

ORALITY & LITERACY

by John E. Becker

Not long ago we were quite confident about how to go about thinking. If we wanted to think about some fundamental value—say, justice—we charted the course of our exploration over the broad and silent ocean of historical and philosophical knowledge accumulated in libraries. Within the last few decades, however, we have discovered, to our dismay, that knowledge has burst the boundaries of print to attack not only eyes, but ears, touch—the whole sensorium. Ease of travel and the wonders of electronics have launched us into an informational universe of too many dimensions. We can be almost anywhere. We can watch space lift-offs and half-an-hour later watch magnified human sperm travel into the womb and beyond. We can “see” the color-coded temperature of Jupiter and look back from beyond the Earth. We can see and hear war happen.

In simple defense we may be tempted to revolt. We may see so many points of view that we tremble at the risk of losing our own—or, worse, try to assert our own against all others with unrestrained infantile will. We may, on the other hand, be tempted to shrug it all off and turn to purely personal concerns. Or we may, like so many of the young, sit fingering the keyboards of our computers, entranced by our electronic manipulation of faery land through the magic casement of a CRT. We have so far passed the point of usable knowledge—we never were really content with merely useful knowledge—that we find ourselves baffled at the problem of making sense.

We must make sense. We must live; we must live together; we must try not to destroy one another. We cannot let the barrage of knowledge or the infinite variety of its forms fail to aid us in the intensifying quest for justice. Yet though we have sought to define justice for millennia, we are less confident than ever of success. It is not just that so many lack the will to pursue justice; the thing itself seems to grow more and more protean, disappearing and reappearing constantly in new and disturbing shapes. Marxist justice offends us with its callous disregard of individual life lived now; yet we realize that the gentlemanly justice of the imperial past was, at best, obtuse. The justice of the Enlightenment was the product of a naive, sometimes cruel commitment to reason. Dante's Christian justice is too hard to adapt to a secular society. In our chaos of constantly reshaped visions of life, a mere

definition of justice seems beyond the range of our capacities.

We may perhaps allay our frustration by moving for a moment to a higher level of abstraction. Instead of asking whether any or all of these bits and types of information help us to establish justice, we may ask, rather, about the economy of the mind, which is presently in a state of such dizzying expansion. It was not always so. Up until recent centuries knowledge was in anxiously short supply. Once men thought without writing; all thinking was talking, and all the information there was was in the walking human memory. At a later time men wrote, but these were scribes only; there was no readily teachable alphabet for the ordinary man of affairs to learn and use. Then there were manuscripts, but no indexes to them; you still couldn't look anything up. Large libraries, at last, filled up with indexed books, but there were not enough scholars to keep things from getting lost in them. Recently there were no computer searches and no rapid transmittals of information via satellite and phone lines. It is at least plausible to suggest that centuries of such extreme changes in the form, abundance, and availability of information must have profoundly changed thinking itself.

ORAL NOETICS

Was early Greek philosophy, for instance, abstract? Rhys Carpenter has shown that Greek culture until about 700 was purely oral. Eric Havelock, a classical scholar, went on to ask what might have been the shape of oral thought.

One of the most moving passages in the *Iliad* is the scene at the end of the story in which Priam, coming secretly at night behind the Greek lines to the lodge of Achilles, pleads for the body of Hector, his son. He wins his suit, and Achilles and the old king eat together before they sleep. Achilles sleeps in the arms of Briseis, the girl taken from him and then restored, untouched, by Agamemnon. Each of the two men in the lodge faces imminent death in his own archetypal way: Priam, an old king whose city is about to fall to the avenging Greeks; Achilles, the young warrior aware that his fate is an early death. In this scene life is given its barest outlines: food, sex, the expectation of death, and a reverence for the body of a dead hero that overcomes tribal hostility. It is a climactic and tragic vision of justice. We realize, however, that Briseis is not Achilles' bride. She is a battle-prize, stolen and awarded to Achilles as the hero of a bandit raid. This may be heroic justice; it is not our justice. Yet the story

creates a context within which we can feel the human thirst for justice momentarily assuaged, quiet on the brink of death. It is tragic and, despite all, it is right. This is what poetry should do. Given its enduring power to do it, generations of students have been at least momentarily disconcerted by Plato's antipathy in *The Republic* to poets in general and to Homer in particular. But the problem was not usually faced. Homer, after all, was "literature" and Plato was "philosophy."

Havelock in *Preface to Plato* focused his attention precisely at this point of scandal. His first reflection was that Plato was not attacking poetry as we know it. Perhaps the difference lay somewhere in the nature of oral culture; and so, Havelock tells us, he turned to the work of Milman Parry on the composition of the Homeric poems.

Parry had shown by the empirical evidence of contemporary Yugoslavian singers as well as by a close statistical study of the language of Homer that the Homeric poems were improvised in the presence of an audience. Somehow the realization that a single poet could improvise so vast a work as the *Iliad*, maintain its remarkable unity and its profound artistic control while composing under the immediate pressure of a listening audience, alerted scholars to the profound difference between our thinking and the thinking of such a poet.

The demands of on-the-spot composition, as Parry and others described it, required poets to have not a vocabulary of words but of formulas, metrically arranged groups of words ready at hand to emerge out of the rhythmic intoxication of the poetic moment. Stories were composed under the powerful control of virtually unconscious mythic story-patterns and built of modular setpieces of traditional and familiar structure: the arming of a warrior, the speech before a battle, the battle-curse, the list of ancestors. And all of this was held in memory by virtue of traditional patterning and the excitement of narrative.

Nothing was questioned or questionable. Oral cultures were tradition-bound and knowledge was kept alive by communal performance, not by questions. For oral cultures, though they may have been free of many of the anxieties of modern man, were intensely anxious about what they knew. What they did not repeat over and over again simply vanished. They tapped the source of cultural understanding by throwing themselves into the rhythmic stream of narrative. Poetic events and situations, laden with feeling, became memorable and thereby morally normative.

This, then, is the noetic world that Plato wished to displace, a world where knowledge was situational, non-analytic, inconsistent, and communal, where poets were dramatic mimics, assuming the roles and personalities successively of warriors, villains, gods. It is easy for us, for instance, to distinguish between the evil character played by an actor in a play and the actor's personal character offstage. But we know plays as momentary experiences within a large panorama of cultural expressions that include a long tradition of religious and philosophical reflection. For the Homeric singer, by contrast, men, including poets, were only what poets sang them to be. Culture was poetically encoded in the young by continuous recitation. We would call it brainwashing or subliminal suggestion—except that there was little rational consciousness to slip it under. Poetic incantation *was* consciousness.

There had been earlier movements toward a more abstract mode of understanding the world. Hesiod had moved away from purely narrative form by incorporating his vision of the world into a divine genealogy. We may understand this more easily perhaps by reflecting on a more familiar example: the difference between chapter 1 and chapter 2 of the biblical book of Genesis. In chapter 2, the more ancient passage, we have true narrative; Adam and Eve undergo a "movement of spirit," from innocence to sin; they discover that they are naked. But chapter 1, which may have been composed as late as after the exile of the Jews, though sounding like a story, is not. There is an extrinsic ordering of God's actions by days of the week. The intrinsic principle of order is schematic: the division of chaos into light and dark; of water into wet and dry; and then the creation of the various classes of things, each according to its kind. We are here at the dawn of an abstractive access to knowledge—division and classification, where things do not change into other things, as in the mythological universe, but exist according to their own natures.

By the time of Socrates and Plato there had been alphabetic writing for several centuries. But the important fact was not the availability of the alphabet to a few writers but the slow emergence of an audience beginning to be accustomed to the objectivity of written thoughts—thoughts out there, examinable, to be juxtaposed and analyzed for consistency. This kind of thinking is articulated by the young men in Book I of *The Republic*, who challenge Socrates to make a case for justice, but not as their parents or the poets had done—as a necessary evil that must be practiced because it prevents conflict or that rewards one with honor and reputation. They demand to know if justice is *in itself* worth its pursuit, apart from any extrinsic rewards. This may seem to us a priggish and adolescent purism, but it is so only because we fail to recognize the radical novelty of trying to think about *anything* in itself. In a narrative world, nothing was anything "in itself." The demand for an idea of justice *in itself* is a protest against situational thinking, an act of the individual struggling to establish the ground of independent judgment and shaking off the power of communal tradition.

Socrates, by asking each speaker to repeat himself and explain what he meant, shifted human thinking away from its passive immersion in the syntax of narrative and toward the syntax of dialectic, an argumentative advance toward a stable vision of truth. This, according to Havelock, was the birth of reasoning and the beginning of our quest for justice as the product of careful thought rather than the emotional, violent eye-for-an-eye morality of tribal and intercity warfare.

THE NOETIC OF PRINT

Walter Ong has been developing the implications of the orality-literacy tension in essays and books over the last twenty-five years. Ong chose his scholarly vantage point at the second great crisis of Western thought: the moment between the Renaissance and the Reformation when the oral word finally found its way into print. Ong shows us that Plato's great turnabout did not effect an instant shift to literate thinking. Homer was not followed by Plato alone. The Sophists taught a very practical sort of oral art: rhetoric—how to argue the pros and cons of anything and,

in Plato's terms, how to make the worse appear the better. Rhetoric eventually achieved educational dominance, while Plato's form of argument—dialectic, or logic—eventually ground to a halt, tangled in the complexities of language.

Rhetoric remained practical during the time of the Roman Republic, when public debate was functional; it continued as the basic form of education even in the time of the Empire, when public debate disappeared. In the Middle Ages, however, another factor intruded into the educational picture. Spoken Latin settled out into the various vernaculars, and the language survived only among the learned. The first task of education became the teaching of Latin. No longer a mother tongue with its roots in the unconscious, it became a kind of puberty rite for young boys—their introduction into the impersonal adult world of affairs via the physical and mental punishment required to drive the language into their heads. Even rhetoric began to suffer under this fundamental necessity of teaching Latin. Boys were first taught Latin grammar. Rhetoric was next, but was really only advanced Latin. Finally they were given a dose of simplified logic, or dialectic.

Knowledge, meanwhile, continued to be oral and to function in terms of personal confrontations. At its best it was the revelation of personal interiors; at its worst, merely argument out of loyalty to a person or a school of thought. Neutrality and objectivity were not considered values because there were simply no objective ways of settling disputes.

The scientific ideal of objective observation arose, according to Ong, by a shift in the sensorium from the oral to the visual. We see this shift most vividly in Ong's study of Peter Ramus, a very influential educationist who became, in 1551, the first regius professor of eloquence and philosophy in Paris. Ramus institutionalized the terrible simplifications that had taken place in logic and rhetoric since Plato. The progress of little boys through grammar and rhetoric, said Ramus, was proper because rhetoric and poetry were but watered-down dialectic, and little boys were not yet ready for the truth. But the dialectic Ramus spoke of was not the heady argumentation of Aquinas and others. Ong makes it clear that the master-of-arts schooling of which Ramus was a product and a professor and which was by far the most commonly followed course of study steered a wide course around theological thought of any kind and attempted, as philosophy, only a smattering of ethics and almost no metaphysics. What Ramus came up with, then, was an educational theory that sounded as if it were solidly based on philosophy but which was actually a kind of rhetoric masquerading as dialectic. And the rhetoric was basically the old technique of "invention"—finding and organizing information—with, however, a new twist.

Ramus's new idea of the old invention was grotesquely visual. His "life" of Cicero, for instance, was arranged in a set of neat dichotomies diagrammed on a single page. Division one: *life/death*. *Life* is divided into *birth/parentage* on the one hand and *teaching/studies/actions* on the other. These were not just handy chapter headings, however, but assurances of exhaustive coverage. And so *actions* were arranged in a chronological order: *childhood, adolescence, manhood, old age*. Within *adolescence* there were three classes of *actions*, and so on through several more levels of bracketed distinctions. This was the Ramist sense of a

"life." It was the old rhetorical concern to manage information, though not in a way to help the memory, but to assure completeness. It fit perfectly, however, with Ramus's sense of "method." All thought, to Ramus, made one movement and one movement only—from the general to the particular.

We have come half-circle, then, from the narrative logic of the Homeric singer. To Ramus there was no such thing as narrative; it was but a concealed form of the "dialectical" movement from general to particular abstractions.

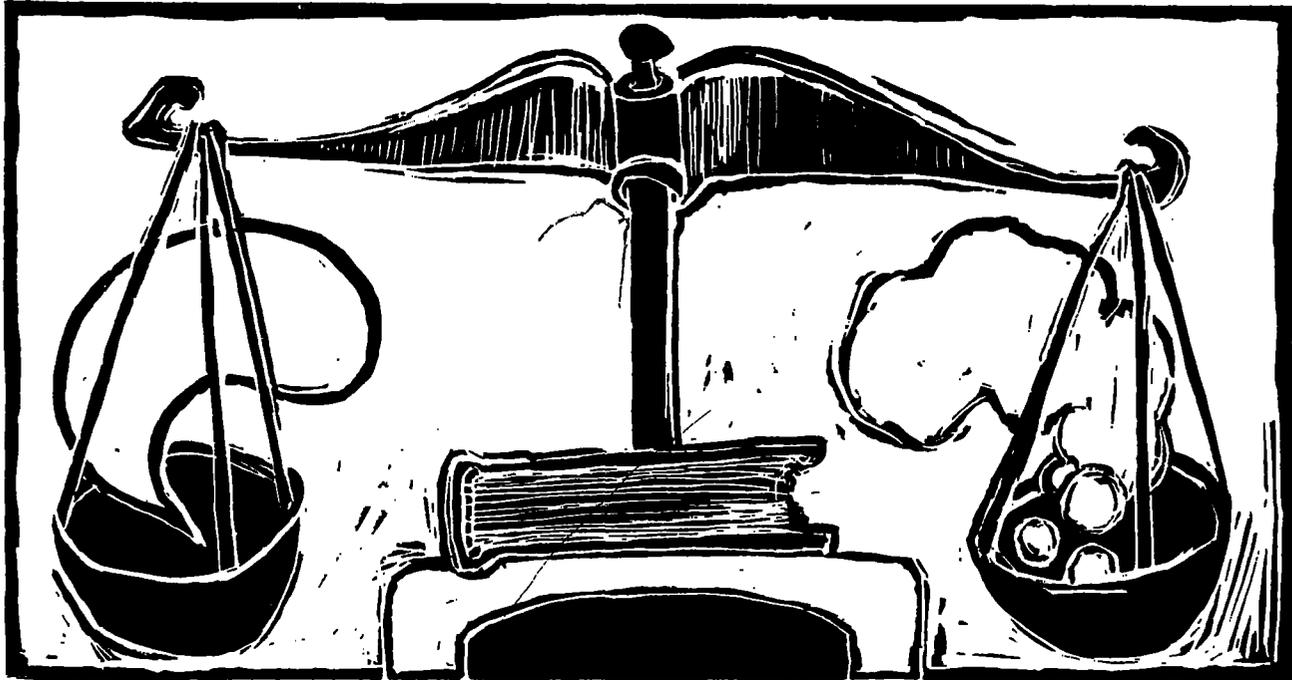
It is easy to make Ramus's simplifications look silly; but the strange simplifications of Ramus's thought are very important in the history of thinking. Ramus's elaborate diagrams are symptomatic of a shift in the sensorium away from hearing to the authority of the visual and to the idea of knowledge as contained primarily in books. The ancient manuscript culture had knowledge on record, but there was no really efficient way to retrieve it quickly in quantity. When print locked information into exactly the same place upon the page in thousands of copies of legible type, knowledge came suddenly to the fingertips, and men acquired an intellectual security about what they knew that they had never had before. We can briefly sketch some of the eventual results: (1) Confident in the possession of old knowledge, men began to consider the unknown, taking pleasure in the wonder of it or horrifying themselves with its terrors. We call this romanticism. (2) Men looked for new ways to do things, secure in the sense that the old technology was stored and could be fallen back on if necessary. (3) Science shifted away from personal argument. Observation could be stored. Things acquired objectivity. Disputation itself became absorbed into the process of objective reasoning. (4) Thought shifted decisively to the private self, where one exercised, eventually, not the public art of dialectic but the private art of thinking.

CLOSURE

Perhaps one of the most important and subtle consequences of both Ramism and the development of the book culture we have known is the sense of closure, something that seems to be directly responsible for some of our present confusion about justice. Ramus's naive confidence in conceptual divisions led him to the further assertion that it was a simple matter to define and divide the disciplines and that, by doing so, one kept them clear and distinct and utterly separate. As each discipline asserted its self-sufficiency and freedom to determine its own object of study, teleology became a bad word. Sciences were to be value-free. The study of human public purposes followed Machiavelli into a pseudo-science pretending to detached observation of mass human behavior. Physical scientists were not to be held responsible for the human consequences of their discoveries and, moreover, should not allow themselves to be distracted by matters irrelevant to the detached pursuit of their discipline.

But not only were the disciplines conceived of as closed and self-sufficient systems, books themselves contributed to the ideal of closure. The fact that they locked thought into space induced a sense of finality. Protestantism erected the Book into the ultimate divine authority. The idea of doing the definitive book, getting a total world vision into a book, has obsessed writers right up to our own time.

We are lucky that this sense of closure, which has af-



Annie Alteman

fects all thinking from literary theory to theology and physics, is dissipating under the force of new awareness created by the power of electronic communication. The work of Havlock and Ong is itself a product of this transformation of the disciplines from closed to open systems of thought. Medical research, literature, astronomy and particle physics, biology, economics, anthropology are all interconnected now in ways that would have seemed unreal and even fantastic in the intellectual atmosphere of universities after the Second World War. And so we are back where we began, contemplating the baffling wonders of electronic culture.

We are still very much Romantics and we love to scare ourselves with the horrors we have created, to tremble at the thought of a world taken over by computers, or to amuse ourselves with fantasies of electronic fairylands. There is a more fundamental way of characterizing our electronic age, however. It is, according to Ong, an age of secondary orality. The term is drab; the idea is exciting. Beneath all the wonder and excitement is the heightened possibility of renewed human intercourse: Human beings, with the help of electronic communication, have more immediate ways to converse with one another and thereby recognize one another as human. Neither the media nor the computer will replace the human brain. They will not even replace the book. As writing intensified dialogue in the time of Plato, electronic culture intensifies the need for intelligent written communication today. Because electronic culture has relieved us, at yet another stage, of our anxieties about knowledge, we may now turn more freely to one another and try to make more sophisticated and sympathetic contact.

What the electronic age is most fundamentally, then, is a radical heightening of the possibilities of self-recognition and a broadening of the ability to recognize others. This may involve several consequences. It may increase the polemical nature of human life, since polemics is basic to

the personalism of primary oral culture. But because of the reflective power inherent in the development of objective thought and complex imagination, it may also allow us to substitute the talking of persons in a human community for the blind insensitivity of the chessboard wars of closed-system nation-states. A value-free science created the atomic bomb. A commitment to amoral force in international politics used it. But self-doubt and anguish emerged as the consequences were vividly observed, recorded, and studied. And the lesson was repeated and brought electronically home over the long, long years of Vietnam. The pursuit of justice, in other words, though it is every bit as difficult as we began by saying it was, at least no longer can be shunted off into a number of value-free disciplines to be studied by scholars and ignored by politicians.

We may even have reason for profounder hopes. The universe of print—the visual, Newtonian universe of a silent God who arranges but does not talk—may refuse to remain silent. As thinking and writing come out of the closet to terminate in talk, we will perhaps reactivate our sense of hearing. Certainly we are able now to rediscover the value and the danger of communal expression and to appreciate in a new way the power of ritual. Communal-ritual actions may still, as they did in Nazi Germany, lead to terrifying mass enslavement—an enslavement immeasurably beyond the scope of the intoxication induced by the epic singers of the past. But they may also, if we utilize our critical awareness, allow us to accept and find sane ways of expressing our wish for community.

Finally, in ways more profoundly disturbing than Homer described in the scene between Achilles and Priam, we all stand facing death—a death engendered by our own technology. But that same technology, by its splendid liberation of the word, gives us the best chance we have had to understand ourselves and what we must do to pursue justice and peace. [WV]