

*Material related to The Presence of the Word
(from earlier drafts of the manuscript)*

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LECTURE COPY

The contrast of oral-aural and chirographic cultures makes possible certain statements about the nature of the epic and of oratory and also about the nature of literature. Epic and oratory are archaic forms of communication--not in any purely depreciatory sense but in the sense that they represent communication in its beginnings. They antedate alphabetic writing, and doubtless all writing. They persist, moreover, after literacy: epic in its purer forms among relative illiterates and in its "literary" form (the Aeneid, The Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost, etc.) among literates; oratory with little diminished force even among literates until persuasion enters a new phase with mass communications, mass marketing, and the use of electronic media. Certain forms of expression are typically literate: the letter is one, and another is the novel, a typographical form derivative in great part from letter-writing techniques and even

growing out of letter-writing manuals (Richardson's). The essay is an intermediate form: in its original phase largely a concatenation of gnomic utterances deriving from the commonplace tradition (a rhetorical tradition) but worked up in writing for silent reading.

The advances achieved by chirography and typography were indispensable if the globe was to be populated by mankind technological advanced and aware of itself as a whole. For writing, latterly supplemented by printing, is necessary not only for technological organization but for man's accumulation of knowledge about his own past, and hence for his fuller possession of his own present and future. But chirography and typography entail certain disadvantages. Communication is necessarily personal, although "information systems" set up inside communication seen as a person-to-person interchange, are not personal. Ultimately, all knowledge, is personal, too, not only in being held by persons but also in being dependent upon communication not only for its dissemination but for its very origins. Science, however "objective," comes into being within conversations--centuries old, often interrupted, but continuous--between men. Science is only arrested dialogue. But the personal cast of knowledge and communication is often virtually concealed by the float of paper and reliance on substructures of information systems demanded by technology. This concealment is psychologically traumatic. The relegation of speech in so great measure to silent space, to the coded surface, has created serious strains in the human psyche.

These strains are eased in various ways. One of the ways is reflective awareness of their existence and origins. Another important way is literature in the strict sense of the term, imaginative, creative, aesthetically directed written expression. Since

it is written, literature as such is nonexistent before writing, although it comes into being with rich heritage of earlier oral-aural forms of expression on which it can draw. Once under way, it helps compensate for the disadvantages which writing entails, for by its magic it restores to the written word itself some of the dynamism and personal dimension which the word loses by being withdrawn from auditory world.

Of course, like epos, literature is impersonal in that it is an artistic production operating at a certain aesthetic distance. But by comparison with other written expression, because of its imaginative, creative, aesthetically determined cast, literature is in many very real senses dynamic and personally charged. Moreover, it becomes more and more deliberately personal and intimate as culture becomes more and more committed to technology. Oral epic is personal in a real but curiously offhand way: the epithets and kennings and other conventions advertise the public recitatory aspects of the form and consequently its distance from the intimacies of real life. Virgil's literary epic is already warmer, less stirring, less fresh than Homer, but curiously more intimate. The full development of "character," however, comes not with epos or even Virgil's imitation epos, but with the genuinely literary, with writing, and it comes here only slowly. One stage is achieved in Chaucer, another in La Celestina (a play only in form, meant obviously for reading, and one in which formally contrived rhetoric of the most obvious sort becomes the butt of satire at the very time it is the central artistic medium). Any number of stages of personal intimacy may be distinguished. For example, one further stage of character treatment is found in Shakespeare, another in Henry James another in J.D. Salinger.

Our post-Freudian age has become literarily, philosophically, and critically articulate about the human person in its deepest individual and social interior to a degree hitherto unknown--at its best in Buber or Jaspers or Marcel or Camus or Faulkner (where voice-within-voice-within voice is all), at its less than optimum in the brilliant doctrinaire promoters of points of view such as Sartre, who light up special aspects of the interior of the human person to inspection, "like a patient etherized upon a table," and at its worst in the new ubiquitous imitators of all of these. As literature grows older and develops its explicit concern with the person more and more articulately, it becomes in its most modern modernity more and more archaizing in the sense that it harks back to the magic of the oral-aural, preliterate world. But literature is not fully archaic, only archaizing, for in the archaic age of oral-aural expression literature was an impossibility .

The succeeding chapters here will attempt to deal with rhetorical culture in the perspectives so far suggested here. They will be concerned with literary forms in their relationship to rhetoric as representative not merely of the master rhetoricians from the Sophists, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian to Ramus and beyond, but also, more basically, with rhetoric as representative of the residual oral-aural sets of mind which are still with us to some extent today but which nevertheless had seemingly reached some major crisis in the seventeenth century. This book will attempt to treat literary productions and rhetorical culture itself as not merely events or points along an imagined diachronic line thought of as representing the movement of mankind through time, but also as products or by-products of the continuing interior crises which

each generation of men knows as its own and each man knows as his own, but which at the same time are somehow a continuation of the unresolved crises of earlier persons and cultures. In these perspectives, the movement from an oral-aural culture through a chiro-graphic culture to a typographical culture and beyond is not merely a series of external phenomena but a succession of interrelated internal revolutions leaving its marks often frightening, within the human psyche. Civilization is not achieved without cost: it leaves its scars--healed areas, as all scars are, but still reminders of a not altogether tranquil past.

The trilling wire in the blood
Sings below inveterate scars
And reconciles forgotten wars.

What is meant here by rhetorical culture, has been indicated earlier, namely, culture in which formal education has a distinctive oral-aural bent which encourages a concern more with the spoken than with the written word. As a relict of the past persisting well into the modern age--and even into our present day, if it is suitable understood--rhetorical culture provides a field for studying in detail the shift from oral-aural to typographical culture and beyond into the new stress on the oral-aural which marks our present electronic age. All the details of rhetorical culture cannot of course be gone into here. This study must be more exploratory than complete. In identifying and analyzing traces of rhetorical culture and their possible significance, a certain strategic selectivity must be practiced.

As an opening gambit, it has seemed advisable to as we go along, we can throughout, polemic will serve as a symptom, parphenomenon rule of thumb, center attention around the polemic aspect of sixteenth-and seventeenth-century writing, although not to restrict

attention to this polemic. A chain of reasons appear to warrant this focus of attention. First, polemic is a striking feature of the writing of this period. It marks almost every conceivable subject--not, despite popular impressions, religious subjects alone, but also philosophy, logic, belles lettres, grammar, orthography, architecture, letter-writing, and historiography. Secondly, as has been seen, a high incidence of externally directed hostility is apparently a mark of an oral-aural culture. While polemic in writing is not of necessity immediately identifiable with the outbreaks of hostility which are among the marks of mental derangement found in persons from illiterate or oral-aural cultures, nevertheless, circumstances hint that the possibilities of some relationship deserve exploring. Sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century polemic is hardly a rationally controlled phenomenon, but rather the product of a certain kind and stage of cultural development. Moreover, this polemic is closely connected with formal education, where the residue of oral-aural attitudes preserved by the rhetorical tradition are highly operative. And finally, there is some indication that the interior crisis signaled by the outburst of polemic is centered around the arts of expression themselves--grammar (with special emphasis on orthography), rhetoric, and logic or dialectic. For these reasons, it appears that focus on polemic provides a plausible starting point for getting into the concrete phenomena connected with rhetorical culture and its seventeenth-century crises.