Chapter 8

Constructing oral tradition: the origins of the concept in Enlightenment intellectual culture

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[M]any circumstances of those times we call barbarous are favourable to the poetical spirit. That state, in which human nature shoots wild and free, though unfit for other improvements, certainly encourages the high exertions of fancy and passion ... An American chief, at this day, harangues at the head of his tribe, in a more bold and metaphorical style, than a modern European would adventure to use in an epic poem.¹

This statement from Hugh Blair's *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763) reflects an important reassessment of oral tradition among scholars during the middle decades of the eighteenth century. It was during this period that scholars began to acknowledge that a society without writing could, as Blair indicates, function as an organized political culture with a tradition of common values and practices. Such a culture, it was thought, could also nourish a 'poetical spirit' that equalled and even excelled the literary resources of European nations in their modern, developed state. These views marked a radical departure from the generally negative opinion of pre-literate cultures that prevailed in the Renaissance and the seventeenth century. In *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (1625), a major source of information about non-European peoples in the early century, Samuel Purchas echoed the conventional view that alphabetical writing marked the main distinction between civilized peoples and 'barbarians': 'amongst Men, some are accounted Ciuill, and more both Sociable and Religious, by the Vse of *letters* and Writing, which others wanting are esteemed British, Sauage, Barbarous.'² According to Purchas and his contemporaries, illiterate 'savages' lacked history, government, poetry or really 'society' of any kind.

Between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, in short, Western attitudes to non-literate cultures transformed fundamentally, paving the way for our modern appreciation of oral tradition as a legitimate basis for poetical expression and social organization. What were the historical factors that instigated this change? Elsewhere, I have traced the concept of oral tradition to theological debates between Catholics and Protestants concerning the authority of customary or 'unwritten' practices and doctrines.³ In this chapter, I will argue that the emergence of this concept in the Enlightenment was linked to a much wider revolution of ideas about language, history and culture. Increasingly, scholars began to recognize the predominant and, in some respects, damaging influence of writing over their conceptions of language and society. They began to recognize more clearly the special powers of speech not possessed by written language, a development that led to a deeper appreciation of so-called 'primitive' language in non-literate societies.

Readers will recognize the irony of this development: as European society became *more* literate, it gained an ever sharper awareness of oral cultures and their special characteristics. Despite being surrounded by a predominantly oral culture, medieval authors were virtually unconscious of 'orality' as a special state of either language or society. They failed to distinguish between oral and literate societies, for they did not conceive of speech and writing as inherently dissimilar forms of language. Relying on Aristotle's *De interpretatione* (largely as explained in the late Roman tradition of Porphyry and Boethius), they regarded writing as an 'image' of spoken language, which in turn was an 'image' of 'mental experience'. Aristotle's definition implied no deficiency in the power of writing to convey either words or thoughts. Consider, for example, the following paraphrase of Aristotle's model (as presented by Boethius) by William of Ockham, the great nominalist philosopher of the early fourteenth century:

According to Boethius in the first book of *De interpretatione*, language is threefold: written, spoken and conceptual ... A written term [*terminus scriptus*] is part of a proposition written on some material, and is or can be seen with the bodily eye. A spoken term is part of a proposition uttered with the mouth and able to be heard with the bodily ear. A conceptual term is a mental content or impression which naturally possesses signification or consignification, and which is suited to be part of a mental proposition and to stand for what it signifies.⁴

According to Ockham, the difference between mental, verbal and written discourse consisted merely in the *medium* of transmission. This understanding of language justified the medieval practice of treating the propositions of written logic as the key to understanding the structure of reality itself. They assumed that language, written or spoken, mirrored the

world, and that the syntax of written Latin revealed mysteries of predication immanent in the very things of nature.

Hence, contrary to what might be assumed, the failure to distinguish clearly between oral and written language is especially characteristic of European scholarship *before* the advent of print culture. It was, indeed, only after Gutenberg that scholars gained a strong awareness of the special characteristics of oral and written language. With the new humanist concern for popular education (leading, as Lawrence Stone argued, to an educational 'revolution'), scholars began to worry about the predominance of illiteracy and the alleged deficiency of oral language and its associated habits of thought.⁵ For example, the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives lamented the wandering of minds undisciplined by the practice of writing:

[T]here are some people who do not understand how to write down what they would be well able to speak; this happens, as far as I can discover, because a wandering and unsettled mind is capable of sufficient attention for speech, but not for understanding what is written; it cannot support the strain of collecting and, as it were, compelling itself.⁶

Vives's conviction in the value of literacy, highly typical of humanist educators,⁷ was further promoted in Northern Europe by Protestantism, with its demand for the individual reading of Scripture and its decreased value for the oral transmission of Christian practice. The steep, even meteoric, rise in literacy in Britain and other parts of Northern Europe during the sixteenth century arose from both these sources.⁸ The expanding middle-classes sent their boys to new grammar schools; universities entered an era of flourishing expansion. Everywhere educated people began to associate illiteracy with ignorance, superstition and social inferiority.

Influenced by the same movement of ideas, Renaissance authors began to differentiate more clearly between societies with writing and those without. Their conception of language gained a temporal dimension virtually absent from medieval thought: because humanists thought that the invention of writing had inaugurated progress towards reason, civil order and religious enlightenment, they characterized non-literate people as embodying an *original* state of pre-literate barbarity. Accounts of the New World often included references to the childish amazement of native peoples at the writing of the Europeans, for the alphabet seemed to exemplify, more than other inventions, the technical superiority of the conquering culture. As Roger Williams wrote in his *Key to the Language of America* (1643), 'when they talke amongst themselves of the *English* ships, and great buildings, of the plowing of their Fields, and especially of Bookes and Letters, they will end thus: *Manittôwock*. They are Gods.'⁹ The ignorance of oral people with writing was a source of self-congratulatory humour: in a popular story, rehearsed by several authors, an 'Indian slave' steals a gift of figs that he is carrying to a neighbour, along

with a letter explaining the gift. When his theft is exposed by the letter, the lesson is not lost on the slave. The next time, he is careful to hide his master's 'talking paper' under a rock so that it will not see him eating the figs.¹⁰

Yet neither Williams nor the authors who told this story had a full or sophisticated concept of an 'oral tradition': they viewed non-literate peoples simply in contrast to the rationality and order that they closely associated with literacy. In the view of Charles de Rochefort, for example, the peoples of Carribean had no 'tradition' whatsoever: 'indeed these Savages themselves speak not thereof but at adventure, and as people tell stories of what they had seen in dreams, so careless have they been in preserving the tradition of their Origine; and they palpably contradict and confute one the other by the difference of their Relations'.¹¹ Johan de Laet observed similarly of the native people of Newfoundland that they are 'rude & sans civilité, n'ayant nulle religion ou cognoissance de Dieu, nul regime Politique entr'eux'.¹² They 'se gouernent pour la plupart sans loix, sans institutions Politiques à la façon des bestes'.¹³ Travel writers showed some awareness that American and Carribean peoples used songs and dance to preserve the memory of victories and other great events. Moreover, the Aztecs and Incas were widely regarded as being far ahead of other American peoples in possessing at least some form of visual records – 'hieroglyphics' in Mexico and *quippos* in Peru.¹⁴ Nevertheless, most authors stressed, like Francisco Lopez de Gómora, that people without letters were like 'beasts'.¹⁵ Particularly as humans and beasts shared the capacity to make significant sounds, speech was not regarded as the distinctive mark of rationality or even humanness. It was instead writing that marked the line between *animal rationale* and the condition of brutes.

Given the prevailing aesthetic outlook of the Renaissance, there could be little 'poetic' about the language of beasts and savages. Influenced by humanism, with its profound reverence for the *written* traditions of language, authors of the Renaissance regarded poetical language as the last product of linguistic refinement, the highest achievement of an advanced and literate culture. As Walter J. Ong observed, humanists set out to 'to make the measure of all speech a fixed *written* tradition'.¹⁶ It was, for example, the *written* tradition that Italian humanists like Dante, Biondi and Veronese made the model of correct and eloquent Latin, for they denied that the illiterate masses of ancient Rome even knew Latin: they spoke instead some barbarous vernacular.¹⁷ These attitudes continued to shape perceptions of non-literate peoples and cultures in the early eighteenth century. As Jean Terrasson wrote in 1715, 'Language never improves among a savage and barbarous people, who make no other use of it but only to express the Necessities of the Animal Life.'¹⁸ In 1741, John Oldmixon was still referring to the American languages as 'dreadful' and 'barbarous'.¹⁹ Even authors who studied and understood native tongues, like John Williams, had nothing complimentary to say about native

poetry or oratory. While acknowledging that native oratory was 'copious and patheticall',²⁰ Williams regarded books and letters as an important sign of Europeans superiority to Americans in all areas of life.

Obviously, such an understanding of language differed profoundly from the praise of native oratory found in the work of Enlightenment authors like Hugh Blair. During the late eighteenth century, authors increasingly departed in significant ways from a humanist tradition that regarded written tradition as the foundation of literary excellence. But how and when did new ways of conceiving language emerge?

A major development in linguistic thought from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment was increasing awareness of the differing natures and functions of writing and speech. This is a historical development that I have described in detail elsewhere:²¹ for my purposes here, I will review some of the main features of the scholarly process that led to a clearer recognition of the special features of spoken language. As I have contended, grammarians and other scholars before the eighteenth century made no clear distinction between the nature of writing and speech. They tended, indeed, to understand language largely as it was *written*, and placed little significance on those features of language exclusive to speech. This tendency to imagine language entirely through the medium of writing was exemplified by two major branches of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century linguistics. The first was the vigorous campaign to rationalize the orthography of vernacular languages to make writing a more faithful 'copy' of speech. In the works of Sir Thomas Smith, James Hart, Charles Butler, Robert Robinson and others, discrepancies between writing and speech were decried as failures correctable by the reform of spelling. The aim of these authors was to create a script in which 'each simple sound having a proper mark appointed to it selfe, may by the same be as apparently scene to the eye, as the sound it selfe is sensibly discerned by the eares'.²² A second branch of early modern linguistics was the invention of a 'real character' or written language to replace speech for the purposes of international communication and science. The many projects of seventeenth-century scholars – including Francis Lodwick, Cave Beck, George Dalgarno and John Wilkins – envisioned a visual language that mirrored the nature of things more accurately than any existing form of speech.²³

Common among these trends was the assumption that writing can replace speech, for the two media differ essentially in their *means of transmission*, not in their natures. It is significant, therefore, that both these areas of linguistic study became more-or-less defunct after 1700, particularly in Britain. Even some earlier authors had strongly questioned the capacity of any writing to replace speech entirely. The sixteenth-century grammarian Richard Mulcalster, for example, denied that orthography could mirror speech in the way envisaged by contemporaries like Smith and Hart. These objections became more common towards the end of the seventeenth century: in *A Dissertation*

on *Speech* (1700), Conrad Amman elucidated some of the objections to the wide-spread belief in the adequacy of writing to duplicate the nature and function of spoken language. Amman was a teacher of deaf-mute people, and this experience convinced him that any purely visual form of communication was inherently inadequate. First, the sound of speech was far richer and more various than any alphabet: 'many letters have their own compass and peculiar modifications; and the same character, even the same language, is not always pronounced in one and the same manner'.²⁴ Second, speech is the only 'natural' way for human beings to express their thoughts. 'Besides that certain signs, not uttered by the living voice, are liable to deceive', wrote Amman, 'every sincere mind, giving attention to itself when about to converse with another on a serious subject, feels a desire to declare the hidden thoughts of his heart ... by the use of Speech'.²⁵

Readers of Jacques Derrida will remark that Amman's preference for speech over writing was hardly novel, but stems from a tradition at least as ancient as Plato's *Phaedrus*. Indeed, according to Derrida's thesis, 'phonocentrism' and the denigration of writing, represent twin pillars of the entire Western philosophical tradition.²⁶ This claim, despite what is sometimes pretended, relies on much more than an abstract analysis of the structure of signification; it derives much of its supposed authority from a generalized *history* of Western culture, a history that views the Western intellectual tradition as uniformly prejudiced against written language. For defenders of deconstruction, therefore, it is surely a problem that 'phonocentrism' by no means characterized Renaissance and seventeenth-century studies of language: Amman was challenging a very general confidence in written language exhibited, as we have considered, by projects for orthographic reform and a 'real character'. But these attitudes were also in the process of change. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson both ignored projects for a 'real character' to replace speech and declared that projects to reform alphabetical writing were the defunct preoccupation of a previous age.²⁷ Johnson complained in the Preface to his *Dictionary* (1754) that 'penmen' had vitiated language by attempting to duplicate 'the boundless chaos of living speech' in their spellings. These reformers, he argued, forgot that all pronunciations reflect only the temporary habits of a particular time and place, and cannot be preserved as an absolute standard.²⁸ Hence, Johnson's own modest reforms of spelling in his *Dictionary* attempted to strengthen the internal analogies of written English rather than mirror speech. He viewed writing not as a 'copy' of speech, but rather as essentially distinct form of discourse with its own rules and standards.

What Johnson exemplified, in short, was a heightened appreciation that writing and speech were inherently *distinct* modes of communication. Writing and speech certainly influenced each other: indeed, Johnson was among the first to consider how literacy changes and (he believed) improves spoken

language, making it available for study and improvement by ‘poets’, grammarians and lexicographers.²⁹ Such a position is correctly seen as reflecting Johnson’s personal linguistic preference for print over the ‘boundless chaos of living speech’.³⁰ Yet Johnson was saying something more interesting: he was challenging the ancient Aristotelean model of writing as an ‘image’ of speech – a challenge undertaken by many other writers of his generation. Even an author who did not, on the whole, agree with Johnson on linguistic issues, the elocutionist Thomas Sheridan, stressed the essential difference of writing and speech:

These two kinds of language [writing and speech] are so early in life associated, that it is difficult ever after to separate them; or not to suppose that there is some kind of natural connection between them. And yet it is a matter of importance to us, always to bear in mind, that there is no sort of affinity between them, but what arises from habitual association of ideas. Tho’ we cannot so easily separate them in our own minds, yet when we come to separate them in relation to others, we see clearly enough their utter independence of each other.³¹

The point made by Johnson and Sheridan was very modern, anticipating the argument of modern linguists such as Josef Vachek and Roy Harris:³² writing cannot even potentially duplicate the functions of speech, for the two media operate according to different principles. Johnson stressed the inherently fluid and adaptable nature of speech, as opposed to the relative fixity of writing; Sheridan found a major deficiency in the incapacity of writing to express the passions through the oral resources of intonation and gesture. Johnson and Sheridan reflect an important shift in the understanding of the writing and speech: in an age increasingly dominated by writing and print, European scholars were beginning to acknowledge the inherent limitations of what could be achieved by visual language.

This is the crux of my thesis. With this separation of writing and speech in theories of language, European scholars also began to imagine oral and literate cultures as quite separate and dissimilar. Societies without writing, it was thought, retained a language that exhibited all the special powers of speech in their purest form, unchanged by writing. It was even proposed that the language of oral cultures might be *better* for lacking the pervasive influence of writing. This was a controversial point. Many scholars of language, such as Samuel Johnson, stressed that only writing and print could give language stability, coherence and elegance: the speech of oral cultures was unstable, vague and indistinct. But another school of thought contended that the propagation of literacy and print culture had destroyed the expressive force of speech, rendering it toneless and cold. This critique was made in France by Rousseau and in Britain, within a different context, by Thomas Sheridan. In his influential *Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1762), Sheridan complained that ‘some of our greatest men have been

trying to do that with the pen, which can only be performed by the tongue; to produce effects by the dead letter, which can never be produced but by the living voice, with its accompaniments'.³³ Sheridan's goal was to promote a more passionate oratory – the kind of persuasive elocution needed to promote Christianity and political freedom. This kind of oratory could only be achieved if speakers cultivated 'tones' and 'accents'. These qualities were the very 'life, blood, and soul' of language, yet they were 'utterly unnoticed in writing'.³⁴

It was this general disdain for the stultifying influence of literacy, as exemplified by Sheridan, that led to the important reassessment of native oratory that we have already noted in Hugh Blair. Blair's tendency to 'classicize' native Americans, whose style of oratory he compared with the epic, echoed the view of previous authors like Cadwallader Colden, surveyor-general of New York. In *The History of the Five Indian Nations of Canada* (1747), Colden portrayed a chief named 'Dacanesora' who 'had a great Fluency in speaking, and a graceful Elocution, that would have pleased in any Part of the World'.³⁵ Danesora reminded Colden of Cicero: with his noble nose and patrician bearing, he even 'looked' like that Roman orator. Another historian of the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Ferguson, shared Blair's opinion on the 'magnificent beauty' of Indian speech which 'no change of language can improve, and no refinements of the critics reform'.³⁶

These passages reflect an important re-evaluation of oral language and culture in the mid-eighteenth century – a re-evaluation connected with the increasing tendency of linguists and grammarians to separate the functions of writing and speech. Enlightenment authors were contending, in particular, that writing lacked the resources of intonation that gave speech its special passionate force. But this new attention to intonation was not the only factor leading to a new interest in oral language and culture. A greater appreciation for oral cultures was connected as well with the critique of European society that was, indeed, a major characteristic of Enlightenment ideology. In the work of Adam Ferguson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the willingness to acknowledge the advantages of oral societies formed part of a challenge to the injustice and inequality of modern civilization, which both authors regarded as overrun with books and bookish speculation. But similar suspicions with literate society can be found in previous works such as the Baron de Lahontan's *Voyages* (1703), where the fictional Huron chief Adario questions whether 'twere better for the *French* that they were Strangers to Reading and Writing'.³⁷ What has writing done for Europeans, he asks, besides hatch vain disputes and scandals? A similar satire on European literacy is found in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). In Part 4, where Gulliver visits the land of the Houyhnhnms, Swift presents an early vision of an oral tradition: the rational horses in this country 'have no Letters, and consequently, their Knowledge is all traditional'.³⁸ Nevertheless, they remember their history

entirely, for their harmonious society has remained uncluttered by the wars, feuds and other corruptions that fill the history-books of Europe.

Neither Lahontan nor Swift intended to present a serious vision of oral culture. Their purpose was satirical, not anthropological. Nonetheless, their work signals the rise of new perception of non-literate countries as embodying what had been allegedly lost in Europe – innocence, passion and naturalness. Sentimentalized Indians, almost invariably lamenting or dying, became stock figures in poetry. This poetry reflected the supposed virtues of native oratory, simple and passionate, yet filled with bold metaphors redolent of pagan myth and the natural world. Here was how Thomas Warton imagined the language of a native chief in *The Dying Indian* (1747):

The dart of Izdabel prevails! 'twas dipt
In double poison. – I shall soon arrive
At the blest island, where no tygers spring
On heedless hunters; where ananas bloom
Thrice in each moon; where rivers smoothly glide,
Nor thund'ring torrents whirl the light canoe
Down to the sea.³⁹

Warton's poem reflects two significant trends in eighteenth-century poetics. The first was a heightened emphasis on the powerful expression of passion as the major characteristic of poetry. In contrast with neo-classical poets like Boileau or Pope, who described poetry as the 'painting' or 'dress' of thought, the English critic John Dennis maintained that the primary characteristic of poetry was the expression of strong emotions. 'Poetry is Poetry', he wrote, 'because it is more passionate and sensual than Prose.'⁴⁰ This heightened passion inspired the 'bold and figurative' language of poetry: Dennis and other authors of the 'Age of Sensibility' anticipated Wordsworth and the romantics in regarding metaphor as a natural response to states of heightened passion. In this way, we will note, new fashions in poetry and poetics dovetailed with trends in linguistics during the same period: non-literate language was deemed more 'poetic' because, as the grammarians were insisting, only speech could express the sentiments with full force.

A further, closely related, trend exemplified by Warton's poem was 'primitivism' – for 'primitive' people, in the supposed 'childhood' of human development, were surely more inclined to strong passions than civilized people. As Enlightenment philosophers were concluding, these strong passions, and not reason, inspired the first languages.⁴¹ 'Primitive' language was therefore inherently more 'poetic' than modern European languages, which had lost in passion what they had gained in clarity and logic.⁴² This way of understanding the history of language inspired works such as Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1749), which re-interpreted the Psalms and other lyrical parts of the Old Testament as the impassioned

and spontaneous effusions of a primitive people. Moreover, the bold metaphorical style of the Old Testament reflected an essentially *oral* culture where poetic declamation, not writing, was the primary vehicle for cultural authority and memory. As Lowth wrote, 'Poetry was of singular utility, since before any characters expressive of words were invented, at least before they were commonly received, and applied to general use, it seems to have afforded the only means of preserving the rude experience of early times.'⁴³

The significance of Lowth's comments is clear. Most obviously, he was beginning to identify a specifically oral kind of poetry, which he connected with a particularly passionate and metaphorical kind language. More daringly, he was claiming that one of the central texts of the Western tradition, the Old Testament, emerged from this very well of oral eloquence. The Enlightenment had opened the door to a reinterpretation of even sacred texts in the light of contemporary developments in linguistics, philosophy and poetics. And if the Bible could be interpreted as exhibiting traits of oral tradition, it was a short step to re-evaluating the great pagan texts of classical literature in the same way.

At the fountainhead of this pagan tradition was, of course, Homer. Ancient critics of Greek culture, such as the Jewish historian Josephus, had raised the heretical possibility that Homer was illiterate.⁴⁴ This possibility was revived during the *querelle des anciens et modernes* of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Scholars who advocated the claims for modern literature over ancient literature – Claude Perrault, Jean Terrasson, Richard Bentley and others – portrayed Homer as an early and therefore primitive poet in a literary tradition that was essentially progressive. Paradoxically, this originally critical view of Homer as 'primitive' (and therefore inferior to modern authors) later became the inspiration for praising the peculiar beauties of ancient epic poetry. A key work in this re-evaluation was Thomas Blackwell's *An Enquiry into the Life and Times of Homer* (1735), which rehearsed many of the new ideas about the history of language. The first languages, Blackwell conjectured, were emitted in states of strong passion typical of primitive people. They were therefore highly intoned, song-like and figurative, for Homer belonged to an age still influenced by the first verse. He was not utterly barbaric, for his work shows the literary polish gained only by some degree of civilization or 'policy'. Nevertheless, the special power of the Homeric epic, its '*Original, amazing, metaphorical Tincture*', reflects the unique energy of language in its earliest state.⁴⁵

Significantly, Blackwell did not try to argue that Homer was illiterate or belonged to an entirely oral culture: such a proposal still strained the credulity of scholars raised on the belief that only writing could preserve a substantial body of knowledge with any fidelity. Even in Blackwell's Scotland, where new ideas of the Enlightenment were accepted more readily than in England, scholars developed the concept of oral tradition with slowness and caution.

An important text in this development was *The Poems of Ossian* (1762–63) by the Highland scholar James Macpherson, who may well have trained under Blackwell at Marischal College in Aberdeen. Macpherson claimed that he had reconstructed the work of a great Highland bard, Ossian, from fragments preserved in the memories of ordinary people around Scotland. That such a substantial body of poetry – including two epics and other poems – could survive merely by oral transmission was indeed a claim of arresting novelty and interest. Influenced by prevailing notions of ‘primitive’ verse, Macpherson attempted to capture the flavour of oral recitation, its vivid metaphors, epithets and song-like cadences. Anticipating the modern discoveries of Milman Parry, Macpherson maintained that the very form of Ossianic verse had a mnemonic function that aided its survival in unwritten tradition.⁴⁶

Yet even Macpherson began recede from these strong claims when they came under fire from sceptical contemporaries. The most belligerent of these critics was Samuel Johnson, whose famous accusation that Macpherson had forged the Ossian poems was based, in part, on his utter disbelief that such poetry could have been composed or transmitted without ‘letters’.⁴⁷ A friendlier sceptic was David Hume, who reluctantly agreed with Johnson, a man from whom he was divided in religion and politics. Like Johnson, Hume concluded that the oral transmission of long poems contradicted that great arbiter of his empirical philosophy, experience. Consult experience, he urged: do we find presently that substantial compositions preserved without writing? This was a strong indication, Hume reasoned, that such a feat was impossible. Contrary to what is usually thought, acceptance of ‘oral tradition’ was undermined less by Johnson’s anti-Scotticism than by a sceptical empirical philosophy developed by Hume in Scotland. He, not Johnson, was the most devastating critic of the authenticity of Macpherson’s Ossian poems.

As this survey suggests, many of the authors who led the way in theorizing on the poetic potential of oral and ‘primitive’ cultures came from the periphery of English civilization – Scotland (Blair, Blackwell, Macpherson), Ireland (Swift, Sheridan), America (Colden). It was, that is, at the *periphery* that disillusionment with modern, literate culture was felt most keenly. Mostly here, it seems, authors were willing to experiment with the idea that non-literate peoples could be, in certain respects, superior. Nevertheless, as I have also considered, ‘oral traditions’ do not readily recognize their own predominant orality: it is a society emerging from orality into literacy which is positioned to perceive this difference most distinctly, for such a society has experienced this transition within living memory and will still retain a large body of oral culture in its midst. In mid-century England, we might note, about half the adult population remained so illiterate that they could not sign a marriage register (though, somewhat more probably, they read a little, a skill that usually precedes writing). Yet literacy had been the norm for generations in the gentry and upper-merchant classes, and had made important inroads into the class of

small merchants and tradespeople.⁴⁸ The difference between orality and literacy, that is, was visible (and audible) all around, and this experience shaped the understanding of literate people towards non-alphabetic societies elsewhere in the world. Orality and literacy, moreover, became temporalized: histories of language, such as Warburton's influential history of scripts in *The Divine Legation of Moses* (1738), strengthened the assumption that writing developed long after speech, and that this event represented a pivotal stage in the progress towards modern civilization.⁴⁹ In looking to their own past, therefore, Europeans increasingly expected to find evidence of 'oral' culture.

That eighteenth-century England was precisely at that point of emerging as a 'literate' society perhaps explains why an Englishman advanced the first sustained argument that Homer belonged to an 'oral tradition'. Almost unnoticed amid the noise of the Ossian controversy, Robert Wood made this case in *An Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer*, written in 1767 and published in 1769. Wood represents a crescendo in the intellectual developments that I have traced from the Renaissance. For he had absorbed the intellectual conditions of his time – a time of increased interest in the sound of language, along with a new interest in 'primitive' speech and culture. His case for the oral sources of Homeric verse was grounded not in historical evidence, but rather in the conjecture that only a tradition without letters could have produced poetry of this kind. The very 'genius' of Homer, the 'musical' quality of his language and his direct knowledge of nature, derived from a primitive age when speech, unrestrained by writing, was passionate and spontaneous. In contrast with the 'cold and languid circumlocution' of modern 'artificial language', the language of Homer exemplifies the 'passionate expression of Nature, which, incapable of misrepresentation, appeals directly to our feelings, and finds the shortest road to the heart'.⁵⁰ The faithful *mimesis* that Wood found in Homeric verse showed the advantages of an 'unlettered' time when nature was known through direct experience rather than books. In contrast with scholars of the Renaissance and the seventeenth century, therefore, Wood portrayed the peculiar beauties of Homer not as the fruits of literate refinement but of untrammelled nature. He suggested that Homer exemplified the same virtues found in the orators of the New World. If scholars like Blair and Ferguson were classicizing the American native, Wood and others compared Homer to the 'primitive' peoples of the New World.

Wood's thesis does not, of course, represent the fully developed theory of oral tradition as delineated in our time by Milman Parry. In the last years of the eighteenth century, the German scholar F. A. Wolf buttressed Wood's case for Homer's orality with a historical investigation of language and poetry in ancient Greece. Wolf even dared to challenge belief in the existence of a single individual named 'Homer', paving the way for nineteenth-century discussions of the bardic tradition that composed and transmitted the epics under that name.⁵¹ From this nineteenth-century scholarship sprang Parry's

investigation of oral tradition as a source for Serbo-Croat heroic verse. The general thesis nonetheless stands: as society grows in literacy, it also becomes more aware of 'orality' as a separate mode of expression and being. Orality is a fundamentally *literate* concept.

Yet the groundwork for these developments had already been laid in the Enlightenment. During that age, intellectual culture nourished a new understanding of non-literate language and culture. The old view that both literature and society had benefited from literacy was challenged by a more complicated view celebrating the supposed beauties of 'primitive' speech. Authors of this era increasingly acknowledged that pre-literate peoples could have a continuous tradition of history, government and poetry. This acknowledgment arose from a number of interrelated intellectual factors – doubts concerning the adequacy of writing, a connected revival of prosody, satire of European manners and society, a new aesthetic and moral taste for sentiment, the *querelle des anciens et modernes*. These factors led scholars to reassess not only non-European cultures but *themselves*. The 'Other' of oral culture became ambivalent and complicated. For a new generation, the Other was no longer just a negative, a mere absence of all order and knowledge, as it was for authors of the Renaissance and the seventeenth century. When Enlightenment scholars measured Europe against the pre-literate cultures of the New World, they generally found both gain and loss – a gain of clarity, sophistication and reason, but also a loss of passion and the expressive energy. In these ways, the difference between orality and literacy became a site for exploring a range of philosophical, linguistic and historical divisions at the centre of Europe's perception of itself and the world.

NOTES

- 1 Hugh Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (London, 1763), 2.
- 2 Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimes*, 4 vols (London, 1625), 1. 176.
- 3 See Nicholas Hudson, "'Oral Tradition": the Evolution of an Eighteenth-century Concept', in Alvaro Ribiero, SJ, and James G. Basker (eds), *Tradition in Transition: Woman Writers, Marginal Texts, and the Eighteenth-century Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 161–76.
- 4 William of Ockham, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Philotheus Boehner, rev. Stephen F. Brown (Indianapolis, IN and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1990), 47.
- 5 See Lawrence Stone, 'The Educational Revolution in England, 1560–1640', *Past and Present* 28 (1964), 41–80. Stone's views are expanded and refined in Rosemary O'Day's *Education and Society 1500–1800: the Social Foundations of Education in Early Modern Britain* (London and New York: Longman, 1982).
- 6 Juan Luis Vives, *Vives: On Education. A Translation of the 'De Tradendis Disciplinis'*, trans. Foster Watson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), 114.
- 7 See Richard Mulcaster, *The First Part of the Elementarie* (London, 1582; facsimile

- reprint, Menston: Scolar Press, 1970), 24–5. See also Lawrence Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England 1640–1900', *Past and Present* 42 (1969): 69–139; Joan Simon, *Education and Society in Tudor England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).
- 8 See David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
- 9 Roger Williams, *A Key to the Language of America* (London, 1643), 118.
- 10 See Francisco Lopez de Gómara, *Histoire générale des indies occidentales & terres neuues* (1554), trans. M. Fumée (Paris, 1569), ch. 28, sig. D5v; Geraldus Vossius, *Quatuor artibus popularibus* (Amsterdam, 1650), 14–15; John Wilkins, *Mercury: or the secret and swift messenger* (1641), 3rd edn (London, 1707; facsimile reprint, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984), 3–4.
- 11 Charles de Rochefort, *The History of Carriby-Islands* (1658), trans. John Davies (London, 1666), 116.
- 12 Johan de Laet, *L'Histoire du Nouveau Monde, ou Description des Indes Occidentales* (Leiden, 1640), 36.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 14 See Gómara, *Histoire générale*, 238–9; Purchas, *His Pilgrimes*, 1: 178–9.
- 15 Gómara, *Histoire générale*, sig. Kk2v (p. 254).
- 16 Walter J. Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 122.
- 17 See Angelo Mazocco, *Linguistic Theories in Dante and the Humanists* (Leiden, New York and Cologne: E. J. Brill, 1993), 13–23.
- 18 Jean Terrasson, *A Critical Dissertation upon Homer's Iliad* (1715), 2 vols (London, 1722), 2, 526.
- 19 John Oldmixon, *The British Empire in America*, 2 vols, 2nd edn (London, 1741), 1. 276.
- 20 Williams, *A Key to the Language of America*, 177.
- 21 See Nicholas Hudson, *Writing and European Thought, 1600–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 22 Robert Robinson, 'The Art of Pronunciation' in E. J. Dobson (ed.), *Phonetic Writings* (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1957), 19–20. On the rationalization of orthography in the Renaissance, see D. G. Scragg, *A History of English Spelling* (Manchester: Manchester University Press; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1974); F. H. Brengelman, 'Orthoepists, Printers, and the Rationalization of English Spelling', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 79 (1980), 332–54; Hudson, *Writing and European Thought*, 92–9.
- 23 There are now numerous good discussions of the projects for a new universal or philosophical script that proliferated in the seventeenth-century. Especially useful studies include Vivian Salmon's Introduction to *The Works of Francis Lodwick* (London: Longman's, 1972), James Knowlson's *Universal Language Schemes in England and France 1600–1800* (Toronto and Buffalo, NJ: University of Toronto Press, 1975), and M. M. Slaughter's *Universal Languages and Scientific Taxonomy in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
- 24 John Conrad Amman, *A Dissertation on Speech* (London: Sampson Low, Marston Low & Searle, 1873), 60.
- 25 Amman, *A Dissertation on Speech*, 8.
- 26 While Derrida refers to the history of writing in several of his works, this subject

- is especially prominent in *Of Grammatology* and *Dissemination*, the latter book containing a discussion of the *Phaedrus*. For a summary of Derrida's thesis on writing and its significance in Western philosophy, see Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), 24–41.
- 27 Samuel Johnson, *Grammar of the English Tongue*, in *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755; facsimile reprint, New York: AMS, 1967), sig. a2v.
 - 28 Johnson, Preface to *Dictionary*, sig. a2r.
 - 29 See Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland*, ed. Mary Lascelles, vol. 9 of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 114–15. This discussion of the influence of literate culture on language occurs as part of Johnson's case against the authenticity of Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian*, discussed below.
 - 30 Johnson, Preface to *Dictionary*, sig. a2r.
 - 31 Thomas Sheridan, *A Course of Lectures on Elocution, Together with Two Dissertations on Language* (London, 1762), p. 7. On Sheridan's views concerning writing and speech, see Michael Shortland, 'Moving Speeches: Language and Elocution in Eighteenth-century Britain', *History of European Ideas*, 8 (1987), 639–53; Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1989), 163–82.
 - 32 The papers of Josef Vachek, who has written extensively on the special nature and function of written language, are collected in *Written Language Revisited*, ed. Philip A. Luelsdorff (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1989). See also Roy Harris, *The Origin of Writing* (London: Duckworth, 1986).
 - 33 Sheridan, *Course of Lectures*, xii.
 - 34 *Ibid.*, 71.
 - 35 Cadwallader Colden, *The History of the Five Indian Nations of Canada* (London, 1747), 156.
 - 36 Adam Ferguson, *A History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1767), p. 265.
 - 37 Louis Armand de Lom d'Acre, Baron de Lahontan, *Voyages*, ed. Stephen Leacock (Ottawa: Graphic Publishers, 1932), 318.
 - 38 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), part 4, ch. 9, p. 273.
 - 39 In *The Three Wartons: a Choice of Their Verse*, ed. Eric Partridge (London: Scholartis Press, 1927), 92.
 - 40 John Dennis, *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (London, 1721), 24.
 - 41 The thesis that language began with 'cries of passion' derives from classical philosophy, particularly Lucretius's discussion of primitive speech in Book 5 of *De rerum naturae*. This argument was widely revived in the 'conjectural histories' of language by Enlightenment philosophers such as Bernard Mandeville and Etienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac. For a good discussion of Mandeville's theories on the origin of language, see E. J. Hundert, 'The Thread of Language and the Web of Dominion: Mandeville to Rousseau and Back', *Eighteenth-century Studies*, 21 (1987), 169–91. The major modern scholar on the linguistic thought of Condillac is Hans Aarsleff. See Aarsleff's 'The Tradition of Condillac: the Problem of the Origin of Language in the Eighteenth Century and the Debate in the Berlin Academy Before Herder', in *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 149–209.

- 42 For discussion of this theory on how languages develop, see Nicholas Hudson, 'Theories of Language', in H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (eds), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4. 335–47. 'Primitivism' is discussed in the same volume by Maximilian E. Novak, 456–69.
- 43 Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*.
- 44 Flavius Josephus, 'Against Apion', in *Works*, trans. William Whiston (Baltimore, MD: Armstrong & Berry, 1839), part 1, section 2. 580.
- 45 Thomas Blackwell, *An Inquiry into the Life and Time of Homer* (London, 1735), 46.
- 46 James Macpherson, *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books: together with several Other Poems, composed by Ossian the Son of Fingal* (London, 1762). See Hudson, 'Oral Tradition'.
- 47 See Johnson, *Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland*, 114–15.
- 48 On rates of literacy in eighteenth-century England, see Roger S. Schofield, 'Dimensions of Illiteracy in England, 1750–1850', in Harvey Graff (ed.), *Literacy and Social Development in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 201–13; idem, *The Legacies of Literacy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 230–3.
- 49 Warburton's dissertation on writing comprises book 4, section 4, of the second volume of *The Divine Legation of Moses* (London, 1738–41). It was later translated into French and published separately by Marc-Antoine Léonard des Malpeines as *Essai sur les hieroglyphs des égyptiens* (Paris, 1744), a version that became the basis for the French Enlightenment's understanding of the history of writing, including the article 'Écriture' in the *Encyclopédie*.
- 50 Robert Wood, *An Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer* (London: John Richardson, 1824), 176.
- 51 See F. A. Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer* (1798), trans. James E. G. Zetzel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985). Wolf praises the 'brilliant audacity' of Robert Wood (p. 71). A good summary of these developments leading to Milman Parry's discoveries can be found in Adam Parry's Introduction to his edition of *The Making of Homeric Verse: the Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).