

# TELLING IS LISTENING

*An unpublished piece in which I return to and go on from some of the themes and speculations of the essay "Text, Silence, Performance" in my previous nonfiction collection Dancing at the Edge of the World.*

## MODELS OF COMMUNICATION

In this Age of Information and Age of Electronics, our ruling concept of communication is a mechanical model, which goes like this:

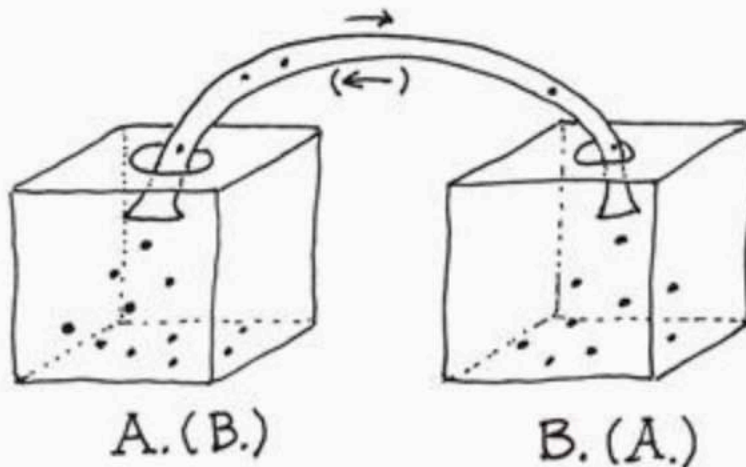


Fig. 1.

Box A and box B are connected by a tube. Box A contains a unit of information. Box A is the transmitter, the sender. The tube is how the information is transmitted—it is the medium. And box B is the receiver. They can alternate roles. The sender, box A, codes the information

in a way appropriate to the medium, in binary bits, or pixels, or words, or whatever, and transmits it via the medium to the receiver, box B, which receives and decodes it.

A and B can be thought of as machines, such as computers. They can also be thought of as minds. Or one can be a machine and the other a mind.

If A is a mind and B a computer, A may send B information, a message, via the medium of its program language: let's say A sends the information that B is to shut down; B receives the information and shuts down. Or let's say I send my computer a request for the date Easter falls on this year: this request requires the computer to respond, to take the role of box A, which sends that information, via its code and the medium of the monitor, to me, who now take the role of box B, the receiver. And so I go buy eggs, or don't buy eggs, depending on the information I received.

This is supposed to be the way language works. A has a unit of information, codes it in words, and transmits to B, who receives it, decodes it, understands it, and acts on it.

Yes? This is how language works?

As you can see, this model of communication as applied to actual people talking and listening, or even to language written and read, is at best inadequate and most often inaccurate. We don't work that way.

We only work that way when our communication is reduced to the most rudimentary information. "STOP THAT!" in a shout from A is likely to be received and acted on by B—at least for a moment.

If A shouts, "The British are coming!" the information may serve as information—a clear message with certain clear consequences concerning what to do next.

But what if the communication from A is, "I thought that dinner last night was pretty awful."

Or, "Call me Ishmael."

Or, "Coyote was going there."

Are those statements information? The medium is the speaking voice, or the written word, but what is the code? What is A *saying*?

B may or may not be able to decode, or "read," those messages in a literal sense. But the meanings and implications and connotations they contain are so enormously complex and so utterly contingent that there is no one right way for B to decode or to understand them. Their meaning depends almost entirely on who A is, who B is, what their relationship is, what society they live in, their level of education, their relative status, and so on. They are full of meaning and of meanings, but they are not information.

In such cases, in most cases of people actually talking to one another, human communication cannot be reduced to information. The message not only involves, it *is*, a *relationship* between speaker and hearer. The medium in which the message is embedded is immensely complex, infinitely more than a code: it is a language, a function of a society, a culture, in which the language, the speaker, and the hearer are all embedded.

"Coyote was going there." Is the information being transmitted by this sentence—does it "say"—that an actual coyote actually went somewhere? Actually, no. The speaker is not talking about a coyote. The hearer knows that.

What would be the primary information obtained by a hearer who heard those words spoken, in their original language and in the context where they might have been spoken? Probably something like: Ah, Grandfather is going to tell us a story about Coyote. Because "Coyote was going there" is a cultural signal, like "Once upon a time": a ritual formula, the implications of which include the fact that a story's about to be told, right here, right now; that it won't be a factual

story but will be myth, or true story; in this case a true story about Coyote. Not a coyote but Coyote. And Grandfather knows that we understand the signal, we understand what he's saying when he says, "Coyote was going there," because if he didn't expect us to at least partly understand it, he wouldn't or couldn't say it.

In human conversation, in live, actual communication between or among human beings, everything "transmitted"—everything said—is shaped as it is spoken by actual or anticipated response.

Live, face-to-face human communication is intersubjective. Intersubjectivity involves a great deal more than the machine-mediated type of stimulus-response currently called "interactive." It is not stimulus-response at all, not a mechanical alternation of precoded sending and receiving. Intersubjectivity is mutual. It is a *continuous interchange* between two consciousnesses. Instead of an alternation of roles between box A and box B, between active subject and passive object, it is a *continuous intersubjectivity that goes both ways all the time*.

"There is no adequate model in the physical universe for this operation of consciousness, which is distinctively human and which signals the capacity of human beings to form true communities." So says Walter Ong, in *Orality and Literacy*.

My private model for intersubjectivity, or communication by speech, or conversation, is amoebas having sex. As you know, amoebas usually reproduce by just quietly going off in a corner and budding, dividing themselves into two amoebas; but sometimes conditions indicate that a little genetic swapping might improve the local crowd, and two of them get together, literally, and reach out to each other and meld their pseudopodia into a little tube or channel connecting them. Thus:

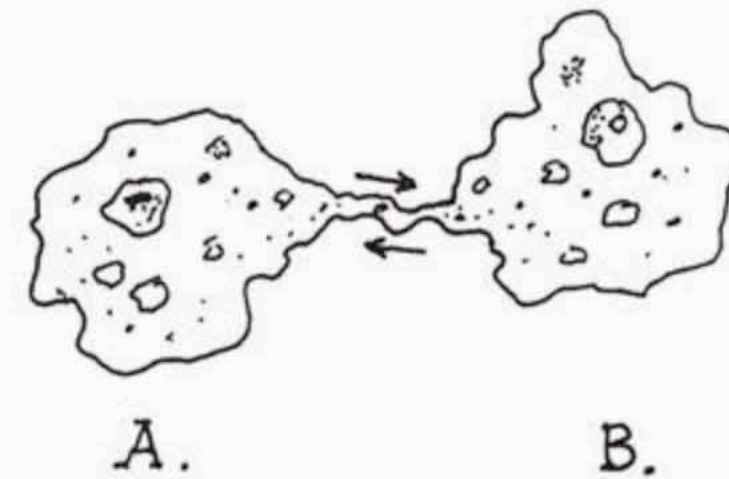


Fig. 2.

Then amoeba A and amoeba B exchange genetic "information," that is, they literally give each other inner bits of their bodies, via a channel or bridge which is made out of outer bits of their bodies. They hang out for quite a while sending bits of themselves back and forth, mutually responding each to the other.

This is very similar to how people unite themselves and give each other parts of themselves—inner parts, mental not bodily parts—when they talk and listen. (You can see why I use amoeba sex not human sex as my analogy: in human hetero sex, the bits only go one way. Human hetero sex is more like a lecture than a conversation. Amoeba sex is truly mutual because amoebas have no gender and no hierarchy. I have no opinion on whether amoeba sex or human sex is more fun. We might have the edge, because we have nerve endings, but who knows?)

Two amoebas having sex, or two people talking, form a community of two. People are also able to form communities of many, through sending and receiving bits of ourselves and others back and forth con-

tinually—through, in other words, talking and listening. Talking and listening are ultimately the same thing.

It is literacy that confuses this whole issue of communication by language. I don't want to get into what literacy does to the human mind, though I highly recommend Walter Ong's books on the subject. All I want to emphasise at this point is that literacy is very recent, and still not at all universal. Most people during most of the history of mankind have been, and still are, oral/aural people: people who speak and listen. Most people, most of the time, do not put words in writing, do not read, are not read to. They speak and they listen to speech.

Long, long after we learned how to talk to each other, millennia or hundreds of millennia later, we learned to write down our words. That was only about thirty-five hundred years ago, in certain restricted parts of the world.

Writing existed for three millennia, important to powerful people, seemingly unimportant to most people. Its use and uses spread. Then came printing.

With printing, literacy quite soon developed from a special craft, useful to privileged men to increase their knowledge and power, into a basic tool, a necessity for ordinary existence for ordinary people, particularly if they were seeking not to be poor and powerless.

And so effective is printed writing as a tool that those of us who use it have tended to privilege it as the most valid form of human communication. Writing has changed us, the way all our tools change us, till we have come to take it for granted that speech doesn't matter; words don't count till they're written down. "I give you my word" doesn't count for much until I've signed the contract. And we judge an oral culture, a culture that does not use writing, as essentially inferior, calling it "primitive."

Belief in the absolute superiority of literacy to orality is ingrained in

us literates—not without cause. Illiterates in a literate culture are terribly disadvantaged. We have arranged our North American society over the last couple of centuries so that literacy is a basic requirement for full membership.

If we compare literate and nonliterate societies, it appears that literate societies are *powerful* in ways nonliterate societies aren't. Literate culture is *durable* in ways nonliterate culture is not. And literate people may have more *breadth* and *variety* of knowledge than nonliterate people. They are better informed. They are not necessarily wiser. Literacy does not make people good, intelligent, or wise. Literate societies are superior in some ways to nonliterate societies, but literate people are not superior to oral people.

What do anthropologists, who ought to know better, mean when they speak of "the primitive mind," or *La Pensée Sauvage* (how should Lévi-Strauss's title be translated—"How Savages Think"?)—What is a "savage," what does "primitive" mean? Almost inevitably it means "preliterate." "Primitives" are people who haven't learned to write—yet. They can only talk. They are therefore inferior to anthropologists and others who can read and can write.

And indeed literacy confers such power on its owners that they can dominate illiterates, as the literate priestly and noble castes dominated illiterate medieval Europe; as literate men dominated women as long as women were kept illiterate; as literate businessmen dominate illiterate inner-city people; as English-literate corporations dominate illiterate or non-English-literate workers. If might makes right, orality is wrong.



These days, not only do we have literacy to confuse this whole issue of

human communication by language, we also have what Ong calls “secondary orality.”

Primary orality refers to people who talk but don’t write—all the people we refer to as primitive, illiterate, preliterate, and so on. Secondary orality comes long after literacy, and derives from it. It is less than a hundred years old. Secondary orality is radio, TV, recordings, and such: in general, what we call “the media.”

A good deal of media presentation has a script and is therefore primarily written and secondarily oral; but these days, its most meaningful distinction from primary orality is that the speaker has *no present audience*.

If instead of writing this, I were giving a speech, your being in the same room listening to me would be a necessary condition of my talking. That’s primary orality: a *relationship* of speaker and listeners.

President Lincoln stands up and begins, “Fourscore and seven years ago,” to a crowd of more or less interested people at Gettysburg. His voice (said to have been rather thin and soft) makes a relationship between him and them, establishing community. Primary orality.

Grandfather tells a Coyote tale to a circle of grown-ups and kids on a winter evening. The story affirms and explains their community as a people and among other living beings. Primary orality.

The anchorman on the six o’clock news stares out of the box, not at us, because he can’t see us, because we aren’t where he is, or even when he is; he is in Washington, D.C., two hours ago, reading what he says off a running tape. He can’t see us or hear us, nor can we see or hear him. We see and hear an image, a simulacrum of him. There is no relationship between us and him. There is no interchange, no mutuality, between us and him. There is no intersubjectivity. His communication goes one way and stops there. We receive it, if we choose to. Our behavior, even our presence or absence, makes absolutely no

difference to what he says or how he says it. If nobody was listening he would not know it and would go right on talking exactly the same way (until his sponsors found out, eventually, from the Nielsen ratings, and fired him). Secondary orality.

I read this speech into a recorder and it is taped; you buy it and listen to it. You hear the sound of my voice, but we have no actual relationship, any more than we would if you were reading the piece in print. Secondary orality.



Like the telephone, private writing, the personal letter, the private e-mail, is direct communication—conversation—mediated by technology. Amoeba A extends a pseudopodium and sends little bits of itself out to a distant amoeba B, who incorporates the material sent out and may respond to it. The telephone made immediate conversation at a distance possible; in written letters, there is an interval between messages; e-mail allows both interval and immediate exchange.

My model of printed public writing and of secondary orality is a box A shooting information out into a putative spacetime that may or may not contain many box Bs to receive it—maybe nobody—possibly an Audience of Millions (see [figure 3](#)).

Conversation is a mutual exchange or interchange of acts. Transmission via print and the media is one-way; its mutuality is merely virtual or hopeful.

Yet local, immediate community can be built upon both literacy and secondary orality. Schools and colleges are centers of the printed word, whether on paper or electronic, and are genuine if limited communities. Bible-study groups, reading clubs, fan clubs, are small printed-word-centered subcommunities, where, as in colleges, people talk

about what they read. Newspapers and magazines create and foster opinion groups and facilitate communities based on information, such as sports fans comparing scores.

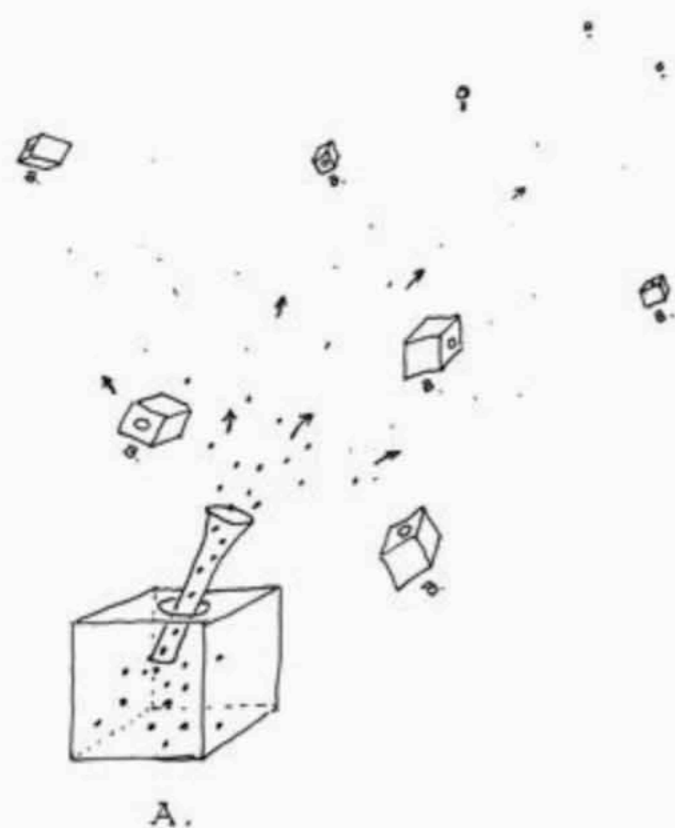


Fig. 3.

As for the audience of secondary orality—aside from that factitious entity the “studio audience,” which is actually part of the performance—many people watch certain TV programs not because they particularly like them but because they can talk about them with other people at work next day: they use these programs as social bonding material. But the media audience is for the most part a tenuous, widely scattered semicommunity or pseudocommunity, which can be estimated and gauged only by market research and opinion polls, and becomes actual only in political situations such as a polling place on

election day, or in the response to a terrible event.

The community created by printing and by secondary orality is not immediate; it is virtual. It can be enormous—the size of America. Indeed it may be literacy more than any other factor that has enabled or coerced us to live in huge nation-states instead of tribes and city-states. Possibly the Internet will allow us to outgrow the nation-state. Although the Global Village McLuhan dreamed of is at present a City of Night, a monstrous force for cultural reductionism and internationally institutionalised greed, who knows? Perhaps we shall soar electronically to some arrangement that works better than capitalism.

But so vast a community must remain more concept than tangible fact. Written word, printed word, reproduced speech, filmed speech, the telephone, e-mail: each medium links people, but it does not link them physically, and whatever community it creates is essentially a mental one.

Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediment. It is marvelous that we can talk to living people ten thousand miles away and hear them speak. It is marvelous that by reading their words, or seeing a film of them, we may feel communion even with the dead. It is a marvelous thought that all knowledge might be accessible to all minds.

But marriage is not of minds only; and the living human community that language creates involves living human bodies. We need to talk *together*, speaker and hearer here, now. We know that. We feel it. We feel the absence of it.

Speech connects us so immediately and vitally because it is a physical, bodily process, to begin with. Not a mental or spiritual one, wherever

it may end.

If you mount two clock pendulums side by side on the wall, they will gradually begin to swing together. They synchronise each other by picking up tiny vibrations they each transmit through the wall.

Any two things that oscillate at about the same interval, if they're physically near each other, will gradually tend to lock in and pulse at exactly the same interval. Things are lazy. It takes less energy to pulse cooperatively than to pulse in opposition. Physicists call this beautiful, economical laziness mutual phase locking, or entrainment.

All living beings are oscillators. We vibrate. Amoeba or human, we pulse, move rhythmically, change rhythmically; we keep time. You can see it in the amoeba under the microscope, vibrating in frequencies on the atomic, the molecular, the subcellular, and the cellular levels. That constant, delicate, complex throbbing is the process of life itself made visible.

We huge many-celled creatures have to coordinate millions of different oscillation frequencies, and interactions among frequencies, in our bodies and our environment. Most of the coordination is effected by synchronising the pulses, by getting the beats into a master rhythm, by entrainment.

Internally, a sterling example is the muscle cells of the heart, every single one of them going *lub-dub, lub-dub*, together with all the others, for a lifetime.

Then there are the longer body rhythms, circadian cycles, that take a day to happen: hunger, eating, digesting, excreting; sleeping and waking. Such rhythms entrain all the organs and functions of body and mind.

And the really long bodily rhythms, which we may not even recognise, are connected with our environment, length of daylight, season, the moon.

Being in sync—internally and with your environment—makes life easy. Getting out of sync is always uncomfortable or disastrous.

Then there are the rhythms of other human beings. Like the two pendulums, though through more complex processes, two people together can mutually phase-lock. Successful human relationship involves entrainment—getting in sync. If it doesn't, the relationship is either uncomfortable or disastrous.

Consider deliberately synchronised actions like singing, chanting, rowing, marching, dancing, playing music; consider sexual rhythms (courtship and foreplay are devices for getting into sync). Consider how the infant and the mother are linked: the milk comes before the baby cries. Consider the fact that women who live together tend to get onto the same menstrual cycle. We entrain one another all the time.

How does entrainment function in speech? William Condon did some lovely experiments which show, on film, that when we talk our whole body is involved in many tiny movements, establishing a master rhythm that coordinates our body movements with the speech rhythms. Without this beat, the speech becomes incomprehensible. "Rhythm," he says, is "a fundamental aspect of the organisation of behavior." To act, we have to have the beat.

Condon went on to photograph people listening to a speaker. His films show listeners making almost the same micromovements of lips and face as the speaker is making, almost simultaneously—a fiftieth of a second behind. They are locked into the same beat. "Communication," he says, "is like a dance, with everyone engaged in intricate, shared movements across many subtle dimensions."

Listening is not a reaction, it is a connection. Listening to a conversation or a story, we don't so much respond as join in—become part of the action.

We can entrain without seeing the speaker; we entrain with each

other when talking on the telephone. Most people feel that telephoning is less satisfactory than being with one another, that communication through hearing alone is less fully mutual, but we do it quite well; teenagers, and people with cell phones in BMWs in heavy traffic, can keep it up indefinitely.

Researchers believe that some autism may be connected with difficulty in entraining—a delayed response, a failure to catch the rhythm. We listen to ourselves as we speak, of course, and it's very hard to speak if we can't find the beat: this might help explain autistic silence. We can't understand other people if we can't get in sync with the rhythm of their speaking: this might explain autistic rage and loneliness.

Rhythm differences between dialects lead to failures in understanding. You need practice, you need training to entrain with a way of speech you aren't familiar with.

But when you can and do entrain, you are synchronising with the people you're talking with, physically getting in time and tune with them. No wonder speech is so strong a bond, so powerful in forming community.

I do not know to what extent people watching movies and TV entrain with speakers; since no mutual response is possible, it seems likely that the intense involvement characteristic of conversation would be much weakened.

## ORAL SPACE AND ORAL TIME

Seeing is analytical, not integrative. The eye wants to distinguish objects. The eye selects. Seeing is active, outgoing. We look *at*. We focus *on*. We make distinctions easily so long as the field is clear. The visual ideal is clarity. That's why glasses are so satisfactory. Seeing is yang.

Hearing is integrative; it unifies. Being on opposite sides of the head, ears are pretty good at telling where a sound comes from, but though the mind, the attention, can focus hearing, can listen *to*, the ear essentially hears *from*: it can't focus narrowly and can select only with effort. The ear can't stop hearing; we have no earlids; only sleep can shut off our reception. While we are awake our ears accept what comes. As this is likely to be noise, the auditory ideal is harmony. That's why hearing aids, which increase noise, are so often unsatisfactory. Hearing is yin.

Light may come from vast distances, but sound, which is only vibrations in air, doesn't travel far. Starlight carries a thousand lightyears; a human voice can carry a mile or so at most. What we hear is almost always quite local, quite nearby. Hearing is an immediate, intimate sense, not quite as close as touch, smell, taste, proprioception, but much more intimate than sight.

Sound signifies event. A noise means something is happening. Let's say there's a mountain out your window. You see the mountain. Your eyes report changes, snowy in winter, brown in summer, but mainly just report that it's there. It's scenery. But if you *hear* that mountain, then you know it's doing something. I see Mount St. Helens out my study window, about eighty miles north. I did not hear it explode in 1980: the sound wave was so huge that it skipped Portland entirely and touched down in Eugene, a hundred miles to the south. Those who did hear that noise knew that something had happened. That was a word worth hearing. Sound is event.

Speech, the most specifically *human* sound, and the most significant *kind* of sound, is never just scenery, it's always event.

Walter Ong says, "Sound exists only when it is going out of existence." This is a very complicated simple statement. You could say it also about life. Life exists only as it is going out of existence.



Consider the word *existence*, printed on a page of a book. There it sits, all of it at once, nine letters, black on white, maybe for years, for centuries, maybe in thousands of copies all over the world.

Now consider the word as you speak it: “existence.” As soon as you say “tence,” “exis” is already gone, and now the whole thing’s gone. You can say it again, but that is a new event.

When you speak a word to a listener, the speaking is an act. And it is a mutual act: the listener’s listening enables the speaker’s speaking. It is a shared event, intersubjective: the listener and speaker entrain with each other. Both the amoebas are equally responsible, equally physically, immediately involved in sharing bits of themselves. The act of speaking happens NOW. And then is irrevocably, unrepeatably OVER.

Because speaking is an auditory event, not a visual one, it uses space and time differently from anything visual, including words read on paper or on a monitor.

“Auditory space has no point of favored focus. It is a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing.” (Ong)

Sound, speech, creates its own, immediate, instantaneous space. If we shut our eyes and listen, we are contained within that sphere.

We read printed on a page, “She shouted.” The page is durable, visible space containing the words. It is a thing not an act. But an actor shouts, and the shout is an act. It makes its own, local, momentary space.

The voice creates a sphere around it, which includes all its hearers: an intimate sphere or area, limited in both space and time.

Creation is an act. Action takes energy.

Sound is dynamic. Speech is dynamic—it is action.

To act is to take power, to have power, to be powerful.

Mutual communication between speakers and listeners is a powerful act. The power of each speaker is amplified, augmented, by the entrainment of the listeners. The strength of a community is amplified, augmented by its mutual entrainment in speech.

This is why utterance is magic. Words do have power. Names have power. Words are events, they do things, change things. They transform both speaker and hearer; they feed energy back and forth and amplify it. They feed understanding or emotion back and forth and amplify it.

## ORAL PERFORMANCE

Oral performance is a particular kind of human speech. It is to an oral culture what reading is to a literate culture.

Reading is not superior to orality, and orality is not superior to reading. The two behaviors are different and have extremely different social effects. Silent reading is an implacably private activity, which while it is occurring separates the reader bodily and psychically from the people nearby. Oral performance is a powerful bonding force, which while it is occurring bonds people physically and psychically.

In our literate culture oral performance is seen as secondary, marginal. Only readings by poets of their own works and theatrical performance by actors may be perceived as having literary power comparable to written work read in silence. But oral performance in an oral culture is recognised as a powerful act, and for that reason it is always formal.

The formality is on both sides. The orator or storyteller tries to meet and fulfill certain definite expectations in the audience, gives formal cues to the audience, and may respond to formal cues from the audience. The audience will show attentiveness by certain expected behaviors: by keeping a posture of attention; in some cases, by total

silence; more often, by formulaic responses—Yes, Lord! Hallelujah!—or formulaic words or affirmations: ah—hai—hah—enh. . . . In poetry readings, little quiet gasps. In comic performances, laughter.

Oral performance uses time and space in a particular way of its own. It creates its own, temporary, physical, actual spacetime, a sphere containing a speaking voice and listening ears, a sphere of entrained vibration, a community of body and mind.

This might be the sphere that holds a woman telling her children the tale of the Three Bears—a small, quiet, deeply intimate event.

It might be the smoky sphere that holds a stand-up comedian extemporising to an audience in a bar—a seemingly informal but, if successful, intensely and genuinely interactive event.

It could be the sphere holding a revivalist preacher speaking his hellfire sermon to a tent revival—a big, noisy, yet highly formalised, powerfully rhythmic event.

It could be the sphere that held Martin Luther King Jr. and the people who heard him say “I have a dream.”

That formal oratorical event can be echoed, can be shadowed, can be recollected, by films and recordings. Images of it can be reproduced. But it cannot. An event does not happen twice. We do not step twice into the same river.

Oral performance is irreproducible.

It takes place in a time and place set apart: cyclic time, ritual time, or sacred time. Cyclical time is heartbeat, body-cycle time; lunar, seasonal, annual time: recurrent time, musical time, dancing time, rhythmic time. An event does not happen twice, yet regular recurrence is the essence of cyclic time. This year’s spring is not last year’s spring, yet spring returns always the same. A rite is performed anew, every year, at the same time, in the same way. A story is told again and again, and yet each new telling is a new event.

Each oral performance is as unique as a snowflake, but, like a snowflake, it will very likely be repeated; and its principle internal organisational device is repetition. Rhythm is basic to oral performance, and it is chiefly obtained by recurrence, by repetition.

From now on I am going to be repeating myself about repetition. One reason there is a lot of repetition in oral performance, as in ordinary speech, is the need for redundancy. The reading eye can turn back and reread and make certain; therefore, in writing you need only say a thing once, if you say it well. So we writers are taught to be afraid of repeating ourselves, to shun even the appearance of repetition. But in speaking, words go by very quickly and are gone; they fly away, they are wingéd words. Speakers know that they may need to bring the whole flock back round again more than once. Orators, reciters, storytellers shamelessly say the same thing several times, maybe varying the words maybe not. Redundancy is not a sin in oral performance, as it has become in writing, but a virtue.

Speakers also use repetition because it is the best device they have to organise, to shape and structure, what they are saying. Experienced listeners in an oral culture—such as a three-year-old who gets read to or told stories a lot—expect repetition. They wait for it. Repetition both raises expectations and fulfills them. Minor variation is expected, but extreme variation, though it adds surprise, which may be welcomed, more likely will be rejected as frivolous or corrupt. Tell it the *right* way, Mama!

Repetition may be of a single word; of a phrase or sentence; of an image; of an event or action in the story; of a character’s behavior; of a structural element of the piece.

Words and phrases are the most likely to be repeated verbatim. The

simplest example of this is starter words, words used to begin a sentence. In the King James Bible, it's *And*. *And the Lord smote the idolaters. And the idols were destroyed. And the people lamented in the streets.*—In a Paiute story, a lot of sentences begin with *Then*—*yaisi* in Paiute. *Then Coyote did this. Then Grey Wolf said this. Then they went in.*—*And* and *Yaisi* are key sounds, cues to the listener that a new sentence, a new event, is under way; also they may provide a tiny mental resting place for the teller or reader of the story. These repeated starter words provide a beat, not a regular, metric beat, because this isn't poetry, it's narrative prose, but just the same a beat at intervals: a pulse that follows a pause, a sound that follows a silence.

In spoken narrative, silence plays a huge active part. Without silence, pauses, rests, there is no rhythm. Only noise. Noise is by definition meaningless, sound without significance. Significance is born of the rhythmic alternation of void and event—pause and act—silence and word. Repeated words are markers of this rhythm, drumbeats to which the story dances.

For centuries, those huge poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* did not exist in writing but only in oral performance. The version we have is the one that happened to get written down. We know now that a tremendous proportion of the language of the epics consists of stock phrases, repeatable terms, used where they were needed to fill out the meter or to take up slack while the performer thought of what Achilles or Odysseus did next. No performer could possibly remember the whole thing verbatim. Every performance was half recital and half improvisation, using that vast stock of ready-made phrases. So the wine-dark sea and rosy-fingered dawn are little metrical bricks, fitted in wherever the hexameter fell short. They are also, of course, beautiful images. Does it lessen them that they are repeated where the

meter needs them? Do we not in fact greet their repetition with pleasure, as we do the repetition of a musical phrase or motif in a sonata or symphony?

Repeated actions in oral narrative are essential structural elements. They are usually varied, partial repetitions, building up expectation towards fulfillment. The first son of the king goes out and behaves badly to a wolf and the dragon eats him. The second son of the king goes out and behaves badly to a deer and the dragon eats him. The third son of the king goes out and rescues the wolf from a trap, frees the deer from a snare, and the wolf and the deer tell him how to kill the dragon and find the princess, and he does, and they get married and live happily ever after.

As for repeated behavior of characters, contemporary novelists are likely to consider predictability to be a fault, a flaw, in their invention. Repeated or predictable behavior, however, is what constitutes a character—in life or novels. If it's highly, obviously predictable, the character is a stereotype or caricature; but the gradations are endless. Some people find all Dickens's characters mere stereotypes. I don't. When Mr. Micawber says "Something is certain to turn up," the first time, it's insignificant; the second time, it's revealing; by the third or fourth time he's said it in the teeth of total financial disaster, it's significant and funny; and by the end of the book, when all his hopes have been savagely defeated, "Something is certain to turn up" is both funny and profoundly sad.

I use an example from literature, not from oral texts, because Dickens's relationship to orality and oral performance is very close, maybe closer than any other novelist since 1800 except, possibly, Tolkien. The repetitive behavior of Dickens's characters is more characteristic of oral narrative than of the novel in general. Delicate probings into the convolutions of the private psyche in a unique situation aren't

well suited to tales told aloud. Characters of oral narratives may be vivid, powerful, worthy of a great deal of thinking about: Achilles, Hector, Odysseus, Roland and Oliver, Cinderella, the Queen and Snow White, Raven, Br'er Rabbit, Coyote. They are not one-dimensional; their motivations may be profoundly complex; the moral situations they are in are of wide and deep human relevance. But as a rule, they can be summed up in a few words, as characters in novels cannot. Their name may even be exemplary of a certain kind of behavior. And they can be summoned into the hearer's imagination by the mere mention of characteristic behavior: Then said wily Odysseus, thinking how to save himself . . . Coyote was going along and he saw some girls by the river. . . . We've heard about Odysseus being wily. We've heard about Coyote seeing some girls. We know, in general, what to expect. Odysseus will get away with it, but at a cost; he will be damaged. Coyote won't get away with it, will be made a complete fool of, and will trot away perfectly unashamed. The storyteller says the name Odysseus, or the name Coyote, and we the listeners await the fulfillment of our expectations, and that waiting is one of the great pleasures life offers us.

Genre literature offers us that pleasure. That is perhaps the central reason for the obstinate popularity of the romance, the mystery, science fiction, and the western, despite decades of critical and academic ignorance and contempt. A genre novel fulfills certain generic obligations. A mystery provides some kind of puzzle and its resolution; a fantasy breaks the rules of reality in a significant way; a romance offers the frustration and fulfillment of a love story. On the lowest plane, genre offers the kind of reliability hamburger chains offer: If you pick up a Louis L'Amour western or the eighteenth mystery in a series, you know what you're going to get. But if you pick up Molly Gloss's *The Jump-Off Creek*, a western, or Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*,

a fantasy, or Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, a science fiction novel, although each reliably fulfills the obligations of its genre, it is also utterly unpredictable, a novel, a work of art.

Above the level of the merely commercial, in the realm of art, whether it's called mainstream or genre fiction, we can fulfill our expectations only by learning which authors disappoint and which authors offer the true nourishment for the soul. We find out who the good writers are, and then we look or wait for their next book. Such writers—living or dead, whatever genre they write in, critically fashionable or not, academically approved or not—are those who not only meet our expectations but surpass them. That is the gift the great storytellers have. They tell the same stories over and over (how many stories are there?), but when they tell them they are new, they are news, they renew us, they show us the world made new.

It does not matter, on this level, whether the story is told and heard, or written and read.

But if it is written and read in silence by the reader, there is some awareness in many of us that a dimension of the experience of story has been lost: the aural dimension, the whole aspect of the *telling* of the story and the *hearing* of it in a certain time and space, by a certain person, now—and maybe over again in times to come. Sound recordings, popular as they have become, supply the sound of the words and sentences, the telling voice, but it is not a living voice, it is a reproduction—a photograph not a living body. So people seek the irreproducible moment, the brief, fragile community of story told among people gathered together in one place. So children gather at the library to be read to: look at the little circle of faces, blazing with intensity. So the writer on a book tour, reading in the bookstore, and her group of listeners reenact the ancient ritual of the teller at the center of the circle. The living response has enabled that voice to speak. Teller and lis-

tener, each fulfills the other's expectations. The living tongue that tells the word, the living ear that hears it, bind and bond us in the communion we long for in the silence of our inner solitude.

## THE OPERATING INSTRUCTIONS

*I wrote this piece in 2000 as a talk to a group of people interested in local literacy and literature.*

A poet has been appointed ambassador. A playwright is elected president. Construction workers stand in line with officer managers to buy a new novel. Adults seek moral guidance and intellectual challenge in stories about warrior monkeys, one-eyed giants, and crazy knights who fight windmills. Literacy is considered a beginning, not an end.

. . . Well, maybe in some other country, but not this one. In America the imagination is generally looked on as something that might be useful when the TV is out of order. Poetry and plays have no relation to practical politics. Novels are for students, housewives, and other people who don't work. Fantasy is for children and primitive peoples. Literacy is so you can read the operating instructions.



I think the imagination is the single most useful tool humankind possesses. It beats the opposable thumb. I can imagine living without my thumbs, but not without my imagination.

I hear voices agreeing with me. "Yes, yes!" they cry—"the creative imagination is a tremendous plus in business! We value creativity, we reward it!" In the marketplace, the word *creativity* has come to mean the generation of ideas applicable to practical strategies to make larger