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A Comparative  
History of Literatures  
in European  
Languages

# Or Words to That Effect

Orality and the writing of literary history

EDITED BY

Daniel F. Chamberlain

J. Edward Chamberlin

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# OR WORDS TO THAT EFFECT

## ORALITY AND THE WRITING OF LITERARY HISTORY

Edited by

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## Introduction

Daniel F. Chamberlain and J. Edward Chamberlin

The essays in this volume raise questions about why oral celebrations of spoken language receive so little attention in published literary histories, especially when they are simultaneously recognized as fundamental to our understanding of literature. They ask what transformations are called for if literary historians are to provide a more balanced and fuller appreciation of what we call literature, one that acknowledges the interdependence of oral and written expression. These questions initially seem straightforward enough, and the problems they raise familiar enough, but arriving at a consensus about them turns out to be challenging. One reason may be that the conventions of spoken and written language, and the ceremonies of belief that literature represents, vary widely across cultures and in different times and places. Also, questions imply answers, and when we look for these we sometimes find that the questions themselves need to be reformulated. The notion of a “problem” also presents challenges, with agreement about what is problematic routinely contested between historians of written and oral literary performance. The recent creation of a new series to examine ‘problems’ in Literary History, sponsored by the Coordinating Committee for a Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages, has provided a fitting venue in which to open up the issues involved, and to prompt a debate among literary historians that will lead to a richer understanding of literature, and of its historical dynamics. To this end, our volume brings distinguished scholar-practitioners, with expertise in major arenas of performance and experience in representing performance on the page, together with more conventional literary historians who have encountered oral performance that demands an attention it does not usually receive. They were all asked to address problems they had encountered or questions they had explored in their work rather than to summarize current theories or prescribe solutions, and to present these challenges in a manner that reflected the principles that shaped their engagement with orality, and with literary history.

From the outset, then, this volume’s goals and challenges have been quite different from those of other works in the regular Literary History series, reflecting the fact that orality presents not only unique problems but also old problems in new ways. The aim of this collection of essays is not to provide a comparative history of oral literatures within a specific period, or between periods. Rather, its ambition is to elucidate the issues that lie at the heart of our ability — and all too often our inability — to accommodate in an appropriate manner the different aspects of oral traditions and innovations in the literary histories that we publish. That question of appropriateness is itself at issue in many of these essays, as we hoped it would be.

Unlike many other studies in orality, the primary purpose of this volume is not to provide authoritative answers, though these may emerge, but to challenge our understanding of the limits of literature and the accepted protocols for its study. With this in mind, we have appealed to an array of experts in oral literature for help in formulating the questions and illuminating the problems that literary historians face in their efforts to give oral celebrations appropriate attention in the work we do. Given that orality has been to a considerable extent excluded from

our academic endeavours, we felt it imperative to look beyond academic sources to skilled practitioners of oral literature and appeal to them for help in bringing the problems into the foreground and formulating the questions that must be deliberated. Bringing expert performers of oral tradition and conventional academics into dialogue has been problematic. On the one hand, conventional academics are often tempted to discount the discourse of oral celebrants precisely because it is non-academic, or heedless of academic protocols, or just categorically different. On the other hand, listeners and storytellers in oral traditions are often reluctant to enter into dialogue, let alone collaboration, with an academic community that has ignored or disdained them at best, and exploited them at worst.

This volume, then, is the product of a concerted effort to welcome the assistance provided by authorities from some of the world's most esteemed academic institutions, and from some of the world's most vibrant oral traditions. In a non-prescriptive way, it welcomes the discourse of storyteller on the same footing as the discourse of scholar, with gratitude to both; it offers the reader voices that articulate the problems we face; and it invites us all to open new dialogues and imagine new directions for the understanding and appreciation of literature.

Each contributor has chosen a strategy of presentation that she or he feels best serves our goal. Several offer an analytical perspective; others employ strategies that entangle the reader directly within the issue at hand; some double back on their own struggle to address the challenges of appropriately accommodating orality in their own endeavours; and others look to questions of identity and ownership in order to elucidate the social and political uses and abuses that have gone hand in hand with the divorce of oral performance from texts in phonetic script, and from institutions that privilege writing. Some contributors approach the problems from a linguistic angle, others from the perspective of teller or listener, and still others from the spaces and silences that mediate both. Many remind us that 'histories' of literature are also "literary" histories. Several question the metaphors through which 'truth' is signified and aesthetic judgments identified. Some look to the past, some to the present, and some focus on the future. Still others look to community and genealogical inheritance rather than chronological or synchronic constructs for temporal points of reference. Most contributions centre on questions of oral style rather than the "oral *versus* written" dichotomy that has marked so many approaches to the dialogue, and their often evocative titles reflect the priority they give to "listening."

None of the contributions offers "easy answers." Instead, each presents its own *aenigmata*, and each is provocative in a way that will, we trust, leave readers with a companionable uneasiness regarding the issues brought to the fore along with a conflation of the familiar and the strange that is not far from that which we embrace in all literary performance, and nourish a sense of urgency in addressing the questions raised and the strategies offered. As uncomfortable as they may be, the difficulties and problems that each contributor raises are intended to inspire rather than rebuke. They are a very significant service to our field of scholarship, generating precisely the kind of dialogue that constitutes a "problem" series.

## Preliminaries

J. Edward Chamberlin

“By the meaningless sign linked to the meaningless sound we have built the shape and meaning” of the world, said Marshall McLuhan. He was speaking, we might say — though actually he was writing — about how we represent ideas and things in words made up of both visual signs and verbal sounds. Writing and speaking provide the most familiar forms of these signs and sounds, though writing without words has a long history in many cultures, and speaking in gestures and other embodied communication may be where language itself began.

The arbitrariness, or what McLuhan mischievously calls the “meaninglessness,” of words — their alphabetic or hieroglyphic or logographic signs and their particular combinations of the one hundred and fifty or so sounds that the human voice can make — is familiar to anyone who knows more than one language, and it often perplexes children when they learn their first language, for learning to interpret those meaningless sounds and signs is what language acquisition is all about. In the Middle Ages, when you learned any language (with its inevitably idiosyncratic styles of speech and script) it was said that you had the “habit” of it. The English word comes from the Latin *habitus*, which is a translation of the Greek word *hexis*, so dear to Aristotle, referring to the essence of something; and languages become naturalized in human consciousness when the habit of interpreting these signs and sounds merges with the habit of believing in the meaning of meaninglessness. Accordingly, the circle of interpretation and belief, beloved of hermeneutics, takes its place at the heart of both language and literature. When a child learns a language she is learning that C-A-T is both a cat and an arbitrary set of sounds or letters; learning this, she learns to embrace both meaning and meaninglessness. When this becomes a habit, she also learns that this is the appeal of stories and songs, and that reading and listening to them involves accepting that words tell of things that are both there and not there, both real and imagined, both happening and not happening ... and that this amiable nonsense applies to images as well. Soon, she forgets about this contradiction in the paintings and pictures she sees, in the stories and songs she hears, and in the language she speaks ... though she will be reminded of it every time she watches a puppet show or goes to a play, as René Magritte reminded her parents with his image of a tobacco pipe: *ceci n'est pas une pipe* — this is not a pipe.

To say that there is a long tradition of such a contradiction in literature is simply to say that literature is a long tradition of stories and songs, and that we are introduced to their traditions of performance and print as children. Those of us in the field of literary studies have developed a critical jargon to account for their marriage of sense and nonsense, and to make it more comfortable; but it is its uncomfotability — what the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski called (referring to magic) its “weirdness” — that is crucial. It is not magic; it is art. And in its paradoxical way it makes reality more real rather than less so, which is where the term “magical realism” comes into currency. We use words like defamiliarization, alienation, incompleteness, indeterminacy, and ungrammaticality to account for the beauties and truths and goodnesses of this; but we do so with a sense of the artifice of imaginative ceremony within which we “believe” it. T.S. Eliot called his seminal collection (in which he published his famous essay “Tradition



and the Individual Talent”) *The Sacred Wood* to catch the sense of ceremonial place and practice that he associated with literature. It is what, in all cultures, children associate with stories at bedtime, and that people from time immemorial have associated with singing and storytelling. Roman Jakobson began one of his discussions of language by repeating the invitation offered by generations of Majorcan storytellers at the beginning of their tales: *aixo era y no era* — “it was, and it was not.” The word *Igarube* signals the beginning of stories told for centuries, perhaps for millennia, by Khoekhoe (Hottentot) hunters and herders in the Kalahari; it means “the happening that is not happening.” “Once upon a time,” we say to our children and grandchildren when we begin a story, meaning “right now.” And as we say this in our various languages, both European and non-European, we establish the conditions of wonder upon which all stories and songs rely, whether popular or elite, in performance or in print. John Keats once said that the quality of a great poet and playwright like Shakespeare was his ability to maintain opposite ideas in his mind without an irritably reaching after fact and reason. This is the quality we instill in our children when we tell them a story or sing them a song. Without it, the wonder that is at the heart of literature is discounted and discredited. We need to respect this in our comparative literary histories; and one way of making sure we do so is to open them to the oral forms of song and story in performance where the love of literature begins for all of us. The Viennese call a person who looks after a house for someone else a *hausbesorger*, a “house-worrier.” Literary historians are the house-worriers of wonder for the world of listeners and readers.

\* \* \*

The American poet Philip Levine tells a story about working on the milling machines in the Chevrolet gear and axle plant in Detroit during the 1950s. A newcomer arrives to work beside him, and after a while he asks what they’re making. The poet answers “I’m making \$2.25 an hour. Don’t know what you’re making.” His co-worker corrects him. “What was we making out of this here metal,” he asked. “I didn’t know,” admits the poet. This book is designed to help us think about what we’re making when we make up comparative histories of literature that are also literary histories.

The “literariness” of a text is obviously a determining feature when it comes to the subject matter of literary history, and though it is notoriously difficult to define, its definition is always at the centre of any literary historical discussion. This difficulty is taken up and examined in many of the essays here, illuminating the ways in which literariness is not just culturally specific, with form and function linked to important aesthetic and pragmatic effects and the rhetorics of popular and elite expression offering new categories for literary classification. It is also associated with particular technologies, both traditional and recently espoused, generating an imaginative agency that is crucial to a people’s sense of identity — of who they are, and where they belong — exemplified in the texts, both oral and written, both actual and virtual, that constitute their literature.

“History” is another term that means different things in different times and places, especially since different languages sometimes constitute a sense of time differently, and sponsor unique epistemologies and cosmologies. Beyond that fundamental difference, it can be difficult in some traditions to identify the historicity of an oral text, as Jon Kortazar discusses in the present volume in relation to Basque orality, situating some texts outside an historical flow; while

in others, it is as clear as in any dated document, with genealogies and geographies offering a precise historical record. These essays offer constructive challenges to our received notions of both the literary and the historical, and they interrogate the ideals of authority and authenticity that preoccupy all literary historians, reminding us that there is nothing “permanent” about any text, however notionally authoritative or authentic, from another time and place. And bringing together literature and history, Michael Chapman, writing from his experience of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, proposes that like any historian a literary historian “must interpret past expression as retaining a contentious capacity in the present.”

I use the word “literature,” as do our colleagues in this book, to include both oral and written forms of expression. This is occasionally contentious to polemicists on one side or the other; but it was assumed by many of the comparative literary historians who shaped the enterprise we know today, and while it may be radical — returning to the roots of the discipline — it is certainly not revolutionary. As the scholar Paloma Díaz-Mas points out in her essay included in this volume, the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy defines literature as “an art that uses language as a means of expression” and describes text — literary or otherwise — as a “coherent statement or set of statements written or oral.” The storyteller Dan Yashinsky proposes in his essay that storytellers “have always paid attention to the unspoken rules, customs and thoughtways that make society work,” especially those represented in unexpected uses of language, which nicely complements scholar John Miles Foley’s maxim that “oral traditions work like language, only more so.” Myths embody another contradiction that is central to all storytelling, spoken or written. Since they often tell of forces — exemplified in phenomena such as floods, earthquakes, and volcanoes — beyond our comprehension but fundamental to our understanding of the world, they are often misunderstood as distancing us from such forces. In fact, they make them *more* real, not less. And the power of such myths comes not from the fact that fires and floods, for instance, are common across cultures, but from the way the stories about them bring together scientific and religious accounts, allowing each its own authority without discrediting the other. We believe such stories not only to make sense of the world, or to take control of it, but also to remind ourselves that some things don’t make sense, and some things we can’t control. The stories of religion show us how to accept these forces. The stories of science show us that we don’t always have to. The stories that we associate with the arts bring together these impulses, often by heightening rather than harmonizing the contradiction. Oral traditions that include myths — and they almost always do, in some form — are thereby often more settled and stable than written literature, whence their interest in unsettled times such as the medieval period, the eighteenth century, or our own contemporary world, and their role in the ceremonies of belief that hold us together, culturally and spiritually. Jonathan Foer, who edited the *New American Haggadah* — the traditional guide book for the stories, songs, and ceremonies of the Jewish Seder — was once asked by his son “is Moses a real person?” “I don’t know,” he replied, “but we’re related to him.”

Whether in print or performance, whether telling of mythical powers or material particulars, storytellers are fellow travellers along a road traversing myriad times and places; which is why the distinguished scholars and storytellers Nora Marks and Richard Dauenhauer — Nora is Tlingit (native Alaskan) and custodian of some of the most important oral traditions of her people, and Richard is a comparative literary critic — titled their magisterial four volume study

of northwest Pacific coast stories and songs *Classics of Tlingit Oral Literature*. Making the connection personal, Nora recalls that when she first read the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* and the Icelandic *Njal's Saga* “they seem so Tlingit in their concern with funerals and family trees.” Later, she “read Homer, Ferlinghetti, e.e. cummings, Basho, John Haines, Gary Snyder, Dennis Tedlock and Han Shan. They became some of my teachers.” This seemingly casual comment catches the comparative spirit that informs this book.

For such has it always been, from Homer and Han Shan to the *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth and Coleridge and Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century in Europe, when literary history began to find its way into the mainstream of critical inquiry, discussions of poetry almost always turned to the (inevitably translated) speeches of Indian chiefs as examples of “pure poetry,” citing them as the standard for literary achievement because of their “boldness,” “originality” and “enthusiasm” — these are the terms used in an entry in the *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* of 1830 to describe the speech of an unidentified Iroquois leader. The ethnocentricity of these words is disconcerting, of course; but the instinct behind it — to identify across cultures the elements that determine the literariness of texts, spoken or written — is very much part of what we do as literary historians, as Beate Eder-Jordan reminds us in her essay when she refers to the “beautiful words” of Romani stories and songs, words that exemplify not only universal poetic grace but also the particular styles of expression that identify the literariness of Romani literature. With this she raises a question about the extent to which cultural and linguistic characteristics — such as *romipen*, or “Romaniness” — are to be associated with literariness. Our contributor Frederico Augusto Garcia Fernandes extends this to a discussion of “oral poeticity” and the rhetorical styles that the *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* associated with the literary.

Like unfamiliar languages, these styles are often strange. This strangeness may be endearing, defamiliarizing us into a literary mode; but it has all too often become an insignia of the incapacity or inferiority of the Other, a concern expressed by all contributors to this volume. Even that early nineteenth century encyclopaedia definition of poetry only partially masks its register of superiority with a lament for the degeneration of civilization, nostalgically compared to the primitive energy and eloquence of the Indians of the Americas; and in doing so it effectively locates the oral traditions of indigenous communities outside the domain of modern literate society and its traditions of literature ... and of law, literature's often unacknowledged foster child. For an illustration of this connection, let me turn to an important Aboriginal rights case, one of many that have had an influence on our conception of oral and written traditions. A few decades ago, the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en (Tsimshian-speaking peoples of the northwest of Canada) went to court to claim jurisdiction over territory where they had lived for thousands of years in a case called *DelgamUukw*. They told the history of their people in the stories and songs that represent their past — *ada'ox* and *kungax* they call them — which in a very real sense constitute their national literatures, representing their material and spiritual inheritance in chronicles of events which were also ceremonies of storytelling belief, literary monuments as well as legal documents presented in a style of orality — performances in particular places, on particular occasions, in particular languages, wearing particular regalia, with particular people present — that underwrote their jurisdiction and imaginative authority.

But the judge (Allan McEachern) dismissed both the literary and the legal credibility of these oral performances (which he had listened to for nearly two years), concluding that since their ancestors had “no horses, no wheeled vehicles, no written literature” they were “unorganized societies” — that was his legal phrase — “roaming from place to place like beasts of the field.” No writing. No civilization. No case.

That was as recently as 1991. His judgment was later rejected by the Supreme Court of Canada, but even that court was unable to find a much better way of characterizing the oral traditions which constitute the history and literature and philosophy and science of Aboriginal peoples than by saying they are not “steeped in the same notions of social progress and evolution” as written traditions. In other words, they are backward . . . the clear implication being that those who cannot read and write are less advanced than those who can. Nice enough people, perhaps — the judge described a couple of the most respected elders of the community, who had spoken of the spiritual and material significance of salmon in Gitksan society, as two old men who like fishing — but primitive. And so illiteracy joins poverty and disease as insignia of underdevelopment.

All of this reflects a bias that has shaped, or warped, many of our disciplines, including literary studies and history itself. The historian Donald Akenson describes how in his profession the founding fathers have generally been classical figures such as Herodotus and Thucydides, mirroring the dominance of classical languages and literatures for millennia in the humanities. “The classics,” Akenson suggests, “were, well, so much classier as intellectual antecedents than were the texts that had their origin in the oral traditions of a group of Semitic nomads from the back of beyond.” (31). These, of course, were the texts that constituted the Old Testament, which ironically gave us the understanding of history as narrative which historiographers cherish these days.

This is a sadly familiar typology. “The history of nearly every race that has advanced from barbarism to civilization has been through the stages of the hunter, the herdsman, the agriculturalist, and finally reaching those of commerce, mechanics and the higher arts,” said United States Colonel Nelson Miles in 1879, a few years before he accepted surrender from Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce and sent them off to school to learn to read and write. We scorn this sort of stuff as a cover for colonization; but whether we admit it or not we are deeply committed to the ascendancy of agricultural and industrial societies, to the civilizing advantages of settling down rather than roaming about, and to reading and writing. We feel both sorry and superior as we surrender to a great inevitability. “The great designer of the universe, in the long past periods of creation, permitted a fiat to be recorded that beings whom it was His pleasure in the first instance to place amidst these lovely scenes, must eventually be swept from the face of the earth by others more intellectual, more dearly beloved and gifted than they,” said a traveller into the country of the Pitjantjatjara in south central Australia in the 1870s.

We wouldn't actually *say* that, of course; but we are much more likely to think it than we care to admit. Partly, this is because we are bound up in the words we use to talk about our own lives and livelihoods. We call those who wander around the world from place to place looking for land or labouring on it and dreaming of the old country they left behind, we call those people — which is for many of us, our people — “settlers;” and we call the others, those who live in one place hunting and gathering and dreaming of the ancestral spirits who have been there

for thousands of years, we call them “nomads.” If the truth were told, we are the nomads and they are the settlers; but we project this misrepresentation onto those whose “nomadic” lives we may even unconsciously envy, and whose land we usually want. They are “idle” people, we say (in a phrase that rings down from eighteenth century European political economy), and their land remains idle until we come along to work it. And then, having driven them from their land, we observe that their old ways are passing and wonder how — or whether — they will survive in the new world, a world of farms and fences with justified lines and clear margins. A world of books.

To confirm this, we classify them as “oral cultures” and praise the naturalness of their languages, with their entertaining or irritating clicks and grunts and woofs and whinnies. We lament the ways in which we have moved away from this oneness with the world — its “boldness, originality and enthusiasm” — into the abstraction and alienation that supposedly come with the written word. We wonder how they recall things so clearly and how they reflect on ideas without the benefit of writing; and then we decide they really don’t, they merely remember formulae. Just as our scientists do, we might add; though we seldom go that far, for after all these societies are “pre-scientific.” Instead, we celebrate their naive consciousness — the kind that children display — and remark on how it is resonant with an openness to experience that we lose as we grow up and “shades of the prison house,” in Wordsworth’s memorable phrase, close in upon us. And yet we know that with this new phase of our lives comes the compensation of self-reflexive intelligence, the kind capable of real thought. And so we end up categorizing aboriginal hunters and gatherers not only as pre-agricultural and pre-historical and pre-literate but pre-adult too. An early stage of human development. A nineteenth century fallacy called the “law of recapitulation,” with its catchy phrase “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” reinforced this line of thinking — though I am hesitant to call it that — regrettably shaping a good deal of twentieth century social science with the mistaken notion that the cognitive development of the child from speech to writing mirrored the cultural development of the society from primitive to civilized.

Even those with a better understanding of the relation between the oral and the written contributed, willy nilly, to this way of thinking. One of the most influential was a legal scholar named Henry Maine, sometime editor of the British journal *Saturday Review*, and author of the enormously influential book *Ancient Law*, published in 1861. The book is seldom referred to now, but it was very well known throughout Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, and became prescribed reading in the English-speaking world along with the works of John Stuart Mill and Thomas Hobbes, the three of them lumped together as the quintessential political philosophers and read as canonical in the university curricula of the 1870s and 1880s, just at the time when literary studies as we now know them were coming into their own. Maine argued (long before Benedict Anderson) that law and order, like art and culture, depend upon a sense of tradition performed in language. For him, this was by no means only true for European societies; it was true for all societies, and many of his examples were in fact drawn from the ancient tribal villages of India. Informality was the hallmark of such traditions, which (in Maine’s account) is why we retain a sense of traditions as things that often are not written down but passed on in the customary ways of cultures where oral performance is an eminent domain. They had the advantage of economy and efficiency, and were increasingly

used as societies became more comfortable with their arrangements ... and by implication, more civilized. These traditions seemed casual; but like the old-fashioned handshake, they represented binding contracts.

But there was always an alternative, the ceremonies according to which certain things of *particular* importance in society were handed over. In Roman law, such things were called *res mancipi*; and the ceremony — which involved written texts or symbolic artifacts — was a “mancipation.” Among the things that fell under this procedure, the most important tended to be land, and that which was necessary for its cultivation — usually horses, oxen and enslaved workers (though certain laws such as the biblical ten commandments, on tablets, also figured in this account.) In his essay in this book, the anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Michael Asch illustrates the legacy of this in nineteenth century imperial treaty-making with Aboriginal peoples around the world, describing how notions of property and literacy were conflated in the process, even though orality was always central to the performance of treaties, as it is in legal proclamations.

Maine’s analysis brought print and performance closer together in a kind of legal conversation. But even though his account recognized *res mancipi* for certain important transactions in the early days of civil society when writing (often without words) was widely practised, its association with property in “developed” cultures slipped into a general assumption about the priority of literacy and print in “civilized” societies. With grim irony, this influenced opinion and deformed a lot of literary history for the next hundred years.

And even longer. Here is a recent description from 1997 in a book published by Oxford University Press titled *The Ascent of Babel: An Exploration of Language, Mind and Understanding*, by cognitive psychologist Gerry Altmann. “The advent of the written word must surely rank, together with fire and the wheel, as one of mankind’s greatest achievements,” he proclaims with Promethean zeal, adding that “the only other time that evolution came up with a system for storing and transmitting information was when it came up with the genetic code.” “Science and technology would hardly have progressed beyond the Dark Ages,” he continues, “were it not for the written word” (160). Or let’s take up another comment, by Michel Foucault; only in the seventeenth century, he insists in *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*), did language and other sign systems come to be seen as representations. In the fashionable opaque language of postmodernism, this sends the same message as Altmann, since in Foucault’s epistemology knowledge of representation *is* knowledge, available only to those adept at the abstractions of writing and reading.

The cognitive psychologist David Olson, one of the world’s leading authorities on the cognitive and cultural dynamics of reading since the Middle Ages, describes in his book *The World on Paper: The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading* and elaborates in his essay in this volume how syllabic and alphabetic writing technologies involve much more than “visible speech,” signalling in their “meaningless” signs not simply the presence of speech sounds but the *absence* of the illocutionary markers of speech, the gestures and rhythms and tones which constitute much of its meaning. Which makes speech and writing inextricably linked, as Roberto Viereck Salinas reminds us in his essay when he reflects upon “the deep oral legacy upon which written literature has been constructed.” And nobody can be unaware of the ways in which speech shares with writing a contractual potential. As Paloma Díaz-Mas notes,

written proclamations — a contradiction in terms, to be sure, but one we routinely entertain — and spoken words such as “I agree,” especially when accompanied by a gesture such as a handshake, are texts that may be “read” differently but carry similarly binding commitments. Philosophers of language sometimes call the latter “speech acts;” but whatever we call them, they remind us that words, spoken or written, are on occasion not just about an event, they are the event. This is what the poet William Wordsworth was on about in his polemical preface to his (and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s) collection of *Lyrical Ballads*, where he argued for language as a form of action and literature as a form of agency.

We need to remember that the kind of “reading” this sponsors had flourished in a sophisticated form in ancient cultures, right back to paleolithic times, in the cognitive dynamics of ancient tracking. Whether ancient or modern, the one thing traditional hunters know when they see the track of an animal is that the animal isn’t there. That’s all they know. And they know that’s all they know ... but they know it within a contradictory circle of interpretation and belief in which the animal signified by the track still *is* there as the quarry, even as it was there before (in the past) and will be there, potentially at least, ahead (in the future.) Trackers also realize that their own survival and that of their community depends upon their ability to read the tracks/texts in this way, endowing them with a temporal and a spatial meaning that reconciles past and future within a present that is re-presented in their interpretation of such textual signs that are meaningless to those not learned in the art of reading them. The successful hunt brings those points of time and space together in a contradiction that includes both life and death, both survival and sovereignty, with the English word “game” illustrating this in an etymology that includes both hunted animal and joyful communion. I return to these spatial and temporal complexities below, as does Frederico Fernandes in his essay’s search for a comparative literary history that embraces the subtle synchronicities of oral celebration and performance.

The knowledge of the contradictions involved in this kind of reading and listening is at the heart of hunting and tracking; and it is at the heart of our understanding of representation, including the form of representation that is language. Instead of 300 years ago, Foucault should have said 30,000. Learning about representation; learning to recognize the distinction between a thing and the representation of a thing — the difference between a bear and the word “bear” or the spoor of a bear, for example — is what tracking and reading are all about. A hunter invests the tracks he sees with the arbitrariness of signification, with “meaning,” so that he can read them. The same kind of arbitrariness is the key to making meaning out of linguistic signs or the sounds of speech, acknowledging them as potential modes of both expression and revelation.

This brings us back to listening as a counterpart to reading, for listening, with the sophisticated understanding of the contradictions of representation that Foucault identifies, is an acquired art, as Daniel Heath Justice points out in his contribution to this volume, and it is an art exercised in all societies, ancient and modern. And interpretation aside, oral performance inevitably, perhaps necessarily, generates uncertainty about whether it is the teller or the tale, the singer or the song, the expression or the revelation, that we believe; and this uncertainty resides at the heart of many traditions of pronouncement and performance in liturgy and literature and law; and as Daniel Justice argues in this volume, this is something comparative literary historians can illuminate by bringing orality into their accounts. In this we are all encouraged

by the pioneering work done during the 1980s and early 1990s by historian and literary critic Brian Stock (in books such as *The Implications of Literacy* and *Listening for the Text*). And we are inspired by a sense that literary history itself might offer a method of navigation through the uncertain dynamics of listening as well as reading. As Robert Finley, the recent chronicler of Christopher Columbus (*The Accidental Indies*) points out, a good navigator must work on the premise that he or she is always almost lost, with uncertainty being a necessary condition for safe travel. In many maritime cultures songs have provided a navigational guide for seafarers, just as myths have for societies; and both of them rely not only on memory but on an imaginative ability to interpret the grammar and syntax, the music and the mystery, of the song or the myth ... and having done so, to believe them.

The University of Toronto, where I taught (with Olson and Stock) for many years, has a lot to celebrate in its analysis of traditions of reading; and also, unfortunately, a lot to answer for in the characterization of oral traditions as primitive, and in discounting — or more precisely, failing to recognize, as Viereck Salinas emphasizes in his study regarding Guaman Poma de Ayala — the various forms of writing without words that these same traditions also display. Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong (McLuhan's sometime student), along with the classicist Eric Havelock, argued (in what we have seen to be a familiar refrain) that writing — alphabetic writing in particular — marked an evolutionary advance which set us apart, “us” being all those who are saved by “first world” development of reading and writing from “third world” benightedness or what McLuhan called (in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*) a “return to the Africa within” us. The anthropologist Jack Goody (*The Logic and Writing and the Organization of Society* and *The Interface between the Oral and the Written*) refers to these scholars and their successors as the “Toronto School” ... an uneasy compliment.

Writing frees the mind for original, abstract thought, insisted Havelock (*Preface to Plato and Origins of Western Literacy*). The eye analyzes, the ear tribalizes, chimed in McLuhan. And Walter Ong added a list of additional limitations: oral cultures are imprisoned in the present, uninterested in definitions, unable to make analytic distinctions, incapable of separating knowledge itself from the process of knowing, and incorrigibly totalizing (“sight isolates, sound incorporates” is the catch phrase he uses, echoing McLuhan). Oral cultures understand the world in magical rather than scientific terms, displaying the primitive range and power of the Indian chiefs celebrated by the *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia*; and those in such cultures who have any acquaintance whatsoever with writing are agonizingly aware of the “vast complex of powers forever inaccessible without literacy,” and realize that literacy “is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language itself.”

This catalogue is from Ong's book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, which became a primer for post-colonial commentary. It is often misleading and misinformed, despite Ong's admirable scholarship, extensive acquaintance with liturgical orality, and essentially — if occasionally patronizingly — generous attitude towards what he calls “oral cultures,” with which he had little field experience. It has been taken on and written off by scholars such as Leroy Vail and Landeg White (in the polemical introduction, titled “The Invention of Oral Man,” to their book *Power and the Praise Poem: South African Voices in History*); but it continues to be extraordinarily influential in the humanities and social sciences, entrenching ideas



that can all too easily become a cover for racist ideologies, perpetuating the curious notion that there really *are* such things as “oral cultures” and “written cultures,” and failing to consider the fact that, as Viereck Salinas emphasizes, indigenous societies are not what Ong calls “oral cultures” *because* they never had any kind of writing, for in fact almost all of them had many kinds. They are “oral cultures” because of the precedence given to orality and oral performance in their literary, legal, political and educational arenas.

And in this, perhaps, they have more in common with us than we might suppose, and the distinction between orality and literacy not as simple as we sometimes assume. To argue, on the one hand, that European and its various settler cultures in Asia, Africa and the Americas are “written cultures” ignores the fact that the central institutions of these cultures — their churches and temples and mosques, their courts, their parliaments and congresses, and their schools — are defined by oral traditions with strict ceremonial protocols and conventions for the appropriate relationships between performance and print. And on the other hand, we should never discount the forms of writing that are typical of so-called “oral cultures”: non-syllabic and non-alphabetic forms such as woven and beaded belts and blankets, knotted and coloured strings, carved and painted trays, poles, doors, verandah posts, canes and sticks, masks, hats and chests, and so forth ... all of them nourishing the abstract thought beloved of those who celebrate the advantages of literacy. Indeed, the complex abstractions housed in *quipus*, or “talking knots,” enabled the Inca to effectively administer an eight-hundred-thousand square kilometre empire; and yet today’s “literate” experts have been unable to grasp its abstract complexities. And the same could be said of the methods of Polynesian navigation — including the reading of signs in the sea and the sky and the stars, in the birds and fish and marine mammals and sea turtles, and since order and relationship are everything on the uncertain sea, remembering the stories and songs in which these were described — which gave them the ability to create a cultural domain that covered one fifth of the earth’s surface, an achievement still not understood by cultural historians, maritime scientists or modern navigators.

The fact is that all cultures display a combination, or sometimes a rich confusion, of the oral and the written, their primary forms of expression situated along a spectrum, with a continual blending of verbal and visual performance and occasional priority given to one or the other. Picking up on the work of scholars in the humanities and social sciences such as Ruth Finnegan (*Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* and *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication*), Julie Cruikshank (*The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* and *Dan Dha Ts’edenintthè / Reading Voices: Oral and Written Interpretations of the Yukon’s Past*) and Duncan Brown (*Voicing the Text: South African Oral Poetry and Performance* and *To Speak of this Land: Identity and Belonging in South Africa and Beyond*), as well as Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo (*Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*), to mention but a few, the contributors to this volume remind us of the problems with any narrow classification of cultures according to a dichotomy of orality and literacy, pointing out that every human community we know of, and probably every society in the history of the world, has maintained a conversation between the oral and the written.

It is often said that what we call poetry began with words or other graphic forms on grave-stones, and our contemporary war memorials continue the tradition of combining the written