

The Oral Aesthetic and the Bicameral Mind

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Ancient epic presents worn faces, but seldom shows the minds they hide. In the world's oldest story, emotions surface visually, unaided by revelations of the characters' thoughts: "tears streamed" on the face of Gilgamesh as he mourned his best friend. The hero wept "six days and seven nights" until his face, "weathered by cold and heat," became "like that of a man who has gone on a long journey" (Gardner and Meier 1984:166, 168, 210, 212). Ancient epic depicts gigantic actions without naming their causes and motivations. "Like a lioness whose whelps are lost," grieving Gilgamesh "paces back and forth"; "he tears off. . . and throws down his fine clothes like things unclean" (*ibid.*:187-88). In *The Iliad*, written down a thousand years after *Gilgamesh*, grieving Achilles groans like "some great bearded lion when some man. . . has stolen his cub" and dirties his clothes, scattering "black ashes over his immortal tunic" (Lattimore 1951:18.23-25, 318-23).

Throughout the first millennium of surviving literature, epic explained love, death, strength, and suffering as the products of monstrous gods—present sometimes as voices, sometimes in the full vision of their godhead. Such descriptions and images lead Julian Jaynes—in his book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976)—to posit that the ancients could describe their own bodies, but could not examine the content of their own minds; that they performed actions without knowing their motivations; that, because of the dual nature of their thought processes, they habitually hallucinated the voices and forms of the gods that directed their actions. Such poems as *Gilgamesh* and *The Iliad* are therefore the *literal* records of what ancient people experienced—accounts little altered by fiction, faulty memory, theology, imagination, or artistry.

Jaynes presents epic imagery as the major surviving evidence of the era of the bicameral mind, when the "hallucinatory area" in the right lobe of the brain—corresponding to Wernicke's area in the left—generated poetry and visions, producing an archaic and incomplete form of consciousness. As Wernicke's area now generates speech, the hallucinatory

area generated inner voices. Signals from the hallucinatory area seemed to come from outside the body; thus they were interpreted in life and in literature as voices and visions of divine beings that controlled human fate. Actions were portrayed without motivations and heroes' minds were not inspected because people were not yet conscious of their own consciousness. Only when Wernicke's area and the left cerebral hemisphere began to exercise the greater power and the hallucinatory area became more or less vestigial did the process of introspective consciousness begin.

Yet there is another sort of evidence that cannot be ignored. The same sort of imagery cited by Jaynes as proof of preconscious thought is found universally in archaic *aural* literature—whenever recorded—as well as in most recently recorded *oral* art, wherever practiced in the world. The “incomplete” perceptual record of *Gilgamesh* and *The Iliad* can be simply explained as part of an oral aesthetic, an aesthetic rooted in the fact that all oral poets share certain imperatives: they must always *perform* their work, and in so doing engage constantly the imagination of their audiences.

Roger D. Abrahams proposes a list of three imagistic universals in oral art: 1) overstatement and understatement, 2) concrete and specific language, and 3) translation of idea and emotion into action and symbol.¹ All three generate such imagery as is found in *Gilgamesh* and *The Iliad*. Consider two stanzas, one from a nineteenth-century English ballad, one from a recent Afro-American blues. In the ballad, a mourning man lets his plan of action express the nature of his grief:

I'll do as much for my sweetheart
As any young man may;
I'll sit and mourn all on her grave
For a twelvemonth and a day.²

In this floating blues stanza, a man dramatizes his wife's greed:

¹ Abrahams and Foss 1968:7-11. Abrahams confines himself principally to the study of British-American oral poetry, but I have applied his analysis to the poems of the thirteen cultures represented in Finnegan 1978. Although there is considerable variation from culture to culture (e.g., Yoruba and Hopi artists almost invariably translate emotion into action and symbol, while Eskimo poets tend to express emotion more directly), all thirteen cultures translated idea and emotion into action and symbol with notably greater frequency than the literary poets (Wordsworth, Shelley, Whitman, and Longfellow) I examined for purposes of comparison.

² Stanza 2 of “The Unquiet Grave” (Child 78) in a version recorded in Friedman 1956:32-34. For a brief discussion of the power of this ballad to express indirectly the mixed and otherwise unspeakable emotions of mourners, see Lindahl 1986.

She takes all my money, throws it against the wall;
She gives me what sticks and keeps what falls.³

Both passages employ understatement and overstatement, but in a very specific way, overstating action to the point of near-parody but leaving no room for explanation or emotion. Moreover, both images are concrete expressions of ideas that could as easily have been rendered abstractly. Thus, both images fulfill Abrahams' final criterion, which could be called the master trope of oral art: the translation of idea and emotion into action and symbol. This is the most concise way of expressing how all three rules produce their effects.

Another way of saying the same thing is that oral poetry tends to be *unglossed*: listeners are presented a striking picture, but each must individually caption it, and draw personal conclusions concerning the ideas and emotions implicit in the poem. There is evidence that oral artists not only avoid, but *disdain* the glossing of their images. Bluesmen and blues fans have commented on the lack of artistry in the blues imitations of the Rolling Stones:

The Stones don't understand how you sing the blues. They don't understand that when you sing about drugs, you really mean sex, and when you sing about sex, you really mean drugs. They mix things up and mess up their songs. They don't have any self-control.⁴

So the oral image, exaggerated as it may seem, is in reality subject to the strictest control: in its presentation of emotion and in the metaphorical encoding of its message—a message that is meant to stop short of the direct expression of the thoughts and feelings that gave rise to the song.

Perhaps the most important explanation for the prevalence of the unglossed oral image lies in the needs of the audience, the ultimate determinant of what songs are sung again and again. Worldwide accounts attest that the audience exerts life-and-death control over a traditional song. In various contexts, unimpressed listeners will shout down a performer, or fall asleep, or simply walk away. In some traditions the inattentiveness of

³ Tampa Red is among the many blues musicians who have performed this floating stanza.

⁴ Paraphrase of personal communications made to me by blues fan Arthur Kempton and musician Earl Strayhorn during an interview in April 1969 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Among the blues artists I have consulted, concrete, uncoded imagery is regarded as a major option, but not as an imperative—while some artists express emotion directly in their lyrics, others prefer indirection.

one listener will end the performance for all.⁵

The oral artist's objective, then, is to overcome the passivity of the audience, to ensure their complicity and support in creating a successful performance. Artist and audience increase their opportunities for mutual engagement by creating a certain aesthetic system, a metaphorical language that ensures that something important will remain unsaid, requiring further interpretation. More than merely leaving room for listeners to "fill in a blank," un glossed imagery allows a significant range of response. As Andrew Welsh has noted (1978:76), "the more precise the poetic Image, the less we can limit with prose definitions the meanings and emotions involved in it."

Whenever researchers have taken the time to know oral artists, it has been shown that the same people who perform concrete, externalized songs—translating idea and emotion into action and symbol—are more than capable of introspection, that they are acutely conscious of the workings of their own minds, and that they can explain very articulately what is going on in their heads and hearts. But it is simply not their aesthetic choice or rhetorical strategy to make such explanations within their performances.

This point is made dramatically in Betsy Whyte's recording of the ballad "Young Johnstone" (Child 88). This Scottish singer presents the song in a restrained, almost ethereal voice, despite the fact that it describes a murderous central character. In the progress of this song, Johnstone—whose "first instinct," states Francis J. Child (1882-98:II, 288), "is as duly to stab as a bulldog's is to bite"—kills his sister's lover, then his own lover, and finally himself. Johnstone's actions, like those of Achilles and Gilgamesh, are concrete and exaggerated. Betsy Whyte's characters do not look into themselves, and as she sings—almost matter-of-factly—she leaves no impression that she wishes to examine their minds. Yet as soon as she stops singing she adds her own interpretation in emphatic, emotional tones:

I've forgotten the last wee bit, but—I know the end. They were supposed to be lying together on the floor, [solemnly] dead. But—it was [emphatically] *true*. It was really a true—ballad. Well—usually when they said they were true in these old times, they *were* true. He was *jealous* o her, you see, he was this *type*, you would have tae understand the Johnstons to ken that type. . . .⁶

⁵ Among the best records of audiences forcefully editing tellers and singers of tales are Lord 1960:esp. 14-17 and Dégh 1969:49-53, 71-119. See also Abrahams 1972.

⁶ Betsy Whyte's version of "Young Johnstone," as well as her comments on the song, are recorded in "The Muckle Songs: Classic Scots Ballads," Tangent TNGM/D, Scottish Tradition 5, recorded through the auspices of the School of Scottish Studies,

Betsy Whyte has obviously lived with this song. In her mind, there is no doubt of its meaning, and hers is not a meaning that most outsiders, including Child, would be likely to infer. Her personal and emotion-filled reading demonstrates beyond doubt that she is fully capable of supplying feelings and motivations for the ballad characters. But, again, not one hint of this interpretation emerges in her sung presentation. Betsy Whyte has chosen to separate what she considers to be a great song from her deeply personal experience of it.

In suppressing her own vision of Johnstone, Betsy Whyte is filling a great communicative need. Recent psychological experiments, though far from settled on a single interpretation, point toward, if not yet inevitably to, the following conclusions. First, an oral image is much more likely than a visual image to spur an audience to create mental images. Second, listeners will respond more quickly and dramatically to concrete than to abstract language. Third, listeners will also remember concrete images longer than abstract ones. Finally, the images that listeners remember longest and most vividly are voluntary—that is, images that emerge from one’s own imagination rather than in response to the specific instructions of a speaker. Taken together, these findings suggest that sharp but sparse and open-ended oral images will create the strongest and longest-remembered response of any form of poetic communication.⁷

To bolster his claim that the ancients could not read their own minds, Julian Jaynes can offer no more powerful evidence than concrete poetic imagery—the same kind of unglossed pictures favored by today’s aural artists. Yet contemporary singers possess great powers of introspection; they simply recognize that the strength of their art lies in avoiding interpretation. In explaining how she performs such dramatic ballads as “Mary Hamilton” (Child 185), Almeda Riddle (West 1986) insists on distance: “Get behind the song. If you get behind it, they’ll see it. If you get in front of it, they’ll just see you and get disgusted.” The listener’s greatest power is the power to be suggested to. Only by thus empowering the audience does the oral artist maintain the right to perform.

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Edinburgh. An accompanying booklet provides a transcription of Betsy Whyte’s remarks. Emphasis is found in the original transcription; I have slightly altered the punctuation of that version.

⁷ These four conclusions are supported by the following articles: Begg et al. 1978; Dickel and Slak 1983; Doll 1983; Jamieson and Schimpf 1980. See also Morris and Hampson 1983:240-99.

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