defined by its relation to history as much as it is defined by its formal properties as discourse set apart from everyday speech forms. This *inherent* historicity presents itself in the following ways⁶⁰:

[t]exts are produced in specific, historical circumstances the imprint of which they bear upon them; secondly, texts are transmitted through time, bringing with them elements of the past but also undergoing a process of erasure and layering as they are refashioned in accordance with new concerns; and thirdly, some - indeed many - texts are also *about* the past and its relation to the present, a relation which may be

presented in narrative or non-narrative form.

The historicity of the oral text, even where the text has no overt historical intent (or 'historical intentional message'), is of course a prime assumption of the historian. Indeed, from the point of view of historical veracity such 'unintended materials' are, according to Vansina⁶¹, frequently more trustworthy than texts *intended* as historical accounts. But given that the historical approach towards the oral text is inadequate - at least from the literary point of view - precisely *because*, as Barber and De Moraes Farias assert, it fails to take into account 'the properties of a text *as a text*', how does the literary scholar integrate his acknowledgement of the text's historicity into an aesthetic that properly accounts for these properties?

Nearly a full chapter of *Oral Tradition as History*⁶² is devoted to the question of textual form, from the basically linguistic (versificational) through the morphological (the sequence of action) to the concept of genre. As Graham Furniss⁶³ puts it, 'taking into account complexities of form and meaning is a necessary part [for Vansina] of separating the wheat from the chaff in the search for reliability of evidence in the construction of history'. Yet this kind of attention to form is clearly not appropriate for the student of literature. What Vansina calls the 'study of form and structure' is, at best, a first *stage* in the methodology of the study of oral history (preceding the analysis of meaning or content on the level of the 'literal' and the 'intended'⁶⁴). From the historian's point of view the relation between the historical (content) and the formal (aesthetic) is, in fact, generally one of contradiction:

As a general rule of thumb one can say that the more artistic [aesthetic] any narrative is, the less it probably reflects a succession of events or an accurate rendering of an historical situation⁶⁵.

A third phase in the methodology of the study of the oral text (or 'message') as history - after the initial study of form and structure and the analysis of literal and intended meaning - relates to the *aim* of the text. Vansina makes the important observation that, even in the case of a text presented as an historical account (the 'historical intentional message'), the 'historical aim' is *secondary* to what he terms 'present-day concerns'. The recitation of a list of royal ancestors, for example, is less intended as information about the past than it is to 'prove that the present king is the rightful incumbent of the throne and that kingship is the rightful and normal political order of the day'. Other concerns may include the advancement

of 'group consciousness' or the association of a group with 'the overall worldview of the community'⁶⁶. Indeed, with the *possible* exception of professional historians, a text which conveys information of past events for the sole purpose of furthering knowledge about the past does not occur in *any* society. Vansina's 'historical intentional message' turns out to be less about history as 'knowledge of the past', than it is about the way in which such knowledge is employed: 'as an argument, as proof, as legitimacy'⁶⁷.

Furniss - referring to Vansina - uses the term 'bias' to describe this 'motivated clouding-over of true evidence'⁶⁸. The historian must recognize bias, account for it, then set it aside. But what is ultimately discarded from an historical point of view can very well be the touchstone of the literary. Central to Furniss's argument is the idea that it is the way in which a text is defined as 'loaded' - in other words, that it is seen as subject to 'the manipulation of evaluative judgments' or perceived as part of 'the social process of argument and counter-argument'⁶⁹ - through which the dual nature of the text as formalist entity on the one hand and historical entity on the other may be reconciled within a single literary (aesthetic) paradigm. Cautious not to present his view as an alternative to the 'explication de texte' (formalist) and 'limited contextualisation' (historical) approaches, Furniss summarizes his comments as follows⁷⁰:

they amount to the suggestion that we try a step further in one direction among many - a return to one of the primary meanings of 'rhetoric'; to look for the context of the text as a representation and re-evaluation of people, circumstances, knowledge of many kinds; *to see the text as a piece in a debate...*

So far, then, we can broadly identify three 'aspects' contributing to our overall description of a text: it is formally and stylistically set apart from 'everyday speech forms', it is embedded in history, it forms part of an argument. The relative nature of each one of these aspects (criteria?) stands to reason. In his 'rhetorical' definition of the text, Furniss, for example, singles out the funny story or children's game as - perhaps - 'evaluatively innocuous' and, as such, falling outside the scope of his proposed aesthetic⁷¹. Surely the children's game is not 'a piece in a debate'? Yet this consideration obviously depends - as would any consideration relating to the comprehensiveness / validity of the above 'criteria' - on a certain kind of 'reading' (or listening) of a text as a *creation* that is both *conscious* and *unified*. This approach is what I have thus far - on the strength of Finnegan's original definition - termed the conventional or 'modernist' approach to literature. But there are other

approaches. On the basis of a (*post-modernist*) *psychoanalytic* reading of a text as manifestation of the unconscious, for example, it could be argued that the notion of the 'bias' of a text can plausibly be extended to the text as expression (or 'slippage') of repressed *desire*. Thus interpreted, it would be virtually impossible to describe *any* text as 'unbiased' or 'evaluatively innocuous', and Furniss's idea of 'looking for bias' would be of little help in defining what is 'literary'. (Then again, as we have already observed, the very need to distinguish between the literary and the non-literary is very much a modernist concern anyway - we shall see 'alternative' readings to the modernist in the second section of this chapter). For the time being, however, we remain within the modernist paradigm, premised on the notion that the text, be it something historical or ideological / argumentative or - in fact - both, exists as an *object* that is at least relatively autonomous. It is this assumption of *unity* that makes it possible, finally, to set apart what is literary from what is non-literary, giving validity to the idea of developing literary 'criteria'.

Another word for unity is *closure* or 'sense of ending': through some 'inner formal requirement' the (literary) text 'prepares [prepares the reader] for its own closure'. This, according to Barber⁷², is an essential characteristic of the literary text, distinguishing it from 'other discourse'. Olabiyi Yai picks up on essentially the same characteristic, which he calls 'finiteness'⁷³. But where the notion of the text as object may thus far have appeared to be more or less compatible with the emphasis on the historicity or rhetorical nature of the oral text, it now becomes problematic. And where the idea of the text as historical entity and rhetorical device could, at least to some extent, *also be applicable to written literature* (the case - respectively - in Marxist literary criticism and, to a degree, formalism⁷⁴), we now come across a conception of the (finite) text that effectively excludes - at least in some cases (as suggested by Barber), if not, in fact, in its totality (as strongly implied by Yai) - the appreciation of orality as literature. In other words, the 'distinctiveness' of the oral is once again in the foreground.

The specific case (genre) which leads Barber to question the notion of the closure of the text is the *oríkì*, known as the 'praise-poetry' of the Yoruba⁷⁵. Barber describes the *oríkì* - 'a collection of discrete and disparate epithets belonging to or attributed to a subject, whether a person, a lineage, an *òrìsà* ('god') or an object or natural phenomenon'⁷⁶ - as essentially fragmentary:

an *oríkì* corpus is characteristically a concatenation of intense contrasts, where great

wars are shoved up against personal foibles; obscure, humorous and scandalous incidents against statements of reigning communal values. Maximum disjunction and contrast is precisely what a *oríkì* performance thrives on⁷⁷.

This performance, furthermore

appears to lack unity - to be a centreless agglomeration of only tenuously related items, with no determinate inner formal relationships between them. It appears to lack closure and boundaries, going on and on in an undifferentiated stream until some external reason, rather than an inner formal requirement, brings the performance to a halt⁷⁸.

If the *oríkì* of the Yoruba are 'bafflingly impenetrable'⁷⁹ from the point of view of formal analysis, an historical one fares better, on condition that it does not confuse historicity with narrative. *Oríkì* do not in any way chronicle events of the past. Instead, their historicity lies in the fact that, in serving as a continued (continuous) expression of 'certain elements preserved from the past', they represent 'the past in the present', putting within the reach of the living community 'the accumulated powers, art and scope of its inheritance'⁸⁰. It is from this perspective, in fact, that the rhetorical nature of *oríkì* comes to the fore. *Oríkì*, Barber tells us, to a large extent serve as an 'aggrandisement' of the subject in relation to whom they are performed, notably in the case of the so-called 'big men':

The living big man is... built up by an intensive bestowal of fragments accumulated from the past - fragments that recall the greatness and uniqueness of the lineage, the mighty deeds of the big man's forbears, and the almost mystical, final and incontrovertible claim to being a real social being through identification with a place of origin [an '*orílẹ̀*']⁸¹.

Contrary to Furniss, who, as we saw, is cautious to present his 'rhetorical' approach to the exclusion of others, Barber strongly advocates the rhetorical as the only vantage point from which *Oríkì*, at least, may be interpreted:

... *oríkì*, by being uttered, effect transitions between one being and another, one state and another, one time and another. Only a rhetoric which could take into account what a text is 'doing' at this level would make discussion of *oríkì* possible⁸².

She also states quite unambiguously, given 'the extraordinary disjunctions and juxtapositions of *oríkì* texts ['texts', one assumes, taken as utterances], their centrelessness, their accommodation of multiple voices and "points of view"', that 'an *oríkì* text is not a literary object'⁸³. From the point of view of our own stated attempt to relate the oral text to an oral literature that is part and parcel of *general* literary theory, this is a somewhat troubling statement. In so far as it derives from a questioning of the notion of text (as object, as

closure), it would seem, at its most superficial level of interpretation, to reflect the idea that 'without a text, there is no literature'. Yet Barber does not deny that Oríkì do indeed constitute 'literary discourse'⁸⁴; her argument is, rather, that this literariness cannot be ascribed to any of the properties or functions normally (that is, from the point of view of 'conventional literary criticism') associated with the text. And even if Barber, in the article under consideration as well as in the introduction, makes - also on the strength of the other contributions - a resounding case for an *interdisciplinary* approach to the oral text, the notion of literature clearly continues to inform this interdisciplinarity, and not 'merely' as an aesthetic *element* of the interdisciplinary process (alongside historical and social considerations) either. In fact, in a very real sense the interdisciplinary approach she advocates is a literary approach which, '[in acknowledging] simultaneously the historicity and the textuality of oral texts, [in combining] a sociology with a poetics of oral literature'⁸⁵, arrives at a *new* poetics, a *new* conception of oral literature. There is, then, no reason to believe that the oral text is necessarily less literary (in terms of Finnegan's definition) for invoking modes of interpretation that fall, strictly speaking, outside that of the interpretation of the literary text. Its literariness may well *rely* on historical and social insights (more so than is the case for the written? - we shall return to this question), but it retains its qualities *as literature*.

So oríkì are, in a very real sense, literature without being literature, or, more precisely, literature that is not recognizable as such. This contradiction brings us to the edge, so to speak, of the 'modernist' approach to oral literature. But we cannot investigate this contradiction and the theoretical consequences it may hold - not just for oral literature, but, indeed, *literature* - without definitively setting aside other questions that may, in one way or the other, influence Barber's assessment of oríkì as literary / non-literary.

To begin at the beginning: when Barber says that 'the oríkì text is not a literary object' she is, obviously, far removed from the 'dismissive approach' to oral literature against which we earlier saw Finnegan offer oral *literature* as defence. Neither are her views to be confused with those of Ong: written and oral modes of literary expression do not differ by virtue of the different cognitive processes they employ. (We have seen Barber's objections to a 'psychological dichotomy' between literate and oral). We can reflect on a third possible interpretation, namely that the oríkì are simply an example of a (predominantly) 'non-literary' oral genre (co-existing with literary ones - much as non-literary and literary texts co-exist in literate societies). Having earlier set aside this distinction, this may be an opportune moment

to look at it more closely.

In the introduction to her *Oral Literature in Africa* Finnegan⁸⁶ observes that criteria for delimiting what is truly 'literature' are much the same for the written and the oral text. To a large extent it is a matter of opinion, which may differ as much between individuals and different age and social groups as between different periods of history. As such she refuses - all the more so, one suspects, for being an outsider - to distinguish between literary and non-literary oral genres, opting instead for a distinction between 'clear-cut' and 'marginal'. The former relates to cases where 'the African [oral] examples are clearly comparable with literary genres recognized in familiar European cultures', such as panegyric poetry, for instance. In the case of the 'marginal' literary texts there is no such (formal) parallel, but other aspects may be taken into account, such as *local* perceptions of the particular genre in terms of the prestige accorded it relative to others⁸⁷, and whether or not its form, even if it is 'clearly marginal: obviously not "literature" in [its] own right', in some or other way reflects 'an appreciation of the artistic aspect of language' and is, therefore, 'not irrelevant to literary formulation and composition'⁸⁸. Examples of these 'clearly marginal' forms include metaphorical names, elaborate greeting forms and proverbs⁸⁹.

Finnegan's evocation of a marginally literary reflective of 'an appreciation of the artistic aspect of language' is, from the point of view of *actually* delimiting what is literature, obviously flimsy. Language is in itself a symbolization, a 'distancing' (this point will be further elaborated in the latter part of this study) and, as such, *all* intelligible discourse becomes 'marginally literary', even within the conventional modernist paradigm. That all discourse is (marginally) literary (rendering perfectly superfluous the distinction between literary and non-literary) may well be conceded purely with reference to the written text, notably in the light of the post-modernist questioning of literature as a separate category of expression. Yet, even if this critique were to amount to an actual 'destruction' of the notion of literature (and this is, as we shall see, hardly the case), the 'literary', however unstable its criteria, continues to be *commonly* distinguished from the 'non-literary' or 'popular': the modernist view may well be more tenacious than its critics would admit. From the perspectives that Finnegan advances here it would appear, however, that a non-literary oral text (in a context where the oral text is regarded as potentially 'worthy' of a literary interpretation) is, frankly, *inconceivable*. But, once again, are we talking about literature or anthropology?

'Inconceivable' is only a slight exaggeration. Tending to ignore even Finnegan's watered-down opposition between clear and marginal literary texts, the literary perspective on the oral text is basically indiscriminate. Once the possibility of 'literature' is perceived, it is perceived everywhere, and in equal proportion. This particularly applies to appraisals of the African oral text. In a recent article Noleen Turner⁹⁰, on the authority of the Zulu Language Board, gives a largely formalist description of literature as 'language... used with particular care in terms of images and words chosen', and lists *imilolozelo* (lullabies), *amahubo* (poetry as song) and *izibongo* ('praise' poetry) as the different categories of Zulu poetry, *izinganekwane* (folktales), *izisho* or *izaga* (idioms and proverbs) and *iziphicaphicwano* (riddles) as the categories of Zulu prose. Drawing heavily on Dundes and Ong, these are given a strongly 'functional' treatment, with little regard, it would seem, for the obvious *differences* in 'care in terms of images and words chosen' between the various categories of text.

Vail and White's aesthetic of 'poetic license', which offers a radical departure from the formalist definition of oral literature (this conception will be considered more fully later on), shows a similar reluctance for delimitating the 'literary'. Their assessment of the African work song to a large extent illustrates this. To begin with, it is a work song (the 'Paiva' song of Mozambique's Zambesia Province) that is credited with making them aware of the aesthetic of poetic license in the first place⁹¹. The song is at first noticeable for its obscenity, revolving around its ribald insistence on the penis of the man referred to in the title. From a functional point of view, the characteristic obscenity of the work song had been accounted for on the basis that the chanting of obscenities made manual labour more appealing and that the relaxation of restrictions - in this case - of what otherwise was a taboo 'helped to get laborious tasks done efficiently'⁹². Yet in the *Paiva* song the functionalist interpretation takes a definite back seat. As Vail and White explain, the song is, in fact, described as a 'map of experience' by those who sing it. The individual to whom the song makes reference (José de Paiva Raposo) partly founded one of the major sugar industries of the region and becomes, as such, a metaphor for the industry as a whole. Through the deft use of further metaphor the song, in Vail and White's words, 'becomes a symbolic representation of the people's experience of company rule over four generations', with the obscene jibe *nsondo wache* standing 'as a permanent repudiation of the company's values'⁹³. Echoing Koljevic's assessment of the South-Slavic song, Vail and White see the song both as a 'reading of history and... a way to transcend that history'. Finnegan's criteria of self-awareness and

detachment are not out of place.

At the same time, however, the purely functional dimension of the work song remains, it 'provides a rhythm for communal labour'⁹⁴. Allowing for the fact that the *Paiva* song (or at least certain versions of it) is 'singled out as being especially important'⁹⁵ (in other words, other works songs are less so - see note 87), surely the postulated aesthetic is not *automatically* relevant to the work song?⁹⁶ Will *our* appreciation of the *literary* qualities of a song like the *Paiva* not benefit from a more discerning use of the term 'literature' in relation to 'less important' texts, particularly of the work song variety? To return, finally, to Finnegan: her 1973 article quoted at the beginning of this chapter can, however reluctant she may be to pinpoint an oral text that is *not* literature, to some extent be seen as *implying* the existence of such a text. Seeking to 'prove' that oral literature exists, it is no doubt significant - to refer only to the example she provides from the Zulu tradition - that she chooses to highlight, not the proverb or the folktale, but 'the *lengthy* praisepoems', and then precisely for 'their *studied* use of parallelism and their *richly figurative* style'⁹⁷. When the (literary) chips are down, the modernist adherence to a formally unified text centred around a consciously reflective and creative ('studied') subject shines through.

Having much insisted on the modernist assumption of textual unity, it may be useful, at this point, to look somewhat more closely at the consequences of this assumption as far as 'literariness' is concerned, and then particularly from the point of view of the reader / critic. Easthope talks about the 'features' of the modernist reading in this regard. Flowing from the assumption of textual unity, the following considerations are particularly important. Firstly, the text is not regarded as transitive but as intransitive, it is not

an act of communication seeking to transform a situation but rather... a self-sufficient object...

Secondly, the text, having become 'object for analysis', is amenable to '*all* possible meanings'. Not just meanings, in fact, but

everything may be significant - all aspects of the text, both formal (the signifier) and thematic (the signified) as well as interrelations between the two⁹⁸.

It is especially the latter consideration that concerns us here. For even if Easthope sets out to prove that the literary vs non-literary dichotomy can be seen as irrelevant on the basis of *post*-modernist readings (these will be seen further on), there are nonetheless texts that *resist* the modernist reading⁹⁹. This he illustrates through an innovative juxtaposition of two

'readings'¹⁰⁰, one of Edgar Rice Burrough's *Tarzan of the Apes* (a 'popular' text), the other of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (a 'literary' text). Easthope labels the former 'a pleasure', the latter 'hard work', the difference lying in the textuality of the two novels. That of *Tarzan of the Apes* is generally 'literal and denotative, [holding] meaning onto represented event, and so, signifier onto signified'¹⁰¹, giving the reader immediate certainty of meaning ('gratification'). In *Heart of Darkness*, however, the reader is required to 'track' the possibilities of 'signifiers that open onto multiple signifieds'¹⁰². Meaning is forever 'deferred', for *Heart of Darkness* is 'an ironic text, always meaning more than it says'¹⁰³.

Besides its requirement as to the 'closure' of the literary text, the modernist perspective can therefore distinguish a literary from a non-literary on the basis of meaning: connotative or 'multi-layered' in the case of the former, denotative or 'straight-forward' in the case of the latter. (This is a simplification of course - see note 101). But to return to the oral text: will the researcher of oral literature (who, as we have seen, is generally trained within the modernist paradigm), be able to tell the difference between an oral text that admits of a modernist reading and one that resists it? Given the obvious disadvantage, not only of cultural unfamiliarity and linguistic incompetence¹⁰⁴, but also of 'scriptocentrism'¹⁰⁵ (Ong refers to the 'pre-emptiveness of literacy'¹⁰⁶ in this respect), this would seem to be a tall order indeed. As such, it will be extremely arrogant of our researcher to - without consultation of 'local opinion' - bluntly adjudge a particular oral text as *non-literary*. But it is equally unacceptable for that researcher, this time acting at the behest of these disadvantages of which he is acutely aware, to go and proclaim as 'literature' *whatever* oral text he comes across. To my mind this transgresses the narrow line between, on the one hand, attributing certain qualities to something and appreciating it in the light of those qualities as deserving of appreciation 'in its own right', and on the other, merely 'applying double standards'. Goody's view that comparative research necessarily involves a 'value element' (it not only raises questions of *process*, but of *progress*) is worth repeating here. To unquestioningly call the oral text 'literature' is to *ignore* process in order to *deny* progress. As such, it is a kind of political expediency, with all the ideological presuppositions that go along with it. Opting for a 'virtual' oral literature (as described in Chapter 1) may, once again, offer some kind of way out.

What is ironic is that the procedure to equate oral text with oral literature actually undermines the artistic integrity of the latter (the sense in which it may be perceived as 'art')

in largely the same way as the 'dismissive' approach to orality, if not quite to the same degree. (See note 2). The more absolute our contradiction of the dismissive approach seeks to be, the more absolute its linking of tradition to text. In other words, the simplistic framework employed by the dismissive approach is perpetuated. For in making 'literature' and 'text' interchangeable one ultimately makes 'literature' and *tradition* interchangeable. Granted, the tradition may - thanks to Parry and Lord - allow for the text to actually have been *composed* in so far as the text is an improvisation on a creative model that is not staid, but flexible. (In the 'dismissive' view this model is characterized by its rigidity, meaning that the text is less composed than it is - above all - 'passed on', *transmitted*). But at the end of the day 'traditional tell us "what"'. Presupposed *as* tradition (as opposed to being *qualified* by it), the oral text that is automatically literature can never be more than folklore. As such, it is never really literature, always anthropology. (See also notes 1 and 3).

To return to Barber's 'oríkì text [that] is not a literary object'. In the introduction she and De Moraes Farias call for 'a sociology of textual production', affirming the decline of '[t]he idea that "a society" or "a people" has a monolithic and homogeneous culture, equally shared by all its members', and drawing attention to

the extraordinarily complex internal cultural differentiation of some societies,... [and] the impossibility of assigning a single determinate 'translation' to any ideological phenomenon in any society¹⁰⁷.

In other words, we cannot talk about the oral tradition of a particular society without first clarifying the social group or class within that society to whom the tradition specifically relates. This view obviously reflects a generally more 'conflictual' model of oral societies, representing a movement away from the conception of oral societies as necessarily tending towards harmony, stability and homeostasis. (See Chapter 2, note 28). Where Oral Theory has generally been premised on the notion of tradition as something relatively unified and simple (as set out in Chapter 2), the latter can increasingly be shown as multiple and complex¹⁰⁸.

But there is no reason to believe that Barber's projection of the oríkì text as falling outside the notion of literature has anything to do with considerations of social stratification and wielding of power within Yoruba society. As 'praise poetry' oríkì are obviously a crucial element not just of the expression of power, but indeed of power (and prestige) itself. Moreover, they are performed across the spectrum of society, by ordinary individuals (both men and women) and specialists alike¹⁰⁹. The particular ambiguity of the oríkì as 'literary discourse' that is not a literary object is not of a social or historical, but a *textual* nature. And

we arrive, perhaps, at the main reason for the 'impasse' in the interpretation of the oral text highlighted by Barber and De Moraes Farias¹¹⁰. The idea of the text as 'given', Barber tells us, lies at the heart of 'the mainstream [modernist] traditions of written literary criticism *in which all scholars of oral literature have been educated*'¹¹¹. Yai¹¹² offers a similar reflection, noting that 'written literary criticism serves as the bedrock to oral poetry criticism, the latter being perceived as the former's appendage'. Once again, the point is worth stressing: however justified the call by Barber and her co-contributors' for an interdisciplinary approach to the oral text, their concern is essentially with the oral text *as text* - a text that may well resist definition as (artistic) object, but which nevertheless *remains distinct* from social information (society) or historical data (history). In the final analysis theirs is the impasse, not of the historian or anthropologist, but of the literary scholar¹¹³.

As such, then, Barber's testimony amounts to a critique of a particular literary theory. In terms of the 'modernist' literary paradigm one cannot give a satisfactory account of *oríkì*, not because this particular kind of praise poetry is not literature, but, quite simply, because the theoretical paradigm is inadequate. What is significant, however, at least from the point of view of conceptualizing oral literature, is the route Barber follows to get out of this dilemma. In an earlier article - published in 1984 - 'Yoruba *Oríkì* and Deconstructive Criticism' (already quoted at the beginning of this chapter), Barber, having noted the inappropriateness of the modernist paradigm, 'read' the *oríkì* against what she termed the 'chief adversary' of conventional criticism - namely deconstruction - only to find the latter equally wanting¹¹⁴. (We shall see her reasons for this later on). While she suggests, in conclusion to the article, that the conception of literature as 'social practice' be the 'real alternative' to the conventional approach¹¹⁵, her constant concern with the notion of criticism (as reflected in the title) ensconces the argument firmly within the field of literary theory. But if Barber, in the 'Interpreting *Oríkì* as History and as Literature' we have been reviewing, bases her argument on exactly the same theoretical inadequacy of modernism, she - following up on her earlier suggestion of literature-as-social practice - now turns for a solution not so much to (post-modernist) literary theory as to an interdisciplinary collaboration with sociology and history. The text is seen as a 'species of social action'; literary study is assimilated to the science of rhetoric, which constitutes a way

of getting at the capacity of the text to activate spheres beyond the confines of its own textuality, and be implicated in social and political action¹¹⁶.

The following questions come to mind: why, given the essentially literary concerns of Barber and her collaborators, is the battle against the 'modernist' paradigm not fought *within* literary theory, *as* literary theory? Why is the oríkì text, given its resistance to closure, its 'infiniteness', not redefined in these terms *as text* rather than projected - as *non-text* (remember that according to Barber oríkì are not literary *objects*) - 'beyond the confines of its own textuality?' In short, instead of pointing out that the assumptions of conventional criticism (and of post-modernist criticism for that matter) exclude the oríkì, why not say that these assumptions are *wrong* and proceed to point out how they should be changed?

It may be objected that these considerations are trivial - and, in fact, rather quaint - in so far as they insist on the very kind of hegemony - of *order* - that the post-modernist (in South Africa temptingly overlapping with post-apartheid) view has liberated us from. Surely it does not matter in which 'field' oral literature is interpreted, as long as this is done properly? But 'literature' has an ideological dimension, and to advance an interdisciplinary historical / social approach as the *only* (as opposed to an alternative) mode of interpretation of a given literature runs the risk of (subtly) *devaluating* the latter. (On the assumption that *everything* may be significant the modernist reading, as we saw earlier, presupposes a text whose 'signifiers open onto multiple signifieds' - is it not that the oral signifier is, somehow, *incapable* of engendering such wealth of meaning?) It is important, for our purposes, that this risk be faced head-on: we are talking, after all, about the literature of the 'other'. And this risk becomes particularly acute when the oral text is denied as object: how do we know that the extra-textual interpretative dimension brought out by Barber's interdisciplinary rhetoric is not merely *functional*? In freeing the oral text from the (written) literary paradigm, are we not, in fact, reverting to the 'cultural focus' Okpewho objected to in Chapter 2?

Of course, Barber at various points draws attention to the importance of textuality (taking into account the properties of a text *as* a text), and in a sense her whole argument is played out on the proverbial tightrope between, on the one hand, the centrality of the text as basis of a literary / aesthetic interpretation and, on the other, the extreme fluidity of the oral text, a fluidity due not so much to the fact that it is, as performance, less 'objective' than its written counterpart, than to the relentless (at least from the point of view of the observer) social / historical demands the oral society makes upon it. But that does not mean that the utterance cannot also, at some point in the range of interpretation to which it appeals, exist as a text - more precisely: an *object* - for the historical / social expectations ('functions') to

which the oral text is submitted can in no way be said to *preclude* the possibility of aesthetic / literary ones.

There seems, in fact, little reason for the *oríkì* not to *also* be 'literary object', no matter how fragmented, disjointed and 'decentred' the latter may be. For a start, *oríkì* constitute a recognizable genre within Yoruba culture itself - the interpretative category of 'praise poetry' was not created by the researcher for the purposes of his own scientific distinction, but is *lived* by the people who perform the *oríkì*. Furthermore the *oríkì*, though coming across as unconnected fragments, are related through the mere fact of being attributed to a single subject: the one to whom the performance is addressed. *Oríkì* are epithets, they constitute a 'dynamic process of naming'. Names, as Barber points out, 'are self-sufficient with their own internal significance...' ¹¹⁷. Surely the understanding of *oríkì* as *names* (rather than words or 'units') provides them with a kind of textual unity? In her 1984 article Barber puts this more clearly:

It would be going too far to claim that *oríkì* are made up of a random assortment of unrelated units. Such an assortment would surely be impossible to perform. There is a clustering of units, through habit and through a kind of thematic drift; and there is a consistency of style which smooths the transition from one unit to another ¹¹⁸.

Oríkì can then be recognized in terms of a style, and it is not impossible to relate them to a theme, even if the latter is not easily summarized. At the end of the day *oríkì* seem, in fact, to provide an excellent example of the oral text that is *not* reducible to some kind of extra-textual role, and which Barber and De Moraes Farias earlier singled out as a particular focus of their study:

we were interested in the properties of oral texts that make them evasive and ambiguous: their capacity not only to take on radically different significances from one historical moment to the next, but also to accommodate at the same moment incompatible significances, with an effect of dynamic ambiguity... ¹¹⁹.

These properties are also those of the *oríkì*. But are they not also those, as Finnegan put it earlier, through which literature is 'distanced'? Conditional in this regard is that the utterance is somehow 'set apart' - that it be textual *object*.

In conclusion to our overview of the *oríkì*, let us consider an aspect that Barber has no hesitation in relating to the lack of 'closure' of the genre, namely that *oríkì* are 'a collection of diverse voices. Different bits were composed by different people' ¹²⁰. Yet the multi-compositional nature of *oríkì* is, on the evidence provided, little different to that associated

with oral texts in general. This brings us right back to the notion of tradition, which, as explained by Parry and Lord, does not only define the ultimate distinctiveness of the oral text vis-à-vis the written, but also, in a very real sense, guarantees the unity of the text. Seen as traditional texts - which they are¹²¹ - the fragmentation and decentredness of the *oríkì* are immediately qualified. Foley's view of the oral text as simultaneously 'thing in itself' and 'directive', gleaning its identity from tradition (a view strongly inscribed in an oral-formulaic theory relatively poorly - as we have seen - adapted to Africa¹²²), may well ring true even for the *oríkì*.

Olabiya Yai echoes Barber's critique of the text as object, noting that the notions of *spatiality* and *unity*, basic to the definition of text, 'are not necessarily relevant in oral literature'¹²³. The conventional formalist and structuralist approaches to oral literature, useful in certain respects¹²⁴, are therefore inadequate for the study of oral literature. What he terms 'the context of situation' (also the 'ethnography of performance') approach - attributed to the development of pragmatics and semiotics - ultimately fails by the same token. While this approach rightfully abandons the idea of the text as self-sufficient unit of analysis (thing in itself and directive to its perceivers?), it still hinges on an opposition of 'text' to 'context' which is foreign to orality: '[t]he text / context dualism may be a function of the "alphabetic ideology" [scriptocentrism?] of the Western world...'¹²⁵.

In a sense, then, Yai's dissatisfaction with the modes of interpretation of the oral *utterance* can be seen as going beyond that of Barber, whose view of literature as social practice reflects, if not exactly a dichotomy, a kind of 'interplay' between the notions of text and context (to be conceived of as discourse on the one hand and power and ideology on the other¹²⁶) in respect of which it could be argued that the text as object remains more or less identifiable. Barber's argument as to the inadequacies in relation to the oral of both conventional and post-modernist literary paradigms is essentially a methodological one, but Yai lodges his objection on a deeper, epistemological level:

The reason for the relative failure of the linguistic [structuralist] and semiotic [pragmatic] approaches to oral poetry criticism is that, whatever their methodology, their presuppositions enshrine a serious epistemological confusion. Since we are dealing with cultural products expressed in linguistic medium, the use of the written modality which is known to be antithetic to orality for apprehending the latter should appear as *prima-facie* suspicious scientific instrument¹²⁷.

Where Barber took us to the edge, so to speak, of a writing-centred *conception* of oral

literature, Yai takes us to the edge of the *modality of criticism* of oral literature, which is writing itself. The distinctiveness of the oral, which in this instance owes nothing to the formalist hypotheses of Parry and Lord, is pushed to the limit, and the prognosis for a proper *oral* literary criticism is nothing if not pessimistic. Arnold Krupat's 'courageous' admission 'I do not believe that our textual culture... can develop an oral poetics'¹²⁸ receives the following justification:

... the very enterprise of a written criticism of oral literature has an intrinsic violence, as well as an assimilationist parti-pris, at its root. Thus all the theories so far examined have produced criticisms of oraliture [oral literature] that are but various versions of written literature criticism. *They cannot fail to miss their target*¹²⁹.

The *inherent* inability of the researcher of Oral Theory to give a particular oral text a literary 'reading' (reception) has already been discussed, earlier in the present chapter as well as in Chapter 1. This inability results in the existence - to us - of but a 'virtual' oral literature, which takes its example from the literary horizons of expectations of the ultimately 'privileged' Homeric poems. As I stated in Chapter 2, this particular conception - in so far as it relates to the theoretical origins of Oral Theory - can be seen as an attempt at setting aside (or bypassing) the 'anthropological bias' of Oral Theory. Of course, it is a vain attempt, for the 'literature' in question remains at the level of pure possibility. But at least it recognizes the need to remove the study of oral literature from its anthropological cradle. Yai, more than any of the authors we have dealt with, is sensitive to this. Reflecting on the approaches to oral literature earlier criticized, he is able to justify them within the framework of a particular 'modality of writing': what he terms 'the Western university tradition'. He continues:

They [these approaches] will still be of use, but their practitioners should bear in mind their status. As long as their role is to inform us about the mechanisms of a literature whose natural audience is not familiar with such discourse, these critical approaches, we must emphasize, *are part and parcel of anthropology or ethnology*¹³⁰.

An interesting twist that Yai gives my earlier argument is the attention he focuses, not on the distance between the researcher of oral literature (whom I shall now call a *potential* critic) and the text he encounters (due to cultural / linguistic unfamiliarity and the failure to come to terms with the oral medium - 'scriptocentrism'), but, instead, on the distance between the oral text's 'natural audience' ('traditional' audience) and the mode of interpretation employed by the 'critic'. Of course, the two 'distances' are really one and the same, but Yai's

formulation goes straight to the core of the matter, which is - in the terms we used earlier - the exclusion of the 'critic' from the text's horizons of expectations. As such, as Yai puts it, 'the student's [critic's] participation in the creative process of poetry is thrown overboard'. To re-use, albeit in a different context, Ong's vivid image: as researcher constantly on the look-out for information (data), the 'critic' of oral literature is nothing more than an assembly-line worker, in other words, not a critic at all.

At this point Yai takes the dissolution of the text-as-object a step further. Apart from their historicity and ideology, oral texts are inherently *critical*, they 'often already contain the germs of a theory of themselves'¹³¹. Beyond the dichotomy of text vs context, Yai is, in fact, concerned with another one, equally scriptocentric, and, as far as the oral text is concerned, equally false: literature vs criticism. The Gèlèdé society of Western Yorubaland, for example, knows a particular kind of 'pre-performance criticism'¹³², where two or three artists with complementary talents (either specialized in melody or in words and metaphors) assess songs proposed by individuals. A song may be re-evaluated afterwards, before being submitted for assessment by the 'collective', a procedure known as *igbalè*. According to Yai, this criticism is 'conceived as a communal exercise, a collective production'. As an example of a form of criticism contemporary to performance, Yai mentions the dialogic mode of the *Iyèrè Ifá* (divinatory poetry), where the responsorial form of the chant enables the audience to register their approval or disapproval of the participant's song at the end of each 'line'. 'Poetic contests' offer yet another - extremely pervasive - example of oral poetry that is simultaneously oral criticism. 'Unlike the criticism of writtleness which is in essence a criticism of mediation', Yai tells us, 'oral poetics is indivisible with its poetry; it is self-productive'. He describes the criticism of oral texts as generative, expansive and ameliorative:

Its objective and function are not only to make poets do better and to arouse more poetic vocations, but more important, to make each poet excel his predecessors and his contemporaries or to give self-transcending performances at every occasion. It is, in several respects, participatory. From the point of view of oral poetics, oral poetry should not even be described. We know it by practising it and by contributing to its making¹³³.

What is noteworthy in this particular critique of the 'finiteness' of the textual object is that, different to Barber, Furniss and - as we shall see - Vail and White, Yai does not refer to some kind of interdisciplinary 'beyond', but declares himself squarely within the field of literature and literary studies. Unlike formalist, structuralist and pragmatic 'literary' approaches, the

'oral poetics' described here is not anthropology, but literature.

Or is it? The logical outcome of Yai's argument is 'an oral approach to the criticism of oral poetry where it is being taught': at university. This will, for the first time no doubt, afford the oral text an interpretative framework in many ways distinct from that developed in the anthropological pursuit of gathering data on traditional societies. But this is easier said than done. Yai mentions courses introduced at universities in Ile-Ife (Nigeria), where oral poets themselves teach different modes of oral poetry with the emphasis on 'performative acquisition'. This innovation elicits the following comment, worth quoting at some length:

A meeting-point has indeed been created between the university ivory-tower and the contexts of oral poetry elaboration but the traffic is one way. Contrary to the usual course of oral poetry apprenticeship, the young poet does not go to his master but the master leaves his village in search of his pupil in an institution where he feels *de trop*. From a central authority in his village, he becomes a peripheralised master, as it were, in the university circle. In a sense a traditional poet teaching in a university patterned on Western models of education is a hostage of the peasant world in a 'modern' island. This, of course, affects patterns of mutual perception between poet / teacher and student. Students do respect the poet for his art and talent but they hardly regard him as a regular teacher. The relationships of camaraderie that constitute the norm between teacher and pupil in the village situation do not exist here, as pupils do not belong to the same socio-cultural background and do not interact outside the classroom. To a considerable extent, creativity is consequently muted in both teacher and pupils and the threat of 'fakelore' becomes more serious¹³⁴.

Yai imagines a 'more flexible and dialogic situation' where the pupil goes to work with the master in the village and immerses himself in the 'ecology' of oral poetry. But he concedes that 'this would require a complete rethinking of our educational tenets' and a questioning of 'the validity of the entire structure of the neo-colonial society with its characteristic urban bias'¹³⁵. Our response can only be the following: the context in which Oral Theory has come to be postulated is simply not part of such a revolutionary project, no more, at any rate, than would be the case for any other academic 'discipline', whatever its degree of interdisciplinarity. Yai's conception of a true oral poetics, while courageously asserting the *equality* of the oral creator and his critic and to a large degree showing how it could be achieved, brings out in full relief, not just the distance between 'us' and 'them', but the ideological stakes involved in 'oral literature'. At issue, as Barber and De Moraes Farias put it, is 'the power imbalance which caused the rupture between producers [of oral literature] and Westernised critics in the first place'¹³⁶. An oral literature theorised and critiqued not as information, but literature, remains at best an ideal.

Yai and Barber - the latter perhaps to a slightly lesser extent - attempt to elaborate a theoretical paradigm for oral literature in full recognition of what we earlier called the 'distinctiveness' of orality. Indeed, the failure of previous theoretical models to interpret the oral text (i.e. to *critically* interpret it as literature), is attributed precisely to their assumption that oral and written texts could share the same critical apparatus. In the light of our earlier interpretation of Ong's argument *against* the notion of oral literature, we can say that Yai and Barber both emphasize that part of oral *difference* that goes to 'cultural chauvinism'. The arguments advanced by Vail and White, however, are best understood as stressing the divisive ('racist') aspect of Ong's views. As such, then, their concern is not to establish - as Yai attempts to do - a *specialized* 'oraliture' criticism, but rather, as Alan Thorold puts it, 'to erase the distinction between the oral and the written in southern African literature'¹³⁷.

White does talk about the need to develop 'an aesthetic deriving not from external models or theories of orality but from the evidence of African texts and from the comments of performers and audiences in Africa about the nature of the literature they value'¹³⁸. This sounds very much like Yai. In fact, there is little question of Vail and White 'disagreeing' with Yai or Barber, and they strongly endorse Yai's complaint as to the lack of communication between the producer and critic of oral poetry. (See Chapter 1, note 80). But in advocating an historical approach to the study of African oral poetry - more specifically in terms of this poetry's 'common aesthetic' of poetic license - they say nothing that, in essence, cannot also be said about criticism of written literature. According to White,

[t]he phenomenon that oral poetry in its various forms is permitted a freedom of expression which violates normal conventions has been noted throughout sub-Saharan Africa¹³⁹.

An historical approach, he further tells us,

conforms very well with the testimony of African informants. A good oral poet is usually described as one who roots his performance, directly or by implication, in a coherent and comprehensive view of the past and present¹⁴⁰.

The important point to make is that the appropriateness in question here relates less to orality *per se* than it does to Africa (or southern Africa) as cultural area. At issue is less what is appropriate for oral, than what is appropriate for *African* literature (poetry). As such, of the numerous advantages that Vail and White attribute to their interpretative framework of poetic license, namely - to mention but a few - that it 'strengthens and makes more specific the customary claim that oral poetry is a kind of social action' (see Furniss and Barber), that it

'makes redundant the distinction between text and context (see Yai), between formalist analyses of literary devices and social analyses of content, in short between poetics and history'¹⁴¹, one advantage stands out:

it enables us to recognize important lines of continuity between oral and written poetry in southern Africa¹⁴².

Vail and White's virulent criticism of the role of the oral formulaic theory in the creation of a 'notional oral man' leads - inevitably one suspects - not just to a denial of the literacy vs orality dichotomy, but to a denial of the difference between written and oral text. Their denial of anthropological division translates amiably into a literary universalism that owes nothing in particular to orality.

Or does it? Vail and White have already made abundantly clear to us that they are not interested in the formula, *even* as an aid to improvisation / composition. (See Chapter 1, note 51). Neither can the *essence* of oral poetry be interpreted 'through an investigation of the mechanics of its performance', in other words - in the terms we developed earlier - through an investigation of the mechanics of its *textuality*. It may be worth reflecting briefly on Vail and White's use here of the term 'essence'. Two possibilities present themselves. Either we take essence to refer specifically to the meaning of the *oral* text ('oral meaning', in other words), in which case the very historicity of the text is regarded as being, in a sense, an effect of oral textuality *regardless* of whether the oral and written text are formally different: the oral text lends itself to an historical approach in ways that the written text does not. Or we may understand essence to mean simply 'meaning' (at issue is simply a text, not necessarily an oral one), in which case formal differences between the oral and written text are entirely inconsequential given the over-all importance - as far as meaning is concerned - of the relation between text and history. Where our first interpretation of the term 'essence' reaches beyond what may (or may not) be *common* to oral and written literature (the textual) so as to address the specifically oral (historicity), the second *ignores* what may (or may not) be *specific* so as to address what it sees as common to literature in general.

The perspectives developed in *Power and the Praise Poem* would seem to provide justification for both interpretations. With regard to the first one, we have already seen White's assertion, based on the views of his African informants, as to the *particular* appropriateness of an historical approach to the African oral text. In other words, we may

justifiably talk of a specifically *oral* literary paradigm without feeling guilty about our lack of concern for textual considerations *as such*. This position will be revisited later on. The second interpretation is, in a sense, the more problematical of the two in so far as it denies - or glosses over - the 'distinctiveness' of the oral. It will be useful, at this point, to reflect on this in somewhat more detail.

Vail and White may well reject the formalist paradigm, but they nonetheless recognize that the oral text is likely to be dominated by certain formal features rather than others. Foremost amongst these are repetition, sentences that are 'short and fairly simple in construction', a predominance, 'because of its greater vividness', of the present relative to past tenses (even where historical events are being described), and, given its greater immediacy, a predilection for the direct speech of the first and second person rather than the indirect speech of the third¹⁴³. These factors all relate to the 'mechanics of performance'. In addition to these considerations, Vail and White are not necessarily averse to a description of the oral text in terms of *the way in which it is patterned*. Central to this is the metaphor. Through its elaboration into 'patterns of interpretation'¹⁴⁴, it

come[s] to stand as the bearers of history and remain[s] in the cultures concerned as evaluative precedents, the 'evidence' to be deployed by subsequent poets as they interpret that history¹⁴⁵.

There is a striking analogy between the conception of the metaphor as 'evaluative precedent' answering to a certain pattern of interpretation, and the idea of a tradition-based 'generalized poetic language'¹⁴⁶ or diction à la Parry. Ong, as we noted earlier, refers to striking visual imagery (which is precisely what the metaphor frequently amounts to) as 'the ocular equivalent of the formula'. (See Chapter 2, note 49). Vail and White are clearly sensitive to this analogy, for they immediately raise their guard:

It should be clear that these metaphors are not 'formulas', either in the sense that they are repeated expressions, for the general diction need not be retained, or in the sense that they repeat given 'essential ideas', for their value is precisely that they provide the currency for new ideas, for reassessment and for reevaluation. Metaphors, by fusing abstract concepts with concrete images, have the characteristic of uniting physical and metaphysical elements into a rich compound of meaning¹⁴⁷.

So, by 'fusing abstract concepts with concrete images' it is the metaphor that - to recall Okpewho's earlier remark (see note 56) - provides the means of escape from objective truth in order to grasp 'truth of a more metaphysical design'. Not only does the metaphor constitute

the point where physical reality gives onto the metaphysical, but, from an interpretative point of view, it also stands at the very juncture where the properly textual / formal merges into the historical, and Vail and White leave us in no doubt as to the supremacy of the latter. This despite their recognition of the importance of the 'skills of the performer'¹⁴⁸ and their acknowledgement, at least in the case of the *Paiva* song, of the way in which form has contributed to its 'popularity and memorability'¹⁴⁹. In fact, this acknowledgement of textuality is relative to say the least, for only a few pages later we are told that

[i]n the final analysis, the long popularity of the *Paiva* song... has had little to do with its form...

And the metaphor is explicitly shown to derive not from considerations of form, but of history:

[i]t [the popularity of the *Paiva* song] has depended on what is widely believed to have been the audacity of its original protest at a historical moment the people still cherish, and on the absolute precision of its central metaphor in expressing the plantations workers' complaint about the sugar company¹⁵⁰.

Contrary, then, to what the perspective on oral *form*, not just as mode of expression, but essentially as mode of *cognition* would have us believe (see Chapter 2), the visual imagery that makes up the metaphor is not about *how* people think (emphasizing what is easily recognizable or 'memorable') but, rather, about *what* they think (in relation to their own experience / history). This is an attractive proposition. But if, in Vail and White's view, the metaphor is, so to speak, *at the service* of history, it is also *subjected* to it. The metaphor derives from history and comes to terms with it, but it seldom - if ever - *transcends* it. And here we arrive at what is no doubt the crucial difference between written and oral literature, namely their different relation to time:

Where a poem reaches its audience through print... [w]e take it at our own pace, appreciating its completeness as a work of art. Even when the points it makes are topical, we tend to praise it for achieving timelessness. Some oral poetry resembles this. There are songs and poems that have been preserved over long periods because they express perfectly what people feel on certain subjects, the words remaining largely unchanged because 'they come from our fathers'. There are others composed well in advance of performance and polished to perfection in rehearsal. The songs of the Chopi *migodo*... are good examples. In general, though, the tendency of oral poetry is to be concerned with the drama of the moment¹⁵¹.

Apart from its - surprising - concession to a Kantian universalist aesthetic (the timelessness

of the text reflects the disinterestedness of the author - see Chapter 1, notes 117 and 118), not to mention the modernist 'art for art's sake' apparent in the idea of a performance 'polished to perfection', this passage is notable for its contradiction. The basic point that Vail and White are trying to make is that oral poetry is essentially time-bound *because of* its concern with 'the drama of the moment' - its historicity. At the same time, though, they allude to a kind of historicity that is *itself*, in a sense, 'timeless': some songs are preserved because 'they express perfectly what people feel on certain subjects'. The point is, of course, that these 'subjects' are *historical* ones: the meaning of a particular text can only become apparent within an historical perspective. But the inherent historicity of the oral text is not only its condition of meaning, it also turns out to be its condition of longevity, of 'timelessness'. The implications of this view brings us close to the idea of the relative 'changelessness' of oral societies Vail and White so explicitly reject. Even though the events themselves do not change, surely the way people feel about them constantly do? As Vail and White themselves demonstrate, the oral text is historical not because it reflects - or even attempts to reflect - the significance of history, but because it interprets, and *re*-interprets, that significance.

Yet many an oral text takes on a kind of momentum that propulses it beyond its historical embeddedness. Finnegan will have no problem in accounting for this momentum: it is what makes the text 'aesthetic', what sets it apart from everyday discourse - in short, its textuality, its form. Being, as we have seen, by no means a strict adherent of the formalism of Parry and Lord, she may well agree with Vail and White that historicity is *the* vital ingredient of textual meaning / interpretation. But the transcendence of that history (or that meaning) into 'communication of *insight*' seems - to me at least - indistinguishable from the effect of detachment that is the prerogative of form, and form alone.

Faced with the contradiction of a historicity that is simultaneously time-specific and timeless, Vail and White are, however, extremely reluctant to attribute to form any such importance. Their reference, in the passage quoted above, to the Chopi *migodo* (sing. *ngodo*) is particularly significant in this respect. For the *ngodo*, performed to the highly structured musical accompaniment of the *timbila* (xylophone) as well as choreographed dance¹⁵², boasts, by Vail and White's own account, very much the kind of formal complexity and elaboration that would be the hallmark of any 'true' art that successfully transcends the conditions of its own creation. The *ngodo*, we learn:

is an extended and complex poetical form... [p]erformed by professional musicians

rather than by laborers and cultivators, and... devised for lengthy public entertainment rather than to accompany communal or work-gang activity, they [*migodo*] are much more thematically and aesthetically ambitious than, say, the *Paiva* song...¹⁵³

Yet, their curtsy to the modernist ideal notwithstanding ('composed well in advance of performance... polished to perfection'), Vail and White are not to be dissuaded. Their demand, throughout, is for an aesthetic of the oral text in which form plays as little a role as possible. Hence - one may suspect - 'poetic license':

we have been describing our own [historical] account of oral poetry in south-central Africa as constituting *in itself* an aesthetic, at the heart of which is the concept of poetic license¹⁵⁴.

Poetic license, as we have already seen, goes to the notion that certain types of discourse (what we have called 'texts') is permitted a freedom of expression that would normally violate convention. In so far as we may talk of an *aesthetic* of poetic license, poetic license is logically also that which turns the oral text into oral *literature*. Given their endeavour to establish an alternative to an aesthetic of form, Vail and White do not explore the question as to whether this license does not - perhaps - tend to coincide with certain types of text (differentiated by form) rather than others. We shall shortly return to this point. Instead, it would seem that poetic license is the effect of purely social / historical considerations, related to the 'expectation' of the audience 'that something of public interest is being said, and said in a manner worth attention'¹⁵⁵.

Vail and White's highlighting of the political notion of public interest would, of itself, to a large extent distance the 'expectation' in question here from the 'horizons of expectations' we talked about earlier¹⁵⁶. Yet in the very same paragraph Vail and White make the point that this expectation is '[i]mplicit in the very mechanics of performance', in other words, implicit - at least to a degree - in the formal properties of the text. Lest this statement comes across as a contradiction of the fundamentally social nature of Vail and White's aesthetic, it may be useful to make a few further observations on the notion of form. In question is not so much whether the latter is a necessary 'criterion' in respect of the literary, but, rather, the *nature* of the form that may be thus considered. Assuming that Vail and White's conception of oral literature *does* relate to questions of form, does *their* 'form' necessarily effect the kind of 'detachment' conducive - at least as far as Finnegan is concerned - to 'literature'?

We earlier qualified the formalist aesthetic as pertaining to 'a special use of language' characterized by certain 'devices' uncommon to ordinary discourse or 'practical language'.

(See Chapter 1, note 92). Against this Parry's notion of an archaized 'specialized poetic language' characterized by the formula has obvious formalist implications¹⁵⁷. But where the formalist device is generally justified in terms of the 'literary' effect it produces (see Finnegan's 'communication of insight' - Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization no doubt offers a good example in this regard¹⁵⁸), the explanation for the oral *style* described by Parry is frequently much more humble: the forms employed by Homer were less to serve poetry than to serve memory.

In an article on the structuralist poetics of Roman Jakobson¹⁵⁹, George Mounin explains what he sees as the preference of the latter for 'the poetry of those countries... where traditional forms have survived'¹⁶⁰ on the grounds that Jakobson 'mistakes structures that are aesthetically pertinent for mnemotechnic structures'¹⁶¹. According to Mounin, the 'metric, prosodic, phonic, grammatical and semantic' devices that permeate Jakobsonian analyses are, as Sunday Anozie puts it:

neither intrinsically musical nor intrinsically poetic, but are instead mnemotechnic, that is, they are invented by civilizations and cultures based upon oral transmission to enable the memory to conserve certain discourses¹⁶².

Anozie, while conceding that 'there is a strong point' to Mounin's argument, qualifies as 'arbitrary' Mounin's distinction between poetry and memory. Whether this distinction is indeed arbitrary need not concern us here, but what is important is that Mounin is far from alone in having made it. The vexed notion of the distinctiveness of orality has generally been interpreted (as we saw in Chapter 2), not in the light of oral-textual forms deriving from and supporting poetic insights, but in the light of textual strategies required to facilitate memory recall in the absence of writing. Even where Vail and White show their appreciation for the 'skills' of the performer (see note 148), it is undoubtedly the latter interpretation that holds sway in their contention that the expectation of the audience is implicit in the 'mechanics of performance'. Crudely put, the audience wants to *know* what is in the 'public interest', the performer wants them to *remember*. Form is, to Vail and White, essentially *useful* in so far as it enhances the text's longevity. The aesthetic function of form as effect of 'detachment' is of comparatively little concern.

If poetic license can be regarded as *in itself* an aesthetic, it is because the 'permission' it depends upon *should* have as little to do with textual form as possible. This is the crux of Vail and White's position. Yet ever attentive to the possibility that an outright rejection of formalist considerations looks suspiciously like a privileging of the social over the aesthetic

(and the text must, after all, speak *as text*), the notion of form is never far from the surface. And where we earlier drew attention to a certain contradiction within Vail and White's notion of historicity (implying the time-boundedness of the text while also - at least in certain cases - guaranteeing its longevity), we can now see the notion of form as at least equally ambiguous.

At some point in history, Vail and White muse, 'oral poets in southern Africa succeeded in formalizing [the] expectations [on the part of the audience on what is of public interest] into a convention of poetic license that privileges poetry and song above all other forms of oral discourse...' ¹⁶³. 'Poetry and song' juxtaposed with 'forms of oral discourse' clearly imply textual form: 'mechanics of performance'. But what to make of the relation between the latter and the idea of *formalized* expectations? (Expectations, it must be remembered, that are essentially *political*). Why should formalized expectations (historicity) coincide with formalized discourse (textuality), and then with certain forms of discourse rather than others?

The formalist / modernist answer would be relatively simple: because the formalized text is set apart from ordinary discourse and therefore enables its subject matter (content) to be distinguished ('distanced') from history even though it is rooted in it. Certain forms simply achieve this detachment (without which artistic appreciation is impossible) better than others. But this response, one feels, could hardly be acceptable to Vail and White. As it turns out, however, they do not provide an alternative one. The expectations at the heart of their aesthetic of poetic license are, in the final analysis, recognized as such *precisely because* of the existence of the textual forms (identified as 'poetry and song') in which they are cast. The expectations are not formalized as history but as text *separated* from history.

One element in Vail and White's aesthetic of poetic license which - in the absence of specific statements to this effect - would tend to support the above conclusion, is their insistence that 'it is not the *poet* who is licensed by the literary conventions of the region,... [but] the *poem*' ¹⁶⁴. The advantage of this emphasis, they argue,

is that it enables us to take into account the wide variety of different performances the prevailing aesthetic can encompass and to locate this broader range of poems in a more complex set of social circumstances [than if the aesthetic was vested in the person of a specific kind of performer] ¹⁶⁵.

If the *aesthetic* attaches to the text rather than the performer (who, like the *imbongi*, may well enjoy official status), the text can be legitimately given an historical interpretation even if it occurs far from the cultural context in which it was first - or is normally - performed: 'not only... [in] the village, the dancing arena, the homestead, the spirit-possession ceremony, but

also... the plantation, the township, the mining compound, or the black trade-union meeting'. The historicity of the text can transcend its context of performance. But this conception of poetic license of necessity implies a recognition of the text as textual *object* which, in transcending a particular cultural context, also *transcends the particularity of historical event*. The formal properties by which the text is recognized as text is vital to this extension of historical meaning.

Parry's determinancy of form 'broke the link between performance and history'. (See note 57). But it is not particularly difficult to construe the arguments we have reviewed - highly critical of the formalist stance - as *implying* the more or less rigid distinction between social / historical and textual / formal. Yai's oral poetics aside (and in the face of the fundamentally skewed balance of power between written *study* and oral *object*, the actual viability of his critical paradigm must be seriously questioned), it can be usefully argued that 'oral literature' actually *requires* the separation of history and performance. The 'break' between performance and history would have two dimensions, intimately related. First, there is the question as to whether the performance can be sufficiently 'objectified' to be regarded as text (textual object). The notion of textual object seemed particularly untenable on the evidence of Barber's *oriki*, which appear as little more than disparate and haphazard utterances. Yet in the very *lack* of form they reflect to the untrained eye lies the elements which make the *oriki* identifiable as genre and, to all intents and purposes, as text. True, the unity of the *oriki* as text is particularly dependent on insight into social and historical context. Once established, however, the *oriki* can also be distanced from the latter. This brings us to the second aspect of the aesthetic separation between text and history, namely the degree to which the text is able to detach itself from its historical reference (including the particularity of its performance / performer) to exist as 'thing in itself'. Not only are they 'evasive and ambiguous', but the *oriki* reflect a concern with their own textuality: Barber remarks that they 'draw attention to their own fragmentation'¹⁶⁶. The formal basis of the *oriki* may well be obscure, but it is as vital an element of their meaning as the question of historicity. Moreover, this formal basis can only be recognized on condition of the link between performance and history being - if not broken - at least temporarily *suspended*.

In Chapter 1 we briefly alluded to the possibility that Vail and White's rejection of the formalist paradigm as interpretative framework of the oral text is, in fact, the result of the 'notional oral man' which they attribute to it. Yet, in spite of Parry's reference to style (of

which he sees the formula as the main ingredient) as the 'form of thought', there is ample evidence, fully recognized by Vail and White, that Parry intended his theory to draw attention to the *creativity* of the oral performer so as to, in Vail and White's words, 'insist... on the nature of literature *as* literature'. They find appealing the idea of the oral artist 'improvising brilliantly within the formulas of his or her tradition', and they note, interestingly, that it is 'consistent with the obvious fact of the historicity of oral literary traditions...'¹⁶⁷.

But for its definitional problems (reviewed in Chapter 1) and the lack of evidence African oral literature seems to provide for it (as noted by Foley, only a relatively small amount of research in Africa can be related to the oral-formulaic theory - see Chapter 1, note 72), the dual conception of the formula as characteristic of an oral style / indicative of an oral mode of composition is, then, not without its merits. Unless, of course - and this brings us back to the 'distinctiveness' issue - postulations as to what is considered *specifically* oral are summarily rejected on the grounds that - as Vail and White maintain - 'there is no essential difference between oral and written literature'¹⁶⁸ [i.e. beyond the fact that the one is spoken, the other written]. The effect of this assumption of similarity would be to make the formalist approach redundant, at least in so far as the latter is obviously geared towards uncovering differences between the oral and the written (even if these are merely of a textual nature) and hence, to draw attention to the fact that the orality of the text is a crucial element in its interpretation.

Yet we have noted the strong insinuation on the part of the authors reviewed in this section as to the inherent time-boundedness or historicity of the oral text; for the interpretation of the written text, historicity would, by implication, be less pertinent. And, crucially, all of them work within the specific framework, not of literary tradition, but *oral* tradition. The literature that is the object of their interest is not merely spoken, but the product of an orality to whose historical and ideological ramifications the authors are particularly sensitive: not only is oral literature marginalised literature (as would be the literature of, say, a particular sub-culture in an industrialised society), but it is the literature of the historically powerless, the non-literate peasantry. (See note 3).

For no reason other, therefore, than that the literature we have come across in this section continues to be qualified, before anything else, as 'oral' - implying the distinctiveness of the oral as *oral-traditional* - the setting aside of the formalist perspective would seem, however justified the pursuit of alternative approaches relating to rhetorical force or historicity may be,

impossible to achieve. After pointing out the failure of both new criticism and structuralism to come to terms with oral literature (as a result of their shared - erroneous - preoccupation with a 'fixed' or 'established' text 'insulated from history'), Vail and White turn to post-structuralism, which

has returned the unstable text to history only by undermining the authority of the poem's language, an authority basic to the aesthetic we have been describing¹⁶⁹.

We shall consider the notion of the 'unstable text' more closely in the next section. But accepting that the authority of the poem's language is fundamental to Vail and White's proposed aesthetic, is it possible to talk about language without talking about textuality, without talking about form? At the end of the day, is the aesthetic of poetic license not founded on an earlier, formalist one? But apart from being unachievable, the abandonment of the formalist aesthetic is in all probability also premature, for it is far from having been exhausted. For why should the formalist approach be restricted to a seemingly endless variety on the well-known theme of 'groups of words regularly employed to express a given idea'? What if formalism could be extended beyond this - initially useful - framework, to address factors of oral textuality to which our scriptocentredness - or cultural chauvinism - has continually blinded us? Why, in fact, should our concern with language necessarily be concerned with words *as* words? What about words as rhythm, and - beyond the familiar preoccupation with metrical pattern - words as *sound*? That such an overwhelming amount of oral literature is not so much spoken as, in fact, *sung*, has been so frequently noted as to have become banal. But rather than pass on this aspect of the oral performance to the musicologist, the time has come, perhaps, to regard it as part and parcel of this 'authority of language' which is the domain of the literary scholar. This may be a particular authority that is the privilege, exclusively, of Oral Theory. Instead of copying models of written literature, the criticism of oral literature may well be in a position to go beyond these, and then *without* having to be projected, as Barber would insist, 'beyond the confines of its own textuality'. The oral text may be more powerful than we have suspected. This will be further considered in Chapters 4 and 5.

3.3 *Oral Literature as Popular Culture*

In coming to associate the oral (which is also the traditional) with the 'popular', I intend moving our exploration of the notion of oral literature beyond the conventional modernist

paradigm into what is known as post-modernism. Briefly, this means that the notion of the textual object endowed with 'closure' and 'finiteness' (as earlier characterized by Barber and Yai respectively) loses its hold on literature: henceforth the text is 'unstable'. As a result, meaning itself is set free, and where the modernist perspective would impose on us the continual questioning and refinement of interpretative 'frameworks' (which may also involve setting aside what is regarded as redundant and inventing what is necessary) so as to progress towards an evermore 'appropriate', evermore 'valid' interpretation, post-modernism expects of us merely to accept meaning and interpretation in all its *plurality*.

As I already stressed earlier, the choice to consider oral literature in the light of post-modernism (the idea of a post-modernist 'framework' would, in the light of the preceding characterization, be contradictory), should not be seen as implying that post-modernist perspectives may necessarily be better adapted to the interpretative context of orality than modernist ones. More about this presently. What is of particular interest to us, though, is the opportunity that post-modernism provides to question - if not actually break down - the familiar opposition (strongly current at least within written literature) between literary and non-literary, and thus to free ourselves from the preoccupation with the 'aesthetic' upon which this opposition has always depended. Crucial from the point of view of orality is the recognition that the undermining of the literary vs non-literary dichotomy can, in fact, be conceptualized as the *ideological project* of addressing the political imbalance between 'high culture' on the one hand and 'popular culture' on the other, a 'progressive'¹⁷⁰ project which shows remarkable similarities to the universalist ideal (highlighted earlier) of breaking down a literacy vs orality dichotomy which has increasingly presented itself as a 'great divide' between a literate 'us' and a non-literate 'them'. Our attempt to align 'oral' with 'popular' should therefore not be seen as an admission of defeat: caught up in a critical discourse which, due to its anthropological bias, cannot but fail to appreciate its aesthetic quality, the oral text, forever denied literary status, settles for the next best position offered by literate society, namely to be considered 'popular'. No, the point is that the distinction between 'Literature' (henceforth with a capital 'L') and 'popular culture' is, strictly speaking, an illusion, with little justification but the ideological interests of an ostensibly 'disinterested' bourgeois humanism (see Chapter I, note 119), which has appropriated literature (as *Literature* - and with it, literary studies) to put forward the self-serving notion of what Easthope describes as a 'best self' promoted and universalised 'beyond the bounds of class, locality,

time or country'¹⁷¹. In other words, the Literature vs popular culture dichotomy reflects, at heart, the same kind of 'cultural chauvinism' that led so many, unwilling to question the presupposed 'truth' of their own experience, to assume the oral text - oral literature - to be *of necessity* composed and appreciated according to the written model. But is it *really* the same chauvinism? Put differently: can the 'great divide' between a literate 'us' and an oral 'them' not just be parallel, but indeed *assimilated* to the divide between Literature and popular culture? Such would be the condition for overcoming the anthropological bias with which oral literature has had to contend, but - more than that - it would be a way for the notion of oral literature to fully take its place within the dominant literary-theoretical discourse of our time.

In this regard Easthope's argument will be particularly illuminating. But before considering the theoretical underpinnings of his proposed *cultural studies* (as a literary studies in which the literary and popular text can be read and appreciated 'alongside each other'¹⁷²) and speculating on the possible place of the oral text within it (literary theorists do not generally talk about the oral, and Easthope is no exception), some closing remarks might be in order on the *other* way in which the notion of oral literature could be - could have been - part of literary theory. From the point of view of post-modernism, oral literature as popular culture turns out, in fact, to be the *only* way of conceptualizing it.

Let us briefly return to the two articles by Barber (1984 and 1989) referred to earlier. Both articles emphasizing the inadequacy of the modernist literary paradigm for the *oríkì* text in question, the former investigates the viability of a particular *post*-modernist approach, the latter that of an approach broadly termed rhetorical or social in which the text is projected 'beyond the confines of its own textuality'. The rhetorical approach being advanced as the 'real alternative' (not just by Barber but, in fact, by all who declare themselves dissatisfied with the modernist approach), we have been critical of it in so far as it runs the risk of taking the study of the oral text outside the field of literary studies, something Oral Theory (at least in the way we have characterized it) *should* be trying to avoid. But why should post-modernism *also* have failed the oral text?

At the beginning of this chapter Finnegan drew our attention to ways in which oral literature is unlike the written, relating mainly to textual form, the role of the perceiver and the notion of authenticity. Setting aside, at least to some extent, the idea of an oral textuality characterized by 'well-known formulaic phrases and runs' (which depends on a conception

of the text as object), these considerations also figure prominently in Barber's overview of deconstructive criticism as the 'chief adversary' of the modernist perspective. But where - situating herself within the latter - Finnegan was concerned with differences between oral and written text, the very characteristics of the oral which showed up these differences now turn out, from the post-modernist point of view, to be characteristic of texts and literature *in general*. Referring mainly to Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes¹⁷³, Barber highlights the following aspects of the deconstructionist argument:

- The text is no longer centered around a conscious or creative author. Rather than see the text as 'isolated self-sufficient artefact', deconstruction (following the lead of structuralism) turned critics' attention to the system of codes - linguistic, literary, and cultural - without which no literary text could be generated or read. By this gesture, the sole authority of the poet as originator of the text is undermined¹⁷⁴.
- What is important is not the unity or identity of texts but their interrelatedness, accounted for in the notion of *intertextuality*. Texts exist only in relation to each other: a text is 'a tissue of quotations from, and allusions to, other texts'. As such, the text is always incomplete, 'not accidentally as a result of the poet's limitations, but essentially...'¹⁷⁵.
- This inherent instability allows the reader to become as active a participant in the production of textual / intertextual meaning as the author. Given the endlessly referential relation between texts (which is, in fact, the endlessly referential relation between the signifiers of language), variants of meaning are themselves endless. No meaning / reading can be regarded as more 'correct' or 'valid' than another¹⁷⁶.

The appropriateness of these arguments to Barber's description of the *oríkì* (disjunctive, fragmentary and decentred texts that are not literary objects) speaks for itself. Of course, Derrida and Barthes, like Easthope, do not talk about orality. Yet, as Barber enthuses,

[d]econstructive criticism, despite its rhetoric of writing, of inscription and textuality, appears to have moved... into a position from which *oral literature takes on a paradigmatic quality*; oral texts are what the deconstructive critics say all literature is - only more so¹⁷⁷.

For once, as Barber clearly implies, oral literature is compatible with a theoretical paradigm to the point of actually being its (potential) model. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that Barber should find it necessary to set aside the deconstructionist approach *as well*. Ironically

however, in destroying the very conception of text and textuality that has, at the level of literary criticism, always excluded the oral, deconstruction recreates - at 'a different level of abstraction'¹⁷⁸ - a version of textuality which, as far as Barber is concerned, manages to be even more exclusive of the oral text than the modernist:

[i]ts [deconstruction's] roots in the presumption of the writtenness of literature are perhaps even deeper than those of the conventional criticism it attacks, its view of textuality even more alien to oral literature¹⁷⁹.

Derrida's famous *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* ('there is nothing outside the text') - quoted by Barber - clearly destroys any remaining vestiges, not just of the modernist text as thing in itself (the points raised above would have put paid to that), but indeed of the text as directive-for-its-perceivers. From its initial engagement of the individual subject as 'libretto for the reader's or perceiver's personal "performance" of the work' (Foley's terms - see note 48), the text will - in its deconstructionist guise - engulf the subject to the point of turning him into just another variant in its endless play of meaning, a play which the individual is powerless to influence and from which there is no escape:

[s]ociety, history, psychology - everything that is usually counterposed to literature - are texts themselves, systems of signs which refer only, and endlessly, to other signs¹⁸⁰.

Yet should we necessarily assimilate the 'text' in question here to the decentred, relational, unstable one which Barber regarded as so reflective of orality? The following view of the deconstructionist text, expressed by Colin Falck, would seem to question the validity of such an assimilation:

Derrida's transformation... of every kind of language-using into an honorific 'text'... is really a verbal sleight of hand which allows him to eliminate the 'experiential' dimension from his theoretical picture altogether¹⁸¹.

From a 'text' clearly reducible to concrete experience (Barber's embracing of the deconstructionist model, it must be remembered, was made on account of her own *observations* of actual performances), we have moved to a 'text' intended to facilitate speculation about what lies - at least as far as Derrida is concerned - *per definition*¹⁸² outside the realm of experience: meaning, or, more specifically, the relation between meaning (the signified) and the *chain of signifiers* that is language.

Barber, however, does not make this distinction, in spite of her awareness of the 'different

level of abstraction' at which the there-is-nothing-outside-the-text conceptualization operates. Rejecting - as her insistence on the social / historical relevance of oral literature would lead us to expect - the deconstructionist vision of the author / critic 'reduced to impotent self-reflection'¹⁸³ (Falck in this regard talks about the structuralist / post-structuralist 'abolition of reality'¹⁸⁴), she comes to the conclusion that deconstructionism

is a view that could only have been entertained in a culture where texts are divorced from both producer and consumer and can therefore appear to exist as a vast system in their own right, pushing human participants into the margins. In other words, a literate culture¹⁸⁵.

That the post-modernist notions discussed above should have come about with reference to a specific type of society (and consequently, to the exclusion of others) is obviously a valid argument. 'Deconstructing' *Western* culture's 'metaphysics of presence'¹⁸⁶ has no doubt been Derrida's most persistent endeavour; Falck, on a more philosophical level, alludes to the possibility that the post-modernist disenchantment with meaning ('truth') may well be 'the legitimization of a metaphysical or ontological void which existed at the heart of *our* culture already'¹⁸⁷. What is somewhat surprising, however, is Barber's readiness to, as it were, 'throw out the baby with the bath water'. And yet there is an explanation. The ease with which deconstructionism slips from text to intertext to nothing-outside-the-text (which is nothing short of humanity - or Western humanity - itself) in a very real sense mirrors Barber's willingness (and that of other authors on oral literature disenchanted with conventional literary criticism) to interpret the text - notwithstanding their purported concern with what the text says *as text* - in the light of historical or social considerations to which the question of textuality is, in the end, largely incidental. And we get back, in the end, to the vexed matter of oral literature as anthropology. For just as post-structuralism is less interested in *a* text than in demonstrating how it is generated by the all-encompassing intertext, what lies at the heart of oral 'criticism' is not the performance, but the society in which the performance occurs. In the final analysis 'oral literature' has to be what it is not: as ill-suited to the finiteness of the modernist aesthetic as it is to the abstraction of post-modernist meaning, oral literature is caught up in an interpretative nomansland that can only be called: anthropology.

Or, perhaps, popular culture. One of the surprising things about Easthope's cultural studies is that it seeks to offer a unified interpretative paradigm for Literature and popular culture without attempting to deny that literature, in fact, can justifiably exist - at least at a certain

level - as Literature. In so doing Easthope to some extent sets himself apart from the more radical view of his fellow Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, who argued persuasively in 1983 that 'literature is an illusion', and with it, literary theory (or literary studies)¹⁸⁸. The problem he encounters centers on two interrelated aspects: on the one hand the purportedly 'scientific' nature of literary studies is compromised by its profoundly ideological character, on the other the aesthetic object it seeks to investigate can also not be defined without recourse to ideology. Bennett phrases this problem as follows (see also his comment on Bourdieu, Chapter 1, note 120):

The inherent instability of the science / ideology couplet undermines the ground necessary to secure a conception of literature either as a form of writing that is invariantly distinct from ideology or as a historically specific form of writing whose differentiation from ideology is the effect of a specific configuration of the field of ideology in general¹⁸⁹.

The end-result is, at best, a 'literature without aesthetics', or what Bennett describes as a 'non-literary theory of literature which will theorise its object as a set of social rather than formal realities and processes'. We may justifiably ask: why retain the notion of literature in all of this? If the essence of the text (*any* text) lies in it being 'a set of social... realities and processes', why qualify it with a term that has come to imply the existence of a further - but actually irrelevant - dimension called 'aesthetic'?

Bennett and Easthope essentially offer the same route out of this conundrum. While both of them reject any 'essentialist' definition of literature (based on the conventionally presumed unity of the literary text, i.e. the modernist aesthetic), they nevertheless accord literature the kind of relative autonomy necessary to justify it being studied *as such*. Bennett again:

while its [the concept of literature's] conventional understanding as a uniquely privileged kind of writing cannot be sustained, the term does cogently designate a specific, but non-unitary, field of institutionally organized practices - of writing, reading, commentary and pedagogy¹⁹⁰.

Easthope, for his part, talks about literature existing, 'not as an essence, an entity, a thing, but as a process, a function'¹⁹¹. Yet Bennett and Easthope's insistence on the existence of literature (even, to some extent, Literature) as *process* rather than object carries with it an implication which places their view way outside the frontiers of the conventional modernist aesthetic¹⁹²: the insights and methods developed in the reading of literary texts can be usefully extended to texts falling outside the literary 'canon' (as well as to fields other than 'literary studies') so as to develop a new literary paradigm (but which, from the point of view of the

old, will be non-literary) in which, in Bennett's words, 'the way is opened for a theory of literature that will construe its object as a historically specific, socially organized and maintained field of textual uses and effects'¹⁹³. This corresponds, of course, to the ambitions of Barber and her colleagues in relation to an interpretative framework for the oral text. But - and it is here, one suspects, that Bennett and Easthope may regard their initiative as having a greater chance of accomplishment than that of similarly inclined critics of the oral text - the envisaged 'discursive space', as described by Bennett,

requires that use be made of the resources to hand - resources which, for the most part, have been shaped by and within aesthetic discourse.... [The new positions] can be organized only by *prising* them away from aesthetic conceptions of literature¹⁹⁴.

Barber, Yai and Vail and White did not really have these resources. But Bennett and Easthope do. Easthope, as we saw in his entertaining juxtaposition of *Heart of Darkness* and *Tarzan of the Apes*, recognizes that not all texts admit (at least to the same degree) of a modernist reading based on the assumption that *everything* is significant. As such, the notion of textual complexity (and hence, any emphasis on textuality *per se*) has generally been the preserve of a literary studies defined the conventional modernist way. Easthope does not agree with this; his 'revised paradigm' of cultural studies in which Literary and popular are read alongside each other should 'recapture some of the subtle and powerful *experiential* force literary studies [as conventional seat of textual analysis] always claimed as its speciality'¹⁹⁵. The alternative methodology (which would neglect textuality on the grounds of '[putting] the politics first' or 'privileging ideological critique') runs, according to him, the risk of 'leaving the prevailing discourse of knowledge untouched' - being excluded from it. Lest Easthope's emphasis on textuality as opposed to ideology (and also his linking of textuality with 'experiential force' - see Derrida's apparent disdain for the concept of experience mentioned earlier) be regarded as reactionary, Easthope is quick to call to his assistance the notion of political efficacy: by excluding yourself from the 'prevailing discourse of knowledge' (of experience?) 'your politics is weakened precisely *because* you are likely to remain outside of that discourse'¹⁹⁶. By, as it were, using the weapon of the erstwhile oppressor (high culture / Literature), the politics of cultural studies (breaking down the high culture / popular culture divide at the heart of capitalist society) will be 'more effective'.

Apart from the political justification he finds for it, Easthope's emphasis on textuality as something distinct from ideology can also be theoretically accounted for, and notably *within*

a post-modernist / Marxist perspective. This time Derrida stands staunchly in Easthope's support. His notion of infinite polysemy (dissemination - deferral - of meaning) implies that the text cannot be interpreted in the light of any particular intention. This 'universality' of the text has the capacity to 'break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts'¹⁹⁷. While this view does not deny the essential truth that 'texts have a meaning in a context and only in a context', it does mean, according to Easthope,

that texts cannot be adequately analysed in relation to a definition of a particular social and historical context. They exceed that context not only diachronically, always temporally going beyond a given reading, but also synchronically, always available to *another* reading at the same time, even in the supposedly 'original' moment when they were first produced¹⁹⁸.

This view of the relative independence of text (textuality) vis-à-vis context (politics) is further corroborated in Louis Althusser's view of history as a 'decentred totality'. A synchronic examination of a particular social formation does not reveal all its elements to be 'in an immediate relationship with one another, a relationship that immediately expresses their internal essence'¹⁹⁹. Just as space (existing as differences) is centreless, so time does not function according to a measurable, linear chronology:

for each mode of production there is a peculiar time and history, punctuated in a specific way by the development of the productive forces; the relations of production have their own peculiar time and history, punctuated in a specific way; the political superstructure has its own history...²⁰⁰.

In terms of our own objective of assimilating the oral / traditional to the popular, this (relative) separation of text and social / historical context is, in fact, crucial, for the study of 'popular culture' has generally been nothing if not politicised - and then within the particular socio-historical conditions of Western capitalism. 'Popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant', writes John Fiske²⁰¹, echoing the idea - formulated by Antonio Gramsci - that, as Bennett puts it, 'cultural and ideological relations between ruling and subordinated classes in capitalist societies consist less in the *domination* of the latter by the former than in the struggle for *hegemony*... between the ruling class and... working class'²⁰². The ruling class 'seeks to negotiate opposing class cultures onto a cultural and ideological terrain which wins for it a position of leadership'²⁰³, hence the need - to recall Fiske's description - for the 'subordinated peoples' to (believe that they) act in 'their own interests'.

While the 'negotiatory' aspect of this model to some extent refines the emphasis on actual *repression* in terms of 'structuralist' and 'culturalist' models of popular culture²⁰⁴, it remains within the broad sphere of what Easthope refers to as 'dominant ideology': 'popular culture... [is] a set of imposed and constrained meanings ultimately determined by economic power'²⁰⁵. Economic power means capitalism, and to study how the latter oppresses, cajoles and pussy-foots in order to retain its privilege is, also, to fight it: studies of popular culture are *per definition* 'left'.

In the light of these considerations Easthope's insistence on the importance of textuality for his 'cultural studies' is no less than surprising. Yet it can be argued that, as a consequence of his arguments, the specific historical experience of living in a highly industrialised, capitalist society becomes relatively de-emphasized. This is a vital point, for though people in oral societies have been colonised by Western capitalism, this historical experience cannot be said to of itself turn them into the exploited 'working class' Marxist theorists talk about. To say that would be to play straight into the hands of those who regard oral societies as changeless and stunted - until, of course, Western technology gives them history, 'civilizes' them...

If the modernist reading *as such* - given the fact that it favours a certain kind of textuality - tends to highlight the Literature vs popular culture divide, Easthope suggests a certain number of 'post-modernist' readings through which Literature is not so much *destroyed* as *repositioned* in relation to the conventional non-literary / popular. These 'readings' place the literary and non-literary text at the same distance vis-à-vis the theoretical issue read *against*, thereby undermining the relative privilege and exclusivity the modernist literary text has enjoyed under humanism. Literature, in other words, is cut down to size. The 'theoretical interventions' in question are the following²⁰⁶:

- reading the text as *sign system* (structuralism)²⁰⁷;
- as representation of *ideology* (post-1968 Marxist critique);
- as representation of *gender* (post-1970 feminist critique);
- as manifestation of the *unconscious* (psycho-analysis - overlapping with the text as representation of *subject position*);
- as reflective of a particular *institution*, and, finally,
- as broadly reflective of those defined as 'other' within the 'discourses concerned with race' of a self-substantiating European subject²⁰⁸.

With reference to the structuralist definition of language as 'system of signs', Easthope defines the text as 'an organization of signifiers from which certain effects and meanings [signifieds] are produced in and for the reader'²⁰⁹, a definition which enables the literary and popular text to be analysed in common terms: as forms of *signifying practice*²¹⁰.

Totally independent of actual 'medium of expression' (one of the foremost signifying practices of our time is the cinema, and even as conventionally non-textual a thing as Sean Connery's eyebrows are - as signifying practice - subjected to Easthope's analysis²¹¹), Easthope's 'signifying practice' is extraordinarily well-adapted to the oral text, not just as text, but as actual (visual) *performance*. And we discover other elements in his argument - besides his reticence to favour specific ideological / historical considerations over textual ones in the process of interpretation - that would seem to make the eventual incorporation of the oral text into cultural studies as revised *literary studies* a foregone conclusion: the question of *pleasure* and - closely related to it - of 'formulaic and repetitive nature'.

That the oral text is pleasurable is not so much an attribute as a defining trait. Apart from the fact that the oral performance frequently occurs as leisure activity (the performances of the *guslari* in Croatian coffee houses come to mind - see Chapter 1, note 132), one could forcefully argue that pleasure is to a large extent the very condition by which the *oral* text is also *traditional* text²¹²: of the horizons of expectations to which the oral text invites, the expectation of pleasure - which, if realized, will ultimately translate into the text being *reperformed* - is undoubtedly one of the most pervasive. Of course, the association between oral text and pleasure has tended to be overstated at the expense of aesthetic considerations, particularly on the part of those commentators who have interpreted orality as mode of cognition. Yet within the framework of an alternative reading to the modernist, some of their arguments can be usefully assimilated to our own. To quote Havelock²¹³: Homer was able to give his auditors

not only pleasure but a specific kind of pleasure on which they came to depend, for it meant relief from anxiety and assuagement of grief. It is this power... of which the poet is most conscious, and naturally so, for, although he might be consulted in his didactic role as a source of knowledge and guidance, he was far more continuously applauded as the great releaser.

We earlier saw Easthope equating the idea of immediate certainty of meaning (as generated by the 'literal and denotative' nature of the textuality of a *Tarzan of the Apes*) with 'gratification'. But there is a more specifically *pleasurable* connotation to 'gratification' -

though certainly deriving from the idea of certainty of meaning - which Easthope relates to the preponderance of 'physical action and external event' characterising the content (meaning / signified) of *Tarzan of the Apes*, and in comparison to which the level of the signifier (actual textual form) strikes the reader as relatively insignificant: it is 'effaced'²¹⁴. Another element of meaning strongly dedicated to pleasure is visual representation, which Easthope sees as 'predetermined towards phantasy rather than conscious thought'. The 'visual melodrama' which characterizes *Tarzan of the Apes* is further indicative of the 'dominance of the iconic'. The latter, strongly dependent on immediacy of meaning - a sign is iconic when there is 'a relation of *resemblance* between signifier and signified'²¹⁵ - is virtually a trademark of popular culture. Generalizing the example he has given, Easthope hypothesises that 'popular cultural discourse, with its dependance on visualization and the idea of the expressivity of the body, is formally predisposed towards wish-fulfilment instead of duty'. As a result of its iconic feature, moreover, the pleasure of popular culture may well exceed that of Literature²¹⁶.

The oral (traditional) and the popular are further intertwined to the extent that the above *pleasure* is reinforced, according to Easthope, 'by what has often been noted in popular culture, the *formulaic and repetitive* nature of the material'²¹⁷. This reminds us, of course, not just of the 'formula' as such (as 'group of words'), but of the notion of formulaic *theme* represented in the 'striking visual imagery' considered by Ong to be the 'ocular equivalent' of the formula. (See Chapter 2, note 49). In fact, the textual differences that Easthope's modernist reading uncovers between *Heart of Darkness* and *Tarzan of the Apes* show a remarkable resemblance with Ong's 'psychodynamics of orality'. (See Chapter 2, note 56 - it must be remembered that Ong derives these 'dynamics' from what he perceives as the features of oral *expressivity*). To name but a few of the characteristics of the textuality of *Tarzan of the Apes*: it is concrete ('situational'), explicit ('agonistically toned'), literal ('close to the human life-world')... ²¹⁸.

And yet, in spite of all these favourable factors, Easthope - in whose book the word 'oral' does not occur even once - still manages to effectively exclude the oral text from the popular one. The exclusion comes in the form of what amounts to something of a throw-away remark, made in connection with the 'visual melodrama' of popular culture discussed above. One of the features of iconicity, as Easthope explains, is that it favours the occurrence of *narratemes*: 'little scenic and narrative epitomes such as Clark Gable turning at the door at the end of

Gone with the Wind and saying: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn". Another example, particularly easily visualized - therefore effective - is 'Me Tarzan, you Jane'²¹⁹. For Easthope the narrateme, generally the preserve of popular culture, has the effect of actually *compensating* the connotative poverty of the popular text by achieving a 'shared collectivity': a univocal [denotative] meaning gives rise, by virtue of its iconicity, to 'a commonplace everyone knows the same way (or thinks they do)... [which] actually excites connotations everyone accedes to differently at the level of phantasy'. Strongly contrasting with 'the individual path through to their own interpretation' which the connotative plurality of Literature invites its readers to follow, the narrateme is, in fact, myth.

Easthope readily concedes what could so easily have been the decisive step in assimilating the oral to the popular: that the narrateme resembles 'myth in *traditional society*'²²⁰. Unfortunately he immediately qualifies this statement, in the process displaying the very evolutionist view of the oral text the latter can do so well without:

[b]ut with this difference. Myth, one could say, partakes of nature and necessity rather than culture and freedom; the popular cultural narrateme moves beyond nature into culture - it is thoroughly a construction²²¹.

Of course, depending on the society, the mythical may well account for only a relatively small part of oral artistic expression. Yet myth / the mythological is so commonly associated with orality that its particular juxtaposition, in this case, amounts to a statement on oral (traditional) texts in general. The traditional may well be popular (in the ordinary sense of 'well-liked by many people'²²²), but then again, it simply is not culture...²²³.

That Easthope's *Literary into Cultural Studies* explicitly addresses itself solely to the cultural forms of Western industrialised society is, under the circumstances, cold comfort. To excuse his relative ignorance of the oral text on these grounds would only be to underscore the marginalised 'otherness' of oral literature we have tried, throughout this chapter, to overcome; an otherness that continues to dictate that 'only an anthropologist can be expected to understand, or to appreciate, oral literature'. Our brief exploration of post-modernism on the basis of its seeming dissolution of the literary vs non-literary dichotomy was, to some extent no doubt, simplistic: the fact that it should provide the theoretical (and ideological) framework within which such a dissolution can take place does not necessarily mean that post-modernist literary theory *in practice* accords the same critical attention to the non-literary - conceived of as popular culture - as it does to Literature²²⁴. Yet even accepting the *bona*

fides of the 'progressive' project of breaking down the hierarchy between a self-substantiating bourgeoisie on the one hand and a perpetually manipulated working class on the other, the great divide which is *our* concern, namely that between 'literate' and 'oral', 'modern' and 'traditional', remains as firmly entrenched as it is ignored. And the literature that is the object of Oral Theory remains destined to operate in a theoretical void²²⁵.

Endnotes

1. The association of 'oral tradition' with 'oral literature', which, from the point of view of Oral Theory at least (and also for the purposes of this study), is founded in the Parry-Lord thesis, has of course also been a general feature of research into the oral text. In this broader - strongly evolutionist - perspective, 'traditional' is frequently rendered by terms like 'folk', 'communal', 'primitive' etc. (For an overview of the intellectual contexts in which these terms have been applied - largely reminiscent of that of Okpewho extensively referred to in Chapter 2 - see Finnegan, 1970:26-47).
2. See Barber, 1984.
3. Barber, 1984:498.
4. Barber, 1984:497.
5. As explained by Finnegan (1977:36), "[o]ral literature"... is seen as arising in a spontaneous way and handed down, relatively unchanged, through unconscious "oral tradition" into which conscious choice, judgment and "art" do not enter'.
6. Finnegan (1970:14) sees this as a 'derogatory interpretation'. The general overlap of 'folklore' with 'oral literature' has, in fact, been of little help in so far as an understanding of the oral text *as literature* is concerned. In *Oral Poetry* (1977:36) Finnegan makes the point that 'whatever the controversies about its [folklore's] exact meaning, all scholars, it seems, agree that it includes (most of) what could be termed "oral literature" and the majority would probably see oral literature as comprising a major part of "folklore"'. The same 'general overlap' would seem to apply to the African oral narrative. See also Görög-Karady, 1984, as well as Makouta-Mboukou's (1973) description of oral literature as 'folk literature'.
7. See Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds). 1973:113-4.
8. Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:118.
9. Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:122.
10. Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:115-7.
11. Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:117.
12. Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:117.
13. Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:114.
14. Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:118.
15. This distance derives most obviously from the specific status the poet or raconteur may enjoy in certain societies (such as the official bards of the Zulu king). But there are also numerous narrative or dramatic devices that achieve the same distancing effect, such as - as is common in Africa - the relation of the content of a story to animals, or the use of musical accompaniment or masks. Even, in some cases, the stress on authority: 'we learn this from the ancestors'. (Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:119-21).
16. Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:124.
17. See Mbiti, J.S. 1966. *Akamba Stories*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 26. Quoted in Finnegan, 1973:125. The descriptions given by Lord of the 'truly oral poet' of course make the same point. (See also Chapter 1, note 90).
18. Among the Maori, for example, songs would be composed and performed within the context of specific everyday occurrences, 'and [for] many other purposes of an unusual nature from our point of view'. (See Best, E. 1934. *The Maori as he was*. Wellington: Dominion Museum, 147. Quoted in Finnegan, 1973:134).
19. Finnegan (in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:133) characterizes this perceived

'practical function' of the oral aesthetic text as follows: '[p]erhaps the literature has a magical or religious purpose? or is in some way tied up with fertility? or satisfies some deep psychological need in mythic terms? Amongst other writers it has been fashionable to represent its function as very specifically "social": perhaps with a conscious social purpose like education or moralizing, perhaps an unconscious function such as upholding the social structure. This kind of pragmatism is often contrasted with the idea of "art for art's sake"'.

20. Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:136.
21. Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:139.
22. Finnegan, 1977:122.
23. Finnegan, in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1973:140. On the contrary, verbal accuracy will obviously be important in pre-composed, memorized texts, such as in certain genres of Somali poetry. (See note 52, Chapter 1).
24. Vail and White, 1991:322.
25. Finnegan, 1970:17.
26. Finnegan, 1970:36.
27. Finnegan, 1973:143. Emphasis added. For a similar treatment of the notion of oral literature, but within the broader context of attitudes of oral societies towards language and speech, see Finnegan's 'Speech, language and non-literacy: the Limba of Sierra Leone', in Finnegan and Horton (eds)., 1988, which also contains a reprint of Finnegan's 1973 article.
28. See Ong, 1986:10-5.
29. Ong, 1986:10.
30. Finnegan, 1977:16. See also Finnegan, 1970:17.
31. Ong, 1986:12.
32. See Chapter 1, note 18. Ong, in fact, also has problems with the term 'text' which, in spite of its greater etymological proximity to the oral than 'literature', is still thought of 'by analogy with writing'. (Ong, 1986:13).
33. Ong, 1986:14.
34. Ong, 1986:41. Emphasis added.
35. Ong, 1986:104. See also Goody, 1977:49-50. This assertion was earlier criticized by Street. (See Chapter 2, note 117).
36. Ong, 1986:104.
37. Finnegan, 1973:142. Emphasis added.
38. Finnegan, 1970:16.
39. See Barber, K. and P.F. de Moraes Farias. 'Introduction', in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:3.
40. Landeg White, for one, posits as the 'key texts' of the literacy vs orality paradigm those of Albert Lord and Milman Parry, and 'less definitively but more recently, Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy*'. (White, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:34).
41. Finnegan, 1977:272.
42. See also Finnegan, 1977:1.
43. Ong, 1967:30. See Chapter 2, note 54.
44. Finnegan, 1970:15.
45. See Easthope, 1991:22-42.
46. Easthope, 1991:22.
47. Easthope, 1991:19.

48. Foley, 1990:5-6.
49. Foley, 1990:6.
50. See Finnegan's discussion (1977:16-24) on 'What is "oral" in oral poetry?'
51. See Finnegan, 1970:2-7.
52. Finnegan, 1970:15.
53. See Finnegan, 1970:7-12.
54. Finnegan, 1977:17. See also note 44.
55. See Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989.
56. Barber and De Moraes Farias, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:1.
57. White, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:34. Also Vail and White, 1991:32.
58. See Koljevic, S. 1980. *The Epic in the Making*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 320. Quoted in White, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:35.
59. Okpewho, 1983:262.
60. Barber and De Moraes Farias, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:2.
61. Vansina, 1985:92-3.
62. See Vansina, 1985:68-83.
63. Furniss, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:24.
64. Vansina, 1985:68.
65. Vansina, 1985:78. This is not an absolute rule, however. Vansina is quick to add that '[a]ny such conclusion should be tested against a generous collection of various versions'.
66. Vansina, 1985:92. This may well remind us of the notion of 'structural amnesia' discussed in Chapter 2, elsewhere criticized by Vansina. (See Chapter 2, note 116).
67. Vansina, 1985:92.
68. Furniss, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:25.
69. Furniss, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:26.
70. Furniss, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:32-3. Emphasis added.
71. Furniss, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:27.
72. See Kermode, F. 1967. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Referred to in Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:18. For an overview of the debate surrounding the question of the unity / identity of the text, see Easthope, 1991:22-42.
73. Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:63.
74. At least, I would suggest, in so far as Furniss's 'bias' can be related to the formalist notion of 'defamiliarization'. See Selden, 1985:8-11.
75. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 13.
76. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:15.
77. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:16.
78. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:17-8.
79. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:15.
80. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:20.
81. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:19. The inherent 'disjunctiveness' of oríkí however also allows for other elements, unrelated to this 'dynamic of self-aggrandisement' and even contradictory to it, to be incorporated. (See p.22).
82. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:23.
83. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:22.
84. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:22.
85. Barber and De Moraes Farias, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:1.

86. See Finnegan, 1970:22-5.
87. See also Finnegan, 1977:84: 'in many poetic traditions some genres are recognized as less innovative and creative... [than others]'. Vail and White (1991:56) make the same point with regard to the oral genres of south-central Africa: oral poetry is 'more serious' than riddles, moralities or trickster tales.
88. Finnegan, 1970:23.
89. From the local perspective the proverb is, however, frequently thought to be as 'serious and "literary" as more lengthy forms'. (Finnegan, 1970:23).
90. See Turner (1994), Makouta-Mboukou (1973), Cauvin (1980) and Opland (1983).
91. Vail and White, 1991:40.
92. See Evans-Pritchard, E. 'Some Collective Expressions of Obscenity in Africa', in Pritchard, E. 1965. *The Position of Women in Primitive Societies and Other Essays in Social Anthropology*. London: Faber & Faber, 76-101. Quoted in Vail and White, 1991:44.
93. Vail and White, 1991:42.
94. Vail and White, 1991:28.
95. Vail and White, 1991:40.
96. Vail and White remark, in fact, that the song 'achieved nothing positive, *only occasionally becoming art*', its major importance lying in the fact that it defined 'a tiny area in which the laborers and their families [had] a separate history', a 'small region of the mind that [refused] to capitulate completely'. (Vail and White, 1991:227. Emphasis added).
97. Finnegan, 1973:127. Emphasis added.
98. Easthope, 1991:16-17.
99. Easthope, 1991:89.
100. See Easthope, 1991:80-103.
101. Easthope, 1991:89. Acknowledging Barthes' argument that discourse is *inherently* connotative, Easthope is quick to point out that the denotative quality of *Tarzan's* textuality is only so *relative* to that of *Heart of Darkness*.
102. Easthope, 1991:90.
103. Easthope, 1991:91.
104. What is important, in this respect, is the ability of the researcher to notice, as Vansina puts it, the 'choices of expression open to a performer'. True linguistic competence will not just be to take what is given but to see what *could have been given*. (Vansina, 1985:84).
105. See Barber and De Moraes Farias, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:3.
106. Ong, 1986:12. This terminology will be more extensively dealt with in Chapter 4.
107. Barber and De Moraes Farias, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:2. This statement is made with particular reference to Mamadou Diawara's account of the representations of the past by women in a particular 'highly stratified' society. See Diawara, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:109-37.
108. It can be fruitfully argued that this to a large extent undermines the very *meaning* of 'tradition' as an 'interlocking chain' (see Chapter 2, note 8), making the notion - to an extent - redundant. But if, as was indicated in Chapter 2, Oral Theory relates the term 'oral' not to 'spoken' but, in fact, to (what it conceives of as) 'tradition', the latter itself becomes *primarily* oral. Whatever its contradictions or strains, the notion of tradition retains its relevance through its association with orality.

109. See Barber, 1984:503, 516.
110. Barber and De Moraes Farias, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:1.
111. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:15. Emphasis added.
112. Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:59.
113. It is interesting to note that White sees the literacy vs orality dichotomy as pertinently having dominated 'the *literary* discussion of African oral poetry'. (White, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:34. Emphasis original).
114. See Barber, 1984:514-5.
115. Barber, 1984:515.
116. Barber and De Moraes Farias, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:3.
117. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:18.
118. Barber, 1984:507. See also Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:20.
119. Barber and De Moraes Farias, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:1.
120. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:20.
121. See Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:16. The meaning - as such - of 'tradition' in relation to the oríkì is left relatively unexplored by Barber.
122. Referring to Parry, Lord and Ong, White remarks that '[i]t is not to the discredit of these scholars that none of them is an Africanist, the empirical data to which oral formulaic theories relate having been collected in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria'. (White, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:34).
123. Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:61.
124. Yai (in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:60) credits formalism and structuralism for having 'broadened our knowledge of the features, levels and relations among the elements of oral texts'. He also notes that 'they... open up the possibility of a discourse on the universal constraints of the functioning of the human mind'. (See our discussion of formalism and structuralism in Chapter 2).
125. Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:62.
126. See Barber, 1984:514.
127. Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:62.
128. See Krupat, A. 1982. An Approach to Native American Texts. *Critical Inquiry* 9,2:323-38, p.324. Quoted in Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:62.
129. Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:62. Emphasis added.
130. Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:66. Emphasis added.
131. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:13.
132. For an overview of examples of 'oral poetics', see Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:63-5.
133. Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:65.
134. Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:66.
135. Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:67.
136. Barber and De Moraes Farias, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:5.
137. Thorold, 1994:53.
138. White, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:35.
139. Vail and White, 1991:319. See also White, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:36.
140. White, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds)., 1989:37.
141. Vail and White, 1991:319-20.
142. Vail and White, 1991:320.
143. Vail and White, 1991:73.

144. Vail and White, 1991:73. This pattern of interpretation can be illustrated in the evolution of the significance of the word 'paiva'. The name of a powerful industrialist, 'paiva' becomes a metaphor, not only for the entirety of the sugar industry, but, within the context of the anti-colonialist struggle waged by FRELIMO, for colonialist repression in general. (See Vail and White, 1991:198-230, especially p.220).
145. Vail and White, 1991:71.
146. Foley, in Foley (ed.), 1986:3.
147. Vail and White, 1991:71.
148. Vail and White, 1991:71. Examples of skills are the following: a 'gift for the memorable phrase... and for the elaboration of metaphor... the wordplay of the oral poet, his mischievous game with language, his skills in punning and double entendre, his manipulation of rhythm and of expressive sound...'.
149. Vail and White, 1991:72. The *Paiva* song, modelled on the canoe song, has a responsive form divided between a lead singer and a chorus. Its rhythm is described as 'accumulative'. (Vail and White, 1991:78).
150. Vail and White, 1991:78.
151. Vail and White, 1991:73.
152. See Vail and White, 1991:112-30.
153. Vail and White, 1991:130.
154. Vail and White, 1991:72.
155. Vail and White, 1991:74.
156. The notion 'horizons of expectations' refers to more specifically aesthetic reflections, particularly as it addresses the question as to how the literary or poetic may be distinguished, over time, from the non-literary or unpoetic. (See Selden, 1985:114-5).
157. See Foley (1988:31): 'a multidialectal, archaized, artificial language...'.
158. Selden, 1985:9.
159. See Mounin, G. 1975. Les difficultés de la poétique Jakobsonnienne. *L'Arc*, 60. Quoted in Anozie, 1981:135.
160. Anozie, 1981:134.
161. Mounin, quoted in Anozie, 1981:135.
162. Anozie, 1981:135.
163. Vail and White, 1991:74.
164. Vail and White, 1991:56.
165. Vail and White, 1991:57.
166. Barber, in Barber and De Moraes Farias, 1989:21.
167. Vail and White, 1991:27.
168. Vail and White, 1991:73.
169. Vail and White, 1991:323.
170. Given the reality that 'every methodology is practised within an institution', Easthope (1991:178) is quick to remark, however, that '[n]o methodology or theoretical procedure arrives with a radical politics already wired into it'.
171. C.H. Herford, quoted in Easthope, 1991:18.
172. Easthope, 1991:103.
173. In particular the following: Derrida, J. 1976. *Of Grammatology*, transl. G. Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press; Derrida, J. 'Living on', in Bloom, H. (ed). 1979. *Deconstruction and Criticism*. New York: Seabury Press; Barthes, R. 'From Work to Text', in Harari, J. (ed). 1979. *Textual Strategies*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Barthes, R. 1975. *S/Z*, transl. R. Muller. London: Jonathan Cape.

174. Barber, 1984:501.
175. Barber, 1984:502.
176. Barber, 1984:502-3.
177. Barber, 1984:498. Emphasis added.
178. Barber, 1984:515.
179. Barber, 1984:513.
180. Barber, 1984:514.
181. Falck, 1989:20.
182. Perception itself, according to Derrida, is but a function of the endless deferral of meaning inherent in the linguistic system. See Derrida, J. 1973. *Speech and Phenomena*, transl. D.B. Allison. Evanston, III: Northwestern University Press. This question is critically discussed in Falck, 1989:20-2.
183. Barber, 1984:514.
184. Falck, 1989:31.
185. Barber, 1984:514.
186. See in particular Derrida, 1967:15-41.
187. Falck, 1989:9. Emphasis added.
188. See Eagleton, T. 1983. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 204. Quoted in Bennett, 1990:139.
189. Bennett, 1990:139.
190. Bennett, 1990:273.
191. Easthope, 1991:53.
192. Hence the title of Bennetts book: *Outside Literature*.
193. Bennett, 1990:142.
194. Bennett, 1990:7. Emphasis original.
195. Easthope, 1991:180. Emphasis original.
196. Easthope, 1991:179. Emphasis original.
197. Derrida, J. *Margins of Philosophy*, transl. A. Bass. Brighton: Harvester, 320. Quoted in Easthope, 1991:112.
198. Easthope, 1991:113.
199. Althusser, L. 1975. *Reading Capital*, transl. B. Brewster. London: New Left Books, 94. Quoted in Easthope, 1991:117.
200. Althusser, *Reading Capital*, pp.99-100. Quoted in Easthope, 1991:118.
201. Fiske, 1989:2.
202. Bennett, in Bennett, Mercer, and Woollacott (eds)., 1986:xiv. Emphasis original.
203. Bennett, in Bennett, Mercer, and Woollacott (eds)., 1986:xv.
204. Structuralism sees popular culture as an 'ideological machine' through which culture is 'dictated' or enforced, while in the culturalist perspective popular culture expresses 'the authentic interests and values of subordinated groups and classes'. (Bennett, in Bennett, Mercer and Woollacott (eds)., 1986:xii).
205. Easthope, 1991:72.
206. See Easthope, 1991:65-70.
207. Of the 'readings' mentioned here, structuralism is perhaps the only one that has regularly been mentioned in connection with the oral text. (See Vail and White, 1991:323; Barber, 1984:512-3). Yet to see structuralism as constituting a significant interpretative framework for the oral text would be misleading, for it is not so much the *text* that is read as self-sufficient system (a methodology that would at any rate be

made extremely difficult given the fluidity of oral textuality), as, in fact, the *society* in relation to which the text / performance becomes a constitutive element. (See Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology*; Okpewho, 1983:36-44).

208. In motivating his isolation of the text reflective of the (racial) 'other' as particular theoretical reading, Easthope (1991:134-5) makes the point - similar to the one we made earlier - that 'while undeniably meanings with a racial intent can be seen to derive from economic institutions and their political expressions in nationalism and imperialism, and while again they have become established as inherited forms of ideology, they function in specific modes calling for specific analysis'.
209. Easthope, 1991:66.
210. Easthope, 1991:103.
211. See Easthope, 1991:125-8.
212. See in this respect - albeit in a strongly evolutionist perspective - Turner, 1986.
213. See Havelock's *Preface to Plato*, p.140. Quoted in Vail and White, 1991:21.
214. Easthope, 1991:93. It is important to distinguish this view of the pleasure of the (popular) text from Barthes' notions of bliss or *jouissance*. The text of bliss 'unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions,... brings a crisis to his relation with language'. (See Barthes, R. 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*, transl. R. Miller. New York: Hill & Wang. Quoted in Selden, 1985:76). In Easthope's perspective the above 'crisis' will be the result of a Literature 'always meaning more than it says'. (See note 103).
215. This definition is taken from Charles Peirce. (Emphasis original). Given the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, iconicity is - strictly speaking - a theoretical impossibility. Yet, as Easthope points out, the discourse in *Tarzan of the Apes* is 'iconic' in so far as it contrasts to the highly symbolic (ironic) discourse of *Heart of Darkness*. (See also note 101).
216. Easthope, 1991:93.
217. Easthope, 1991:91. Emphasis added. See also Stiebel, 1992:49.
218. Easthope, 1991:89.
219. Easthope, 1991:94.
220. Easthope, 1991:95. Emphasis added.
221. Easthope, 1991:95.
222. See Williams, R. 1976. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana, 198-9. Quoted in Easthope, 1991:76.
223. Barthes (1973:154) to a large degree makes a similar distinction - on the basis of what is 'natural' vs what is 'constructed' - between what he terms a 'bourgeois' and a 'rural' myth. Affirming that 'myths tend towards proverbs', he contends that '[p]opular, ancestral myths still partake of an *instrumental grasp of the world as object*'. 'Bourgeois aphorisms, on the other hand, belong to metalanguage; they are a *second-order language which bears on objects already prepared...* Here the statement is no longer directed towards a *world to be made* [nature]; it must overlay one *which is already made...*[constructed]'. Emphasis added.
224. Interviewed by Derek Attridge - see Attridge, D. 'An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in Attridge, D. (ed). 1992. *Acts of Literature*. London: Routledge - Derrida, for one, displays, in Easthope's words, a '[h]igh Modernist aesthetic [which] would attribute inherent properties to certain aesthetic texts - richer, denser - as much as any Kantian or Coleridgean aesthetic. And its all high art, for there is not a trace here of popular

culture'. (Referred to in Easthope, 1995:13). Easthope adds: '(I've not come across anything to suggest that Derrida has ever sat in a cinema or watched television)'.

225. It may be suggested that the isolation of oral literature as perpetual 'other' can be addressed - at least to some extent - by (re)conceptualizing it as *folklore*, particularly in so far as the latter is increasingly studied as a phenomenon of modern industrialized societies. With reference to so-called 'urban legends' Bengt af Klintberg, for example, argues that there is 'no reason to conceive contemporary legend as... separate from traditional legend'. (See Af Klingtberg, in Rörich and Wienker-Piepho (eds), 1990:123). Even where recognized as 'modern', folklore continues, however, to command a theoretical scope generally distinct, not just from literary studies (whether modernist or post-modernist), but indeed from popular culture (Easthope's exclusion of the traditional should be illustrative in this regard). As such, it remains strongly aligned to anthropology. (See also notes 1 and 6).

CHAPTER 4

ORALITY / SOUND

4.1 *Introduction*

As *performance* orality is a multi-faceted discourse involving a variety of media (the vocal, instrumental, dancing, gesturing). At its most obvious level, however, orality *means* the production of vocal sounds. This is, of course, especially true for the (hypothetical) Oral Theory researcher who has little or no knowledge of the language of the 'oral literature' he is studying, and as a result finds himself unable, not only to know what a particular utterance means, but indeed to tell whether it constitutes 'language' at all. Unable to speak nor understand any of the languages normally associated with the 'living oral traditions' that have been the stuff of Oral Theory, such will indeed be my experience. But even if I have to rely on an informant or translator not just to understand, but even to be sure that the sounds I hear are, in fact, *linguistic* sounds, I will *per definition be able to listen* to the performer and *hear* the vocal sounds he emits. This will be a significant first impression, and all the more so when this impression is the fruit, not of attendance at a live performance with its pervasive visual component, but - as is frequently the case - of having listened to oral literature 'collected' by means of electronic recording.

Given its predisposition to 'literature', Oral Theory has tended to neglect oral vocal production *as sound*. Where the latter is specifically noted, it would generally be in a secondary sense, as 'stylistic device'. As an area of interest to Oral Theory, sound is considered mainly - even exclusively - in relation to the meaning of the text, which is, of course, made up of words. (This point will be further explicated in Chapter 5).

In two particularly engaging passages in his *The Power of the Word* and *Orality and Literacy*, Ong¹ momentarily suspends this subordination of sound to linguistic meaning. Of concern to him are the perceptual properties specific to sound. In this regard we can highlight the following aspects:

- 1) Sound is 'more real' or existential than other sense objects², in spite of - or, in fact, *because of* - its greater evanescence. Sound can only exist in its process of production, as *event*; it cannot reveal quiescence³ - there is no equivalent of a 'still shot' for sound⁴. As such, sound, relative to other sensory phenomena, provides a privileged reflection of the 'here-and-now', hence, of *presence*.

- 2) Sound is 'a special sensory key to interiority'⁵. Contrary to our other senses which all have to *violate* interiority in order to reveal it (one first has to open a container in order to feel or look - or smell - inside it), our sense of sound can reveal interiority *as such*: we know simply by the sound of the closed container whether it is empty or full, or of what materials it is made⁶.
- 3) Relative to other sensory phenomena - especially with reference to light - sound is notable for the extent to which it *immerses* the perceiver in his sensory perception. Whereas light is perceived unidirectionally (there has to be a given 'line of sight'), sound is perceived simultaneously from all around us. Given its evocation of presence, sound establishes the perceiver 'at a kind of core of sensation and existence'. Ong talks about the 'centering effect' of sound⁷ in this regard.

While he concedes that 'truth can come into man's possession in ways other than direct conceptualization'⁸, one of the most fundamental of Ong's theses is *the alignment between sensory perception and thought*. Our apprehension of reality is largely dependent on the peculiarity of each of our senses; our sense of sound, for example, may lead to a conceptualization of reality different to that mediated by the other senses. Ong does not explicitly state the epistemological model he subscribes to, but two possibilities - overlapping to a large degree - would seem to present themselves.

We could interpret the above arguments concerning the properties of sound within a broadly *representationalist* epistemological model. To briefly characterize: in his *The Evidence of the Senses*⁹ David Kelley describes this view of the relation between consciousness and object of consciousness as constituting a kind of midway between, on the one hand, epistemological *realism* affirming the 'primacy of existence', and on the other, epistemological *idealism* committed to the 'primacy of consciousness'. The following analogy is useful:

Representationalism denies that we can perceive this world directly: the senses... are like television cameras, bringing news of the outer world but subject to all the distortions that medium is prey to¹⁰.

As Kelley makes clear¹¹, the 'outer world' at issue here is not a physical object but an *idea*, the idea being simultaneously *mode* and *object* of consciousness. In terms of the Cartesian 'theory of ideas', the 'content of our thought' is conceived of as having *both* a formal and a representational nature, the latter being an aspect of the former. Once again, a well chosen

analogy:

A determinate mode of consciousness... is like a single frame of movie film projected on the screen. The projector (the mind) casts a beam of light; light in general, like consciousness, is the essential attribute of the projector, and the different shades and patterns are its modes. The light illuminates an image on screen, it has an object. *But the image is not something distinct from the light by which it is seen.* The projector is not a searchlight, illuminating objects independent of it. The image is conveyed by the light itself, the image is 'in' the light¹².

The notion of the primacy of consciousness (what we are conscious of is our own consciousness, and what we perceive exists within it) has tended to dominate post-Cartesian philosophical discourse, with realism (the primacy of existence) holding comparatively little sway¹³. Kelley's own thesis, however, is very much in favour of the latter, although he distances himself from its more radical 'mirror of nature' format¹⁴. There is, on closer inspection, no reason why this particular *realist* view should not also be applicable to Ong. Realism is founded upon the idea, in Kelley's words, that 'consciousness is *not* metaphysically active, it does not create its own objects, it is a faculty of identifying *what exists*'¹⁵. At the same time, however - and this is an aspect that has frequently been denied, both by 'traditional realists' and their critics - realism *does* regard consciousness as 'active epistemologically in processing these contents [objects]':

*What we are aware of is determined by reality - there is nothing else to be aware of - but how we are aware of it is determined by our means of awareness*¹⁶.

That the two representationalist analogies quoted earlier both refer to the visual is a matter of coincidence; Kelley is concerned with sensory perception as such - of a 'colored, sounding, odorous world'¹⁷ - and does not offer a perspective on how different senses may lead to different ways of *making* sense. In other words, Kelley advances no particular 'hierarchy' of the senses. As we noted at the outset, this is not the case with Ong: the different modes of perception - and notably the sense of sound - are akin to different *conceptions* of reality. Certain modes of perception are predisposed towards certain modes of conceptualization, certain modes of thinking. Where one sense could be regarded as 'dominant' in a particular group of people, it would follow that their cognitive processes would be influenced accordingly.

Of course, I have already argued (see Chapter 2) that the elaboration of a peculiarly oral way of thinking (whether described as pre-logical, concrete, collectivist etc.) is not only

largely unjustified, but indeed - from the predominantly textual / literary perspective of Oral Theory - counterproductive. The question may rightly be asked of what interest yet another such elaboration - albeit using different criteria - could be at this point. But if Oral Theory is to succeed in setting up a theoretical space for itself beyond the largely vacuous if not contradictory notion of 'oral literature' (as I tried to demonstrate in Chapter 3), it is crucial that it embarks on a re-evaluation of the one element which characterizes it, namely sound. In this regard Ong's reflection on what distinguishes sound from other sensory phenomena may well offer a useful point of departure. Our interpretation of the significance of these differences within the context of Oral Theory will obviously differ from his; yet it is in the critical reflection upon at least some of the detail in Ong's argument that we may eventually find the general outlines of our own.

Ong calls the totality of man's perceptual experience the 'sensorium'. The latter (as we to some extent already hinted at with the opposition of a 'centering' sound to a 'unidirectional' light) cristalizes into two conceptions of reality labelled 'verbomotor' and 'visualist'¹⁸, that are the result, respectively, of the relative pre-eminence of the senses of hearing and vision. That Ong should in this way single out hearing and vision does not mean that he disregards the other senses. In fact, a considerable passage is devoted to a consideration of how the different stages of the human 'communications media' (the *oral-aural* stage, followed by the *script*, and, finally, the *electronic*)¹⁹, can be conceived of in terms of the oral, anal and genital stages of Freudian psychosexual development²⁰ dominated by touch and smell. But Ong's entertaining assimilation of the act of writing to control of the sphincter muscle (to name but one of the parallels he explores), is little more than a temporary flirtation with the 'threatening' aspect of Freudian analysis centred not only around its attention to the excretory and sexual but 'its subtle exploitation of a tactual and kinesthetic sensorium'. For the culture to whom Freud addressed himself - a fact happily conceded, according to Ong, by 'Freudians themselves' - 'had previously by dint of great effort worked itself into massive and difficult exploitation of a highly auditory and visualist sensorium'²¹. In fact, Ong deftly harnesses psychoanalysis for the benefit of his own strongly evolutionist views:

For purposes proposed as scientific, psychoanalysis makes use of the very 'proximity senses' which Freudian thought itself has advertised as prescientific and full of danger for abstract thinking. For psychoanalysis has pointed out that for the rise of civilization, taboos must be imposed on the senses providing greater bodily pleasures (touch most of all, as well as taste and smell), and more attention must be given to the more sublime (abstract, distancing) senses such as hearing and, especially, sight²².

It could be argued that the claims on behalf of psychoanalysis made here by Ong are, in fact, reminiscent of its Jungian *rather* than its Freudian version²³. Jung's universalist view of a collective unconscious, not to mention his later distinction between directed (characterized as 'conscious, adaptive and creative') and non-directed thinking (the latter being 'associative, uncoordinated and uncreative')²⁴, would seem particularly amenable to Ong's expressed preoccupation with 'the rise of civilization'. In any event the gist of Ong's argument is clear enough: concomitant to (or underpinning?) the evolution in the 'communications media' which, on a conceptual level, is the condition for the rational and the abstract, there is a deeper, in a sense more immediate evolution in the sensorium. Man moves from a the world of acoustic space (the verbomotor) to a world of 'pure' space (the visualist):

Pure space comes rather late into man's ken as his sensorium is reorganized, in some cultures at least, to minimize the ear and maximize the eye²⁵.

What becomes clear, at this point, is the parallel in Ong's thinking with regard to vocal sound and expressive form. (The relation between expressive form and noetic process was dealt with in Chapter 2). If Ong's observations on the *form* of oral expression has appropriately been described as 'psychologizing' (see Chapter 1, note 67), it should come as no surprise that his insistence on the relevance of that expression as *sound* should have a similar orientation. Previously Ong arrived at the oral mindset on the back of the formula, this time his vehicle will be sound²⁶.

At this point we need to extend our overview of Ong's verbomotor - visualist paradigm to include the views of another prominent author interested in the psychological effects of vocal sound, namely Marcel Jousse²⁷. Jousse is best known for his view that, in certain oral cultures at least, the movement of the vocal organs, closely allied to respiratory rhythm, takes on a certain 'gestual' quality which constitutes a distinctive *oral style*, described by Hagège²⁸ as nothing short of a literary genre. The term 'verbomotor' is, in fact, coined by Jousse, and is used mainly to characterize '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'²⁹. Ong will expand the term so as to incorporate 'the oral type of context' in general.

Writing well before Parry³⁰ (his *Style oral rythmique et mnémotechnique chez les Verbo-moteurs* was originally published in 1925), Jousse is well acquainted with the role of the formula (what he terms the 'oral propositional cliché'³¹) in oral composition, with regard to

which he quotes at length from - amongst others - Antoine Meillet (who, as we saw in Chapter 1, was Parry's doctoral research supervisor). But what is of particular interest to us - and no doubt to Ong - within the context of the oral as sound, is Jousse's notion of oral vocal production as *gesture* - what he refers to as 'laryngo-buccal gesticulation'. In effect, this notion takes the qualities we earlier saw Ong associate with sound (its privileged evocation of the present - not as a state, but as an event - its special relation to interiority, its 'centering effect') a decisive step further. For beyond its particular usefulness as a 'distancing' means of communication (a usefulness these qualities to some extent illustrate), sound is asserted as having *a special affinity with the psyche*.

If both Ong and Jousse see sound as intimately connected with the psyche, it is important to stress, however, that their conception of the latter is far from similar. Ong is, as we shall see, altogether more generous in his appraisal of (the cognitive effects of) writing than Jousse. But the root of the two authors' divergence (even if their arguments coincide in important ways) lies, in fact, within what would seem to be different epistemological models. In this regard we shall need to pay particular attention to the following:

- 1) the relation perception to consciousness;
- 2) the relation consciousness to conceptualization (thinking);
- 3) the way in which language (both oral and written) can be said to interact with the above.

We can introduce our discussion of Ong and Jousse's conceptions of vocal sound (underlying their conception of verbomotor man) with some brief remarks on their respective appraisals of writing which, to both, constitutes the essential watershed between the verbomotor and the visualist. Man is 'speech-driven' - to extend the 'verbomotor' metaphor a bit - to the extent that the 'vocal gesture' is nothing short of our basic act of consciousness: '[w]e are all verbomotor people'³², asserts Jousse. And yet Jousse, as we have noted, essentially makes exactly the same distinction between a verbomotor (oral) man and a visualist (literate) man as Ong. The perspective elaborated by Jousse on the cultures he observes constitutes, in fact, a good example of the evolutionist - yet 'glamourizing' - 'Romantic stress on the significance of the "other" and the "lost"' earlier discussed by Finnegan. (See Chapter 1, note 22). (Finnegan, in fact, qualifies as 'basically biological' Jousse's view of rhythm - *gesture* - in oral societies being 'instinctive manifestations of "le rythme vital"', a view that comes

close to the 'dismissive' notion that oral literature 'would ultimately be analysable in *physical* and instinctual rather than cultural terms'³³ - see Chapter 1, notes 97 - 98). Alternately described as 'undisassociated' and 'spontaneous', oral cultures are thus qualified by Jousse in contrast with *our* 'disassociating' one, which has alienated us from 'the profound and subtle spirit of things'³⁴. The unmistakably Rousseauian character of this line of argument is confirmed, finally, when we are explained the cause of this contamination, namely writing³⁵:

with the development and spread (of writing, and especially of its *use in composition* itself) a sort of parasitic language comes into being... [This] written language has succeeded in establishing itself as a bastard variation of the primary language³⁶.

In terms of the foundational relation he establishes between 'real [oral] language' and consciousness (we shall examine this shortly), Jousse is in no doubt as to the negative cognitive consequences of this process:

This parasitic written language... is now out of key with present-day ideas; it demands a tiring cerebral tension and very quickly exhausts the mind³⁷.

Jousse's romantic acclaim of the 'spontaneity' of oral people - not to mention his pessimism regarding the onset of literacy - is to a large extent, one suspects, indicative of the age in which he lived³⁸. Ong lives in a different age, and finds orality considerably less glamorous:

There is hardly an oral culture or a predominantly oral culture left in the world today that is not somehow aware of the vast complex of powers forever inaccessible without literacy³⁹.

It could also be argued that the 'disassociating' (alienating) character of the technology of writing so decried by Jousse is to some extent 'remedied' in Ong's concept of secondary orality (although, as we have seen, the latter is but a further stage in the development of the literate 'mindset' - see Chapter 1, note 144). Ong is at pains to stress how the technological age has in many ways intensified face-to-face contact on a scale far greater than that of oral man⁴⁰, what with conventions, 'brain-storming' sessions and the like (not to mention the revolution in verbal communication brought about by electronics: '[v]oice, muted by script and print, has come newly alive'⁴¹). Also, the possibility of 'sequential analysis' which is the fruit of literacy (see Chapter 1, note 132) favours the kind of reflectiveness through which 'the pristine human consciousness which was not literate at all' can be reconstructed. Even if the shift from oral to literate culture is irrevocable (Barber's observations on the progressive marginalisation of the illiterate - Chapter 3, note 4 - are relevant here) the written word can,

after all, be used to *recover* the oral⁴² - at least to a degree.

Let us now return to a consideration of the central epistemological issue. Jousse's understanding of orality is grounded in his conception of consciousness as something unabashedly physical:

Our intelligence has only one mode of action. Whatever fact it apprehends, it is always in the domain of experience (reception) that it finds it. I cannot know what it means to think, feel or want if I no longer experience (or revivify) in myself thought, emotion or volition. Involved in my interior operations, and also in the impressions which come to me from outside, there is a consciousness of the concrete; and it is in the concrete fact, once it has been experienced, that I perceive the general notion and grasp the abstraction⁴³.

The dual juxtaposition of experience with the 'receptional and reviviscent' calls for particular comment. The *concrete* nature of consciousness excludes any notion of experience that is not primarily experience of the *body*. One of the most striking of Jousse's conceptions in this regard is that of perception as a muscular reaction: what is perceived is literally 'mimed by the muscles'⁴⁴. This 'gesticulation' represents the physical harnessing of experience. It is the re-enactment ('revivification') of this 'reception' which constitutes consciousness.

Consciousness is therefore the constant re-enactment by the body of its own reaction to an original sensory impact. The key element of this re-enactment - and therefore of consciousness - is 'laryngo-buccal gesticulation', the production of vocal sound. But consciousness is also something fundamentally social, a factor, one may assume, that serves to distinguish vocal gesticulation from what would be the production, by means of the vocal, of *mere* sound (noise). Gesticulation becomes 'semiological' - in other words: *speech* - in so far as it comes about not so much through the individual's re-enactment of his own 'gesticulation of consciousness', but, essentially, through the conditioning⁴⁵ of the latter as a result of the gesticulation of consciousness he observes in others: '[gestural] tendencies relating to one's own body... are analogous to one's reaction to the bodies of one's fellow men'⁴⁶, argues Jousse.

We earlier qualified Ong's epistemological perspective as broadly representationalist or, to some extent at least, realist (in the sense of the 'epistemologically active' consciousness supported by Kelley). In the case of Jousse, however, there is simply no such ambiguity. His *concrete* consciousness is nothing if not realist, and then strongly so: the 'gesticulation of consciousness' derives from our prior 'reception' of a physical impact. What is 'mimed by

our muscles' derives not from ourselves, but from *outside* ourselves. Ong's 'outside' is, by contrast, much harder to track down. Perception might precede consciousness chronologically (as in the 'primacy of existence'), yet nothing is perceived that is not already *received* within a conceptual framework. To speculate on what Ong would consider to be 'the profound and subtle spirit of things' would therefore, strictly speaking, be a contradiction in terms. Man could never - could never have been - 'spontaneous', for there is nothing that has ever been uncluttered by human consciousness.

Or, for that matter, by thinking, if not, in fact: language - at least as far as Ong is concerned. For if it is difficult to distinguish the perceived from the epistemological, it is, if anything, *more* difficult to isolate what is epistemologically active from what is thought (Ong talks more or less interchangeably about writing restructuring *thought* / writing restructuring *consciousness*⁴⁷), not to mention what is thought from what is spoken (at a different level of the sensorium: from what is written).

This brings us to what lies at the root of the epistemological discrepancy between Ong and Jousse: the relation of language to thought. This is, of course, a highly controversial issue. Moreover, it is of crucial significance to our elaboration of a 'theoretical space' for Oral Theory that lies - as the title of this work suggests - beyond the distortive notions of 'tradition' and 'literature'. For if both these notions are underscored by a division of the world into an 'us' and a 'them' (albeit from different perspectives - as we remarked at the beginning of Chapter 3, tradition 'sets apart' while literature 'brings back'), it is precisely because they are built around a series of oppositions in which the cognitive *continues*, in one form or another (and even if its area of deployment has in this century evolved from an overtly racist intellectual *capacity* to a more relativist cultural / sociological *context*), to be the most persistent variable. That the orality - literacy continuum revolves around a change in communication media is something of an axiom of Oral Theory. But the medium - be it oral or written - is, in the final analysis, always reducible to language. As such, the notion of an oral mindset, as far as Oral Theory is concerned, cannot come about without the idea that language and thought are causally linked - at least at a certain level of development. On the face of it the evidence that there is *some* link between thought and language seems overwhelming. At the same time, however, man's intellect has also been described as interdependent with other fields of human endeavour by and large unrelated to communication (such as the manipulation of objects). Language may be but one of a variety of

'characteristics' of man that relate to thought, and not necessarily the privileged one. This is an important argument that we shall need to explore further.

4.2 *Orality / Sound / Language / Thought*

Over the years the question of the relation of language to thought has received particular attention in research on the learning capacity of non-hearing (deaf) people, research which is certainly not without relevance to the oral - literate controversy we are concerned with. According to Adrienne Harris, the long-standing concern with this question has rested on the following assumptions:

First, language is equated with speech, correlative perhaps with an assumption that without speech one cannot think.... Second, this research concentrates on... the *mathetic* functions of language. What is under examination is the capacity of language to represent experience, to observe, to conceptualize, and to categorize⁴⁸.

Certainly, virtually all of Ong's reflections on the nature of language (including the specifically *written* language of literate culture) can be related to either one or both of these assumptions. To support his assertion that there are no 'instances of languages which are not in one way or another constituted in sound'⁴⁹, he quotes a survey by Bertha Siertsema⁵⁰ according to which 'the primacy of sound [in language] emerges as quite incontestable'. (And yet the primacy of sound *has* since been contested - more about this further on). Ong moreover advances with a great deal of certainty, not just that there is a relation between speech (sound) and thought, but that thought is, in fact, *dependent* on it⁵¹. It is worthwhile to briefly review Ong's argument in this regard.

We earlier discussed Goody's insistence on the communicative nature of language as a prerequisite for its conceptual function. (See Chapter 2, notes 86-8. It is the fact that writing is fundamentally a medium of communication which makes it the agent for social change Goody considers it to be, and which enables it to be such a crucial factor in the development of conceptualization). Goody's perspective in this regard can be adequately summed up in the Durkheimian notion of thinking as a 'social thing'. If thinking is indeed social, there is no doubt excellent reason to link it to the development of Ong's 'distancing' senses. (See note 21). More than any of the senses developed by man, hearing and sight allow, as Claude Hagege puts it, 'for a deferred reception in space'⁵²; these are the senses that have historically served man's particular capacity for social organization (culture) from which the development of language is to all intents and purposes indistinguishable⁵³. And - significantly - it was

hearing (rather than sight) that came to be the preferred motive force of human communication, hence of language. Historically anyway.

The reasons Hagège finds for justifying the domination of hearing over sight as far as the development of language is concerned are predictable enough: vision is badly impaired at night and light cannot go around things. Sound, by contrast, does not require the sun (or the moon) to shine, and is generally undeterred by physical obstacles⁵⁴. (See the 'centering effect' of sound Ong talks about). In so far as thought is social, this inevitably means that thought itself would have become associated with 'soundedness' (even if the sound is not actually verbalized) rather than with visualization. To these reasons Ong adds two less obvious - and in that sense interesting - ones. The first goes primarily to the 'interiority' of sound:

Voice [as sound]... manifests interiors as interiors and unites them [the 'centering effect']. Since thought arises in a human community [thought is social] and since a human community is essentially a union of interior consciousnesses... it appears understandable that that particular sense world which is by its nature most directly interior would be the most readily exploitable in direct connection with thought⁵⁵.

By its very nature, then, sound is 'attuned' to the interiority of thought, at least in so far as we agree with Ong that thought and consciousness are basically the same thing. (It is doubtful that Jousse, for one, will concur with this - presently more about his position in this regard). The second reason goes to the privileged relation of sound with the 'here and now', hence, with time itself. Ong's reasoning here is, however, less seductive, for it requires of us to think of thinking - in the sense of 'formal intellectual cognition' - as essentially time-bound, a process rather than a state⁵⁶. The interiority of thinking (or, rather, of consciousness) to a large extent speaks for itself. That thinking should be *essentially* time-bound (in the same way as sound) seems, by comparison, rather disputable.

Perhaps the most persuasive of Ong's arguments in favour of the thought - sound link is his reflection on the 'lalling' stage in children⁵⁷, which is characterized by a relatively undifferentiated sensorium through which everything the child perceives is but a 'big, blooming, buzzing confusion'. During this period the child surrounds himself with 'a persistent effluvium of sound'⁵⁸. Although this also involves kinesthetic sensations (burbling, gurgling, crowing, playing with the lips), it is essentially through the sounds the child makes that the world around him begins to take some kind of conceptual shape. This happens when the child utters sounds that - through chance - actually correspond to words, and ends up attaching concepts to these sounds through the 'positive reinforcement' (to use the Skinnerian

terminology) of the social body (the parents and others around him). The sound 'mama' has been particularly well documented in this regard, no doubt because the formation of the *concept* of mother with which it comes to be associated brings the child to separate 'some sort of unified being' from the general sensory confusion, a process crucial to his eventual recognition of himself as a unified subject. 'Which did the child learn first?' asks Ong. He continues:

Did he learn first to isolate 'mama' from the confusion of the sensory world and thereby to think mama first or did he learn the word mama first? The question appears quite impossible to answer. *If anything, the word came first and the concept after. Only the word was not really a word until the concept accompanied it. Previously it was just a sound*⁶⁰.

According to Ong, sound can then be said to be *conditional* for thought in so far as it constitutes the identifiable unit (as sanctioned by the social body) to which concepts are attached: '[w]e have no instances of conceptualized thought arising in complete independence of words'⁶⁰. But this does not mean, as he points out, that thought is necessarily connected with a '*chain of verbalization* in all or even most instances'⁶¹. This is an important distinction and one which Ong himself perhaps passes over rather quickly. We shall return to this point in more detail.

In the meantime, however, it will be useful to make a brief detour through Jousse, whose position on the language - thought controversy provides, at least to a certain degree, a counterpoint to that of Ong. We concluded earlier that the 'semiological gesture' that is speech constitutes our very *act* of consciousness. But does that mean that it also constitutes our thinking? The cognitive consequences Jousse attributes to writing (see note 37) would seem to suggest that he *does* regard language and thought as causally linked. Even if it is its 'bastardised version', writing is, after all, still derived from 'real' language, and in that sense is certainly reducible to it. Also, it is through writing that we have come to disassociate ourselves from the 'true spirit of things', a process that surely implies a change in *thinking*. If written language so easily changes (i.e. coincides with) thought, why not the oral?

Ong, as we have seen, by and large equates consciousness with thinking (see note 47) and, within the framework of Jousse's 'gesticulation of consciousness', should have little hesitation in equating language with thinking. But there are instances where Jousse seems to distinguish quite clearly between language and thought, and, in that sense, between consciousness and thinking - at least if we give the latter the more or less narrow definition of 'formal

intellectual cognition' occasionally used by Ong. Jousse is, in fact, far more prepared than Ong to entertain the possibility that thinking could be purely derivative of what is *visualized*. If consciousness derives from laryngo-buccal gesticulation (i.e. vocal sound), there is certainly a kind of thinking that approximates it in so far as it comes to 'mimic in a deferred way' the original laryngo-buccal movement. 'By a process of substitution to which the mind of the child very soon grows accustomed' (the notion of conditioning is once again important here - see note 45), this process comes to reflect 'the infinite variety (of mental dispositions vis-à-vis) things, ideas or feelings...' ⁶². Yet there is a second kind of thinking, functioning, so to speak, at a remove from the (auditory) sensory bias of consciousness, which makes use of 'visual reviviscences of objects' and does *not* need 'to resort to the help of corresponding verbal expressions' ⁶³. Crucial in this regard is the fact that the 'reviviscence' (or 're-enactment') has nothing to do with the ability to write. It is not a spatial representation of language, but of the 'object' ('things, ideas or feelings') itself. Given this independence of thinking from verbalization, Jousse is not at all troubled by the fact that

[t]here are certain thinkers who, although they are very intelligent, never succeed in expressing themselves well ⁶⁴.

Ong, not surprisingly, hardly entertains this possibility. In keeping with his view on the close link between speech and thought, he prefers to state the opposite:

the most literate persons [i.e. who *think* in literate terms] are often enough extraordinarily fluent oral verbalizers as well ⁶⁵.

Of course, it could be argued that Jousse's great thinker but poor speaker (for whom 'language is an obstacle rather than an aid to thought' ⁶⁶) merely constitutes proof, not of the independence of thought from language, but merely of the independence of thought from language as a 'chain of verbalization'. This raises the question of the 'mathetic' function of language (see Harris' second assumption of the language - thought relation quoted above), at least in so far as we take this function as relating, not just to the postulated link between the individual sound (word) and the formation of concepts but, indeed, to a link between 'world-view' ('mindset', 'synthesis' - see note 26) and what linguistically lies *beyond* the word: the lexical, morphological and syntactical categories that make up the linguistic *system*. Again, Adrienne Harris:

Mathetic functions arise as the child separates himself from the environment and comes to interpret experience... [They] serve in *the construction of reality undertaken by the child and most importantly lead the child to learn about language itself* ⁶⁷.

Before going deeper into this question, however, we need to carry Jousse's contention that thought is not necessarily nested in speech a little bit further (Harris' 'first assumption' again). On this point certain developments concerning the conceptualization of the congenitally non-hearing (i.e. people who are deaf from birth) are particularly illuminating. Ong argues strongly that, even in the case of the non-hearing, intellectual development goes side by side with exposure to sound *as such*:

deaf children learn from those who themselves are vocalizers. They participate indirectly in a world held together by voice⁶⁸.

The fact that the non-hearing have, in the past, frequently grown up 'intellectually subnormal', is consequently ascribed to the failure of (previous) pedagogical techniques to '[introduce] deaf-mutes more thoroughly, if always indirectly, into the oral-aural world...'⁶⁹. Ong here joins forces with a long-held notion in work on the cognitive development of the non-hearing, namely that problems with regard to such development are the result of 'language deficiency'.

According to Adrienne Harris, this linking of cognitive process to language prowess has been a strong trend in Russian psychology, in which the work of Aleksandr Luria (on whom Ong draws strongly for his 'psychodynamics of orality' - see Chapter 2, note 65) has been particularly noticeable⁷⁰. That the development of the intellect is dependent on the integration of the subject into 'the world' is beyond question⁷¹ (see our discussion of the 'falling' stage above), but does this world necessarily have to be experienced - be it indirectly - as a *sounded* one? A significant change in emphasis with regard to the problem, as phrased by Lynn Liben, of 'why deaf people with normal intelligence typically perform relatively poorly on cognitive and social tasks'⁷², would seem to suggest that the answer is no. This concerns the suggestion, attributed to Hans Furth⁷³, that impaired cognitive development in the non-hearing is the result, not of 'language deficiency', but rather of 'a blending of social, emotive, and intellectual neglect' or '*experiential deficiencies*'.

This loosening of the language - thought bind is, from our point of view, an important concession. There are, however, two relatively *contradictory* ways of motivating this movement towards the experiential rather than the linguistic as prime factor in cognitive development, which each in its own way relates to our attempt at setting aside the notion of an oral mindset. These motivations respectively attack the dual notion so strongly asserted by Ong, namely:

- 1) that language and thought are fundamentally interdependent, and

2) that language is fundamentally *sounded* language.

We need to briefly review both motivations, as well as the impact they may have on the orality - literacy question.

The first motivation for experiential rather than language deficiency is suggested by the very title of Furth's 1966 work: *Thinking without language...* (see note 73). In spite of their deficiency in standard middle-class American English (they do not properly possess a natural - i.e. sounded - language), 'the majority of deaf individuals [in the United States] adequately adjust to the world. They marry, raise children, pay taxes, contribute to the good of the community...' ⁷⁴. In other words, non-hearing people *do* think, and generally think sufficiently well, even though they to a large extent lack language. (Of course, Furth is overlooking sign language, which is the very point to be made in the second motivation). To explain how this non-language based thinking takes place, Furth relies heavily on Jean Piaget's ⁷⁵ cognitive model according to which 'sensorimotor actions - not language - are assumed to lay the foundations for logical thought' ⁷⁶. This is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of Piaget's conception, which would lie way beyond the scope - and interest - of this study. But certain of his more fundamental notions are nonetheless of relevance to us in so far as they relate - or *seem* to relate - to some of the notions used by Ong in his description of the oral mindset, hence the following brief foray into cognitive psychology.

Essentially Piaget postulates that intellectual growth in children takes place in 'a universal and invariant sequence of stages' ⁷⁷. The first ⁷⁸, the *sensorimotor*, extends from birth to about two years of age, and is characterized by the child gaining acquaintance with his environment through sensory perception and movement. The second, called intuitive or *pre-operational*, takes the child to about seven years of age, and sees him beginning to assimilate concepts not directly vehicled by the senses, such as the relativity of number and space: more or less, nearer and farther, etc. But the child can only pay attention to one aspect at a time, and although 'beginning to internalise actions into thoughts' ⁷⁹ (more about this presently), can only work forward in his thinking. Piaget talks of the 'semi-logical' stage in this regard:

we should note that this logic is limited in two essential respects: such ordering or classifying or setting up of correspondances does not involve reversibility, so we cannot as yet speak of 'operations'... ⁸⁰.

The third stage (roughly between the ages of seven and ten) is, by contrast with the second, more fully logical:

[The child] now arranges things in series and understands that in lining them up, say,

in order of increasing size, *he is at the same time arranging them in order of decreasing size*; the transitivity of relations like bigger than, and so on, which previously went unrecognized or was noted as a mere matter of fact, is now something of which he is explicitly aware... the conservation principles which earlier were lacking are now established...⁸¹.

What Piaget calls 'conservation' relates to the child's newly-acquired ability to compare particular configurations of a certain number of objects or quantities with previous ones, without allowing his initial *measurement* of the number or quantity to be influenced by it⁸². The child can, for the first time, consider two or more aspects of a situation simultaneously, yet his thinking remains confined to 'concrete situations'⁸³, hence Piaget's qualification of this stage as *concrete operational*. The latter handicap is, however, overcome in the fourth *formal operational* stage, which sees the eleven to twelve year old finally able to manipulate 'abstract symbols or ideas'. Reasoning is fully 'reversible' (see stages 2 and 3 above) and the child can also 'reason by implication'⁸⁴.

Where does language fit into all of this? The answer is: nowhere - at least in the *foundational* sense that Ong (in regard to thought) and Jousse (in regard to consciousness) would prefer to think of it. To understand the 'role' Piaget assigns to language within the cognitive process, we need to revisit the 'stages' described above, but this time not from the point of view of their actual (differential) sequence, but from the point of view of the 'mechanism' that enables the child to make cognitive *progress*, both within a particular stage and in his passage from one stage to another. Such a perspective is notably adopted by Fodor, who describes Piaget's model as involving 'the assimilation of a series of "logics" of increasing representative power'⁸⁵.

The sensorimotor child possesses a 'logic of action': he reasons on the basis of a 'generalization of actions'⁸⁶. What is going to determine his cognitive progress is precisely the *assimilation* Fodor refers to, defined by Piaget as 'the integration of new objects or new situations and events into [the result of] previous... [generalizations]'⁸⁷. At the very initial stage of the child's development, assimilation hinges purely on the child's recognition ('comprehension') of an object. Having been face to face with, say, a hanging object before, the child is subsequently able to *recognize* such an object whenever he sees it. But from the child's second year (i.e. still within the sensorimotor stage), assimilation begins to become possible not only through 'the integration of an object to a scheme of action' (see note 87) - i.e. through recognition - but through what Piaget terms 'extension': the ability to *evoke*, that

is, 'to think of something that is not actually and perceptibly present'⁸⁸. In other words, the child acquires the capacity to *assimilate* into his generalizations that which is *absent*. And this capacity, which is fully the capacity to *represent*, results from the formation of what Piaget conceives to be 'the symbolic or semiotic function'. And of this semiotic function

language is a particular case..., but it is *only* a particular case - particularly important, I do not deny - but a limited case within the totality of manifestations of the symbolic function⁸⁹.

Other instances of the semiotic function (existing, so to speak, side by side with language) include 'symbolic play' ('play that evokes by means of gestures a situation that is not current, not perceptible'⁹⁰) and - to some extent already implied in the idea of 'play by means of gesture' - *imitation*. With respect to the latter Piaget interestingly echoes Jousse's notion of semiological gesticulation as a 'miming of the muscles' (see note 44):

I mean by imitation not the imitation of a person... but the imitation of an object, that is, the copying by gestures of the characteristics of that object (for example, the object has a hole that must be enlarged, and this enlargement is imitated by the motion of opening and closing the mouth). This imitation plays a very large role because it can be motive at the outset..., but it continues later on as an *interiorized imitation*. I claim that the mental image is nothing more, at the beginning, than an interiorized imitation that creates the ensuing representations⁹¹.

Jousse, as we have seen, aligns the 'mimicking' by means of gesture (i.e. 'laryngo-buccal' gesture) to the act of speech (language) and sees it, in its 'deferred' form, as the substance of thought itself. (See note 62). But imitation can also derive from 'visual reviviscences' (see note 63), leading to a thinking largely independent from language. Unlike Jousse, Piaget does not assimilate imitation to language, but sees it as functioning parallel to it within the broader semiotic process. But at least to the extent that Piaget's 'mental image' is an interiorized imitation 'at the beginning', one can no doubt be justified for finding it largely reminiscent of Jousse's 'deferred mimicking' of 'visual reviviscences'⁹².

In terms of the thought - language controversy, Piaget's characterization of language as a *limited* - yet *important* - 'case' of a broader representative function, can obviously be interpreted according to which of these adjectives one wishes to emphasize. In this regard a distinction has been made between the *concrete* operational and the *formal* operational stages, to the effect that, while language is not necessary in the course of cognitive development *as such*, it is all the same, in Furth's words:

a principal and preferred medium of thinking for a developed mind, for a mind that

has reached... the formal operating stage⁹³.

An essentially similar reading of Piaget is provided by Liben:

... even without language, the child's interactions with the physical world should permit the development of fundamentally normal cognitive skills, *at least through the concrete operational period*⁹⁴.

Piaget's position with regard to the thought - language relation at a fully developmental level can then at least to some extent be said to approximate that of Lev Vygotsky's *Thought and Language*⁹⁵. Thought and speech have different ontogenic roots and evolve along different lines throughout the child's development. At a certain point, however, 'these lines meet, whereupon thought becomes verbal and speech rational'⁹⁶.

The formal operational stage represents, as we saw earlier, the human intellectual capacity for *abstraction*. Our thinking is fully 'reversible' and we can reason by implication. To the extent that language is the most elaborate - and, in that sense, the most abstract - of the semiotic functions identified by Piaget, not to mention the fact that it functions according to readily deductible and predictable *rules* (more about this point in our discussion of the *mathetic* aspect of language), the association between language and a fully 'rational' reasoning seems perfectly fair. At this point, however, the following question comes to mind. Even if - taking an essentially Chomskyan line - language is regarded as 'rational' (and therefore conducive to rational thinking), how sure can we be that our thinking - as *adults* - is itself intrinsically rational? This is, once again, not a question that we can entertain here in any detail. But the following comment by David Green⁹⁷ sheds some light on the complexities of this question, specifically in so far as it refutes the taken-for-grantedness of notions like rationality and abstraction in relation to formal operative reasoning. In a 1972 article Piaget⁹⁸ advances, reports Green, that 'adults solve problems according to the principles of hypothetico-deductive logic'. Yet

... it became clear both from work on human reasoning in the sixties and from research on human judgment... that such a claim is incorrect. Indeed, it is perhaps as well that we do not think according to the canons of formal logic for our thinking would be maladapted to the world in which we live... where *relevance is more important than logical equivalence*.

As a result,

... our capacity to reason effectively is crucially dependent upon *relatively specific, rather than context-free, problem representations*⁹⁹.

Does the idea of a 'relevant' or 'relatively specific, rather than context-free' reasoning not take us back, at least to some degree, to the *concrete*, object-oriented logic of the child in which - as we have learnt - language is a relatively unimportant factor? Whatever one's response to it, this question is useful in so far as it raises the further issue of the actual *validity* of Piaget's (and others') essentially *developmental* model of a 'staged' human cognition. We can conclude this first segment of our reflection on Ong's sound / speech / language / thought approximation by briefly considering an alternative to such an evolution.

One of the more pointed critiques of Piaget comes, in fact, from Fodor, who rejects the former's notion of a progression through increasingly complex conceptual systems on purely logical grounds. Side-stepping the myriad of schematic syllogisms Fodor offers us, we can broadly nail down his argument to the following. Concepts *as such* can only be learnt through 'the projection and confirmation of hypotheses'¹⁰⁰ (even if - as would obviously be the case with small children - the latter are never actually verbalized). Yet for the hypothesis to have been advanced in the first place means that the concept to be 'learnt' must have been present in it from the start. In other words, the subject merely learns which of a range of concepts he *already* possesses best fits his experience of a given situation, or, as Fodor phrases it, 'which of several locally coextensive concepts is criterial for the occurrence of reward'. Hence Fodor's emphatic conclusion: 'one can't learn a conceptual system richer than the conceptual system that one starts with'¹⁰¹.

The only thing that can, in fact, become more powerful, is the degree of *expressivity* of the conceptual system. It is at this level that the child's learning of a language becomes useful. But rather than relate the latter to factors of cognition (factors of intellectual *competence*), Fodor essentially links language to the relatively extraneous factors of intellectual *performance* like memory capacity and the ability to focus attention¹⁰². Conceptualization *as such* is the province, not of language (i.e. the natural languages that children learn), but of what Fodor conceives to be 'an *internal* representational system' or 'private language'¹⁰³. And, no matter how crude this may sound, the representational power of this conceptual system is, 'to all intents and purposes, *innately* determined'¹⁰⁴. Fodor concedes that he uses the term 'language' in relation to this 'inner code' merely by way of analogy¹⁰⁵. The fact is that while this conceptual system can possibly be regarded as representational in a way similar to language (no doubt as part of a Piagetian semiotic function), it is fundamentally *not* learnt. The stages that Piaget discusses cannot be differentiated in terms of the child's ability to learn

concepts and - important as far as we are concerned - conventional (natural) language has, strictly speaking, nothing to do with how we think.

We can now turn to what we earlier identified as a second motivating factor in the move from *language* deficiency to *experiential* deficiency as a means of accounting for perceived cognitive problems of the non-hearing, namely the contention that - contrary to what Ong believes - language is *not* necessarily associated with sound. Here, however, we have to enter a note of caution. The mere fact that language becomes disassociated with sound obviously does not of itself imply that thought and language are unrelated. It is in this sense that I earlier described the two motivations for experiential deficiency as 'contradictory'. This contradiction is borne out in Furth's argument, mentioned earlier (see notes 73 - 74), that non-hearing people are able to think *even though* they do not have language. While largely supportive of his contentions as to the independence of thought from language, both Moores and Liben are critical of Furth's assumption that language means *vocal* language. Non-hearing people, even those who know little or no vocal language, are not 'alinguistic', and attempts to motivate the relative independence of thought from language through research on non-hearing subjects are, as Moores puts it, 'misdirected'¹⁰⁶. But to say that non-hearing people who use manual signs are as 'linguistic' as hearing people who use vocal signs does not for all that mean that the language deficiency argument is to be reintroduced at the expense of the notion of experiential deficiency. The effect of this assertion is, rather, to take language out of a *perceived* 'natural' (because of being sounded?) relation to the psyche, so as to place it more fully in the world 'out there' into which the developing child has to integrate. In other words, it brings into clearer perspective the non-private, social nature of language, the fact that language is *itself* part of a more general experience that children need in order to develop. Liben, having argued against the notion that language learning amongst the non-hearing should necessarily be equated with learning a vocal language, thus summarizes the main implication of her views:

[r]ather than proposing that language affects thought directly,... language... is hypothesized to have its effect on cognition indirectly, being mediated through interactions with family, peers, teachers, and society in general¹⁰⁷.

What is particularly important for our purposes, however, is that the idea of a non-vocal language may also have implications for our perspective on writing. We can, therefore, expect it to shed light on the relation between oral and written language.

When Ong asserts (on the basis of Siertsema's 'findings' - see note 50) that "languages"

making no acknowledged or overt use of sound always depend... upon languages which are built in sound'¹⁰⁸, he seems unlikely to be thinking of American Sign Language (Ameslan), or otherwise is obviously dismissive of it. Recognition of Ameslan as a language has, in fact, been comparatively recent. At least prior to 1960, as Ronnie Wilbur reports, Ameslan held little or no interest for linguistic theory, as it was generally considered not to be a language¹⁰⁹. It was seen, in the words of Ursula Bellugi and Edward Klima, as just 'a loose collection of gestures - gestures that have no systematic internal structure and that are strung together without hierarchical syntactic organization'¹¹⁰. To some extent this conception has continued to cloud matters, all the more so, it would seem - and this perhaps explains Ong's own ignorance - that users of Ameslan make extensive use of non-systemic gestures like pantomime¹¹¹, facial expression and body posture¹¹² to convey their information, and frequently mix Ameslan with forms of fingerspelling (such as 'manual' English) or sign systems (such as 'signed' English)¹¹³ that imitate the grammatical aspects and word order of a spoken language and are, in this sense, obviously 'dependent' on languages 'built in sound'. But Ameslan, whose signs represent concepts as opposed to words, is not. Bellugi and Klima summarize its main features (most frequently subject to confusion) as follows:

American sign Language is not a derivative or degenerate form of written or spoken English. It has a lexicon that does not correspond to English, but must be considered a different language. The grammatical principles governing the modification of meaning of signs are different, in form and content, from the grammatical processes in English and in spoken languages in general. [It]... is in no way limited to 'concrete ideas'. It is a fully-fledged language with the possibility for expression at any level of abstraction. ... [It also]... is not a universal form of pantomime¹¹⁴.

Apart from its structural qualities, it is important to note that Ameslan further resembles spoken languages in so far as it can, in fact, be learnt as 'a primary natural language', at least in situations where the parents of non-hearing children are themselves non-hearing¹¹⁵. The process of language learning itself, then, can take place as something basically oriented around the visual¹¹⁶.

What significance could a sign language like Ameslan - fully a linguistic *system* - have for Oral Theory, given the latter's concern with the interplay of the oral and the *written*? Following a deconstructionist train of thought, and on the assumption that Ameslan is, at root, a 'language of gesture' ('[i]t seems plausible... that at least certain aspects of [Ameslan]... originated from some form of pantomime or iconic representation', Bellugi and Klima tell us¹¹⁷), one could perhaps argue that Ameslan is a *kind* of writing; more precisely, the kind of

'primary' writing that, as Derrida speculates in the opening pages of his *De la grammatologie*, could 'precede' spoken language - if not in a historical sense, at least from the point of view of representation of meaning¹¹⁸. But such a view, quite apart from watering down the definition of writing to a level where it becomes frankly unusable (at least in terms of the issues and arguments that have animated Oral Theory over the years)¹¹⁹, would also fail to account for the *necessity*, identified by George Sperling, of developing a writing system that actually represents Ameslan as Ameslan¹²⁰. No, writing is fundamentally a *graphic representation* of language¹²¹, Ameslan is not. And while, as Naomi Baron puts it, there is in the case of writing 'some connection between the visual representation and the spoken language'¹²², Ameslan is, in theory at least, wholly independent of such a connection. (See note 113).

Where Ameslan does link up with writing, however, is that it is, just like writing, an undeniably visual means of linguistic communication. Of course, writing and Ameslan are not visual (or, indeed, visible) in the same way. The visibility of writing is durable, becomes an object; that of Ameslan moves through time in the same way as speech. It is there one moment, gone the next. Also, writing, at least in so far as it has a phonetic base, makes visible *sound*; Ameslan makes visible *concepts*. But, quite apart from the enormous differences in the way they actually appear, writing (at least in so far as it has been 'internalized' as *literacy*) and Ameslan (at least in so far as it has been learnt as a natural language by a congenitally non-hearing person who knows no other language) can at the very least be assumed to share one quality: that of enabling - and, in fact, forcing - their users to 'see' their language, to think of it as something visual. This can be best explained by reference to how we may represent abstract concepts to ourselves, concepts, in other words, that do not correspond to any readily imaginable referent in the world of objects. ('Represent' in this sense needs to be clearly distinguished from 'associate' - at issue is not the mental association of abstract concepts with more concrete ones but their representation *as such*). The 'native speaker' of Ameslan, upon thinking of a particular abstract concept, will be able to see, in his mind's eye, a gesture or series of gestures linguistically representing that concept. The literate person will represent the same concept to himself as a written word, as in the following example given by Ong:

A literate person, asked to think of the word [concept?] 'nevertheless', will normally (and I strongly suspect always) have some image, at least vague, of the spelled-out word and be quite unable to think of the word... without reverting to any lettering but

only to sound¹²³.

Ong sees this as illustrative of what he terms the 'pre-emptiveness of literacy'. (See Chapter 3, note 106; see also Ong's comments earlier on the irrevocable nature of the shift from the oral to the literate). Apart from our differences with Ong as far as the object of the 'pre-emptiveness' is concerned (to Ong, what is *pre-empted* by literacy is, of course, the very process of conceptualization), we can, for our present purposes, given that we have also discovered visibility in a system of linguistic representation that is *not* written, substitute 'literacy' with 'the visual'. What is important to us in the above example is not that the word 'nevertheless' is seen as a series of letters, but, more fundamentally, that it *is seen*. The concept of 'introducing something more or less contrary to what has been stated' implicit in 'nevertheless' will similarly be seen by the user of Ameslan, even if the concept is not in the same way distinct or separable from others as the existence of the word 'nevertheless' would make a user of English inclined to believe. Both writing and Ameslan can, in this way, be said to induce a visual *conception* of language, on account of the fact that both writing and Ameslan turn language into something basically *spatial*. It is in this sense, and in this sense only - independent of the actual mechanisms of thought - that the visual could be regarded as 'pre-emptive' in the example given by Ong. Sounded language, on the contrary - at least as it is perceived by the ear¹²⁴ - can only be represented as sound, inextricably bound up with the flow of time. This notion will be further developed in Chapter 5.

This brings us to the significance of Ameslan to Oral Theory. As already noted, the representation of Ameslan is not in the same way durable as that of writing, and to the extent that durability is seen as the crucial factor in the postulated cognitive effect of writing (it is because it is durable, for example, that writing can be used as a record - see Chapter 2), Ameslan will, in all probability, not be aligned to writing at all. At the same time it is obviously not speech, which no doubt explains why Ameslan (or sign language in a broader sense), has tended to be overlooked in the orality - literacy debate. But Ameslan clearly has characteristics of both: like speech it is bound to time, like writing it is visualizable - and visible - in space. And it is fundamentally, not merely a means of communication, but actual *language*. It is as language that Ameslan may cast its shadow over Oral Theory. In order to arrive at an understanding of its significance, we need, therefore, to remind ourselves of Oral Theory's most basic assumptions about language.

These are inevitably presented as contrasts, be it as actual differences (oppositions) or as

polarities in an interplay or continuum: language is oral or written; hence, language is heard or seen; hence, language is temporal or spatial. Most importantly, the second terms of the polarities (written, seen, spatial) are always evolutions of the first. Not just are they evolutions, but actually *consequences*. To make sense of this we need to take a step back, as it were, and reintegrate language into the broader field of interest of Oral Theory. To review Ong's argument: written language / literacy has the revolutionary effects it has on society and the individual psyche precisely *because* it is, as representation, 'grounded' in oral language / orality. In other words, writing, which is something visual (spatial), would not fulfill the functions it does, would not have the influence it does, were it *not* the representation of something auditory (temporal). Logical and abstract thinking, for example, depends on the ability to think in terms of space ('visualist' space which is 'pure' - see note 25). At the same time, however, thinking is essentially *dependent* on the 'interiority' and 'centering' of sound ('acoustic' space, which is decidedly temporal).

The major insight to be gleaned from the evidence provided by Ameslan is, in this context, that language is not *per definition* subject to the kinds of polarisation around which it has appeared in Oral Theory. The parallel evolutionary passage between oral and written, auditory and visual, time-bound and spatial does not have to be theorised on the basis of some *internal condition* of language and language use. It is, rather, not unlike the factors that originally led to language being vocal rather than visual, rooted in the practical, in other words, in the contingencies of a history which - had it evolved on the basis of linguistic data provided by Ameslan - could have been very different. (See note 54).

Essentially the same point - albeit in a different way - is made by Roy Harris in his critique of the lip-service paid by modern linguistics to the notion of the primacy of the spoken word (see note 121), while it 'has itself remained consistently and irredeemably scriptist in orientation'¹²⁵. (This critique will be looked at in more detail in Chapter 5). Harris lists four 'respects' in which speech is considered more fundamental than writing: **all human** communities have had spoken language before they have had 'a corresponding written language' ('phylogenetic priority'); any normal child learns to speak his native language before he learns to write it ('ontogenetic priority'); speech 'serves a wider range of communicational purposes than writing' ('functional priority'); writing is originally a representation of speech ('structural priority'). Significantly Harris does not, à la Derrida (see note 118), attempt to stand these priorities on their collective head (although some would

argue that Derrida actually willfully ignores them¹²⁶). He does, however, remark that the 'doctrine of the primacy of speech... is itself a curious amalgam', for

it does not follow from any of the priorities that the use of articulated sound as a medium of expression must be treated as criterial, to the exclusion of writing, in defining what a language is.... [T]he priorities as such say nothing about the crucial question for any analytic science; namely, the interrelation between the two forms of co-existent behaviour¹²⁷.

Harris does not bring Ameslan into the equation at all. But if he were prepared to accept our notion of the relation of speaking (at least in the context of primary orality) to writing as essentially that of an auditory to a visualist conception of language, he would express the same kind of theoretical relativity as regards what is 'truly' (fundamentally) language as we have found on the basis of the linguistic evidence provided by Ameslan.

One aspect of this insight is of particular interest to us: what we earlier decried as an auditory (temporal) and visual (spatial) *conception* of language can no longer be equated with different stages of an evolution. The different languages of the world studied by linguistics may well be constituted in sound, justifying the concern of modern linguistics with speech rather than with writing. But from the point of view of the definition of language as a multi-layered system of discrete units¹²⁸, there is no reason why the ear should be regarded as more original, more *primitive*, than the eye¹²⁹. The issue of the 'pre-emptiveness' of the visual (as literacy - see note 123, also Chapter 2, note 106) turns out, therefore, to be largely irrelevant. That orality (an auditory conception of language) can actually be 'dominant' in a *literate* person, is, of course, to some extent suggested by Ong himself when, on the basis of the frequency of oral-formulaic form in the writing of certain literate poets (see Chapter 1, note 39), he points out that '[o]ral formulaic thought and expression ride deep in consciousness and the unconscious, and they do not vanish as soon as one used to them takes pen in hand'¹³⁰. What Ong here ascribes to thought on the basis of form of expression, we would ascribe to an auditory conception of language on the basis of language primarily experienced as sound. This conception may or may not be altered by the experience of writing, depending on the intensity of the latter. The significance of Ameslan is, if nothing else, that it suggests the possibility that the respective sense-based conceptions of language can yet turn out to be no more than mere alternatives, deriving from different linguistic experience.

In conclusion to our appraisal of the thought - language relation, let us now consider what we earlier referred to as the mathetic function of language: the capacity of language 'to

represent experience, to observe, to conceptualize, and to categorize', or, put differently, to 'serve in the [mental] construction of reality'. (See notes 48 and 67). Of course, this presumed capacity has to a large extent already been dealt with and, in fact, contradicted. (See in particular our overview of Piaget and Fodor). But our present discussion would not be complete, I would argue, without considering conceptions as to how language as internalized *structure* (as opposed to language as a means of expression or communication, or language as consisting of words relating to concepts) can be said to impact on our ability to construct mental categories concerning the world around us. From a more concrete perspective, this involves revisiting Ong's earlier distinction between thinking 'as words' and thinking as a 'chain of verbalization'. (See note 61). It is especially the latter kind of thinking that would engage notions like verbal category and grammatical structure.

This brings us face-to-face with the controversial thesis originally developed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, namely that language structure to a greater or lesser extent determines thought¹³¹. Ronald Wardhaugh distinguishes between a strong and weak statement of this thesis. The former purports 'that language structure determines thought completely and controls the way a speaker views the world', the latter 'that the structure of a language makes certain kinds of perception easy and others difficult, but does not make anything impossible'. The weaker version, in other words, sees language as predisposing the speaker towards a certain conception of the world rather than *determining* this conception.

Once again, Ameslan can provide us with useful insights. The Sapir - Whorf thesis was obviously formulated with vocal languages in mind; our thinking is determined by the concepts *produced* - rather than *vehicled* - by the language we first learn to speak. In this regard we could usefully distinguish two kinds of concepts, those attached to individual (i.e. lexical) elements of the linguistic system (what we would broadly call words), and those that do not attach to lexical items as such (although individual words frequently represent them¹³²), but rather to the way in which words can be linked to each other. The term 'grammatical marker' can be used for the latter. As mentioned earlier, the signs of Ameslan represent concepts, not words. But Ameslan is also, like spoken language, a 'first order' linguistic representation (it does not, like writing, represent the elements of a linguistic system that exists prior to it), so it comes across, in a very real sense, as a language of concepts. What is more, the concepts of Ameslan would, at least relative to those of vocal languages, be of the 'lexical' rather than the 'grammatical' variety. This essentially reflects what Edna Levine

terms a 'thinking in pure meanings', obviously independent from the influence of language:

Largely eliminated by Ameslan are the struggles to encage what goes on in the mind in rigid rules of English grammar. We may hypothesize that, with this obstacle eliminated, the 'syntax' of unadulterated Ameslan is closer to the 'syntax' of pure thought than is the syntax of verbal language¹³³.

As reported by Wardhaugh¹³⁴, there has been little by way of research data in clear support of the Sapir - Whorf thesis, even taken in its relatively watered-down version. In one experiment, 'Nahavo-dominant' and 'English-dominant' children between the ages of three and ten were asked to match together objects differing in shape, size and colour, the hypothesis being - from a Whorfian perspective - that the Nahavo-dominant children would tend to group objects according to their shape, given the obligatory grammatical markers that Nahavo attaches to 'verbs of handling' according to the shape of the object to be handled. Significantly however, differences in how the children matched together the objects corresponded, not with language background, but with age distribution. Older children from *both* language groups tended to favour shape, while younger children favoured colour. Wardhaugh points out that, on the assumption that reliance on shape rather than colour is a sign of cognitive development, one could assume that such development would benefit from a special grammatical category for shape in the children's language. At the same time, however, there would be other equally important supporting factors, such as, for example, a relatively privileged middle-class environment. (The group to most strongly opt for shape as organizational criterion was, in fact, a control group made up of middle-class English-speaking children). If grammatical structure is a variable in cognitive development, it is one amongst several, and certainly not the most prominent¹³⁵.

Speaking of thinking as a *process*, Ong draws attention to its main ingredient, which is judgment. (See, in this regard, Fodor's reference to concepts that are 'criterial for the occurrence of reward' - note 101). Ong does not talk about reward but about truth, and judging whether something is true or not always implies a statement: *the union of subject and predicate*, which is, as Ong muses, 'buried in the origins of language itself'¹³⁶. In other words, the essential ingredient of thinking has, in this sense, been bequeathed by language, but not by the word as such (coinciding with the concept), but by the syntagmatic *relation* (to use the Saussurian terminology) that lies beyond it. For all this, Ong does not enter into much reflection on the possible coincidence of thought and linguistic structure, yet we undoubtedly

see such an assumption at work in certain instances.

Within the context of explaining the psychological effect of the time-boundedness of sound, Ong finds at least some of Whorf's research (notably that on the Hopi language and culture) eminently useful. The Hopi people, we learn,

do not think of today as a part or section of time as coming after another part or section of the time-mass designated yesterday. They do not picture today as 'next' to yesterday... but rather think of time in terms of its perpetual 'getting later'¹³⁷.

The question of orality / literacy (or verbomotor / visualist) does not directly enter Ong's discussion here, but we can assume the Hopi (as quintessential 'non-Western' culture¹³⁸), to more or less conform to Ong's conception of an oral people. This is certainly what Ong implies, and the evidence quoted above relating to the Hopi notion of time would certainly fit Ong's general characterization of the oral mindset as event rather than object oriented. But we know, of course, that Whorf was far less interested in literacy as a determining factor of cognition than in language structure. Ong, momentarily, shows a similar inclination. Wanting to make the point that literate people have a more spatial conception of time than oral people (at least this is what we can assume he wants to say), Ong settles, instead, for drawing attention to what in a Whorfian perspective would be a telling difference between English and Hopi:

English, like modern Western languages generally, is impoverished in qualifiers derived directly from time...¹³⁹.

Why should Western languages be qualified as 'modern' here? One could be pardoned for inferring from this that Hopi is *not* modern, which, from a linguistic point of view, would be non-sensical: Hopi is as 'living' or contemporary a language as English. But in another passage we get a strong indication (even if it is never explicitly admitted) that Ong integrates contemporary languages into by and large the same evolutionist paradigm as he does the matter of orality - literacy. Ong assumes that the subject - predicate relation that is the subject of thought translates into the linguistic categories of noun (substance) and verb (action)¹⁴⁰ which, at least in a language like English, are expressed in distinct words. Yet there is 'some evidence', Ong tells us,

that in the earlier stages of languages nouns and verbs are not so completely disjoined from each other as they are in later stages of linguistic development¹⁴¹.

Certainly, the 'evidence' referred to here would to some extent be borne out in the development of a modern Romance language like French from its 'classical' ancestor, Latin.

Whereas both languages are regarded as 'inflectional'¹⁴², French is certainly more 'isolating' than Latin in so far as it generally assigns different grammatical functions to different words, Latin by comparison concentrating a variety of such functions within a single word, typically the verb. At the same time, however, the quintessential isolating language is Mandarin Chinese, and what about the many agglutinative languages (where a single complex word expresses what in an isolating language would require a sentence¹⁴³) in use the world over? Are we to assume that the latter represent an earlier stage of linguistic development?

As already indicated, Ong does not clearly commit himself on this point. But if we see the Western languages Ong talks about against the background of the history of alphabetic writing, a certain parallel between the way Ong presents these languages and his view of the cognitive processes of the literate or visualist becomes clear. Most obvious in this regard, is the likeness between Ong's notion that a clear distinction between noun and verb is linguistically the most developed, and his notion that literacy favours abstract conceptualization. Indo-European languages clearly set apart noun and verb, and they (or rather their speakers) have arguably the longest history of alphabetic literacy. (While not downplaying the very real differences in linguistic structure between Indo-European languages and other language families, it could of course also be argued that our awareness of these languages as 'isolating' is to a large extent aided by what is after all a convention - a *habit* - of graphic representation¹⁴⁴).

A similar parallel between the presentation of a certain type of (Indo-European) linguistic structure and the postulated effects of literacy has been remarked by Brian Street¹⁴⁵. The cognitive quality at issue this time is pertinently the matter of objectivity. On the basis that '[l]anguages can be legitimately analysed in terms of their greater or lesser context-dependence and culture-dependence'¹⁴⁶, John Lyons, as reported by Street, makes the observation that indication on the part of a speaker of his social status, as well as his attitude as to the actual truth of what he is stating is, in many languages, not just left to the choice of the speaker within the particular context of discourse, but actually encoded in the linguistic system itself. In other words, the speaker is grammatically and lexically obliged to make explicit what is very much a subjective qualification, a fact which makes it difficult for users of such language-systems 'to approximate to neutral, objective statements'¹⁴⁷. This brings Lyons to reflect on the absence of such structural requirements as far as English is concerned. Once again, the parallel is straightforward. Just as literacy favours the development of

objectivity through its spatial objectification of language, so the linguistic structure of English favours objectivity through its relative non-insistence on grammatical markers of status and subjective attitude.

The typical member of an oral culture on whose cognitive processes the assertions of the 'autonomous model' of literacy (see Chapter 2, note 101) are based, does not speak an isolating Western European language. Relatively few studies have been done on the effects of literacy in non-European languages, one of which - on the Vai language of West Africa - deviated from the autonomous model in so far as it attributed certain more developed cognitive skills shown by subjects literate in Vai script, not so much to their literacy, as to the fact that they were receiving formal education in a school environment. (See Chapter 2, note 120). A similar explanation suggests itself for one notable instance where Ong finds justification for describing as 'oral-based' the thought processes of a modern *English speaking* person. Having differentiated between, on the one hand, what he terms the 'restricted linguistic code' (or 'public language') of the 'lower-class English dialects' in Britain and, on the other, the 'elaborated linguistic code' (or 'private language') of the 'upper-class dialects', Basil Bernstein goes on to remark that the expression of the speakers of the 'public language' he studied is characterized, as paraphrased by Ong, by 'a formula-like quality and [that it] strings thoughts together not in careful subordination but like "beads on a frame"'¹⁴⁸. Ong significantly points out that the subjects of this particular study were 'messenger boys with no formal grammar school education', while a group of 'private language' speakers studied by Bernstein - whose cognitive performances were largely superior - were 'from six major public schools'. Yet Ong unhesitatingly suggests that the linguistic code of the former could be regarded as 'oral-based', and that of the latter as 'text-based', by and large the same distinction he habitually draws between the oral and the literate. Amazingly, the vast gap in the social and educational environment of the two groups (quite apart from differences in reading and writing ability) receives no mention from Ong in terms of accounting for their perceived differences in cognitive performance¹⁴⁹.

Wardhaugh makes the point that wherever linguistic criteria have been employed in support of a division between 'advanced' and 'primitive' (the exact terminology is of little importance), 'it has generally been so within a very superficial Whorfian perspective'¹⁵⁰. Whorf, in fact, finds as much evidence - and, in certain cases, more¹⁵¹ - of rational thinking or logical analysis in the linguistic structure of Hopi as he does in that of English. He also

refuses to be drawn to any kind of binary psychological differentiation on the basis of linguistic structure, even where, as with the broadly 'extraversion - introversion' model suggested by the Irish linguist James Byrne¹⁵², the basis of differentiation is *not* the all-too-familiar logical vs pre-logical or analytical vs totalising. (See Chapter 2, note 69). Certainly, there is little justification for interpreting the Sapir - Whorf thesis as a statement on the evolution of languages or, for that matter, of thought.

As such, the occasional references Ong makes to the kind of linguistic data that would be of interest to Whorf speak of the same superficiality. But in making these references, Ong not only distorts what Whorf says, but to a large extent also undermines the theoretical basis of his own assertions as to the significance of literacy *per se* as a variable in the evolution of conceptualization. As it turns out, nothing would express more clearly what we earlier called the 'anthropological bias' (biasedness?) of Oral Theory. For through these references to Whorf, the whole question of Oral Theory's focus on the oral rather than the written, on orality rather than literacy, comes across as but an attempt to further legitimize what, notably through the input of anthropology (particularly in its earlier versions - see Chapter 2, note 111), had become something of an intellectual convention: that what *really* orientates our research is the difference we see between what is modern and Western and whatever is not. If a Whorfian perspective, however superficial, can aid this cause (even at the expense of the actual factor of orality / literacy taking a backseat), so be it.

The views we have surveyed in this chapter, from Jousse to Fodor, from Piaget to the various perspectives on the non-hearing, not to mention, finally, the inconclusivity of the Sapir - Whorf thesis, all suggest that language and thinking are basically independent from each other, and that where a particular type of thinking *does* coincide with language, it also coincides with a multitude of other social factors. There is, then, no reason why the objectification of language achieved in its spatial dimension (either, to use Baron's terminology - see note 121 - as secondary representation, i.e. writing, or, for that matter, as primary representation, i.e. manual signs) should necessarily favour the occurrence of similar processes on a conceptual level. There is no reason to believe that our thinking will become more 'object orientated', that we will tend to think more in visual or spatial terms, that our thinking will become more discriminate or analytical in the same way as our sense of vision might be said to be more discriminate or analytical ('dissecting') than our sense of hearing.

Of course, as we indicated earlier, we actually *need* to detach language from thought if we

are going to succeed in moving Oral Theory beyond the twin beacons of tradition and literature. So, is the above interpretation of the various arguments reviewed not, in fact, rather selective? What about the nagging idea, for example, that language is, in spite of everything, the 'preferred medium' of thinking at Piaget's formal operative level? (See notes 93 - 96). Or, for that matter, that language, as Liben has speculated, affects thought *indirectly*? (See note 107).

If we can draw one unified conclusion from the preceding discussion, it is, perhaps, that language does *not* determine thought in any kind of direct *interior* way (i.e. as part of a kind of introspective 'private world'), but can, to some extent, influence thought indirectly in so far as it is something *social*. Thinking is, as Goody has asserted, also something social in so far as it is *socially learnt*. Yet to say that both our language and our thinking derive from our interaction with the world around us, is a far cry from saying that they are interdependent. On the matter of the (non)relation of language to thinking, that is all we can say. But we can at least cast a few further doubts on the notion that language and thought are interrelated, by uncovering - perhaps - certain inconsistencies in the way the autonomous model of literacy has represented some of the perspectives on cognition we have come across.

Lets take the idea that 'thinking is something social'. In the light of Ong and Goody's motivations (reviewed in Chapter 2) of the cognitive consequences of writing, this assumption would in many ways appear to be less than straightforward. Both of them see writing (at least in so far as it has become 'widespread' and 'interiorized' as literacy - which is, of course, the level at which it is supposed to interfere with the cognitive process) as to some extent *undermining* the social. The development of writing and print, Ong tells us, 'ultimately fostered the breakup of feudal societies and the rise of individualism'¹⁵³. On an immediate level writing brings about the text-as-object serving as a basis of analysis and reflection hitherto impossible, but it consequently - on a societal level - promotes individualism, causing people to turn away from the received truth of tradition towards an ever-to-be-constructed truth of introspection. Thought becomes fundamentally 'de-socialized', a process most famously embodied in René Descartes:

By the eighteenth century Descartes' logic of personal inquiry, silent cerebration, had ousted dialectic, an art involving vocal exchange, as the acknowledged sovereign over human intellectual activity. The new logic was not the art of discourse... Rather, it was the art of thinking - that is, of *individualized, isolated intellectual activity, presumably uninvolved with communication...*¹⁵⁴.

At this point one could justifiably expect that Ong is about to sever thought from language. Maybe, on the abstract level of conceptualization to which the written word gives access, thought is not just liberated from speech (a service essentially performed by writing), but from language itself, leading to a kind of 'thinking in pure meanings'. (See note 133). Instead, we learn that this 'isolated intellectual activity' has, so to speak, appropriated language for its own purposes. Thought *remains* 'nested in language', but then a language that has, to all intents and purposes, ceased to be social, at least in the *fundamental* sense both Ong and Goody have, in different contexts, insisted upon.

One is tempted to say to Ong that he cannot have his cake and eat it. But Ong will retort that there is nothing particularly contradictory in all of this, it is merely the final straw in the intrinsic contamination of writing (see notes 35 - 36), the pre-emptiveness of a literacy that, not without a certain irony (writing was, after all, merely supposed to *copy* speech) continually changes things (even language) to suit its own cognitive purposes.

Significantly however, it is precisely at this point - where thinking has stopped being social - that Ong (to a slightly lesser extent Goody¹⁵⁵) begins to use concepts like abstraction, analysis and logic. Of course, Ong is careful not to appear too categorical (see also Chapter 3, note 36):

we [must not] 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 move¹⁵⁶.

Oral thinking 'can be quite sophisticated and reflective in its own way', says Ong further, citing the elaborate explanations that Navaho narrators proffer in support of the significance of their stories. Yet one cannot but be struck by the similarities of the cognitive skills presumed by Ong to be the fruits of the ability to write, and those acquired by the eleven to twelve year old child who, within the Piagetian framework, proceeds from the concrete operational to the formal operational stage. (See notes 79 - 83). As we saw earlier, language is not regarded as a significant factor in this evolution.

The characteristic of the oral mindset most extensively dealt with by Ong in his discussion of the 'psychodynamics of orality' (see Chapter 2, notes 56-65), is 'situational rather than abstract'. As reported earlier, Ong here draws strongly on Aleksandr Luria's research on the verbal reasoning of illiterate and semi-literate peasants in a remote part of Uzbekistan. A significant factor, only fleetingly mentioned by Ong, is that Luria does not 'systematically

encode his findings expressly in terms of orality - literacy differences¹⁵⁷. (The latter differences, as Curran reports, also to a large extent coincide with differences in milieu, such as between remote rural villages and state run collective farms, reflecting obviously different levels of technology and education¹⁵⁸). But Ong does. As such, Luria's research basically establishes the following: oral people, presented with (pictures of) objects or geometrical shapes, will not categorize them according to some or other logical criterion (however determined), but rather relate each one individually to another object they are familiar with, or to some or other practical purpose. Confronted with a syllogical statement, they will immediately problematize the content of the statement in terms of real life experience, rather than follow the course of premise - deduction implicit in the syllogism. They are also unable to give a self-analysis without recourse to external events. By contrast, people who have even a measure of literacy will tend towards categorization, deduction and reflection¹⁵⁹.

What would a Piaget make of such findings? Clearly, there is no evidence of reasoning by implication or of manipulation of abstract ideas (the formal operative stage), and thinking is confined to concrete situations: 'illiterate subjects seemed not to operate with formal deductive procedures at all', concludes Ong¹⁶⁰. This failure to achieve formal operative thought would, furthermore, seem to tally with the findings of at least certain Piaget-based studies on non-literate (oral) communities, notably that of C. Hallpike, who has argued that adults in the community he researched had, in fact, not even reached the level of *concrete* operational thought¹⁶¹.

And yet Piaget has stated his belief in the formal operative as a universal stage, even if it may be acquired most predominantly in certain areas of specialization relating to specific aptitudes¹⁶². If, as Curran reports, cross-cultural Piagetian studies on cognition (focusing predominantly on non-literate communities) have tended to focus on concrete rather than on formal operations, it is not necessarily for the absence of the latter in these communities, but, quite simply, because the concrete operational framework offers more opportunities for finding what he terms 'culturally appropriate' tasks liable to be used as a measure of cognitive ability¹⁶³. The concrete operational relates to the manipulation of certain physical objects that are, to a large extent, universally known. Cross-cultural cognitive research interested in formal reasoning would, therefore, do better to follow Piagetian theory rather than Piagetian procedures¹⁶⁴. Curran again:

European norms on Piagetian tasks are not a yardstick against which people of other

cultures can be compared. To use them as such would be blatant ethnocentrism. *The same task and the same procedure does not necessarily tap the same psychological processes in different cultural groups*¹⁶⁵.

Though obviously not Piagetian in origin (the Uzbekistan studies were conducted in the early 1930s), Luria's findings - most certainly as interpreted by Ong - can be questioned on the same grounds. In cases where the syllogistical procedures followed by Luria have been replicated in studies on other non-literate cultures, conclusions have to a large extent differed from those formulated by Ong. With regard to reasoning based on syllogisms, Sylvia Scribner has used the term 'empiric' to refer to reasoning derived from the subject's personal knowledge or experience (falling outside the information contained in the premise), and the term 'theoretic' for reasoning purely within the contents of the premise. Her findings are similar to those of Luria, in so far as oral subjects most frequently opted for empiric solutions to syllogistical problems. Most of them *do* however give theoretic answers to syllogisms when the information contained in the syllogism is compatible with their own knowledge, in other words, when they could have some reason for believing in the truth of the premise. Where illiterate people are able, in this way, to treat the syllogism as a self-contained problem, their reasoning is shown to be as logical as that of literates¹⁶⁶.

Towards the end of his overview of Luria's findings, Ong momentarily considers the question of their scientific validity:

One could argue that responses [to Luria's problems] were not optimal because the respondents were not used to being asked these kinds of questions...

He continues:

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,... or articulated self-analysis, all of which derive not simply from thought itself but from [written] text-formed thought. Luria's questions... come from a world the oral respondent does not share¹⁶⁷.

What Ong fails to consider is the possibility that skills like abstract categorization and logical reasoning may well have come to the fore had Luria considered the way in which his oral subjects engaged with tasks and activities forming part of their everyday lives. His remark that an oral culture 'does not deal in such items as geometrical figures' also completely disregards one very definite context in which oral cultures do deal in such figures, namely in the context of artistic decoration which frequently constitutes a symbolic representation of certain culturally important norms and values. In the South African context, the intricate

geometrical patterns of - amongst others - Ndebele mural art and Zulu beadwork spring to mind. Even so, it is remarkable that what is by Ong's own admission essentially an *experiential* (and therefore contextually determined) difference between the literate and the oral, should so comfortably translate into differences derived 'from thought'. We can take this one step further. Scribner has pointed out that the particular kind of formal approach required for the resolution of the kind of deductive problem presented in syllogisms is essentially a 'genre' of language. This genre - which obviously relates to a certain *use* (conception?) of language - may well become more familiar through interaction with the school environment, which would include the activities of reading and writing¹⁶⁸. Had Ong been less attached to the notion that language and thought are interdependent, he may well have been more subtle in his appraisal of cross-cultural studies of thinking, and more in line with recent developments in the field of cognition.

We may note a few further inconsistencies in the notion of an oral mindset (still lodged in a perspective of language - thought interdependence), which particularly come to the fore when one compares Ong's characterizations of the oral with certain long-standing - if to some extent disputed - characterizations of the congenitally non-hearing. At issue are certain aspects of behaviour and conceptualization. To be brief: the most typical behavioural problems associated with the non-hearing are what Robert Harris calls 'deficits in impulse control'¹⁶⁹, which result in the perceived high predisposition of the non-hearing towards impulsiveness and emotional disturbance¹⁷⁰. The root cause of these disadvantages has been the subject of some debate, which generally hinges on whether they are caused by loss of hearing *per se*¹⁷¹ (i.e. the absence of sound) or rather, by linguistic / communicative deficiency (lack of language). Recent approaches have tended to focus not so much on the fact of deafness as such, but on its 'side-effects' within the broader social sphere the child finds himself in. In this regard communication - or rather the lack of it - has come to be regarded as the main factor in the inability of many non-hearing children to effectively control their emotions, a situation that can to some extent be improved by early use of manual communication¹⁷². Alongside 'predisposition towards impulsiveness', a second characterization of the non-hearing, this time on a cognitive level, relates to the notion that non-hearing people think in more 'concrete' ways than the hearing. (This obviously reflects some of the views on language / experiential deficiency reviewed earlier in this chapter. Ameslan, for example, was long seen as a conglomeration of essentially iconic gestures ill-suited to abstraction - see

notes 109 - 110). As in the case of oral people, this contention has been strongly disputed¹⁷³.

Disputed or not, what is remarkable as far as we are concerned, is that essentially the same allegations have been made about oral people, yet on the basis of totally different causes. Certainly, there are occasions where, specifically within the context of evolving power relations in increasingly technological societies, the qualification *oral* (taken as 'illiterate') comes to denote actual deficiency: economic, educational and, in that sense, experiential. But this has by and large nothing to do with the 'experiential deficiency' that disadvantages non-hearing people, which, even though it also alludes to broader educational and social ramifications, singularly emphasizes difficulties in communication. The average person in the average more or less cohesive oral society simply does not share these difficulties.

Yet, as we have seen, the thinking of oral people is situational and concrete. We are told that on a behavioural level they are, relative to literates, prone to emotional outbursts, if not actual violence:

The individual is psychologically faced outward, he is a 'tribal' man, and, under duress, he directs his anxieties and hostilities outward toward the material world around him and chiefly to what he is most intimately aware of in that aurally or vocally received world, that is, to his fellow man¹⁷⁴. [See also note 27].

Feelings of guilt or remorse, freely associated with introspection, are, furthermore, essentially absent amongst oral people, and therefore a benefit of literacy (albeit, one would imagine, an ambiguous one)¹⁷⁵. This echoes Altshuler's association of what he describes as the 'generally egocentric view of the world' of the non-hearing with, amongst others, 'the absence of much thoughtful introspection'¹⁷⁶.

The contradictions inherent in these views of an 'oral personality structure' defeat further explanation. The very social integration which for the non-hearing would be an *overcoming* of deficiency, comes across, for the oral, as an actual disadvantage, preventing them from thinking and behaving *like us*. Entire generations of human societies are, in this sense, 'pathologized'. The link - via language - between orality and psyche becomes nothing less than absurd.

On this note it would be appropriate to make a final remark on Ong's view of orality - literacy as essentially based on a perceptual polarity between auditory and visual (verbomotor vs visualist / acoustic space vs visual space). 'We are not suggesting', says Ong

that typographic [literate] man uses his eyes more than earlier [oral] man had. Even primitive man is highly visual in the sense that he is a keen observer, detecting all sorts of minute visual clues in his environment that civilized man misses. What

happened with the emergence of alphabetic typography was not that man discovered the use of his eyes but that he began to link visual perception to verbalization to a degree previously unknown¹⁷⁷.

Of course, what is important about alphabetic typography is not only that it represents language but, more specifically, that it represents language in a systematic, essentially abstract, way. Ong seizes upon the one aspect of visual experience which oral people can be said to lack (the visual representation of language as words made up of letters) as a basis for a general perceptory opposition brimming with intellectual and behavioural consequences. As such, this *particular* absence of visual representation becomes the foundation upon which the whole theoretical edifice of orality - literacy is constructed. But what if the shoe is, occasionally, on the other foot? What if the visual experience (serving as the basis upon which symbolic visual representations can be made) of literate people in some ways falls short of that of oral people? At issue is much more than observation: what if the 'clues' detected by the 'primitive man' in the passage above are not, as Ong obviously suggests, merely sensations resulting from acute sensory perception, but *are actually integrated into an organized system of discrete signs*? Such a representational system will not be linguistic, but it can for all we know aspire to similar levels of discreteness and abstraction¹⁷⁸, and what if such visual *systems* actually exist more abundantly in oral cultures than in literate ones? This possibility puts an entirely new focus on the visualist - acoustic opposition and renders it, in fact, entirely useless unless specifically applied to the field of language. More about this in Chapter 5.

If we reject, furthermore, Ong's notions of 'acoustic space' and 'auditory synthesis' (see notes 25 and 26) as fatally embroiled in the psychological, of what remaining use could sound, that we earlier highlighted as *distinctive* of orality, be to us? In this respect the following reflections of the anthropologist Steven Feld can, at least to some extent - and with the appropriate reservations - serve as a kind of springboard to our own. Different to us, Feld sees sound not as characteristic of orality *as such* (notably because of the way notions like 'acoustic space' have distorted orality¹⁷⁹), but links its significance much more specifically to the ecological context of the society whose symbolical practices he has been studying, the Kaluli, who live in a remote rainforest environment in Papua New Guinea. 'I particularly felt', he tells us,

that as forest dwellers, the Kaluli must be acutely aware of sound, and able to use sound to advantage over vision. I was convinced that in a rainforest environment,

auditory adaptation - in biological survival terms - must co-evolve with expressive traditions and the local sense of identity and self-consciousness.

On the basis of these hypotheses, he describes the form his study took as follows:

... I have studied the way Kaluli language, music, and aesthetics are interdependent. This has not taken the form of a general musical ethnography - with emphasis on instruments, functions, performances, social roles - but a study of sound as a cultural system, a system of symbols that articulate and embody deeply felt meanings through verbal and musical conception and action, while simultaneously linked to sensory processes, to environmental awareness, and to physical adaptation¹⁸⁰.

The view we can adopt with regard to sound is, compared to Feld's, simultaneously broader and narrower. Broader, in the sense that we are going to see a certain 'indebtedness' to sound as characteristic of an orality defined very much in relation to a relative absence of writing, a definition to which Ong's 'primary orality' will not be inappropriate. (See Chapter 2, note 145). Narrower, in so far as the effect of the perceptory orientation will be limited to the field of language. In other words, the only thinking that will be of concern to us will be thinking about the nature of language itself; conceptualization as such will be unaffected by linguistic conception. (In the case of the Kaluli people studied by Feld sound plays a more specific cognitive role in so far as it provides an indispensable source of metaphorical characterization for large areas of experience¹⁸¹, justifying, no doubt, Feld's expectation that 'auditory adaptation' will 'co-evolve' with mental dispositions like sense of identity or self-consciousness). An important point, however, is that we shall assume what oral people think of language to be *inaccessible* to us, requiring - at least to some degree - that we speculate on it and, in that sense, 'reconstruct' it. We are not about to ask oral people definitional questions about language that they would - just like literate people generally - in all probability not be bothered to ask themselves. Where researchers like Finnegan have 'proved' that at least certain oral societies are characterized by a reflective attitude towards language (see Chapter 3, note 27), we shall basically assume this to be true of oral people in general (whether or not such an attitude is actually made explicit or not), and leave it at that. But the oral conception of language should have certain consequences, not only in so far as the *use* of language is concerned, but, more pertinently, for the way in which language presents itself: language is differently *defined*. Linguistic expression (hence, linguistic communication) would therefore show certain differences to that of societies oriented towards a visual conception of language (the linguistic sign is *visible*, therefore readily visualizable). It is on the basis of

such differences, and such differences only, that Oral Theory could assign to itself a specific object of study. Where other disciplines may explain these differences in the light of pragmatic / contextual or cognitive factors, our interest will be to describe them as factors that are essentially linguistic. For this we shall need an *aural linguistics*, paying specific attention to linguistic representation *as sound*. As we shall see, this may well involve looking more closely at certain symbolic fields hitherto largely ignored by Oral Theory, and most certainly by linguistics, notably music. In Chapter 5 we shall take a few tentative steps towards laying the groundwork for such a field.

Endnotes

1. See in particular Ong, 1967:111-38; Ong, 1986:71-4.
2. Ong, 1967:111.
3. Ong, 1967:112.
4. Ong, 1986:32.
5. Ong, 1967:117.
6. Ong, 1986:71.
7. Ong, 1986:72.
8. 'One can sense the truth in a situation or simply in being itself without formalizing this truth in concepts...'. (Ong, 1967:150).
9. See Kelley, 1988.
10. Kelley, 1988:7.
11. See Kelley, 1988:7-14.
12. Kelley, 1988:14. Emphasis added.
13. Kelley, 1988:9.
14. The reason for realism's lack of favour would seem to lie in the conception held by 'traditional realists' of 'a model of consciousness as a "mirror of nature", grasping its objects by reflecting them in a transparent medium'. This (simplistic) assumption of a completely *non-creative* consciousness has been the source of antirealist arguments generally. (Kelley, 1988:38).
15. Kelley, 1988:40. Emphasis added. See also Rand, A. 1979. *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. New York: Mayflower Books, extensively referred to by Kelley.
16. Kelley, 1988:41. A possible distinction between conscious(ness) and aware(ness) is not pertinent here. With regard to such an opposition, see Chalmers, 1995:66, where awareness is defined as 'the process by which information in the brain is made globally available to motor processes such as speech and bodily action'. While consciousness 'correlates' with awareness, the latter 'is objective and physical, whereas [the former] is not'.
17. Kelley, 1979:17.
18. See in particular Ong, 1967:161-75.
19. Ong, 1967:17. Ong characterizes the 'script' stage in the light of, first, the invention of the alphabet, and second, of movable type (the processes which led to the popularization, hence the *interiorization* of the written word). With regard to the oral-aural and electronic stages, see Ong's 'primary' and 'secondary' orality discussed in Chapter 2.
20. See Ong, 1967:92-110.
21. Ong, 1967:109-10.
22. Ong, 1967:110.
23. See Okpewho, 1983:7-12.
24. See Jung, C. 1944. *Psychology of the Unconscious*. London: Kegan Paul. Quoted in Okpewho, 1983:11.
25. Ong, 1967:164.
26. In comparison with Ong's postulations on the basis of the formula, the perception-based model of the verbomotor 'mindset' focuses less on cognitive processes *as such* than on patterns of behaviour: '[s]pecializing in auditory syntheses and specializing in visual syntheses foster different personality structures and different characteristic anxieties'. (Ong, 1967:130-1). Not only, theorises Ong, are verbomotor people (given

to auditory syntheses) more prone to anxiety than their visualist counterparts (given to visualist syntheses) - a fact related to the fact that 'sound itself signals that something is going on' - but, unlike visualist people who will tend to react to anxiety by physical withdrawal, they will more likely indulge in outward displays that are also frequently violent. See Opler, M. 1956. *Culture, Psychiatry, and Human Values*. Springfield: Thomas. Referred to in Ong, 1967:131-2.

27. See Jousse, 1990.
28. See Hagège, 1985:81.
29. Ong, 1986:68.
30. Foley (1988:14) mentions Parry as citing Jousse 'for his attempt at a psychological theory behind oral style'. However, describing Jousse's monograph as 'an idiosyncratic synthesis of philosophy, psychology, and secondhand fieldwork reports', he finds it unlikely that it would have led Parry to any particular insight, other than to make him generally aware 'of the cultural institution of oral tradition and the highly organized system of unwritten communication it provided'.
31. See Jousse, 1990:61-71. In later writings Jousse, in fact, adopts the term 'formula'. (Edgar Sienaert, personal communication).
32. Jousse, 1990:59.
33. Finnegan, 1977:91.
34. Jousse, 1990:46.
35. One of the central elements in the corruption of the 'noble savage' is the advent of writing. See in particular Derrida, 1967:361-78.
36. Jousse, 1990:70. Emphasis original.
37. Jousse, 1990:71.
38. Parry's enthusiasm for an oral language 'directly expressive of heroic ideals' has similarly been linked to the Romantic mood of the times in which he lived. (See Parry, 1971:xxvi). Quoted in Vail and White, 1991:16.
39. Ong, 1986:15.
40. See Ong, 1967:87-92.
41. Ong, 1967:88.
42. Ong, 1986:15.
43. Ong, 1986:44.
44. Ong, 1986:44.
45. See Jousse's reference (1990:57) to 'propositional gesticulations' that are 'conditioned reflexes'. It is the propositional gesture - much rather than the word - that makes up language (p.56).
46. Jousse, 1990:43.
47. See for example Ong, 1986:28, 78.
48. Harris, in Liben, L. (ed.), 1978:219. Emphasis original. For the origin of the term 'mathetic', see Halliday, M. 1975. *Learning how to Mean*. London: Arnold.
49. Ong, 1967:141.
50. See Siertsema, B. 1955. *A Study of Glossematics: Critical Survey of its Fundamental Concepts*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 109-27. Referred to in Ong, 1967:141.
51. See Ong, 1967:140-61.
52. Hagège, 1985:18. My translation.
53. The *genetic* development in man of a 'faculty of language' seems to coincide with a corollary development towards more complex forms of social behaviour. The human ancestor in whose brain the so-called 'area of Broca' emerges as the specialized

location of communicative ability is also the first of our species to manufacture tools: stones modified as scrapers, cleavers, gouges etc. This technology is an integral part of what is not only the most vital but also one of the most *social* activities of early man, namely the hunt. As such, it constitutes the basis of an emerging capacity for symbolization - culture - in which the development of actual languages (as opposed to the *faculty* of language) will, some two million years later, no doubt be the most significant step. (See Hagège, 1985:13-7).

54. Hagège, 1985:19.
55. Ong, 1967:146.
56. Ong, 1967:149.
57. See Ong, 1967:142-4. In psycho-analytic terms this period would correspond to the oral and anal stages of the child, referring to 'a preverbal functional state that governs the connections between the body (in the process of constituting itself as a body proper), objects, and the protagonists of family structure'. (Kristeva, 1984:27).
58. Kristeva (1984:25) would refer to Ong's 'effluvium of sound' as the *chora* - a 'non-expressive totality' produced by the 'drives'. The *chora*, which is 'analogous... to vocal and kinetic rhythm', is not (yet) a sign (i.e. a word), 'it is, however, generated in order to attain to this signifying position' (p.26). These notions will be briefly returned to in Chapter 5.
59. Ong, 1967:143-4. Emphasis added.
60. Ong, 1967:140.
61. Ong, 1967:149. Emphasis added.
62. Jousse, 1990:57.
63. Jousse, 1990:58.
64. Jousse, 1990:59.
65. Ong, 1967:89. Noam Chomsky, whose notion of a generative grammar insists on the rational nature of language (more about this in Chapter 5), makes essentially the same remark: '... I would be inclined to think, even without any investigation, that there would be a correlation between linguistic performance and intelligence; people who are intelligent use language much better than other people most of the time'. (See Piattelli-Palmarini, (ed)., 1981:175).
66. Jousse, 1990:59.
67. Harris (Adrienne), in Liben (ed)., 1978:226-7. Emphasis added.
68. Ong, 1967:140-1.
69. Ong, 1967:142.
70. Harris (Adrienne), in Liben (ed)., 1978:195-7.
71. The following characterization - attributed to Jean Piaget - would be apt: 'the development of intelligence involves establishing a series of states of equilibrium between the child's demands upon the environment and the environment's demands upon the child'. (See Fodor, 1975:90).
72. See Liben, in Liben (ed)., 1978:197.
73. See Furth, H. 1966. *Thinking without Language: Psychological Implications of Deafness*. New York: Free Press, 120. Quoted in Liben, in Liben (ed)., 1978:197. Emphasis added.
74. As argued by Furth. Referred to in Moores, in Liben (ed)., 1978:179.
75. See Moores, in Liben (ed)., 1978:180-2. Unrecognized by Furth, many theorists from a variety of fields (notably in semantics) have, like Piaget, stated the relative independence of thought from language.

76. Liben, in Liben (ed)., 1978:196.
77. See Curran, in Claxton, (ed)., 1988:178. It is worth noting, though not particularly important for our purposes, that Piaget's idea of invariant stages of cognitive development has been revised in recent years, the most notable adjustment being that the stages have come to be seen, as A.V. Kelly (1989:95) puts it, 'as modes of thought or representation, all of which persist into adulthood'. In other words, rather than pass from one stage to the next, we learn, throughout our lives, 'to work within' different modes of thought that exist alongside each other rather than in a chronological sequence.
78. See Ferron, 1989:49-50, from which (except where otherwise indicated) the present summary is drawn.
79. Ferron, 1989:50.
80. See Piaget, J. 1970. *Structuralism*. New York: Basic, 64-5. Quoted in Fodor, 1975:89.
81. See Piaget's *Structuralism*, pp.65-6. Emphasis added. Quoted in Fodor, 1975:89.
82. Fodor (1975:88) gives the following account of Piaget's 'classical experiment' on conservation of quantity: 'the child is shown two identical containers (A and B) which, he agrees, contain the same amount of liquid. The child then watches while the contents of one of the containers (say, B) is poured into a relatively tall, thin vessel (C). He is then asked, "Which has more, C or A?" the nonconserving child is defined by his willingness to judge that C has more than A (presumably on the grounds that the level of the liquid in C is higher than the level of the liquid in A)'. For a critique of the notion of conservation as used by Piaget, see, amongst others, Wallach, L. 'On the Basis of Conservation', in Elkind, D. and J. Flavell (eds). 1969. *Studies in Cognitive Development*. London: Oxford University Press; as well as Mehler, in Piattelli-Palmarini (ed)., 1981, particularly pp.347-8.
83. Ferron, 1989:50.
84. Ferron, 1989:50.
85. Fodor, 1975:88.
86. 'For example, take a child in front of a hanging object: he tries to grasp it and fails, but this makes the object swing; then he becomes very interested, he continues to hit it and make it swing, and after that, every time he sees a hanging object he pushes it and makes it swing. Here is an act of generalization that obviously shows a beginning of logical generalization or intelligence'. (See Piaget, 'Schemes of Action and Language', in Piattelli-Palmarini (ed)., 1981:164).
87. Piaget, in Piatelli-Palmarini (ed)., 1981:164-5. Piaget, in fact, talks about 'previous schemes' (emphasis added), but subsequently defines a scheme as 'the result of generalizations'.
88. Piaget, in Piatelli-Palmarini (ed)., 1981:166.
89. Piaget, in Piatelli-Palmarini (ed)., 1981:166.
90. Piaget, in Piatelli-Palmarini (ed)., 1981:167.
91. Piaget, in Piatelli-Palmarini (ed)., 1981:166. Emphasis added.
92. See also Piaget's reference to 'deferred imitation... which begins in the absence of the model' (Piaget, in Piatelli-Palmarini (ed)., 1981:167), which seemingly parallels Josses's contention of the laryngo-buccal movement being mimicked 'in a deferred way'. (See note 62).
93. See Furth, H. 1971. Education for Thinking. *Journal of Rehabilitation of the Deaf* 5:7-71, p.11. Quoted in Moores, in Liben (ed)., 1978:180.
94. Liben, in Liben (ed)., 1978:196. Emphasis added.

95. See Vygotsky, L. 1962. *Thought and Language*, transl. E Hanfmann and G. Vakar. Cambridge, Massachussetts: M.I.T. Press, 44. Referred to in Moores, in Liben (ed)., 1978:182. Also relevant, in this respect, is the following remark by Noam Chomsky: 'I take it for granted that thinking is a domain that is quite different from language, even though language is used for the expression of thought, and for a good deal of thinking we really need the mediation of language'. (See Piattelli-Palmarini (ed)., 1981:173-4).
96. Moores, in Liben (ed)., 1978:182.
97. See Green, in Claxton (ed)., 1988:132-52.
98. See Piaget, J. 1972. 'Intellectual Development from Adolescence to Childhood'. *Human Development* 15:1-12. Referred to in Green, in Claxton (ed)., 1988:133.
99. Green, in Claxton (ed)., 1988:133. Emphasis added. In substantiation of these remarks Green refers, amongst others, to Hunt, M. 1982. *The Universe Within: A New Science Explores the Human Mind*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
100. Fodor, 1975:95.
101. Fodor, 1975:97.
102. Fodor, 1975:86.
103. Fodor, 1975:78. Emphasis added.
104. Fodor, 1975:96.
105. Fodor, 1975:78.
106. Moores, in Liben (ed)., 1978:184-5.
107. Liben, in Liben (ed)., 1978:211.
108. Ong, 1967:141.
109. See Wilbur, in Bjarkman and Raskin (eds)., 1986:166. Wilbur details a number of transformational studies on grammatical aspects of Ameslan, noting (p.176) that while some progress has been made in the description of its phonological aspects, Ameslan sentence structure has generally not been amenable to studies based on transformational grammar. He concludes (p.179) that 'the evidence points in the direction of a discourse-based rather than sentence-based grammar'.
110. See Bellugi and Klima, in Liben (ed)., 1978:43.
111. Bellugi and Klima, in Liben (ed)., 1978:48.
112. Moores, in Liben (ed)., 1978:185.
113. Moores, in Liben (ed)., 1978:185-6. For a discussion of fingerspelling and the role of facial expression and other expressive gestures in the use of Ameslan, see also Levine, 1981, particularly pp.89-100.
114. Bellugi and Klima, in Liben (ed)., 46-7.
115. Bellugi and Klima, in Liben (ed)., 1978:53-4.
116. On the subject of learning language without reference to sound, a recent report on the *Lenguaje de Signos Nicaragüense* makes interesting reading. As reported by Judy Kegl, this language is *in its entirety* the construction of congenitally non-hearing children at a school in Managua. (*Scientific American* 273,6:10).
117. Bellugi and Klima, in Liben (ed)., 1978:51. It has frequently been conjectured that a kind of gestural language must have preceded the advent of spoken language. (See, for example, Hagège, 1985:19).
118. 'It is as if the Western concept of language... today reveals itself in the guise or the disguise of a primary writing: more fundamental than the one which... was merely regarded as a supplement to speech'. (Derrida, 1967:16-7). My translation.
119. For a pointed critique, on linguistic grounds, of what he terms Derrida's 'semantic

- wrenching' with the term 'writing', see Hall, 1987, particularly p.118.
120. See Sperling, in Liben (ed)., 1978:111. Sperling speculates that a reading ability in their native Ameslan will give non-hearing children a 'headstart' in reading, and ultimately facilitate their acquisition of spoken languages.
 121. The notion of the primacy of oral over written language as far as modern linguistics is concerned is generally attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure. (See De Saussure, 1959:23-37). See also, in this regard, Naomi Baron's distinction (1981:149) between (spoken) language as a 'first order' and writing as a 'second order' representation.
 122. Baron, 1981:162. Emphasis added. Depending on one's definition of writing, this is to some extent a moot point. The most commonly referred to example of a writing system with no obvious link to speech is the Chinese ideographic system, which can be equally well read - and understood - by speakers of a number of mutually incomprehensible Chinese dialects. (See Sperling, in Liben (ed)., 1978:107-8; also Thorold, 1994:54). Western observers for a long time were favourable to the notion that Chinese writing represented a 'universal system of ideas'. As Hagège (1985:81) reports, this writing system (known as *wenyan*) has however been unequivocally demonstrated to represent the Chinese language, even if (p.86) it has never actually corresponded to its 'spoken use' (*usage parlé*). In any event, the majority of historians and linguists concerned with writing consider a phonetic base (the representation of the sound of a language) to be an essential criterion - alongside that of *organization* (a system of discrete units limited in number) - in the definition of writing. (Baron, 1981:168).
 123. Ong, 1986:12. Emphasis original.
 124. The spectrogram has of course made it possible to 'see' sound as patterns on a screen. Its usefulness in making speech accessible to the non-hearing is, however, extremely limited. (See Nickerson, in Liben (ed)., 1978:123-5).
 125. See Harris (Roy), 1980:7-8.
 126. See Hall, 1987:117-8.
 127. Harris, 1980:13.
 128. Language is defined as a coherent, self-sufficient system in De Saussure, 1959; Baron, 1981; Hagège, 1985; and Bellugi and Klima, in Liben (ed)., 1978.
 129. This view is to a large extent corroborated by research into the functioning of the area of Broca. (See note 53). According to De Saussure (1959:10-1), '... the same part of the brain [the area of Broca in the third left frontal convolution of the brain] is the center of *everything that has to do with speech [language], including writing*. ... [O]bservations that have been made in different cases of aphasia resulting from lesion of the centers of localization, seem to indicate: (1) that the various disorders of oral speech are bound up in a hundred ways with those of written speech; and (2) that what is lost in all cases of aphasia or agraphia is less the faculty of producing a given sound or writing a given sign than the ability to evoke by means of an instrument, *regardless of what it is*, the signs of a regular system of speech [language]'. (Emphasis added).
 130. Ong, 1986:26.
 131. Sapir, in fact, advances this thesis with considerably less conviction than Whorf. (Wardhaugh, 1993:198).
 132. See in this regard Whorf's distinction between an *overt* linguistic class (such as gender in Latin with its characteristic suffix) and a *covert* linguistic class (as is the case in

English which lacks a distinguishing mark for gender). (See Whorf, in Carroll (ed)., 1956:68-9).

133. Levine, 1981:98.
134. Wardhaugh, 1993:203-5.
135. Wardhaugh, 1993:204-5. See also Hagège's detailed discussion (1985:132-43) of the relation of language structure to thought, in which he shows himself broadly supportive of the 'weaker' version of the Sapir - Whorf thesis.
136. Ong, 1967:152.
137. Ong, 1967:44.
138. American structuralist linguistics, in which the work of Sapir and Whorf is amongst the most influential, has been closely allied to anthropology. (Hawkes, 1977:30).
139. Ong, 1967:44.
140. According to Hagège (1985:137), there are however languages, notably the Nootka language from British Columbia, where there is hardly any distinction between the noun (as essentially the category that implies) and the verb (as essentially the category that asserts). He suggests that the distinction verb - noun can be better conceptualized as that of predicat - non-predicat.
141. Hagège, 1985:152.
142. The words of inflectional languages consist of a combination of radicals and affixes. (Hagège, 1985:66).
143. Wardhaugh, 1993:203.
144. Which, according to Roy Harris (1980:12), can be dated to the later part of the medieval period.
145. Street, 1984:70.
146. See Lyons, J. 1977. *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Quoted in Street, 1984:70.
147. See Lyons, J. 1982. Personal Correspondence with Street. Referred to in Street, 1984:72.
148. See Bernstein, B. 1974. *Class, Codes, and Control. Theoretical Studies towards a Sociology of Language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 134-5. Referred to in Ong, 1986:106.
149. Ong, 1986:106.
150. Wardhaugh, 1993:205.
151. One example quoted by Whorf (in Carroll (ed)., 1956:85) is particularly interesting. English does not distinguish between different relations of 'channel of sensation' (seeing, hearing, etc.) to 'result in consciousness' (the latter being generally introduced by 'that', as in 'I see that it is red', 'I see that it is new'). Hopi, however, employs specific grammatical markers according to whether the verb relates to an actual sensation (as in the first example) or to an inference on the basis of unspecified evidence (the second example). This shows, according to Whorf, 'a higher plane of thinking, a more rational analysis of situations' than is the case in English, a kind of rational analysis to which the Hopi speaker would generally be more accustomed than the English.
152. See James Byrne's (1885) *General Principles of Structure of Language*. According to Whorf, 'Byrne independently found, or thought he found, a correlation between language structure and two types of mentality, one quick-reacting, quick-thinking, and volatile, the other slow-reacting, slow-thinking, but more profound and phlegmatic. His slow-thinking mentality... went, on the whole, with languages of a synthetic type

having a complex overt morphology and much derivation and word-building, the extreme of the type being polysynthesis. His quick-thinking (extraverted) type went, on the whole, with a simpler morphology, lack of synthesis, an analytic or in the extreme an isolating type of language'. This distinction Whorf sees as roughly corresponding to the two 'fundamental psychological types' of introversion and extraversion identified by Jung. (Whorf, in Carroll (ed)., 1956:76-7).

153. Ong, 1967:54.
154. Ong, 1967:63-4. Emphasis added.
155. See in particular the chapter 'Intellectuals in pre-literate societies?' in Goody, 1977, in which Goody generally supports the notion of individual intellectual activity in oral societies, particularly with reference to the sphere of religion.
156. Ong, 1986:57.
157. Ong, 1986:50.
158. Curran, in Claxton (ed)., 1988:183.
159. See Ong, 1986:50-4.
160. Ong, 1986:52.
161. See Hallpike, C. 1979. *The Foundations of Primitive Thought*. London: Oxford University Press. Referred to in Curran, in Claxton (ed)., 1988:179.
162. Piaget, 1972. Referred to in Curran, in Claxton (ed)., 1988:181.
163. Curran, in Claxton (ed)., 1988:179.
164. See Greenfield, P. 'Cross-Cultural Research and Piagetian Theory: Paradox and Progress', in Riegel, K. and J. Meacham (eds)., *The Developing Individual in a Changing World*. Vol. 1. The Hague: Mouton. Referred to in Curran, in Claxton (ed)., 1988:181.
165. Curran, in Claxton (ed)., 1988:181. Emphasis added.
166. See Scribner, S. 'Modes of Thinking and Ways of Speaking: Culture and Logic Reconsidered', in Freedle, R. (ed)., 1977. *Discourse Production and Comprehension*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum. Referred to in Curran, in Claxton (ed)., 1988:184. (See also Chapter 2, note 119).
167. Ong, 1986:55.
168. See Scribner, in Freedle (ed)., 1977. Referred to in Curran, in Claxton (ed)., 1988:184.
169. See Harris (Robert), in Liben (ed)., 1978:152.
170. Harris (Robert), in Liben (ed)., 1978:140-1.
171. Harris (in Liben (ed)., 1978:144) quotes K.Z. Altshuler as noting that 'audition is somehow necessary for internalized control of rage'. (See Altshuler, K. 1971. *Studies of the Deaf: Relevance to Psychiatric Theory*. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 127:1521-1526, p.1521).
172. Harris (Robert), in Liben (ed)., 1978:152.
173. Moores (in Liben (ed)., 1978:184) puts it as follows: '[t]he available evidence suggests that the condition of deafness imposes no limitations on the intellectual capabilities of individuals. In addition, there is no evidence to suggest that deaf people think in more 'concrete' ways than the hearing or that their intellectual functioning is in any way less sophisticated. As a group, deaf people function within the normal range of intelligence and they exhibit the same wide variability as the hearing population'.
174. Ong, 1967:134. Ong here draws on Carothers, J. 1959. *Culture, Psychiatry, and the Written Word*. *Psychiatry* 22: 307-20.
175. See Carothers, 1959. Referred to in Ong, 1967:135.
176. See Altshuler, K. 'Personality Traits and Depressive Symptoms in the Deaf'. In

- Wortis, J. (ed)., 1964. *Recent Advances in Biological Psychiatry* vol.6. New York: Plenum Press, 63-4. Quoted in Harris (Robert), in Liben (ed)., 1978:141.
177. Ong, 1967:50.
 178. I would suggest, by way of example, that the marks on the ground so skillfully interpreted for tracking purposes in hunter-gatherer societies like the !Kung, could no doubt be suggestive of a visual (and visualizable) system in this regard. See Lee, R. 1979. *The !Kung San: Men, Women and Work in a Foraging Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Referred to in Curran, in Claxton (ed)., 1989:185.
 179. See Feld, in Tokumaru and Yamaguti (eds)., 1986:19-22.
 180. Feld, in Tokumaru and Yamaguti (eds)., 1986:21.
 181. This relates primarily to the role played by birds and bird sounds in the Kaluli conception of natural history. (Feld, 1982:130).

CHAPTER 5

TOWARDS AN AURAL LINGUISTICS

5.1 *About the Auditory Conception of Language*

What I have been arguing so far comes to this: instead of defining its field of interest in anthropological / sociological or aesthetic / literary terms, Oral Theory should concentrate on language. What is interesting to us about orality *as such* - therefore justifying that it be an object of study in its own right - is not that it strikes us as 'traditional', nor that it constitutes a particular cultural object or expression, but that it is language used in a way other disciplines, notably linguistics, have either ignored or failed to account for. In fact, not just is it language *used* differently, it is language different *by nature*.

How can the language of orality be so different, yet still be language? Western anthropologists have discovered all the people in the world to communicate with each other in more or less the same way they do, using the same organs. This is ordinarily called speech, what De Saussure refers to as *parole*. Structural and comparative linguists have been able to systematize the speech sounds they heard the people of a particular community produce by using the same techniques they had employed for their respective Indo-European native tongues, thereby reconstructing these sounds as an actual linguistic system - *langue* in De Saussure's terminology. If all people possessed languages, this obviously derived from a particular human faculty that could be regarded as universal - De Saussure's *langage*¹. Having established that all people and cultures thus shared in the uniquely human phenomenon of language, the search for universality could henceforth be extended into the various linguistic systems (languages) themselves, of which Noam Chomsky's proclamations of a 'universal grammar' no doubt constitute the most influential theoretical elaboration advanced in recent times². A note on terminology: within the context of the present discussion, I propose using Jonathan Culler's term 'materiality of language'³ for the purposes of referring to language in its ordinary, non-technical sense, undifferentiated in terms of De Saussure's famous tripartite division.

I am not about to dispute that language, both in its broader materiality and its different levels of conception, is, indeed, universal. But it is important, for our purposes, to briefly reflect on the significance of the fact that what we know about it - not to mention what we know about the ways in which it is universal - we know by and large from the reports and

reflections of linguists whose own Indo-European languages constitute but a fraction of the world's languages, and whose actual linguistic experience must be regarded as extremely limited, not just in terms of their narrow (predominantly Western) geographic origins, but in terms of the highly particular social classes and institutions they represent. Having made this point, it is also useful to remind ourselves that these linguists, notwithstanding the universalist aspirations of their theories, find themselves in profound disagreement as to what it is they are - or should be - studying. Indeed, it will be difficult to find academic fields more divided - or, for that matter, contradictory - than modern linguistics. As Roy Harris remarks:

The history of modern linguistics is not the discoveries of previously unknown languages of the world. It is the history of conflicting views as to how we should set about the analysis of language. In that respect it has little in common with the history of geography, or of physiology, or any of the natural sciences⁴.

This brings us back to the matter of linguistic conception. In the opening chapter of his *The Language-Makers*, Harris focuses on some of the ways in which the concept of language, taken for granted as it is (and therefore no doubt comfortably assumed to be shared by everyone), to a large extent turns out to derive from a certain peculiarity of experience. The following factors can be highlighted. First, there is the assumption of the 'educated European' that all languages are mutually translatable, an assumption that has informed his education from the outset. This ties in with the fact that, whether or not he is actually able to use more than one language, our educated European automatically thinks of himself as at least potentially bi- or multilingual. Languages are, in this sense, thought of as essentially interchangeable, an idea, as Harris points out, that 'has a lot to do with the linguistic history and geography of Europe'⁵. A second kind of 'cultural conditioning' central to the Western conception of language relates to the assumption that the same language can crop up in different civilizations widely separated in time and space, an idea brought home by the European experience of linguistic exportation, both within Europe (for example the spread of Latin as a result of the Roman conquests) and outside of its boundaries (Europe's colonization of large parts of the world). Related to this is the experience of one language (Latin) developing into several mutually incomprehensible languages (for example French, Portuguese, Italian)⁶. Last - but by no means least - in this determination of linguistic conception by matters historical is the European's experience of writing:

The advent of writing was the cultural development which made the most radical alteration of all time to man's concept of what a language is. It opened up the

possibility of regarding articulated sound as a dispensable rather than an essential medium of expression for languages; and even as being an intrinsically defective or imperfect medium⁷.

It will be tempting to say that a conception of language based on the factors discussed here is, compared to that liable to be formed by the oral monoglot on the basis of his linguistic experience in an isolated linguistically homogeneous society long untroubled by contacts with the outside world, obviously more valid. Our oral monoglot may well be party to such linguistic heresies as believing that there is a natural causal link between the sounds he produces and whatever these sounds refer to and that, on the assumption that there is only one reality, there could obviously be no other language than his. (In fact, he may well - for argument's sake - not even think of the sounds he makes in communicating with other people as deriving from an underlying materiality 'language' at all, but rather think of them as spontaneous, constantly unique utterances that take on a supernaturally endowed meaning in response to certain stimuli). But to say that such a conception is inferior or 'wrong' will be similar to the Nahavo thinking that English is inferior to his language because the verb in the latter does not formally discriminate between the physical properties of the thing which is its object. (See Chapter 4, note 130). Our view of linguistic conceptions different to ours can be just as subject to the kind of simplistic rationalism that inspires superficial Whorfian pronouncements on linguistic structure. For, just as the linguistic structure of any surviving language is, to paraphrase Hagège, fundamentally equal to the ability of its speakers to establish some kind of working order and regularity in the whirlpool of reality⁸, so is the conception of language held by the average language user fundamentally equal to his successful use of a language and to his participation in a broader linguistic 'materiality'. What determines whether a particular conception of language is valid is, quite simply, whether - from the point of view of the language user - it 'works'.

The relativity of linguistic conception from the point of view of language users - which is, in that sense, the relativity of the materiality of language itself - receives a certain confirmation, albeit on a different level, in De Saussure's often quoted disclosure to students of language that, when it comes to defining the object of linguistics,

[f]ar from it being the object that antedates the viewpoint, it would seem that it is the viewpoint that creates the object;... nothing tells us in advance that one way of considering the fact in question takes precedence over the others or is in any way superior to them⁹.

De Saussure's insistence on the linguistic system (rather than the linguistic aptitude or the procedures of speech) as the appropriate object of linguistics has therefore been considered, not so much as a particular insight into the materiality of language, but as an attempt at formulating a methodology that would enable linguistics to pursue fresh avenues unrelated to the heavy philological emphasis characteristic of language studies in De Saussure's time. De Saussure is, above all, a linguist 'in search of a method'¹⁰.

As it turns out, it can be argued that De Saussure's methodological lesson has to a large extent found more application in the social and human sciences in general than in the mainstream of linguistics in particular. His elaboration of the linguistic system is widely seen as providing the initial theoretical impetus for structuralism (and no doubt also, even if it is as a counterpoint, for what has come to be known as 'post-structuralism') which, notably through the work of Lévi-Strauss, has been a dominant force in anthropology¹¹. De Saussure's insights into the nature of the linguistic sign has similarly been regarded as providing the theoretical basis for the larger part of recent French and American literary theory¹², while his definition of a binomial linguistic sign (signifier / signified) has been put to extensive use in psychoanalysis¹³.

For all that, the most publicised developments in linguistic theory since the 1960's have to a large extent bypassed De Saussure's teachings. Noam Chomsky's generative grammar, which, in its various permutations and refinements¹⁴ can be said to have dominated linguistic theory for all of three decades, to a large extent constitutes a revival of 17th century Port-Royal grammar with its view of linguistic structure as explicable in terms of rational processes¹⁵. It could also be argued that Chomsky's fundamental interest in those properties of the human mind that enable us to acquire language tend, in Saussurian terms, to orientate his linguistic object away from the linguistic system (*langue*) towards linguistic aptitude (*langage*)¹⁶. By contrast, the concern of *pragmatics* or speech act theory with language use in the context of communication has tilted the object of linguistic study towards speech (*parole*)¹⁷.

The oscillation of the object of linguistic study between aptitude, system and speech is far from irrelevant to us, and we shall have to consider in more detail which one of these 'levels' would be most conducive to the 'linguistics of sound' we wish to establish as the true discipline of Oral Theory. At the same time, however, the particular *auditory* conception of language we are postulating as definitive of orality cannot be expressed in terms of any one

of these definitions of the object of linguistic study as such. One can of course postulate that oral societies 'use language differently', thereby limiting their relevance to linguistics purely to the *parole*, but that will mean by and large ignoring their linguistic *conception*. But if we cannot pin down this different (conception of) language to either *langage*, *langue* or *parole*, how can we even begin talking about it in linguistic terms? What is more, how can we talk about it when - as we stated at the end of Chapter 4 - what the oral person thinks about language is largely inaccessible to us?

Other disciplines, no less universalising in their aspirations, have been more courageous than linguistics in facing up to the uncomfortable possibility that their object of study is relative. I am talking about musicology. To quote Jean-Jacques Nattiez:

[a]ny musicologist realizes that music is probably a universal fact (it appears that there is no civilization without music), and realizes that the 'faculty of music' is written into the genetic destiny of humanity, like 'faculty of language'. The moment this is realized, however, the musicologist must be able to relativize the concept of music, and acknowledge that Western musicology is itself merely a form of culturally conditioned knowledge¹⁸.

This realization, important as it is, will have no effect if it is not accompanied by a crucial methodological recognition: that the *etic* approach (analysis by means of the 'methodological tools and categories of the researcher') must be complemented by the *emic* (analysis reflecting the viewpoints of 'the native informant')¹⁹.

In a discipline as devoted to abstraction as linguistics (a tendency exemplified in the deductively formulated theories of generative grammar)²⁰, the distinction between the *etic* and *emic* viewpoints has had only marginal methodological validity - and then only within certain 'sub-fields' like socio-linguistics specifically devoted to 'attitudes about language'²¹. That the researcher's conception of language should be the only one to take into account when answering the question 'What is language?' is at least partly the result, one feels, of the assumption that the native speaker, notably of 'exotic' languages, *does not really have* a conception of language. Whatever theory there is going to be *of necessity* has to be that of the researcher. This neglect of the *emic* in favour of the *etic* is to a large extent reminiscent of a structuralist methodology, according to which an understanding of the way the system operates is essentially the prerogative of those who, in one way or another, stand outside it (or think they do)²². The native of central Brazil is fascinated by the mythological stories of his culture, but it is up to Lévi-Strauss to demonstrate how these myths are constituted of interrelations reflecting 'mythical thinking' as a human phenomenon. The knowledge of the

Nahavo is the result of cultural conditioning, that of Lévi-Strauss can rise above it. (See Chapter 2, note 41).

Once again, the example of musicological research can be illuminating. Feld sees Bruno Nettl as implying a similar absence of theory amongst non-literate peoples (the distinction literate - non-literate has, significantly, also been much emphasized in music), when he points out that '... in primitive music a scale does not exist in the mind of the native musicians, so the musicologist must deduce it from the melodies'²³. As Feld remarks, it is not always easy to know whether this type of assertion seemingly implying a lack of theoretical knowledge goes to an absence of theory as such (giving it, in other words, cognitive implications), or merely points to the fact that theoretical considerations are not made explicit in the *metalinguistic* way to which sciences like linguistics and musicology have accustomed us²⁴. In his own case, he finds ample evidence of musical-theoretical thinking amongst the Kaluli in their extended use of a special type of metaphor, employing terms gleaned from the semantic field associated with water. Feld concludes:

Kaluli musical theory... verbally surfaces in metaphoric expression. This is hardly surprising, since theories are often expressed as systematic metaphors²⁵.

Metaphoric categorizations may well, in the absence of a metalinguistic terminology, offer keen insights into oral people's conceptualization about language. In any event, that there is a reflective concept of language particular to orality is, as we stated at the end of Chapter 4, something we take for granted, and even if it is, for no reason other than for our own poorly adjusted methodologies, by and large inaccessible, we cannot on account of that simply abandon the emic approach as 'unworkable'. We should still, as would be the ultimate aim of this work, speculate on its nature and try to integrate it into the etic theories that have achieved 'scientific' status, not in order to dignify what could otherwise be termed 'primitive', but to make the scientific appraisal more valid²⁶. Oral Theory is in an excellent position to undertake such a task.

The relative sensitivity of musicology to the emic has led it to concern itself more fundamentally than linguistics has done with the question of its own boundaries. De Saussure's answer to the 'What is language?' question is not, as we have seen, a statement about the materiality of language, but essentially a statement of method. (See note 10). This has been, given the atmosphere of methodological conflict that has permeated modern linguistics (see note 4), characteristic of affirmations generally as to what language is.

Ironically therefore, questions relating to the actual boundaries of language (as broader materiality) have in all probability had much greater pertinence within the framework of musicology than within that of linguistics, even if these questions are primarily aimed, not at defining language, but music²⁷.

The most important emic conceptions of music that Nattiez reflects upon, concern precisely the impossibility of defining the concept of music without in some way also referring to language. If, as he argues, 'the semantic surface of the concept "music" is displaced from one culture to another'²⁸, what is displaced along with it, more often than not, is the (implied) concept of language.

This conceptual fuzziness would, one assumes, be particularly noticeable in cultures where there is no single word that refers to what in a Western sense is considered music. For that matter, in how many languages is the concept of language lexically accounted for in ways different - perhaps profoundly different - to that of Indo-European languages? Which metaphors are used? Certainly, I am not about to suggest that elements of linguistic structure should be taken as indicative of a particular conceptualization - such a notion was largely set aside in Chapter 4 - but given the methodological poverty that impedes proper considerations of emic views of language, they could to some extent offer a point of departure. An example of the delicateness of emic conceptions of both language and music is offered, in this context, by the Inuit word *nipi* which, as Nattiez reports, 'includes the things that we would designate by the term "music", [but] is much more general than our "music", since it encompasses noise *as well as the sound of the spoken voice*'²⁹. One of the most important consequences of the emic approach has been the recent tendency in ethnomusicology to avoid the etic concept of music altogether, using emic categorizations - appropriately paraphrased - in its stead³⁰. (Feld's *Sound and Sentiment* uses this procedure). A related tendency can be remarked in a conceptual movement within musicology which sees the latter's object of study not as 'music', but rather as 'musical phenomena' or 'the musical'³¹. Could the object of linguistics be 'dispersed' in a similar fashion?

Quite apart from the rather fragmented status it presents in a global perspective, the concept of music has, of course, also been far from unified in the West, with definitions generally vacillating between an emphasis on conditions of production (music as organization / combination of sounds) and an emphasis on conditions of effect (music as sounds that are pleasing to the ear)³². What Jean Molino calls the 'total musical fact' can include elements

as diverse as the conductor's body language and the dimensions of a concert hall. Ultimately, however, its *minimal condition* is sound³³; it is this condition, taken together with other - culturally variable - factors (for example conditions of production) which brings about the conceptualization 'music'³⁴.

The identification of sound as the most basic element of the musical fact reminds us, of course, of our own argument that sound is, in a way, also the minimal condition of orality, a situation which has led us to qualify our exploration of the language of primary orality as an exploration of the auditory conception of language. Having recognized the importance of the emic point of view for linguistics, not to mention the way in which, in the case of musicology, it *brings into question* the very concept around which it is built, we are now in a position to put orality and language, as it were, together, and *imagine* the kind of linguistic object this union would give rise to. To do this we can take a brief step backwards and consider some of the main conclusions reached so far. Language is sound, music is sound. Taken as activities, both the linguistic and the musical are part and parcel of *culture* and, as such, are *symbolical*: they have meaning. (De Saussure's distinction between signification as something arbitrary and symbolization³⁵ as something more or less motivated is not immediately relevant here). The sounds produced in speech are meaningful (as the discrete units of which, as the linguists tell us, all linguistic systems consist), while the sounds produced in music are *also* meaningful, but in a different way (the units of music are, as we shall consider in more detail further on, continuous or 'suprasegmental' rather than discrete). Against this background, according to which criteria should oral people conceive of language? I would contend the following: within the etic ('scientific') conception language is isolated *as such* on the basis of the discrete nature of its units, a procedure favoured - if not caused (we shall return to this question later) - by the fact that language is experienced as something essentially visual rather than auditory. From an emic (oral) point of view, however, there is every reason to believe that it will be less the discreteness of the linguistic unit that will attract conceptual attention than the fact that it is meaningful (symbolic) sound. As object of an emic linguistics language will consequently be conceived of not in isolation, but *in a continuum* with other sounds, more specifically, with sounds that, within the culture concerned, fulfill some kind of symbolical function: 'music'. A significant consequence of this version of the linguistic object, furthermore, is that it at least to some extent alters De Saussure's conception of the linguistic system as a 'self-contained whole and principle of

classification'³⁶. More about this later.

To say that in orality the conception of language is indissociable from the conception of music, does not for one moment mean that oral people do not distinguish between language and music. Neither does it imply that the auditory conception of language, thus defined, is in any way less 'objective' or 'analytical' than the visualist. With regard to the latter, as we shall see in more detail further on (and as we have, in fact, to some extent already discovered in Roy Harris' discussion of linguistic conception earlier - see notes 5 - 7), the concept of language is not necessarily as unambiguously isolated as linguistics would want us to believe. Before dealing with these matters however, it would be useful to make a quick detour through the 'mainstream' of Oral Theory (as investigated in Chapters 1 - 3), to remind ourselves, as it were, of the continuous - albeit underplayed - presence of sound / music within it. But for what would seem an almost accidental methodological choice made by Oral Theory (at least as represented in the body of commentators reviewed in this study), the association of orality with sound / music could have been one of the main defining aspects of the field.

5.2 *Symbolical Sound / Music within Oral Theory*

In a footnote at the beginning of *Oral Poetry*, Finnegan³⁷ draws attention to the absence of musicological analysis in her work, which, as she points out, would be required to give 'a full account of many instances of oral poetry'. At the same time, however, she to some extent justifies this oversight by explaining that she has 'in any case chosen to concentrate on the literary aspects of oral poetry and its social context'. A few years later, at a conference with the theme 'The Oral and the Literate in Music'³⁸, Finnegan gives a paper on the approaches to composition and performance she observed in her study of different musical genres³⁹ (classical music, jazz and rock) in the English town of Milton Keynes, and reflects on this as her 'tentative present venturing into the musical arena'⁴⁰. Finnegan's paper (and indeed the theme of the conference as a whole) is interesting from our point of view, in so far as it emphasizes the importance of the orality - literacy question in a cultural field up to that point largely ignored by Oral Theory - at least in terms of its potential theoretical contribution⁴¹ - namely music. After a brief overview of how the literate (what Roy Harris would term 'scriptist' - see Chapter 4, note 125) fixation on the text-as-object used to bedevil research in oral tradition - a tendency, as she gratefully points out, since broadened to include the study of 'processes of performance and audience reception' (see our discussion of Barber and

Vail and White, amongst others, in Chapter 3) - she makes the following observation:

In the study of music we find the very same Western assumptions about the dominance of writing [as in literature]. Musical art, too, tends to be equated with its *written* form, so that if something is not written it is assessed as not 'really' music, or at any rate not worth serious scholarly study. In traditional Western musicology 'music' is usually defined as the musical work, itself in turn defined as its written formulation - the score - rather than, for instance, the process of playing or singing or the act of performance⁴².

I would argue that the scriptist bias of music (even of Western - 'classical' - music) is in all probability less than that of literature, even if for no more profound reason than that in the overwhelming majority of cases - and even in a highly literate society - people's familiarity with music continues to stem from their being exposed to its *performance* in one way or another. To read music is, compared to reading a story or a poem, an extremely specialized activity. As we noted earlier, there is, within the field of music, also a certain awareness of the relativity of definitions of the musical object. But these are minor considerations. The fact is that music composed by means of graphic representation (music of literate societies) has been subject to by and large the same kinds of anthropological differentiation from music not represented in graphic form (music of non-literate societies) than has the written text vis-à-vis the oral, a differentiation which, not surprisingly, runs along similar lines as the notion of a literate vs an oral mindset.

At issue, once again, are concepts like complexity, analyticity, rationality. As we shall see, however, arguments in this regard, while overlapping with the literacy - orality paradigm (as formulated by Goody and Ong), actually tend to resemble the kind of 'superficial' Whorfian perspective on linguistic structure considered before. (See Chapter 4, notes 140 - 146). Acknowledging Goody, Nattiez remarks that 'writing facilitates manipulation of elementary musical units, in a way not permitted by mere memory'. This does not mean, as he is quick to point out, that 'musics of the oral tradition are "more primitive" than occidental music' - the former in many ways use procedures more complex than those of the latter⁴³ - but:

[w]e cannot overlook the fact that the existence of writing allowed polyphony and counterpoint to attain the degree of complexity we know in the works of Gesualdo or Sebastian Bach⁴⁴.

One could object that Nattiez's reference here to Gesualdo and Bach as, in a sense, the 'products' of *written* music, to some extent smacks of complimenting literacy with the

essayist technique without taking cognisance of the specific milieu and institution of the latter. (See Chapter 2, note 120). That the graphic representation of music, quite apart from its mnemonic value, should also have a considerable influence on musical style and compositional technique is, however, beyond dispute. But it is in any event quite rare that the written music / oral music question is addressed at the level of *actual* writing or the absence thereof. Written vs oral becomes, rather, a metaphor for what are essentially differences of musical structure, frequently juxtaposed according to the familiar Western vs non-Western, advanced vs primitive format. Most salient in this regard - at least in so far as European (in fact, classical) and African music (assuming that such a generalization is at all possible) are concerned - is the former's association with melody and the latter's with rhythm. In his groundbreaking - for the times - *A History of Jazz*, Rudi Blesh explains this as follows:

Rhythm and its development are the fundamental African aims; form and formal development of melody *in* harmony are the European. Thus one has to begin with movement and momentum on the one hand, the structure of forms on the other.... In Africa, development, variety, and contrast come through unstemmed motion, through constant variation or mutation, often improvisational, through the combination of several rhythmic and melodic parts. In our [European / Western] music, rhythm is an adjunct, not the prime consideration;... Essentially, the forms in Western music are different melodies or the same melody variously expressed in different keys and rhythms, in contrasting major and minor modes, in a variety of harmonizations and instrumentations, in various inversions and variations of line. These forms are juxtaposed and contrasted to secure a feeling of architectural balance and satisfying structural completeness⁴⁵.

There is nothing in Blesh's reasoning to suggest that the (oral) music of Africa is *per se* less complex than the (written) music of Europe, unless one were to assume, of course, that rhythm is in some way more fundamental (i.e. 'primitive') than melody. (Jousse's 'rythme vital' comes to mind in this regard - see Chapter 4, note 33). Finnegan, for one, denies this: rhythm is not a physical, but a cultural concept. She also quotes Nettl as pointing out that 'rhythmic manifestations [that] appear on their own' (such as in drumming, i.e. 'percussion without melody') are characteristic of *complex* musical cultures⁴⁶. Raymond Court makes essentially the same point. Musical systems predominantly oriented around rhythm are in no way 'primitive' and are as 'legitimate' as musical systems based on tonality⁴⁷. Court at the same time, however, manages to link the Western musical system's preference for the note (*hauteur*) - which he sees as integrated into a 'rigorously defined network of discontinuous scales' - with the *génie* [specific mental inclination] of the West. 'It is indeed not by chance',

observes Court, 'that the West has, in her appropriation [*lecture*] of basic sound [*sonore brut*], emphasized that aspect which best lent itself to systematization and rationalization'⁴⁸. In other words, Western music is not more sophisticated than say, African music, but it *is* more systematized and rational. Court's manoeuvre is subtle, but he does not quite escape the ethnocentrism he criticizes in others⁴⁹.

A final factor we can mention as pointing to the similarity of views on the oral text and oral music, is the association of the latter with societal *function*. Treating of the relation between music and myth, Eero Tarasti observes that music and myth became 'disunited' in the West, a development which saw music 'develop as an *autonomous discourse*', through which it was able to gain in complexity⁵⁰. Tarasti makes no mention of writing in this regard, but the idea of Western music as 'autonomous discourse' essentially freed from social context will no doubt strike a chord with Walter Ong.

We pointed out at the beginning of Chapter 4 that 'oral vocal production as sound' has tended, within Oral Theory, to be regarded as a 'stylistic device' at the service of - and subordinated to - linguistic meaning. Ivan Fónagy's definition of vocal style [*le style vocal*] as 'implanted [*greffée*] onto the linguistic message'⁵¹ is apt in this regard. What is true for the sound of the *voice* is, we can assume, even more so for sound - defined as what could be regarded as *musical* within the oral context - in a more general sense: it is superimposed on - rather than part of - textual meaning. But we must be careful not to oversimplify this duality. For example, it will be wrong to say that what is musical is *ignored* by Oral Theory. Many a researcher has commented on the close alliance in orality between music and text, if not to point out, as Elizabeth Tonkin does, that they are inseparable⁵². This kind of statement has been made particularly with reference to tonal languages, prevalent in parts of Africa, in which, as the musicologist Hugh Tracey (studying the Chopi *migodo* - see Chapter 3, notes 152 - 153) has observed, 'the sounds of the words themselves almost suggest a flow of tunes'⁵³. Reflecting on how, in an oral society, poetry is often part of the very process of socialization, Finnegan (quoting S.A. Babalola's study on the Yoruba *ijala*) hints, significantly, at the possibility that such a sensitivity may well be grounded in the sound of the language, particularly where it is tonal. 'Yoruba children', she remarks,

grow up with an increasing awareness of the potentialities of 'their tonal, metaphor-saturated language which in its ordinary prose form is never far from music in the aural impression it gives'⁵⁴.

Another noteworthy instance of the interaction between the linguistic and the musical, associated, once again, with tonal languages, is found in the *drum languages* (drum poetry) of certain African societies, notably the Kele (Congo) and the Akan (Ghana). As reported by Finnegan, the tonal as well as rhythmic patterns of the languages can be reproduced on a two-to three-toned drum, through which the drumming comes to represent 'the spoken utterances in a way intelligible to the listeners, and heard as actual words and groups of words'⁵⁵. Junzô Kawada refers to the drum language of the Mosi (Burkina Faso) as 'a system of instrumental transmission for verbal messages'⁵⁶. Within the general ambit of the oral-formulaic theory, furthermore, the musical has been regarded, at least in certain traditions, as an important - and even determinant - aspect of oral-formulaic expression. In the Japanese *The Tale of the Heike* the music, in Ong's words, frequently 'stabilises the text', acting as a 'constraint' - i.e. a mnemonic device - through which the words of the text can be remembered almost verbatim. (See Chapter 1, note 62). Apart from syntactic and metrical considerations, the formula can frequently also be defined in musical terms.

An important - dominant? - aspect of Oral Theory's attention to music in the instances characterized above goes, of course, to the fleetingness of the spoken word and the consequent need of the oral performer, within this context of evanescence, to make an impact on his audience, to be *memorable*. In this perspective music is considered not so much for its aesthetic enhancement of the performance, nor - which is what we are interested in - for the way in which it interacts with textual / linguistic *meaning*, but rather as a mnemonic device. This position will be particularly strongly held within an oral-formulaic framework (Ong's reference to *The Tale of the Heike* is perhaps illustrative of this), but will by no means be limited to it. (See our discussion of Vail and White in Chapter 3, especially the remark by Mounin - notes 159, 161).

What seems to generally happen in Oral Theory is that sound / music is integrated into the *contextual* aspect of the oral performance where, alongside a myriad of other 'performance factors' (the performer's physical appearance, the place of performance, the prevalence of gesture and dance, the role and participation of the audience, not to mention socio-political and historical concerns) it serves as a kind of aid to our understanding and appreciation of the performance *as literature* (aside, we can suspect, from its more generally highlighted mnemonic value). Okpewho in this regard talks about the 'stability of a performance [depending] on a proper fit between the pace of the music and that of the words' - 'stability'

obviously being a factor of memory - but also sees music as a distinct form 'with peculiarities of [its] own that nevertheless reflect certain characteristics... in the oral literature and give us a further understanding of the qualities of the oral culture'⁵⁷. If we assume, with Finnegan, that study of the oral text has definitively gone beyond the scriptist-inclined study of the text as *object*, the consideration of the musical in the sense understood here by Okpewho may well have become indispensable. (Let us not repeat here our arguments, elaborated in Chapter 3, as to the inevitably anthropological - and hence, from an aesthetic point of view, deprecating - nature of this procedure, no matter how well-meaning). But the essential point is that, in relation to the oral text, sound is regarded not as constitutive of meaning but only as *partially* constitutive of it, and then constitutive in such a way as to merely elucidate that part of the meaning most easily accessible to the Oral Theory researcher - and therefore, in a very real sense, predetermined by him as the *essential* meaning - namely the *linguistic* meaning, the meaning 'of the words'. Lord's conclusion with regard to the Homeric and the *guslar* traditions, that 'the tale's the thing'⁵⁸ (rather than the music - the Balkan epics are, after all, *sung*, and the *guslar* is a musical instrument) has - contrary to his theory - remained by and large undisputed. And yet, as Okpewho remarks, many oral narrators, particularly in Africa but also elsewhere, find it extremely difficult to dictate their tales without the accompanying music. To quote a Mandingo *griot*: 'music is the griot's soul'⁵⁹.

In our formulation of the theoretical basis for an aural linguistics, two aspects - which are, in fact, assumptions - have so far come to the fore. Firstly we noted the importance of extending definitions of language to include emic conceptions. Reconstructed from the *oral* point of view, such a conception would regard what we term linguistic sound (or *speech* sounds) as existing in a continuous relation, not only with other speech sounds but also - and perhaps more fundamentally - with sounds that are not primarily linguistic (in an etic sense) but are, within the culture concerned, part of a symbolical system. Secondly - flowing from the above - we noted the usefulness of the concept of music (as referring to a system of symbolical sound) to the kind of linguistic investigation we are concerned with. Research in the field of orality has constantly revealed a close interaction between musical and linguistic expression. Furthermore, at least in so far as emic conceptualizations of language and music are reflected in the actual words (lexical units) of a language, there seems to be some evidence that fluctuations in the boundaries between the musical and the non-musical are not without implication for the relation between the musical and the linguistic; the two to some

degree overlap.

The above seems to me a reasonable recapitulation of our argument. One item of concern, however, would be the word *system*. We concluded earlier that the auditory conception of language questions notions of the linguistic system as something 'self-contained' or 'whole' (see note 36), a consideration which, taken at face value, to a large extent refutes in this instance the very validity of the concept of system. Yet we have in the above summary not been at all shy to use the word 'system' in relation to non-linguistic symbolical sounds. If orality's linguistic field is not, to paraphrase De Saussure, a 'self-sufficient principle', it seems rather surprising that its musical field should be. We shall take up this contradiction again when we come to discuss the *sign*. Crucial to any elaboration of aural linguistics would be to establish which definition of the sign best suits its needs. For the time being, however, the term 'system' in relation to symbolical sound can be of some use to help distinguish the latter from *noise*. Noise frequently has meaning (I know, for example, that a certain discordant whining represents a hack-saw), but it does not form part of the sounds which a given culture, according to its own norms and tastes⁶⁰, integrates into its music. As such, noise is *per definition* non-systemic⁶¹.

5.3 Aural Linguistics / Linguistics

At this stage of our elaboration it would be appropriate to return to some more fully etic conceptions of language (we are, after all, situating our argument in the field of linguistics), and consider the pertinence of these to the linguistic slant we are giving to orality. Such an overview will be particularly useful in that it should, at the very least, make clear to us what aural linguistics is *not*.

The association of orality (at least as taken in its customary orientation towards 'literature') with linguistics is of course, as Yai confirms, nothing new:

Literary history will perhaps one day confirm the judgment that one of the distinctive features of the poetics of our times... is that it allows itself to be carried away by linguistic theories⁶².

The first linguistic theory on which orality (in the guise of folklore) allowed itself to be thus 'carried away' - and to which, according to Yai, it also contributed - was the structuralist linguistics inaugurated by De Saussure's view of the linguistic system as a 'self-contained whole' consisting of elements (signs) that exist not by reference to what could be thought of as lying outside the system, but purely by reference *to one another*; language (*a language*)

is 'characterized as a system based entirely on the opposition of its concrete units'⁶³. Chiefly, this theory can be traced to what we earlier identified, through Okpewho, as the taxonomist tradition of scholarship, in terms of which the tale is 'picked to pieces' so as to lay bare its underlying units and to determine the various ways in which these can be assembled. (See Chapter 2, note 27). Whether conceived of as component motifs / functions (Propp) or structural units (Lévi-Strauss), these *forms* have also been related to language in a broader sense in so far as they have been regarded, at least by some, as potentially reflective of actual *linguistic* structures lying, to quote William Hendricks, 'beyond the sentence'⁶⁴.

Aural linguistics, as should have become clear by now, is not interested in textual form, whether in the folkloristic sense of component motif or in the more linguistic sense of (types of) *discourse*. Our concern is with a certain conception and use of language which we regard as characteristic of the situation of orality, which is certainly inclusive of but extends, ultimately, *beyond* the textual frameworks of genre or, for that matter, of performance. As such, aural linguistics is not about verbal *art*, but about verbalization in general. Our indebtedness to structuralism lies, therefore, on a totally different level to that of an oral poetics. In this regard we have already quoted Saussurian definitions of language, to which we can add his binomial (the sign as combination of signifier and signified) and relational definition of the linguistic sign. We shall review these definitions in more detail further on.

A second linguistic theory to have been incorporated into the study of orality - albeit with considerably less impact - is Chomsky's transformational generative grammar. Yai mentions a number of articles⁶⁵ attempting 'somewhat mechanically' to apply its principles to literature, but qualifies as 'virtually non-existent' transformational generative grammar's influence on the development of oral poetics⁶⁶.

After a brief consideration of what he considers to be the substantive achievements of 'universal' or 'philosophical grammar' (as practised in the tradition of Port-Royal - see note 15) and the - by contrast - more limited 'methodological' contributions of structuralist linguistics (see, in this regard, also note 10), Chomsky provides us with the following account of his linguistic interest:

... to study the problem of rule-governed creativity in natural language, the problem of constructing grammars that explicitly generate deep and surface structures and express the relations between them, and the deeper problem of determining the universal conditions that limit the form and organization of rules in the grammar of a human language⁶⁷.

Chomsky goes on to mention that the study of these questions gives rise 'to conclusions regarding mental processes of very much the sort that were developed... in the rationalist philosophy of mind that provided the intellectual background for universal grammar'⁶⁸.

Chomsky's project (which, as we have already noted, has over a substantial period dominated linguistic theory - see note 14) is, from a linguistic-theoretical point of view, of little relevance to us. On one level there is Chomsky's concern with the 'deep structure' of language which, as he approvingly notes in discussing the views of the philosophical grammarians, 'reflects the basic properties of thought and conception'⁶⁹. (See also Chapter 4, note 65). Chomsky in at least one instance conceives of linguistics 'as a branch of cognitive psychology'⁷⁰; we, however, spent a large part of Chapter 4 trying to extricate language from its entanglement with thought. On a more immediate level, however, transformational generative grammar, with its theoretical reliance on 'ideal speaker-hearers'⁷¹, sets aside more fundamentally than any other linguistic theory what Roy Harris describes as 'the typical imperfections of ordinary spoken discourse - phenomena involving hesitations, slips of the tongue, interruptions, syntactic breakdowns, impromptu adaptations to context'⁷². A further point is that pronunciation (i.e. sound) plays no role in the 'generative' (at the level of deep structure) and 'transformational' (at the level of surface structure) grammatical rules⁷³ through which the speaker has the ability to produce a limitless array of sentences from a limited number of linguistic elements⁷⁴ - an ability which, in the Chomskyan view, forms the essence of linguistic inquiry. Sound is, to again quote Harris, 'a superficial garb to a basically non-phonetic structure'. He continues:

But suppose we strip away this superficial phonetic garb of the sentence, what lies underneath it? Something which must have all its words in place, their order determined, their grammatical relations established, and their meanings assigned - but which simply lacks phonetic embodiment: a string of words with the sound turned off. In short, a linguistic abstraction for which there is only one conceivable archetype so far in human history; the sentence of *writing*⁷⁵.

If Chomsky can be excluded from aural linguistics on account of his scriptist approach to language, so, to a large extent, can De Saussure. We shall return to this point presently. (See Chapter 4, note 125). But scriptism would surely be an unfair charge against a third linguistic theory we can consider here, namely pragmatics, the most readily advanced definition of which is the study of language *usage*⁷⁶. (See note 17). Moreover pragmatics, as Colin Levinson remarks, at least partly developed 'as a reaction or antidote to Chomsky's treatment

of language as an abstract device, or mental ability, dissociable from the uses, users and functions of language'⁷⁷. Pragmatics, conceiving of language as essentially a social *instrument*⁷⁸, constitutes the reintegration of language into the concretely contextual, a reintegration, it will be remembered, that authors like Finnegan, Barber and Vail and White have also demanded, within the context of Oral Theory, for the oral text. Furniss' conception of the oral text as a 'piece in a debate' comes to mind in this regard (see Chapter 3, note 70); Finnegan reports the 'performance-centred' approach as to a large extent having come to regard the oral text as *fundamentally* 'a communicative event in time'⁷⁹.

Certainly, the study of orality has in important ways benefitted from pragmatic and speech act oriented conceptions of language. Pragmatics also opens up the possibility, to the extent that it addresses itself to a distinction between *speaker-meaning* on the one hand (what we can broadly term 'message') and *sentence-meaning* on the other (linguistic meaning)⁸⁰, of paying particular attention to aspects like stress, intonation, speech tempo, pause and so on. Neither sign-based (Saussurian) nor sentence-based (Chomskyen) linguistics⁸¹ integrates these factors into their respective notions of the linguistic object, regarding them as 'paralinguistic'⁸² and consigning them to the sub-field of phonetics. Intonation can, for example, play a crucial role in conveying to the hearer the possible irony of a sentence (utterance) like *linguistics is fascinating*, in terms of which the utterance may take on a meaning totally opposite to its conventional (linguistic / sentence) meaning⁸³. In the perspective of pragmatics such a difference in meaning is fundamental to the task of linguistic inquiry; in the sign or sentence-based perspectives it is at best peripheral.

These 'paralinguistic features' will certainly be a crucial preoccupation of aural linguistics as well - they are integral to the vocal sounds of orality. But where pragmatics would, one could assume, be concerned with determining the role played by these features in the conveyance of the message, aural linguistics may well proceed differently. In order to understand this divergence of aural linguistics from pragmatics we have to briefly reflect on some commonly held assumptions - not only of pragmatics, but of linguistics generally - about certain notions relating to the area of language-in-context. Most important for our purposes are the notions of communication and - closely connected to it - of message.

Given the inadequacies - generally related to its assumption that speaker-meaning coincides with sentence-meaning (see note 80) - of the so-called 'message model'⁸⁴, linguistic communication is generally conceptualized in terms of what Akmajian *et al* refer to as an

'inferential' approach:

in the course of learning to speak our language we also learn how to communicate in that language, and learning this involves acquiring a variety of shared beliefs or *presumptions*, as well as a system of inferential *strategies*. The presumptions allow us to presume certain helpful things about potential hearers (or speakers) and the inference strategies provide communicants with short, effective patterns of inference from what someone utters to what the person might be trying to communicate⁸⁵.

The presumptions in question here refer, one suspects, to what could be more generally called 'cultural' attributes. Our familiarity with these would, then, enable us to 'disambiguate' statements by relating them to the context in which they occur, and to make accurate inferences regarding the speaker's use of language; his message may, for example, be cast in indirect or metaphorical terms (in other words not be reducible to its sentence-meaning). Communication is successful to the extent that these inference strategies 'take the hearer from hearing the expression uttered to the speaker's communicative *intent*'⁸⁶. In other words, underlying the act of communication is an *intention* which, for all practical purposes, is the actual message. Levinson, drawing on Paul Grice, characterizes it as follows:

communication consists of the 'sender' intending to cause the 'receiver' to think or do something, just by getting the 'receiver' to recognize that the 'sender' is trying to cause that thought or action. So communication is a complex kind of intention that is achieved or satisfied just by being recognized. In the process of communication, the 'sender's' communicative intention becomes *mutual knowledge* to 'sender'... and 'receiver'⁸⁷.

Significant, as far as we are concerned, is that we see the inferential approach, through its basic idea of communication equaling intention that has become 'mutual knowledge', by and large mirroring the message model's notion of communication consisting of a speaker and hearer respectively *encoding* and *decoding* the message. The relative complexity of the inferential approach lies in its multidimensional view of the communication channel; it does not, however, significantly alter the message model's view of the content of communication as 'message', nor of the relation between the two communicants.

'Neither Saussure nor Wittgenstein', Roy Harris informs us - Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical writings constitute some of the original texts for what John Searle describes as 'institutional theories of communication'⁸⁸ - 'questions the lay assumption that language is primarily a form of communication and that languages are to be viewed as communication systems'⁸⁹. To De Saussure communication (which, as *parole*, he of course excludes from the object of linguistics) is *telementational*, it is concerned - as is shown in his illustration of the

'speaking-circuit' (which to all intents and purposes is the 'message model' referred to above)⁹⁰ - with, in Harris' words, 'the transference of a thought from A's mind to B's'⁹¹. That thought *as such* is the substance of communication is, as Harris indicates, to a degree questioned in Wittgenstein's formulations of the communicative process, in so far as he seems to allow for the possibility that communication - at least in the context where the speaker's utterance is intended to elicit an *action* on the part of the hearer - can be 'automatic, a kind of triggering process': the action is carried out without some prior 'mental image' or thought⁹². But this consideration of Wittgenstein's is really besides the point. The fact is that both De Saussure and Wittgenstein, though 'with different nuances', regard thought as fundamentally inseparable from language, hence from speaking, hence from (linguistic) communication. Their agreement on this point can at least partly be related to their shared rejection of *nomenclaturism*⁹³ (the idea that words 'stand' for things). Harris thus sums up their position:

in the perspective adopted by Saussure and Wittgenstein, the function of a word is no longer to be explained by reference to the thought it allegedly expresses; nor the thought in turn to be explained by reference to some 'object' or feature of the external world which it mentally 'represents'. Instead the word, now treated as an indivisible unit of sound-with-sense, is explained by contrasting its role with that of other words in the linguistic system of which it forms part. The upshot of this revaluation is to make thought (or at least those forms of thought which are propositionally articulated and generally held to characterize human intellect) in all important respects language-related. *Thinking is no longer an autonomous, self-sustaining activity of the human mind, and speech merely its externalisation.* On the contrary, speech and thought are interdependent, neither occurring without the other, and both made possible by language⁹⁴.

The frequent use of words like *idea*, *concept*, and indeed *intention* in characterizations of the communicative message, would seem to bear out that De Saussure and Wittgenstein's association of thought with language (at least as expressed above) has survived pretty much in tact in present-day pragmatics. (The contention that thinking is determined by linguistic *structure* has of course, as we saw in Chapter 4, been by and large rejected, but De Saussure and Wittgenstein are concerned not with the relation between thinking and linguistic system but with the relation between thinking and the *realization* of the system as *speech*)⁹⁵. It is this notion of the interdependence of language - or rather speech - and thought that, I would contend, underlies what Searle calls the 'principle of expressibility': *whatever can be meant can be said*⁹⁶. Searle is quick to concede that this is, of course, not necessarily true in *fact*:

I may not know the language I am using well enough to adequately express what I mean, or the language may indeed lack the resources required by me to this effect. But I can, in the former case, improve my knowledge of the language and, in the latter, 'in principle at least enrich the language by introducing new terms or other devices into it'. As Searle points out, 'where there are thoughts that cannot be expressed in a given language or in any language, it is a contingent fact and not a necessary truth'⁹⁷.

What needs to be remarked here, of course, is that Searle's argument is, to some extent at least, a circular one. When he says that what is meant can be said, he is, in fact, limiting the concept of meaning - without clearly stating it - to what he has predetermined - within the linguistic conception that is his - as the expressive potential of language. If language always expresses thought (which is, of course, what he implies in the quotation directly above), then it speaks for itself that whatever meaning a particular utterance has must of necessity be reducible to something that can be the product of thinking, that is amenable to logical analysis or explanation, in other words, that *could have been said in the first place*. What Searle's principle of expressivity therefore really means is this: whatever can be said, can be said in a different way.

But what, we may ask, if what is communicated - i.e. the message - is *not* thought? The musicologist Charles Seeger has pointed out that '[a] large proportion of what is communicated by systems of human communication other than speech is not communicable by speech'⁹⁸. Searle, to some extent perhaps, entertains such a possibility when he observes that 'the principle of expressivity does not imply that it is always possible to find or invent a form of expression that will produce all the effects in hearers that one means to produce; for example, literary or poetic effects, emotions, beliefs, and so on'. Put differently, '[w]e need to distinguish what a speaker means from certain kinds of effects he intends to produce in his hearers'⁹⁹. What soon becomes clear, however, is that the *only* such effects that Searle regards as falling within the ambit of the speech act are those that are reducible to words, more specifically, those words defined by Austin as constituting 'perlocutionary acts': to scare, alarm, convince, enlighten, edify, and so on¹⁰⁰. Once again, meaning (even if reconceptualized as 'effect produced on the hearer') is, in a sense, *prelimited* according to what can be analysed by means of words, or, quite simple, said in a different way or paraphrased.

Of course, the intention of this analysis is by no means to criticize Searle's notion. Within

the linguistic conception he is operating in, what he says makes perfect sense. What is this conception? As we saw earlier, the communication model essentially regards the message as something that is thought, which means - on the assumption that thinking and speaking are interdependent - that any message can be analysed in linguistic terms, which actually comes to saying that it can be paraphrased. No message is irreducible. And we see, quite clearly, how such a conception of the message (which is also a conception of communication) is, in a sense, foregrounded by a certain view of language (*a language*) as linguistic system. The units of the language, deriving their meaning purely in terms of their differential relations to one another, can convey essentially the same meaning by a variety of different permutations. In Saussurian terms: the same signified can be expressed by different (combinations of) signifiers. This relates to the relation between signifier and signified being *arbitrary*¹⁰¹.

If we could imagine a language (which would, in fact, be the 'auditory conceived' language of orality) where sound carries meaning *on top of* its primary (to us) duty of differentiating between signifiers, it should be clear that the 'communication' that takes place by means of such a language, the 'messages' that are conveyed through it, will be far from adequately circumscribed - let alone explained - by the kinds of notions evolved in pragmatics. In this context a more useful conception of communication, less predetermined by a certain conception of language, may well be sought in Charles Seeger's definition of communication (intended for music) as 'transmission of energy in a form'¹⁰².

Within the general framework of pragmatics we can, of course, question the extent to which certain types of speech acts (for instance, the perlocutionary mentioned above) is universal to all linguistic communities. Also, do all societies necessarily have the same concept of 'commanding' as we have?¹⁰³ But our concern lies deeper. For a start, the whole conception of a message as something essentially paraphrasable, unified, resulting from some kind of single-minded 'act', will have to be modified. An instance of speaking that comes to mind - to name only the most obvious 'problem' in this regard - is the metaphorical, so abundantly noted in oral societies. We have become accustomed to regarding metaphors as 'clever' or 'witty' or 'entertaining' and, in that sense, as exceedingly useful stylistic devices used by the oral performer in order to make his message 'stick' better. We are not denying that this is, at least to some extent, true. (See, in this regard, Vail and White's notion of the metaphor as 'evaluative precedent' - Chapter 3, note 145). But, just as sound (music) has, within the context of Oral Theory, generally 'played second fiddle' to the latter's

preoccupation with linguistic meaning (which, in the context of the performance, becomes a 'piece in a debate', a 'message'), so, in fact, has metaphor (inevitably, of course, given the linguistic conception that is ours: metaphor is but an 'indirect' way - basically paraphrasable - of saying what you 'really mean')¹⁰⁴. Aural linguistics would be interested in a different explanation. In fact, the metaphorical aspect of speech would, in many ways, offer the most obvious starting point to any study concerned with the interplay - on the level of meaning - between language and sound¹⁰⁵. Through the sound(s) in which it is expressed or by which it is accompanied the metaphorical, in terms of an auditory conception of language, may be far less 'indirect' than we think, and its meaning anything but 'reducible'¹⁰⁶.

This brief overview of the ways in which our project sets itself apart from some of the more dominant linguistic preoccupations of recent times, brings us to the point where we need to consider what is perhaps its most vital - and perhaps also most controversial - orientation, namely that it seeks to address the language of orality as a *system*. In the course of this study we have come across some notions, relatively taken-for-granted, that, looked at closely, turn out to derive from a kind of cultural conditioning that we have labelled 'scriptist'. The notion in regard to which scriptism has been most frequently asserted is the notion of text as literary *object*. But there are other candidates, notably in the field of language. Within the context of our preceding critique of pragmatics and generative grammar, we can propose notions like 'message' and 'sentence'. Both of them could quite plausibly be associated with a certain kind of analysis / abstraction that results from the experience of reading / writing which, while fruitful from the point of view of understanding what something is about (a point no doubt overstressed by Ong), also (as an inevitable breaking-up-into-*manageable-parts*) invites oversimplification - to some extent, I would argue, the very problem with the notion of message. To these we can add the notion of word, notoriously problematic from a linguistic point of view, that continues, in layman terms, to be most easily defined as 'having a space on either side'. (See Chapter 4, note 144). But it can be plausibly argued that the scriptism of these notions is most readily motivated in terms of the extent to which they form part of an analysis that regards language / linguistic communication as a system. As Roy Harris puts it:

... the systematic analysis of spoken languages depends essentially on their conceptualization as systems amenable to representation *in a medium other than sound*¹⁰⁷.

The fundamentally spatial (therefore *non*-auditory) character of the linguistic system can be most easily understood in the light of what composes it: the linguistic *sign*, defined, by De Saussure, as the pairing of a *concept* (signified) with an *acoustic image* (signifier)¹⁰⁸. As Harris remarks, the latter metaphor (given De Saussure's insistence on the primacy of the spoken - see Chapter 4, note 121) is 'perhaps unwisely drawn from visual perception'¹⁰⁹. The point however, conceded by De Saussure himself, is that it is only in writing (in other words as something visual) that the sign attains anything approaching tangibility, that it can be 'captured'¹¹⁰. Depriving oneself of the perceptible image supplied by writing means running the risk of 'being left with a shapeless mass'¹¹¹. (Here we can be usefully reminded of Ong's 'centering effect' of sound - see Chapter 4, note 7).

We can, of course, to some extent circumvent this controversy by suggesting that the word 'system' in relation to orality should not be taken in any 'technical' sense, which will make it basically synonymous with words like 'field', 'area' and so on. But that will be counterproductive to what is perhaps aural linguistics' most important motivation, namely to find an alternative to the *evolutionist perspective* that, more than anything else, has tended to prevent Oral Theory from delimiting a field of interest worthy of study *in its own right*.

Let us re-endorse here Goody's contention that process is *inevitably* conceptualized as progress, no matter how hard we may wish to protest to the contrary. (See Chapter 2, note 106). Oral Theory, whatever theoretical basis we ascribe to it - be it oral-formulaic / formalist or performance-oriented / pragmatic - has never really been able to conceive of orality as anything other than a stage of evolution. The evolution may well not be towards literacy *per se* - Street's ideological critique of literacy (see Chapter 2, notes 114 - 120) can be mentioned here - but it is nevertheless towards something more or less associated with it: 'modernity', 'development', and lately more especially, 'empowerment'.

Against this background our use of the notion of system - which we define in the Saussurian mode as consisting of discrete and differential units - is anything but incidental. The exact degree of self-sufficiency or 'closedness' we attribute to the system may well be different to that of De Saussure and of structuralism in general (we shall return to this further on), but this point is not immediately relevant. What is, for our purposes, central to the fact that the linguistic is a *system* is that it turns out to revolve around a *principle of organization* that is *per definition only realizable on the level of the abstract*. But contrary to De Saussure, Ong and Goody (representative, in fact, of the *cultural conditioning* of writing) aural

linguistics would assert that this abstraction can be made explicit - and as such, also lend itself to application beyond the purely linguistic - not only through the visual, but indeed through the auditory. There is no reason to believe that in its auditory conception language is necessarily a 'shapeless mass' nor, for that matter, that it is more *concrete* than it would be conceived of visually. The degree of abstraction is, in both cases, essentially the same. In terms of the visualist conception of language it comes to be represented in a system of meaningful graphic marks (writing), in terms of the auditory conception of language it comes to be represented in a system of meaningful sounds (music).

It can be objected that what we have just done has been to reintroduce the issue of language - thought interdependence after we so emphatically set it aside earlier. (See Chapter 4, as well as our critique of the *message* earlier in this chapter). In a sense this is true; abstraction can only be a function of thinking, and we have linked this thinking to the conceptualization of language as a system. What we really have done, however, has been to redefine thinking - or at least how thinking *makes itself apparent*. It turns out, in fact, that what we attempted to detach language from earlier is itself something essentially *scriptist*, a notion which regards thinking as manifested - and therefore amenable to development - in essentially, if not exclusively, *spatial* terms. Music, however - at least in the situation of orality - sees the manifestation of thinking in terms of *time*.

Just as in the visualist conception language and writing frequently overlap - a fact ostensibly decried by modern linguistics, even though, as we have seen, it generally perpetuates this tendency - so in the auditory conception do language and music. Our above reasoning enables us to thus link our etic definition centred around 'abstract system' with the emic 'definitions' of music / language speculated upon earlier. (See for example note 29). A related consequence is that it brings into question the familiar opposition of language to music on the basis of the former representing thought (an association we have dealt with extensively) while the latter, as Nattiez phrases it, 'is directed primarily at the emotions'¹¹². Nattiez mentions Johann Sebastian Bach and Pierre Boulez as counterexamples to this claim, the relatively specialized nature of these examples indicating, perhaps, that the association of music with emotion is by and large true *within the Western musical tradition*. The linguistic and the musical are, after all, *distinct* areas of activity within Western notions of science and culture. But these counterexamples should not even be necessary as far as oral societies are concerned, for if we accept that music, like writing, represents a certain degree of abstraction

vis-à-vis spoken language, then the polarity intellect vs emotion loses all validity: language and music will both be more or less intellectual, more or less emotional.

Contrary to recent emphases on orality as cultural activity or *event*, aural linguistics would suggest that orality (inclusive of the oral *performance*) constitutes a field of interest inviting study as a *system in itself* (or rather, as we shall see, as a system of interrelated systems), constituted around symbolical sound. (This methodology is, then, far removed from that of a structural anthropology, seeing the performance as an element or form within a broader *cultural system*). The notion of system in relation to the oral has the effect, to put it bluntly, of 'intellectualising' the oral; the oral voice is fully *rational*, albeit proceeding along modes of abstraction by and large unrecognizable from the scriptist / visualist perspective. Let us restate here what enabled us to assert the existence of an 'aural system' in the first place: our conception of orality as, first and foremost, *sound*, and the conceptual parallel between such symbolical sound and the music of Western culture which, regardless of its postulated 'emotionality', has all the same been shown to be systematic, admitting certain combinations of harmony and rhythm rather than others; in music there is, in Court's words, 'a mode [*plan*] of *organization* underlying the mode of *composition*'¹¹³.

Evolutionist views have always hinged on the relative *absence* of abstraction / rationality of the oral. Aural linguistics, I believe, can come close to avoiding this trap. To see the essence of orality as lying in its sound (amenable to systematization of a high degree of complexity) rather than - as is frequently asserted - its *rhythm*, has, then, certain advantages. Of course, rhythm is an essential ingredient of symbolical sound, particularly in Africa¹¹⁴, but sound is also much more than rhythm; it is melody, tonality, timbre, intonation...¹¹⁵.

The association of orality with rhythm has an unmistakably Jousseian feel to it, rhythm being the essential manifestation of laryngo-buccal gesture. (See Chapter 4, note 28). Two interrelated aspects come to the fore here. On the one hand rhythm is commonly thought of as evocative of presence, i.e. of what is *concrete* (it is, as Jousse has shown, essentially a movement of the body), on the other it is strongly linked to the expression of emotion. We earlier encountered Jousse's notion of the vocal gesture as a 'revivification' of an original sensory impact. (See Chapter 4, note 44). Fónagy, generally within a similar framework, sees vocal expression (conceived of not as sound, but essentially as a series of muscular contractions) as a kind of microrepresentation of the movements of the body in situations evoking strong emotional response: danger (evoking fear), love (evoking tenderness) etc¹¹⁶.

Henri Meschonnic, defining orality as 'linguistics of rhythm' (*rythmique linguistique*) stresses rhythm as presence or, more specifically, as decisive in the psychological formation of the subject. In this perspective the relation between writing and the oral is set out as follows:

[w]riting... would be defined as grouping together [*rassemblant*] those forms (linguistic and social) dominated by codes [*où les codes... sont les régisseurs*], the mass of discourses in which the language is understood and given effect [*réalisé*] as the use the individual makes of it, [a mass of discourse] instauring social relations and grammatical constraints. It is not an utterance through which a subject comes into formation [*se réalise*]¹¹⁷.

To paraphrase: orality is the formation and realization (we can say the *embodiment*) of the subject, literacy the submission of the subject to the rules and limitations of the social. This conceptualization is strongly reminiscent of Julia Kristeva's psychoanalysis-derived distinction between the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic', the former revolving around the 'drives and impulses' of infancy and 'analogous... to vocal and kinetic *rhythm*' (it by its very nature defies any kind of 'axiomatic form'), the latter around 'family and society structures' as manifested in a variety of *constraints* associated with the notion of *law*¹¹⁸. Cast in terms of the general framework of our argument in this chapter: the musical is of the order of the semiotic, the linguistic (as grammatical structure and sign), of the order of the symbolical¹¹⁹.

Kristeva is, of course, concerned with characterising what she terms 'poetic language' in regard to which there is a certain co-existence of the semiotic and the symbolic; art and poetry can to some extent be defined as the 'breach' of the latter by the former¹²⁰. Her notion of the semiotic has, however, been applied to oral societies (see Chapter 2, note 143) and is certainly open to the kind of evolutionist interpretation (the semiotic is 'savage', the symbolic 'domesticated') aural linguistics would be sensitive to¹²¹. As we have seen, the voice of primary orality is *as subject* to systemitization as the writing of literate society. As such, it is just as prone to abstraction, just as rational. It is also similarly subject to constraint, albeit, of course, through different perceptual and sensory modes.

5.4 Towards an Aural-Linguistic Sign

Let us attempt a few observations on the nature of the sign that constitutes the system we have been talking about. The ideal, of course, would be to arrive at a more or less unified conception of the linguistic sign (what we may be tempted to call an aural-linguistic sign), which addresses the kinds of emic conceptions of language we have been speculating about, conceptions which derive from the experience of a language which, *exactly like music*, is

fundamentally made up of sound. In other words, we would ultimately like to *redefine* De Saussure's linguistic sign. We can more or less conjecture what such a sign will look like. It will still be discrete and differential, but the identity of the signifier will no longer be determined by its dual relation to a concept on the one hand and its relation to other signifiers on the other, but by something more: the fact that it is part of a larger suprasegmental combination of sound with meaning that we can call, for want of a better term, *musical*. This musical aspect will not only present itself as a third 'term' alongside signifier and signified (changing the linguistic sign from binomial to triadic) but will in all probability also limit the degree of arbitrariness of their relation, making it - within the limits of the more complex set of triadic relations - relatively motivated. At the same time the concept itself will cease to be unified as such, being an intrinsic part of a larger 'musical' meaning. The aural-linguistic sign will have the fundamental property of signifying two or more things at the same time¹²².

This invites the following reflection: the above 'property' of the aural-linguistic sign - assuming, of course, that my prediction is correct - offers an interesting basis against which to set Derrida's deconstructionist notion of an essentially scattered, eternally 'ungraspable' meaning, which also constitutes one of the most notable critiques of the Saussurian sign. Contrary to what De Saussure's 'concept' would lead us to believe, Derrida tells us that the concept is endlessly differed: signs relate to each other not only on the basis of *différence* but, in fact, also on the basis of *différance*; in this way they, as Selden puts it '*enforce an endless postponement of presence*'¹²³ ('presence' in this sense being fully locatable in the notion of meaning)¹²⁴. Against this, Hall cogently argues that Derrida's concerns with an 'ultimate reality' (ultimate meaning / concept) are uncalled for; what counts from a linguistic point of view is that the speaker *assumes*, 'for purposes of every-day living' and in the context of language use, that meaning fully exists. Also, as Hall points out, 'correlations between linguistic forms and their referents must necessarily be at least slightly loose' for the simple reason that 'meanings', 'ideas' or 'concepts' are highly individual things. Language would not function as a means of communication if it were 'a completely tight, "well-formed" system'¹²⁵. I would contend that the aural-linguistic sign, as set out above, could offer a useful theoretical basis - far simpler than that employed by Derrida - upon which to motivate a conception of the linguistic sign as essentially 'fluid'. But, taking Hall's point, the fluidity of the aural-linguistic sign is far from being the *ultimate* fluidity envisaged by Derrida.

However alluring the idea of a *redefinition* of the linguistic sign may be, it seems to me

for our purposes more prudent to, rather than conceive of the aural-linguistic sign as a single theoretical concept, approach it as consisting of two essentially different types of signs, the linguistic (for which the Saussurian definition will be considered sufficient) and the musical. Other than to advance that the aural-linguistic sign will be the result of the interpenetration of these two signs (stemming from the aural-linguistic system being the result of the interpenetration of two kinds of symbolical systems), we shall attempt no actual definition of it. We can merely hope to illustrate some of its peculiarity in terms of the conceptual distance between our etic conceptions of the linguistic sign on the one hand and the musical sign on the other.

We need, at the outset, to distinguish between the aural-linguistic sign and its representation / abstraction (much like De Saussure does for the linguistic sign vis-à-vis writing). The aural-linguistic sign is essentially a function of the *voice*, consisting of the relation between linguistic sign and musical sign as manifested in it. We could say that it exists in *speech*, but then with the important reservation that speech - as speaking - is culturally determined. In cultures where there is, for example, no polarisation between 'speaking' and 'singing' along lines similar to those obtaining in Western culture¹²⁶, the musical sign that informs the aural-linguistic will no doubt be relatively *complex*, a combination of two (or even more) musical signs related to different levels of vocal sound (tonality, intonation, rhythm etc.) all falling within the ambit of what that culture considers as speech. Where speaking (as opposed to singing) is culturally fairly clearly defined, the musical sign will be comparatively simple. Of course, there may, particularly within the context of the performance, be numerous other musical elements (instrumental sounds, non-linguistic vocal sounds, etc.) producing musical signs interacting with that of the aural-linguistic, even to the extent of influencing its meaning. But these musical signs cannot be part of the aural-linguistic sign; they are representations or *abstractions* of it. Our references to the 'musical' / 'musical sign' in the passage that follows refer, then, to the sound of speech *as speech*, a sound which, in addition to its properly linguistic differential function has, in auditory conceived language, its own symbolical meaning that interferes with and even changes linguistic meaning.

As we are primarily concerned with what distinguishes the aural-linguistic from the conventional (Saussurian) linguistic sign, we shall be focusing our attention on the musical, more specifically, on conceptions of musical meaning. Before considering, however, how music can be said to 'mean' or 'signify' something, it will be useful, given our conception

of the aural-linguistic sign as, in a sense, combining the linguistic with the musical, to consider at least one semiological vantage point from which these two symbolical fields can, perhaps, be conceptualized *together*.

Nattiez (whose *Towards a Semiology of Music* offers us a particularly rich source of reflection) suggests that this can be done by moving from De Saussure's 'static' conception (implying an essentially one-to-one relation between signifier and signified - see Derrida's criticism referred to above) towards a more 'dynamic conception'¹²⁷ of the sign, notably as developed by Sanders Peirce¹²⁸. The essence of Peirce's thinking (at least as interpreted by Nattiez) relates to the fact that the signifier (or *representamen*) refers to an *object* in relation to which it gives rise to *another* signifier (the *interpretant*), the latter coming about in the mind of the person to whom the original signifier is addressed. The essential divergence from the Saussurian position lies therefore in the fact that the notion of meaning is displaced from the position of *referent* (the concept or signified in De Saussure's terms) towards the signifier - as interpretant - itself. This process takes place every time the signifier is addressed to someone. The signifier consequently has the potential to create an array of interpretants in relation to the same object, interpretants that are the seats of meaning as well as, in themselves, signifiers - in other words, the interpretants are actually *signs* in the full (Saussurian) sense of the term. The Peircian sign can thus be said to institute an endless series of signs, all reflecting a different meaning of the referent (object). This brings Nattiez to conclude

that the object of the sign is actually a *virtual* object, that does not exist except within and through the multiplicity of interpretants...¹²⁹.

We can perhaps rephrase Peirce's position as follows: the object to which the sign refers is 'virtual' in so far as its meaning is, in a sense, 'scattered' throughout the range of interpretants / signifiers / signs that come into being in reference to it. In other words, meaning is *essentially* multiple; there is no single concept to be derived from a single sign. The usefulness of the Peircian sign as far as Nattiez is concerned obviously lies in the semiological framework it provides for accounting for what he considers to be the most outstanding - and also most troubling - feature of the musical sign, namely that it is *polysemic*:

when we listen to music, the meanings it takes on, the emotions that it evokes, are multiple, varied and confused. These meanings... are the object of an interpretation

that is thus always *hazardous*. Given the looseness of the associations between music and what it evokes, we can no longer say with certainty what constitutes the expressive, the natural, the conventional, the analogical, the arbitrary association [between the sign and what it refers to]¹³⁰.

The kind of meaning Nattiez refers to here is largely *referentialist* - meaning established in relation to an 'extramusical universe'¹³¹. We shall return to this conception presently. But to get back to the polysemic nature of the Peircian sign: setting aside a rigorously Derridian viewpoint (see note 123 - 124), one can, within the context of language, no doubt be excused for finding the idea of a 'virtual meaning', an *essential* looseness between sign and meaning rather bewildering. The relation between signifier and signified may well, according to De Saussure, be arbitrary, but it is, after all, a highly *conventionalized* relation established on a *collective* (as opposed to an individual) level¹³². Nattiez gives the following example which, one suspects, may well be intended to reassure us. The word 'happiness' makes instant sense to the reader. In attempting to explain it, however, many different words like 'bliss', 'satisfaction', 'contentment' and so on come to be *attached* to it - all new signs deriving from the original confrontation with 'happiness', signs that reflect meanings 'that vary from one reader to the next, according to the personal experiences of each'¹³³.

Of course, Nattiez on purpose, one feels, chooses a word with a strongly subjective - 'abstract' - connotation to illustrate the applicability of the Peircian model to language. 'Typewriter', by contrast, may well have served him less well. Hall's counterargument to Derrida's endless deferral of meaning comes to mind - there is no reason why it should not have a similarly sobering effect on the polysemy of the Peircian sign. Finally, we could argue that the explanations one gives of a concept do not necessarily represent its meaning *as such*. They are, within the context of 'putting something across to another person' merely minimalist approximations of the concept which can exist quite fully and in all certainty *independent* of the linguistic sign(s) which refer to it (at least, of course, to the extent that we divorce language from thought). In fact, Nattiez says exactly the same thing - but, significantly, only with regard to *musical* meaning. He warns us, quite explicitly, not to 'confuse music's meaning, properly speaking, with *translation* of that meaning, since verbalizing music's meaning is itself a special type of symbolization'¹³⁴.

In any event, the Peircian sign is far from unproblematical from a linguistic point of view, whatever its merits for explaining polysemy¹³⁵. Yet we can, perhaps, limit some of its more

disconcerting facets (related to the notion of an *endless* variety of meaning) by going back to the Saussurian notion of a *system*, taken in the sense of something coherent and self-sufficient. For is meaning - as an integral part of signs existing in *differential relations* within a system - not *also* subject to these relations? Considered from this point of view, meaning is far from being 'endless', even potentially. The common notion of the meaning of certain things being 'culturally determined' surely derives from this perspective; culture is implicitly seen as a system. Nattiez, for his part, takes up a generally non-structuralist stance¹³⁶, attributing the determination of meaning not to differential relations of signs but rather - within a generally hermeneutic framework - to what he terms the *poietic* and *esthetic* dimensions of the symbolical process. (The former relates to the process of creation, the latter to the process of reception, while the third *trace* or 'neutral' dimension he refers to - the 'physical and material embodiment of the symbol' - to all intents and purposes corresponds to the signifier. See Chapter 1, note 96).

There is a further point. We may well, in fact, question Nattiez's assumption of the polysemy of the musical sign on the grounds that it derives from an essentially Western division - criticized earlier - between language and music on the basis of the former expressing thought, the latter emotion. His implied contention, mentioned above, that verbalization can convey the meaning of the linguistic sign but that it cannot convey the meaning of the musical (see note 134), can be seen to derive, at least to some extent, from this kind of conceptual division: musical meaning is somehow more 'intimate' than linguistic meaning. And yet, we know of cases - and there may be more - where musical instruments are used to convey words (in other words linguistic meaning), such as in the various 'drum languages'. (See notes 55 and 56). Also, there are definite examples of oral societies, such as the Tepehua society researched by Charles Boilès, in which, as Tarasti reports, 'there exist fully prescribed equivalences between melodic phrases and semantic meanings'¹³⁷. A distinction between the linguistic and the musical sign along the lines of *relative* univocity on the one hand vs plurivocity on the other may not be as straightforward or self-evident as we may think.

If our attempt at finding a definition of the sign that would be equally applicable to language and music has been less than satisfactory, we may attempt to find some kind of justification for 'conceptualizing language and music together' by looking, not so much at how the sign is defined, but rather, at how the sign comes to be isolated or delimited *as such*.

In other words, we move our attention from the internal relation between signifier and signified towards considering the relation between signs (however defined) amongst themselves, the only qualification being our assumption that the sign is, somehow, meaningful.

Let us act in typically scriptist fashion and consider the sign in its - to us - most tangible form, namely as it exists in writing (or rather, for our purposes, *phonological* writing). The advantage of this procedure is that it enables us to get right into the sign without worrying about first defining it, and consider what constitutes it in the first place, i.e. *as signifier*. In linguistics the basic component of the signifier is the phoneme, broadly defined as that part of speech sound that is conditional for distinguishing between different linguistic signs; phonemes are the quintessential differential units in that they make up the most fundamental system of a language, its phonological system¹³⁸. It is distinguished from the *phonetic* sound (the sound as it occurs in reality) in that it represents the latter purely in terms of its *functional* relation to other speech sounds, in other words, it presents the sound in 'discretized' form.

All languages of the world can be broken up into phonemes. Can the same be said with regard to music? The most obvious musical counterpart to the phoneme is the note, which Nattiez describes as similarly 'discretized'¹³⁹. But the note as basic element or 'essential feature' of Western (classical) music cannot be summarily considered to fulfill the same function in other musics. As Nettl explains:

a concept such as the note... might be erroneously applied to another musical culture in which the glides between notes are the essential feature. Slight deviations from pitch, hardly audible to Western ears used to the tempered scale, might be essential distinctions in another music. Again, several obviously distinct pitches could be considered merely different versions of a single tone¹⁴⁰.

Notwithstanding the difficulty in distinguishing what, within a given music, constitutes an essential feature and what does not, the principle is clear enough: music (the musical sign) is composed of elements which, in the distinctive features they represent, are fundamental to the nature of the particular music concerned and - to go further - to the identity of its musical signs. These units would form the notational basis of the musical system in question.

The relation between phoneme and signifier can be fairly easily characterized as that between non-meaningful segment on the one hand and segment fully accessible to meaning on the other. This is generally referred to as the 'dual articulation' of the linguistic system,

made up of minimal units endowed with meaning (also sometimes called the 'moneme'), which in turn consist of non-meaningful linguistic units (the phoneme)¹⁴¹. But the relation between basic constitutive segment and meaningful segment is far more difficult to establish as far as music is concerned. To try and establish a 'dual articulation' of the musical system is, by and large, a futile exercise¹⁴².

At what point, then, can the basic musical segments be said to become musical *signs*? This brings us, finally, to consider the 'meaning' of music. How, and what, does music signify? Benveniste sees music as consisting of units that are not endowed with the capacity to signify; there is, consequently, no such thing as a musical sign¹⁴³. As Nattiez comments however, 'in order to make this claim... the notion of the sign must be limited to "something that refers to the exterior world"'. By thus limiting our conception of meaning to the 'referential modality' of verbal language, 'we run the risk of overlooking the *symbolic specificity* of music'¹⁴⁴.

We earlier briefly came across the 'referentialist' (or *extraversive, extrinsic*) meaning of music (see note 131), whereby music is, like language, taken to refer to what lies outside it. Francès gives the following account of this modality of meaning and how it takes place:

[t]he kinship between rhythmic and melodic pattern in music, and the patterns of gestures that accompany behavior, represent one of the basic elements of music's expressive language... [T]he basic psychological states (calm, excitation, tension, relaxation, exaltation, despair) normally translate themselves as gestural forms that have a given rhythm, as tendencies and ascents, as modalities for organizing fragmentary forms within global forms (constant repetition, diversity, periodicity, evolution)... [T]he transposition of these rhythms, tendencies, and modalities of movement into sound-structure of music constitutes music's basic expressive language¹⁴⁵.

We would be able to derive from this characterization (which cannot but remind us, notably through its evocation of gesture, of the perceived relation between orality and the 'basic psychological states' - see our discussion of Fónagy, Meschonnic and Kristeva, notes 113 - 116) a certain view of the musical sign (signifier) as 'rhythmic and melodic pattern'. Nattiez distinguishes three 'fields' of extrinsic (referential) meaning, namely the spatio-temporal, kinetic, and affective. These fields of meaning are associated with psychological states or with the properties of the human body (heart rhythm, muscular contraction, depth of respiration) to the extent that they are frequently thought of as having a *natural* basis¹⁴⁶. Yet associations of high notes with an impression of height and happiness, a certain kind of resonance with an impression of open space and calm, a certain kind of low note with an impression of darkness and gloom are fundamentally *cultural conventions*. As Nattiez points out, in Greek, Arab, and

Jewish music, many of these associations are reversed¹⁴⁷.

But it is a second modality of musical meaning, qualified as *absolutist*, *formalist* or *intrinsic* which, to my mind, can be most fruitfully exploited by an aural linguistics. In this perspective music 'means itself'¹⁴⁸. The interest of this type of meaning, as far as we are concerned, lies in its fundamental reference to time. Once again, we can regard as musical sign a certain kind of 'musical structure'. This time, however - and this is an important point - it is *not* isolated in terms of the feeling or association it evokes. Extrinsic meaning being essentially culturally defined and as such - from the point of view of the researcher - largely inaccessible, will almost *per definition* find itself excluded from the meaning of the (aural)-linguistic sign, in the same way as the musical has generally been marginalised by Oral Theory. Rather, musical structures are identified as *signs* in so far as they refer either to similar musical structures already heard or - crucially - lead us to *expect* the occurrence of similar types of musical units in future¹⁴⁹. Robert Austerlitz puts it as follows:

the meaning that is conveyed by a musical text is basically deictic, cataphoric, in the sense that it is a *prediction*. The musical text makes reference to the future, in that it challenges the listener to predict the shape of the musical substance to come in the immediately pending future - on the basis of the musical substance perceived in a given moment... If anything can be called meaning or *semiosis* in music, then it is the experience required to predict immediately impending musical substance¹⁵⁰.

One could be excused for finding this notion of musical meaning, based on what is, after all, purely a consideration of musical *form*, rather unconvincing. To say that, on the basis of my own experience I can, upon hearing a particular rhythmic / melodic pattern, place it in a certain relation to rhythmic / melodic patterns heard before, or predict the kinds of rhythmic / melodic patterns which will be subsequent to it, is all very well, but is it not, no matter how impressive it may be, what we would simply call knowledge *about* music? Why call it *meaning*?

It is true that what is described above is essentially a type of knowledge, which is knowledge about music but also knowledge about culture; it is exactly the kind of knowledge that we would draw upon as *background* for our interpretation / appreciation / study of a particular oral utterance or group of utterances in a particular oral society. It is, of course, all we can do with this knowledge, for it is not meaning *to us*.

Let us briefly return, at this point, to the drum languages mentioned earlier (see notes 55 and 56) which, in the light of our postulated oral / aural relation of linguistic to musical

meaning, offer us perhaps an obvious - but by no means unique - vantage point. Drum language, Kawada tells us, 'eliminates segmental [differential] features of the spoken language, and reproduces only its suprasegmental features'. Writing - especially alphabetic / phonetic writing - of course does the reverse; it takes the segmentality / differentiability of speech sounds a step further by explicating the non-meaningful sounds in which it is constituted. And yet, as Kawada reflects, drum language can be likened to a writing system, at least in so far as it extends 'beyond the reach of the human voice'¹⁵¹. This is a crucial insight, but which needs to be carried further. Drum language, as we have seen, has been documented in and associated with cultures using a particular kind of 'tonal' language. But can we not go *beyond* this association, and see drum language as a *particular manifestation* of a certain conception of language, a conception founded in the experience of language - and of linguistic meaning - as sound? Our isolation of drum language *as such* - as a symbolical practice peculiar to certain societies - may well have prevented us from seeing it in its broader relevance as an illustration of how linguistic meaning can be developed - integrated into symbolical abstract systems - *through and in sound*. But for our culturally conditioned juxtaposition of language / text on the one hand to music / sound / rhythm on the other, we may well discover that drum languages are far from the only illustrations of this principle, by and large unfamiliar to the 'literate' of this world.

It is on the basis of this kind of insight, I believe, that Oral Theory as aural linguistics can make a difference. For our failure to recognize meaning, more especially *linguistic* meaning, does not mean that it is not there. It merely exists on a level of abstraction which, as a result of our visualist conception of language, we are unable to apprehend. But aural linguistics can at least help us to speculate about this meaning. We make our most elaborate mental substitution¹⁵² - our language - in terms of what we see, and it is in what we see - which is space - that we are able to elaborate certain further abstractions from it: writing, mathematical equations, etc. What if this process is realized in terms of what is heard, that is as sound, existing as durations of time?¹⁵³ This perspective can, perhaps, provide us with a clearer picture of the kind of intrinsic musical meaning highlighted above, a meaning which is, as *concept* of the aural-linguistic sign, also fully linguistic meaning. What would be meant is things like the following - or at least their possibility: before, now, after, beginning, repetition, sequence, irregularity, interruption, end...

When you run out of words - which in this case is not so much words as conceptual

categories - it is time to stop. In conclusion, a few remarks on the viability of aural linguistics as an actual research paradigm: could one do research and label it 'aural-linguistic'? Of course, a lot of what we have been saying is not new. Culler, for example, at the end of an article in which he particularly strongly emphasises with Tedlock's frustration at mainstream linguistics' exclusion of 'suprasegmental' features¹⁵⁴ (an exclusion which, significantly, Culler sees as the exclusion of the *temporal dimension*), dreams of a linguistics (ironically - but no doubt in a Derridian perspective - called a 'linguistics of writing'), which would

seek to invert the usual relation between discrete, already codified signs and the material usually deemed irrelevant except as a means of manifestation. It would treat discrete signs as special cases of a generalised echoing, and explore whether a linguistics could be constructed on that model, and how far it could go.

'The task of linguistics', Culler tells us further,

has been to divide the signifying from the non-signifying, excluding the latter from linguistics, but if this boundary region is central to linguistics and its functioning... then this geography must be revised,... the problematic materiality of language which may or may not carry meaning and produce effects, must lie at the centre of our concerns¹⁵⁵.

Culler is a literary theorist, and it is doubtful, his references to Tedlock notwithstanding, that he would expect a contribution to his linguistics of *writing* to come from the field of Oral Theory. In any event, if the objectives of Culler's linguistics of writing can, at least to some extent, be seen as similar to those of aural linguistics, I would be prepared to wager that they may well have a better chance of realization recast in the terms we have been talking about, which concern the integration, into the mainstream of linguistics, of the *auditory conception of language*.

Studies on oral texts that specifically include a consideration of sound in their appraisal generally do so within the framework of an aural *aesthetics*¹⁵⁶. This is of course giving the aural a different function to the one we have been concerned with, but that does not mean that the insights it provides cannot be useful. It may well be, in fact, that an aural aesthetics is to some extent a first stage in the development of an aural linguistics. At any rate, the conceptual categories at our disposal fall, at least for the moment, far short of providing us with the means of giving a full account of the language of orality in its *existence* as sound, an account which - I hope to have shown - has nothing to do with measurement and quantification (electronic or otherwise), but everything with how we think. In the meantime, the main interest of aural linguistics can only be on a philosophical level¹⁵⁷, where it will

hopefully remind us that the simple is complex, the concrete is abstract, the traditional is modern and the oral is literate in ways we cannot comprehend.

Endnotes

1. The *langage / langue / parole* division is made in De Saussure, 1959:9-15.
2. Wardhaugh, 1993:23. For a generally pessimistic appraisal of the 'search for universals' between the linguistic structures of the different languages of the world, see Hagège, 1985:43-67.
3. See Culler, in Fabb *et al* (eds.), 1987:183. Culler uses the term in the context of a discussion of the signifying and non-signifying elements of a language. As such, he no doubt relates it primarily to the linguistic *system*.
4. See Harris, 1988:ix.
5. Harris, 1980:5.
6. Harris, 1980:5.
7. Harris, 1980:6.
8. See Hagège, 1985:153.
9. De Saussure, 1959:8.
10. See Tobin, 1990:30, as well as Culler, in De Saussure, 1959:xv.
11. Culler, in De Saussure, 1959:xiv-xv.
12. See Falck, 1989:4.
13. With regard to De Saussure's relevance for Julia Kristeva, see Roudiez, in Kristeva, 1984:4. Regarding his influence on Jacques Lacan, see Bowie, 1987:109.
14. Wardhaugh (1993:21-3) mentions 'transformational-generative' grammar and 'universal' grammar as most prominent. Works by Chomsky referred to in this regard include: Chomsky, N. 1957. *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague: Mouton; Chomsky, N. 1965. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press; Chomsky, N. 1976. *Reflections on Language*. London: Temple Smith.
15. See Hughes, in Bjarkman and Raskin (eds.), 1986:306-22, particularly pp.306-8. Also Tobin, 1990:27.
16. See Wardhaugh, 1993:25-6.
17. See Hagège, 1985:229. Fundamental works in the development of pragmatics are Austin, J. 1962. *How to do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; as well as Searle, 1969.
18. Nattiez, 1990:60.
19. Nattiez, 1990:61.
20. Terence Moore and Christine Carling closely relate generative grammar with its proliferation of formal models devoted to the relatively restricted area of syntax to what they term the 'North American descriptivist' approach of the 40's and 50's. Central to this approach, dominated by Zellig Harris and Charles Hockett, is the idea that linguistics is 'an exact and rigorous science' with a methodology comparable to that of the physical sciences. As such, it aims at as high a degree as possible of mathematisation, an ideal which Chomsky's brand of 'theoretical linguistics' was to bring to a certain fruition. In particular, the methodology employed in the elaboration of so-called 'distributional' systems explicitly sought to eliminate meaning as a factor within the system, and, in Moore and Carling's words, 'generally glossed over the informant's problem of what counts as a repetition [of a sound segment]'. See Moore and Carling, 1982:19-47, particularly pp.21-7, p.33).
21. Tobin, 1990:5.
22. Lévi-Strauss uses the analogy of an orchestra and its audience to explain this principle.

The myth-teller is like a musician who, lacking an overall perspective of the orchestra, plays his own part 'as if it were the entire work'. An appreciation of the performance as a whole is possible only to those who are outside the orchestra. (See Lévi-Strauss, C. 1964. *The Raw and the Cooked*, transl. J. and D. Wrightman. London: Cape. Referred to in Tarasti, 1978:28-9).

23. See Nettl, B. 1956. *Music in Primitive Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Quoted in Feld, 1982:163.
24. Feld, 1982:163.
25. Feld, 1982:165.
26. Nattiez (1990:60) makes a similar point in regard to music.
27. My main resource in exploring these questions is Nattiez, 1990. Other works - quoted in this study - falling more or less within the ambit of music and dealing extensively with the relation between music and language include Court, 1976; Seeger, 1977 and Durant, 1984.
28. Nattiez, 1990:54. Emphasis added. Nattiez suggests that in the case of the Inuit the distinction between 'music' and 'non-music' is best inferred, not from explicit conceptualization, but from behaviour. One Inuit cultural practice that, from a Western point of view, seems decidedly 'musical' is *katajjaq*, which actually turns out to be a game. Nattiez however justifies his own qualification of *the latter* as a 'musical fact' on the basis that the players as well as the people who teach the game pay particular attention to its 'sound-parameters'. (Nattiez, 1990:54-5. See note 33 below).
29. Nattiez, 1990:56.
30. Nattiez, 1990:58.
31. Nattiez, 1990:60.
32. Nattiez, 1990:41-2.
33. Nattiez, 1990:43. The question can be asked whether a certain type of 'experimental' musical production, such as John Cage's 4'33", which Nattiez describes as 'a silent work in which the pianist places his fingers on the keys and removes them again, repeatedly, without ever sounding a note', can be termed 'music'. But it is not; it is, rather, a *commentary* on music, 'to expose or denounce the institutional aspect of music's functioning'.
34. For a brief overview of the etymological origins of the word 'music', indicating the twin aspects of inspiration and ritual as, perhaps, the 'original' components of a Western conception of music, see Durant, 1984:20-2.
35. See De Saussure, 1959:68.
36. De Saussure, 1959:9.
37. Finnegan, 1977:xii.
38. The papers presented at this conference were published in Tokumaru and Yamaguti (eds), 1986.
39. See Finnegan, in Tokumaru and Yamaguti (eds), 1986:73-87.
40. Finnegan, in Tokumaru and Yamaguti (eds), 1986:84.
41. Foley makes little mention of musicological analysis in his 1988 overview of the theoretical origins of Oral Theory. He remarks, however (p.88) that musical improvisation within the oral-formulaic mode is 'an often neglected but *fundamental* aspect of oral poetic phraseology'. (Emphasis added).
42. Finnegan, in Tokumaru and Yamaguti (eds), 75. Emphasis original.
43. See Nattiez, 1990:71. As examples of the complexity of the music of the oral tradition Nattiez mentions Simha Arom's demonstration that Banda-Linda polyphonic horn

ensembles are controlled 'by a subtextual [unrealized] melody present in the minds of the performers' - something that is 'hardly primitive'. (See Arom, S. 1985. *Polyphonies et polyrythmies instrumentales d'Afrique Centrale*. Paris: S.E.L.A.F.). Nattiez also quotes his own research on the Ainu music of Japan, which, as in the case of the contrapuntal genre *upopo*, demands 'quite sophisticated feats of memory'.

44. Nattiez, 1990:71-2.
45. Blesh, 1946:30. Emphasis original.
46. See Nettl, *Music in Primitive Culture*, p.62. Referred to in Finnegan, 1977:91.
47. See Court, 1976:50-1.
48. Court, 1976:50. My translation. Court here refers to Max Weber. (See Weber, M. *Die rationalen und soziologischen Grundlagen der Musik*. Munich: Drei Masken Verlag).
49. Notably with regard to Lévi-Strauss, who, according to Court (1976:48-9), sees Western tonal music as *superior* to all other forms of music in so far as it is the only music to be truly 'founded in nature'. (See Lévi-Strauss's *Le cru et le cuit*, p.31).
50. See Tarasti, 1978:41. Emphasis added. Where the mythical is present in Western music (Wagner being the prime example), 'music is obliged to relinquish the complexity of its structures to allow for the emergence of mythical structure...'. Complexity at this level relates not to the music as such, but to '[the] connections with the mythical level which is manifested by it [the music]' (p.51).
51. Fónagy, in Revel and Rey-Hulman (eds.), 1993:47. My translation.
52. See Tonkin, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:42-3.
53. See Tracey, H. 1948. *Chopi Musicians: Their Music, Poetry, and Instruments*. London: Oxford University Press. Quoted in Vail and White, 1991:126.
54. See Babalola, S. 1966. *The Content and Form of Yoruba ijala*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, v. Quoted in Finnegan, 1977:197-8.
55. Finnegan, 1977:120. Finnegan here draws strongly on Carrington, J. 1949. *Talking Drums of Africa*. London: Carey Kingsgate Press. See also Okpewho, 1992:253-61.
56. See Kawada, in Tokumaru and Yamaguti (eds.), 1986:158.
57. Okpewho, 1992:253.
58. Lord, 1968:68. Quoted in Okpewho, 1983:95.
59. Okpewho, 1983:95.
60. Nattiez (1990:47-8) puts it as follows: *just as music is whatever people choose to recognize as such, noise is whatever is recognized as disturbing, unpleasant or both*. The border between music and noise is always culturally defined...'. Emphasis original.
61. One could, of course, distinguish between symbolical sound and noise by arguing that the meaning of the latter is not symbolical but iconic; the signifier *resembles* the signified. (See Chapter 3, note 215). Iconicity as such, however, is not a disqualification for being part of a system.
62. Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:60.
63. De Saussure, 1959:107.
64. See Hendricks, 1973:11-47, for a detailed overview of some of these 'tagmemic' approaches. A notable attempt at relating textual form to language, not dealt with here by Hendricks, is that of André Jolles - often regarded, with Propp, as a fore-runner of structuralism - in his *Einfache Formen*. (See Jolles, A. 1956. *Einfache Formen*. Halle: Max Niemeyer). Although this work primarily differentiates between certain verbal genres (conceived of as 'simple forms'), its central thesis, according to Heilna du

Plooy, lies in the view that 'the literary work derives from a basic language construction and that such "language gestures" (*Sprachgebärde*) develop into certain simple forms'. (See Du Plooy, 1985:32. My translation).

65. See, amongst others, Bierwisch, M. 'Poetics and Linguistics', in Freeman, D. (ed.), 1970. *Linguistics and Literary Style*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; Van Dijk, T. 1972. On the Foundation of Poetics: Methodological Prolegomena to a Grammar of Literary Texts. *Poetics* 5:89-123. Referred to in Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:60.
66. Yai, in Barber and De Moraes Farias (eds.), 1989:60. It can be noted that generative theory has had some influence in musicology, notably in the area of formulating musical 'universals'. In this perspective what is characteristic of all musics is sought not on the level of the 'immanent structure' (i.e. what is heard), but, as Nattiez (1990:65) puts it, 'in the *behaviors* associated with sound phenomena'. (Emphasis original). In other words, the universal has, strictly speaking, nothing to do with sound, but with an envisaged 'deep structure' of music in which, in the words of John Blacking, 'there are elements that are common to the human psyche, although they may not appear in the surface structures'. This inevitably recalls Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence. (See Blacking, J. 1973. *How Musical is Man?* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 108-9. Quoted in Nattiez, 1990:65). Durant (1984:15) in this regard mentions 'techniques developed in transformational grammar in order to explore, in perception of musical forms, regularities that might indicate more general, innate cognitive capabilities'.
67. See Allen and Van Buren (eds.), 1971:5.
68. Allen and Van Buren (eds.), 1971:6.
69. Allen and Van Buren (eds.), 1971:3.
70. See Chomsky, N. 1968. *Language and Mind*. New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1. Quoted in Blakar, in Mey (ed.), 1979:131.
71. Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, p.3-4. Quoted in Harris, 1980:18.
72. Harris, 1980:18.
73. Wardhaugh, 1993:22. Chomsky characterizes as follows: '[l]et us define the "deep structure of a sentence" as that aspect of the [syntactic description] that determines its semantic interpretation, and the "surface structure of a sentence" as that aspect of the [syntactic description] that determines its phonetic form'. (Allen and Van Buren (eds.), 1971:12).
74. See Allen and Van Buren, 1971:7-16.
75. Harris, 1980:18. See also Culler, in Fabb *et al*, 1987:174. Emphasis added.
76. For a problematization of this definition, see Levinson, 1983:5-32. Definitional questions presented by pragmatics to a large degree revolve around, on the one hand, its relation to linguistic structure (aspects of contextual performance may be grammatically 'encoded') and, on the other, its relation to semantics. (The same sentence may, depending on the context in which it is an *utterance*, have different meanings). See also Akmajian *et al*, 1990, where pragmatics is defined (p.308) as 'the study of language use in relation to context, and in particular the study of linguistic communication'.
77. Levinson, 1983:35.
78. See, in this regard, Blakar, in Mey (ed.), 1979.
79. Finnegan, in Tokumaru and Yamaguti (eds.), 1986:74. Finnegan refers, amongst

- others, to Tedlock, D. 1977. Towards an Oral Poetics. *New Literary History* 8:507-19; and to Ben-Amos, D. and K. Goldstein (eds.), 1975. *Folklore: Performance and Communication*. The Hague: Mouton.
80. This distinction relates to one of the definitions of pragmatics dealt with by Levinson, namely that '[p]ragmatics is the study of all those aspects of meaning not captured in a semantic theory'. (Levinson, 1983:12). Central to it is the notion of 'non-natural meaning' elaborated by Paul Grice, in terms of which meaning depends on the *intention* of the speaker - hence 'speaker-meaning'. (Levinson, 1983:16-7; see Grice, P. 1957. *Meaning*. *Philosophical Review* LXII:377-88).
 81. A distinction between sign and sentence-based linguistics is drawn in Tobin, 1990:23-44.
 82. See Tedlock, D. 1983. *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 205. Quoted in Culler, in Fabb *et al*, 1987:176. These features are also frequently called 'supra-segmental'. (Blakar, in Mey (ed)., 1979:153).
 83. Levinson, 1983:17.
 84. See Akmajian *et al*, 1990:309-11. This model fails to account for things like ambiguity, figurative and indirect use of language, etc.
 85. Akmajian *et al*, 1990:316. Emphasis original.
 86. Akmajian *et al*, 1990:330. Emphasis added.
 87. Levinson, 1983:16. Emphasis original.
 88. Searle, 1969:71. See, for example, Wittgenstein, L. 1958. *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, transl. G. Anscombe. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 89. Harris, 1988:97.
 90. The message model's encoding and decoding present themselves in the following way: in the case of the speaker '[a] given concept unlocks a corresponding sound-image in the brain' which is transferred 'to the organs used in producing sounds'. In the case of the hearer 'the process is reversed: from the ear to the brain, [takes place] the physiological transmission of the sound-image; in the brain, the psychological association of the image with the corresponding concept'. (De Saussure, 1959:11-2).
 91. Harris, 1988:99.
 92. Harris, 1988:103.
 93. Harris, 1988:7-17.
 94. Harris, 1988:29. Emphasis added.
 95. Despite De Saussure's rejection of the possibility of pre-linguistic thought (see 1959:29-30), it must not be forgotten that his postulation of the linguistic system as sole object of linguistics has the methodological effect of setting linguistics *apart* from psychology. (See De Saussure, 1959:16). His association of thought with language on the level of speech is therefore not to be confused with *mentalism*.
 96. Searle, 1969:19.
 97. Searle, 1969:20.
 98. Seeger, 1977:39.
 99. Searle, 1969:20.
 100. Searle, 1969:25.
 101. See De Saussure, 1959:67-70.
 102. Seeger, 1977:19.
 103. Levinson (1983:40) mentions the need for 'independent evidence' that speech acts like

- ordering, questioning and asserting are, indeed, 'predominant in social life' of the world's various language communities.
104. This view, in terms of which metaphors are basically 'inessential frills', is, according to Andrew Ortony, ultimately grounded in the philosophy of logical positivism. (See Ortony, in Ortony (ed.), 1979:1-2).
 105. A particular example of such metaphors can - perhaps - be found in the following description by Jousse (1990:47) with regard to the expression of anger in Hebrew. It entails 'a host of picturesque expressions, all of which are borrowed from physiological traits. On one occasion the metaphor will be taken from the rapid animal breathing that accompanies passion...; on another from heat..., or from boiling...; on one occasion from the actions of loudly snapping something...; on another from quivering...'. (See also Alant, 1994:48-9).
 106. Max Black's notion of an 'emphatic metaphor' can also be relevant here. (See Black, in Ortony (ed.), 1979:26).
 107. Harris, 1980:16. Emphasis added.
 108. De Saussure, 1959:65-7.
 109. Harris, 1980:17.
 110. Harris, 1980:16. Derrida's remark 'that there is no linguistic sign before writing' can, outside the universalising ('metaphysical') slant he gives the notion of writing, no doubt be understood in this sense as well. (Derrida, 1967:26. My translation).
 111. Harris, 1980:17. De Saussure, of course, did not live to see the development of sound spectrography. Harris suggests that the latter may well have influenced his characterization of the sign. (See also Chapter 4, note 124).
 112. Nattiez, 1990:62. Durant (1984:3) describes music as 'often valued as a kind of immediate sensuality, seemingly something literally breathed into the body from the air'.
 113. Court, 1976:14. Emphasis original. My translation.
 114. This is particularly strongly asserted by Jon Michael Spencer, who sees rhythm (characterized as 'multimetricity, cross-rhythms, and asymmetrical patterning') as the distinctive quality of African culture, serving as a kind of cultural / spiritual rallying point for all people of African descent (defined along overtly racial lines). (Spencer, 1995:xvi).
 115. See Blesh, 1946:18-23.
 116. See Fónagy, in Revel and Rey-Hulman (eds.), 1993:59-61.
 117. See Meschonnic, in Revel and Rey-Hulman (eds.), 1993:86.
 118. See Roudiez, L. 'Introduction', in Kristeva, 1984:4-5; also Kristeva, 1984:26-7. (See also Chapter 4, notes 57 - 58).
 119. Kristeva, 1984:63.
 120. See for example, Kristeva, 1984:70.
 121. Meschonnic, in fact, describes Kristeva's conception of rhythm as a 'spatialization [*mise en espace*] of the body by means of the voice'. This amounts to an 'irrationalisation' of the voice which is also, according to him, a 'desubjectivation', a movement away from meaning. (See Meschonnic, in Revel and Ulman (eds.), 1993:92-3).
 122. This may well offer some kind of explanation for the frequently-remarked 'indirectness' of oral cultures. (See for example Jousse, 1990:56). It will also have important consequences for the notion of communication. (See notes 98 and 102).
 123. Selden, 1985:85.

124. See Derrida, 1967.
125. Hall, 1987:119.
126. Nattiez, 1990:58.
127. Nattiez, 1990:8.
128. See Peirce, C. 1931-1935. *Collected Papers* vols. 1-6, eds. Hartshorne and R. Weiss. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Peirce, C. 1931-1935. *Collected Papers* vols. 7-8, ed. T. Burks. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Referred to in Nattiez, 1990, particularly pp.3-8.
129. Nattiez, 1990:7. Emphasis original.
130. Nattiez, 1990:37. Emphasis original.
131. Nattiez, 1990:108.
132. De Saussure, 1959:68.
133. Nattiez, 1990:7.
134. Nattiez, 1990:124. Emphasis original. Nattiez (1990:8) gives the following definition of a 'symbolic form': 'a sign, or a collection of signs, to which an infinite complex of interpretants is linked'. In the light of the rigid distinction between symbol and sign drawn by De Saussure (1959:36) - the former has an analogical connection to what it represents, the latter a purely arbitrary one - it may be useful, within the present context, to remark that Nattiez's frequent differentiation between symbol and sign is of little consequence from our point of view, there being no actual theoretical difference in their respective relation to meaning.
135. Tobin distinguishes between 'message' (relating to the pragmatic function) and 'invariant meaning' (relating to the value of the linguistic sign at the level of the linguistic system) to account for polysemy from a Saussurian perspective. He illustrates that same words generally taken to have different meanings (cases of homonymy / polysemy) can, in fact, be shown to have the *same* invariant meaning. This to a large extent counters the frequent argument that the Saussurian sign does not allow for the occurrence of polysemy and homonymy. (See Tobin, 1990:51-8).
136. See, for example, Nattiez's critique of Eco (Nattiez, 1990:19-28), in which he denies the possibility of integrating the Saussurian and Peircian models of the sign: '[m]eaning cannot simultaneously be both the relationship between signifier and signified (the first step in a chain of interpretants) *and* a fixed, stable position within a *system*'. (Emphasis added).
137. Tarasti, 1978:30. See Boilès, C. 1973. *Les chants instrumentaux des Tepehua: un exemple de transmission musicale de signification. Musique en jeu* 12.
138. See De Saussure, 1959:32-4. This is sometimes called the 'phonemic' system.
139. Nattiez, 1990:81.
140. See Nettl, 1964:102.
141. See Martinez, 1980:16. Roy Harris (1980:24-9) however problematizes this particular 'design feature' of language, arguing that, depending on the prior definitions one has in regard to them, non-meaningful and meaningful units can be found in similar relations in non-linguistic, and indeed non-human, means of communication.
142. See for example Ruwet, N. 1972. *Langage, musique, poésie*. Paris: Seuil. Referred to in Court, 1976:13. Court, in fact, finds a *kind of* 'dual articulation' in music to the extent that musical sound as culturally organized system can be said to 'derive' from the fundamental sounds of nature.
143. See Benveniste, E. 1969. *Sémiologie de la langue. Semiotica* 1:1-12, 127-35. Referred

- to in Nattiez, 1990:115-6.
144. Nattiez, 1990:116.
 145. See Francès, R. 1958. *La perception de la musique*. Paris: Vrin, 299. Quoted in Nattiez, 1990:118-9.
 146. Nattiez, 1990:121.
 147. Nattiez, 1990:122.
 148. Nattiez, 1990:110. Nattiez mentions a type of meaning that one could label 'formalist-expressive' which, though referring to emotion (strictly speaking extra-musical), regards the latter as *intrinsic* to music. See in this regard Hanslick, E. 1854. *Du beau dans la musique*. Paris: Macquet.
 149. Nattiez, 1990:111.
 150. See Austerlitz, R. 1983. Meaning in Music: Is Music like Language and If So, How? *American Journal of Semiotics* 2,3:1-12, pp.4 and 6. Quoted in Nattiez, 1990:117.
 151. Kawada, in Tokumaru and Yamaguti (eds), 1986:161.
 152. Mounin characterizes as symbolical 'all acts of mental substitution, that is, the tendency, associated naturally or conventionally with a given object or situation, to use all other objects of perception as susceptible to substitution for that object or situation, whenever that object or situation is difficult or impossible to grasp'. (See Mounin, 1970. *Introduction à la sémiologie*. Paris: Minuit. Quoted in Nattiez, 1990:35).
 153. One may object that this sounds suspiciously like a speculation on the mental substitutions of somebody *without* vision. But remember we are only talking about language, and about mental substitutions that are language-based. There are countless highly complex processes and systems of mental substitution that are *not* language-based, as our argument against the notion of the interdependence of language and thought suggests. (See Chapter 4). These are visual / spatial, and are in no way determined or influenced by orality and its auditory conception of language. (See Chapter 4, note 178).
 154. See Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*.
 155. Culler, in Fabb and Durant (eds), 1987:183.
 156. Of which Feld (1982) gives a particularly rich account. See also Pensom, 1982:196, where the *Chanson de Roland* is described as an 'aural text'. Linguistic meaning is shown to be foregrounded in the metrical properties of the *Chanson*, which are, of course, 'extra-linguistic' and which Pensom frequently interprets by analogy with the structures of classical music. This aural style is, however, essentially exploited as a function of 'auditory memory', in other words, as mnemonic device (p.197).
 157. By which I do not wish to imply that no attempt should be made to also *apply* the ideas set out in this chapter to examples of actual oral material. The first step in such an initiative would be to determine how symbolical sound is evaluated in a given culture, followed by a consideration of the ways in which such an evaluation may be influenced by linguistic experience. This will be the real project of an aural linguistics, a project to which the present study would hopefully serve as a Prolegomenon.

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