

# ORALITY AND SOUTHERN LITERATURE

by

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(Under the Direction of Hubert McAlexander)

## ABSTRACT

For most if not all of its history, the South has been marked by a high degree of oral residue that has distinguished it from the rest of the United States. This study explores the influence of residual orality on Southern literature. The first chapter provides the historical background necessary to gauge the South's resistance to the transformative powers of typographic literacy. Education, reading habits, publishing, and the literary life are discussed. Chapter Two synthesizes research on oral language with stylistic analyses of Southern literary works, specifically James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* (1927) and Eudora Welty's *The Ponder Heart* (1954), in order to illustrate the oral bent of Southern writing. Next, two well-known short stories, William Gilmore Simms's "Sharp Snaffles" (1870) and William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (1930) are shown to be characterized by the strategies of folk narrative. While "Sharp Snaffles" corresponds to a well-documented and ancient oral narrative pattern, "A Rose for Emily" is an essentially typographic work that is organized according to an oral storytelling structure. Finally, the

characteristically oral modes of thought and expression cataloged by Walter J. Ong are compared to certain well-known theories of Southern exceptionalism, especially those outlined in the Southern Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) and Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934). These oral Southern epistemologies are shown to be significant to Hurston's classic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and to the poetry of Donald Davidson. These discussions provide not only a new theory of Southern exceptionalism, but also a new theoretical framework for reading Southern texts.

INDEX WORDS: American literature, Southern literature, orality, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, James Weldon Johnson, William Gilmore Simms, Donald Davidson, Zora Neale Hurston

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## DEDICATION

For Gail and Jake

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## INTRODUCTION

The oral tradition of the South is a world in which past and present concert in a babble of chat and memories and observation and complicated kinship relations. An oral world keeps multiple blood relationships in easy acoustic focus in the same way as a pre-literate people have no trouble in managing complex word formations and inflections. . . . The author of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn* stays in the heart of this oral world . . .

—Marshall McLuhan (*Essential* 198)

Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) revolves around the Wingfields, a white Mississippi-Delta family transplanted to St. Louis where they grapple with the disappointments and hardships of the Great Depression. Although the connection has garnered little attention, it is not difficult to read the play against the backdrop of the revolution in communications technology that took place between the transcontinental telegraph of the 1860s and the television explosion of the 1950s. The family's patriarch, "a telephone man who fell in love with long distances" (5-6), abandons his wife and children for a life of independence and adventure, sending them nothing but a picture postcard from Mazatlan. The only two words written on it, "Hello—Good-bye!" (6) are "telephone words" which became common in American English only with the advent of the medium: previously, the former had been an expression of surprise rather than a greeting, and the latter had been too high-toned for casual conversation (Barron 26). This fact, in addition to Wingfield's profession and love of "long distance," suggests that the three central characters of

the play have been abandoned not only by a roguish husband and father but by the modern technologies of information with which he is associated.

In the absence of the stability of the traditional two-parent home, the remaining Wingfields struggle to make ends meet and find personal fulfillment. Amanda, the jilted wife, earns money by means of the technology that provided her faithless husband's vocation: a kind of prototype telemarketer, she sells subscriptions to a women's magazine over the phone by salaciously describing serialized romances. A more degrading occupation would be difficult to imagine. The physically disabled daughter Laura briefly attends business college to learn the typewriter, but this textual device is so foreign to her mind and body that the experience makes her violently ill. And the son Tom works at a shoe manufacturer's warehouse where he is similarly sickened by the "*celotex interior*" and "*fluorescent—tubes*" (27). Yet it is to electric media that both junior Wingfields constantly retreat for escape from the painful reality of their lives: Laura to the soothing melodies of her Victrola gramophone, and Tom to the adventure of the cinema. Both of these sanctuaries, however, prove illusory and hollow.

Amanda's own haven from an intolerable existence is not technological but rather comes in the form of the oldest medium of all, oral storytelling. Throughout the play, the dehumanizing techno-culture of 1930s St. Louis is contrasted with the idyllic South of her girlhood

memories. While the industrial city is a place of isolating technologies such as film and recorded sound, media that reproduce performances for audiences to receive passively and not participate in, the Blue Mountain of her stories is communal and affirming. When Tom asks his mother how she entertained the scores of gentlemen callers she would receive on Sunday afternoons, Amanda's reply depicts the South in terms of the social folkways of oral culture:

I understood the art of conversation! . . . Girls in those days *knew* how to talk, I can tell you. . . . They knew how to entertain their gentlemen callers. It wasn't enough for a girl to be possessed of a pretty face and a graceful figure—although I wasn't slighted in either respect. She also needed to have a nimble wit and a tongue to meet all occasions. (9)

Because her suitors were all “planters and sons of planters” (10), Amanda assumed that she would marry such a person and live out her life in this halcyon agrarian setting. “But,” she tells Laura's own gentleman caller, Jim O'Connor, later in the play, “man proposes—and woman accepts the proposal!—To vary that old, old saying a little bit—I married no planter! I married a man who worked for the telephone company! . . . A telephone man who—fell in love with long-distance!—Now he travels and I don't know where!—” (80).

In the South there was a system of orality in place which, in addition to supplying formulaic “old, old sayings” such as “man

proposes, God disposes” to be repeated and varied, protected young women from marrying the wrong kind of man, as Amanda explains to Tom in Scene Five:

When I was a girl in Blue Mountain and it was suspected that a young man drank, the girl whose attentions he had been receiving, if any girl *was*, would sometimes speak to the minister of his church, or rather her father would if her father was living, and sort of feel him out on the young man’s character. That is the way such things are discreetly handled to keep a young woman from making a tragic mistake! (55-56)

When Tom asks the obvious question of how she managed to make such a tragic mistake in spite of the Blue Mountain safeguards, Amanda answers, “That innocent look of your father’s had everyone fooled! He *smiled*—the world was *enchanted*” (56)! The traditional folk culture of this rural Southern community has been seduced, subverted, and rendered powerless by the progress in communications technology represented by Wingfield, and the price is paid by Amanda, who is abandoned by her “telephone man,” just as Laura is preemptively abandoned by O’Connor, the student of radio engineering who “believe[s] in the future of television” (104). Having been divorced from the oral culture of their homeland and made dependent on technologies of isolation, these Southern expatriates find themselves completely

alienated from their own emotions, from each other, from society, and from reality itself.

Although Amanda's romantic stories should not be taken as unironic—certainly Williams does not intend them to be accurate descriptions of life in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Mississippi—they are representative of a commonly perceived dimension of Southern culture, one that will be the primary focus of the present study. Many commentators have argued, as Amanda does implicitly, that the South has been relatively unmarked by the culturally transformative powers of typographic literacy—that is, that it has existed within a residually oral media ecology. The term *media ecology* refers to the noetic environment formed by the family of live possibilities for communication available to a culture, as well as to the particular sub-discipline of communications studies that will provide the theoretical basis of this thesis.

Broadly defined as “the study of complex communication systems as environments” (Nystrom), media ecology is an emerging field of inquiry that examines the significance of modes of communication to, among other things, human thought, feeling, expression, and behavior. Harold Innis, Eric Havelock, Marshall McLuhan, Jack Goody, Walter Ong, and Elizabeth Eisenstein are among the early authors whose work provided a lens through which subsequent scholars from diverse disciplines have viewed the relationship of media to cultural and cognitive change. This theoretical framework relies on a number of important assumptions.

First, reality as we experience it is shaped not only by what we encounter in the outside world but also by the technologies that allow us to encounter it. Second, these technologies are not neutral conveyers of information but rather, because of their physical properties, have certain sensory, cognitive, socio-political, and epistemological biases that effectively set the boundaries for what can be thought, felt, and expressed. Third, since human societies are largely defined by patterns of human interaction, which is dependent upon the technologies by which we communicate with one another, media environment also has important implications for larger cultural formations of identity and socio-political power structures.

Although the term *media ecology* was coined by McLuhan in the 1960s, the field can in fact be directly traced at least as far back as the 1920s, when classical scholar Milman Parry attempted to answer “the Homeric question” (did Homer compose orally?) through detailed analyses of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and comparisons to the epics of a culture *known* to be exclusively oral (in Yugoslavia). What Parry concluded was that many of the features of Homeric verse that strike the modern reader as strange—the catalogs, the repeated formulaic epithets (“wily Odysseus”), the episodic structures, the repetitions of entire passages—reflected the specific demands that recitation from memory placed on the bardic singer of tales.



But a decade before Parry's work received its first book-length discussion, in Albert B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales* (1960), Harold Innis was studying the significance of mediation to the social and economic power structures, forms of organization, and epistemological predispositions of cultures throughout history and around the globe. Innis made two observations about differences between speech and writing that have been widely influential and that will be particularly important to the present study. The first was that since sound is evanescent, the amount of information that can be passed on in a primary oral culture is limited by the human capacity for memorization. The second was that communication via speech is more public and communal than communication via writing, since speech communication (at least before the advent of Laura Wingfield's Victrola or her mother's telephone) requires speaker and listener to be in physical proximity to one another. Two of the theorists most heavily influenced by these ideas were Marshall McLuhan and Walter J. Ong, both of whom expanded on Innis's insights, though with different emphases and to somewhat different ends.

McLuhan focused on the sensory biases of media and the cognitive and social consequences of relying primarily on one or the other sense (hearing, in oral cultures; sight, in literate cultures). In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), McLuhan discussed how the proliferation of printed materials following the invention of movable type and the new form of

literacy that it engendered resulted in the privileging of sight over sound. This privileging, McLuhan argued, created the concept of standardization, “objectified” knowledge, and canonized a linear, “cause-and-effect” model as the “correct” mode of reasoning. Though influenced by McLuhan (under whom he studied), Ong, whose 1982 book *Orality and Literacy* is a summary and synthesis of decades of work conducted by himself and others, concentrated less on sound’s sensory bias and more on its physical properties, particularly its ephemerality. Lacking the facility to record information, primary oral cultures must rely on certain mnemonic formulas and structures to preserve communal wisdom, and this reliance accounts for many of the communicative and psychological peculiarities of oral cultures, what Ong terms the psychodynamics of orality. Ong characterizes orally-based thought and expression as being additive rather than subordinative, aggregative rather than analytic, redundant or “copious,” conservative or traditionalist, agonistically toned, and situational rather than abstract.

One thinker who both heavily influenced Ong and was in turn heavily influenced by him was the classical scholar Eric Havelock (1963) who, following Parry and Lord, undertook a re-examination of ancient Greek culture and, in a series of important books, explained many of the significant features of the literate revolution that this culture experienced. Like Ong, Havelock was interested in the ways that the dominant mode of communication determines thought processes, but his

primary emphasis was on moral codes, especially as they relate to the Hellenic movement away from poetry and toward logic, rhetoric, geometry, and empirical science. Before the “internalization” of literacy (which Havelock dates at 430 BCE, some three centuries after the invention of the alphabet), the Greek dramatic, epic, and musical festivals were occasions for cultural work—for public education, for renewal of one’s commitments and reinforcement of one’s place in the world. What we think of as the artistic mode of “poetry” was really the agent of socialization, the handmaiden of cultural identity. For example, Havelock shows that the *Iliad* was not primarily a tale of adventure but rather “a kind of metrical textbook” that taught values and conventional wisdom by allowing its audience to participate in the events it recounted, a process that resulted in the merging of individual and societal moral codes (*Preface* 87). Thus, Plato’s infamous attack on the poets in the *Republic* had nothing to do with art but rather with the traditional Greek source of cultural direction and wisdom. As a member of that first Greek generation to have internalized literacy, Plato saw as no longer desirable the communal shared consciousness fostered by the bard-listener collaboration, preferring instead the contemplation of abstract areas of knowledge by the autonomous individual (i.e., philosophy) that can only exist in the literate world.

While Havelock is correct in pointing out that conceptions of individuality such as those observable in Plato began to emerge with the

advent of writing, it was not until the invention of printing and the subsequent mass production and distribution of books that individualism was to become the dominant Western *weltanschauung*. Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979, 1983) provides a detailed historical analysis of the development, spread, and consequences of printing and typographic literacy, exploring the rise of not only individualism, but also nationalism, rationalism, capitalism, and linguistic standardization. Eisenstein points out that, long after the apparent internalization of chirographic literacy, a communality characteristic of oral cultures existed in Europe, even as the bard or minstrel was being replaced by the *reader*, a literate who would read cheaply produced printed materials aloud to his fellow villagers. It was only after the internalization of *typographic* literacy that silent reading, and the isolation that accompanies it, brought about individualism as we now understand it.

Important to Eisenstein's observations is the notion, most commonly associated with Ong, that the communicative and cognitive markings of orality do not disappear when a culture becomes literate. For Ong, "oral" and "literate" exist on a continuum rather than as polar opposites, so that even cultures that have known literacy for millennia may exhibit varying degrees of residual orality. If, for example, the Blue Mountain of Amanda Wingfield's girlhood can be understood to embody a powerful oral residue in sharp contrast to the typographic culture of 1930s St. Louis, then, given all that media ecology has to say about the

epistemological influence of communications technology, the fact may be seen as crucial to many common notions of Southern exceptionalism. Although Southernist critics have generally not made use of the observations of media ecology, some, very early on, have hinted at the cultural significance of the region's comparatively oral environment.

In his 1950 essay "Why the Modern South Has a Great Literature," Donald Davidson suggests that the comparatively oral nature of Southern culture played a significant role in the Southern Literary Renaissance that began after World War I and that found its greatest avatar in William Faulkner. With great irony, Davidson looks to the modern science of sociology to explain how a literary artist of Faulkner's caliber could arise from, of all places, Mississippi, specifically employing data from Howard W. Odum and Harry Estill Moore's *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration* (1938). Comparing Mississippi's "plane of living" (Odum's term) to that of Massachusetts, Davidson shows the Southern state to be seemingly much less hospitable to the development of literature. With regard to per capita wealth, urbanity, expenditures for libraries, and expenditures for public education, Mississippi scored in the lowest bracket in the nation, Massachusetts in the highest. "By every cultural standard that the sociologist knows how to devise," Davidson summarizes, "Mississippi rates low in the national scale during William Faulkner's formative period" (*Still Rebels* 164). After showing the failure of New England to

produce a novelist of comparable stature to Faulkner during this period, Davidson concludes that “the way for a society to produce a William Faulkner is to have him born in a thoroughly backward state like Mississippi” and, conversely, that “a prevalence of material progress, great wealth, modern institutions such as libraries and art museums, factories, industrial gimcracks, liberalism, science, political radicalism—that is the way not to produce a William Faulkner” (167). On one occasion when Davidson read his paper attributing Faulkner’s genius to the fact that he had not been corrupted by an education, one audience member is said to have called the thesis “[t]he most powerful plea for ignorance I have heard in a long while” (qtd. in Griffin 34).

What appears to be Davidson’s astounding anti-intellectualism, however, may be nothing more than the recognition that a Southern writer’s indebtedness to oral tradition is an indebtedness to the comparative illiteracy in the South that spawned the tradition. While many critics may prefer to think of Faulkner’s writings as reacting *against* the South’s backwardness, his fiction offers little support for that position. In fact, Faulkner has explained the Southern Literary Renaissance in terms remarkably consistent with Davidson’s argument: “I myself am inclined to think [the explosion of literary activity in the South] was because of the bareness of the Southerner’s life, that he had to resort to his own imagination, to create his own Carcassonne” (*Faulkner in the University* 136).

But Davidson is not simply arguing that the cultural bareness of the South has provided the region's writers with *motivation* to engage in literary activities. For Davidson, the genius of Southern writers such as Faulkner is deeply rooted in the "traditional society" that has produced them. (Davidson is surely aware of the original meaning of *tradition*, now largely lost: "an *unwritten* code . . . handed down *orally* from generation to generation" ["Tradition," my emphasis]. *Oral tradition* is a redundancy; *literary tradition*, an oxymoron.) The cultural inheritance provided by a traditional (oral) society includes not only ready-made subject matter and forms but also a peculiar cognitive and emotional orientation that Davidson believes is particularly conducive to the creation of great works of literature:

I do not know how to explain this except by saying that the person who is born of a traditional society, if he is not corrupted, will act as a whole person in all his acts, including his literary acts. The truth of experience that fills his emotional being is not at war with the truth of his intellectual judgments, but the two, as he writes, are one. His apprehension of his subject matter, which is intuitive and comes from "knowledge carried to the heart," moves hand in hand with his composition, which derives from his intellectual judgment, his sense of fitness and order. . . . It is natural for a Southern writer to compose that way, as it is

natural for him to ride a horse with his whole heart as well as with his controlling intelligence. (176)

Davidson is quite prescient in his tacit suggestion that it is the *orality* of Southern culture that is responsible for the special power of the region's literature. Still, it is difficult to take his claims altogether seriously. Certainly the industrial urbanity of Dublin, coupled no less with the "corruption" of a University College education, did not prevent the creation of a James Joyce during the same general period. And certainly Faulkner, like Joyce, did not write in a vacuum; he could not have arrived upon his particular achievement, however *local* the materials of that achievement may have been, without the influence of *international* modernism. But then again, Hugh Kenner (1962) has repeatedly made the argument that Joyce himself was able to become the most fundamentally typographic writer of his time precisely because "Ireland . . . is unique in the West for the exclusiveness of its emphasis on oral rather than typographic culture" (*Flaubert* 47-48). It was the very alienness of typography to his oral, Irish sensibilities, Kenner argues, that allowed him to comprehend and exploit "the antithesis between the personal matrix of human speech and the unyielding formalisms of the book as the book" (48). He continues:

It can hardly be accidental that two Irishmen, Swift and Sterne, exploited as long ago as the eighteenth century the peculiarities of the book to an extent no Anglo-Saxon has



ever thought to emulate: nor is it accidental that the two of them link arms throughout *Finnegans Wake* like a pair of tutelary deities. Both of them were detached, as Joyce himself was later detached, from the assumptions of typographic culture: detached by the richer assumptions of a culture that thinks not of words but of voices, of the voice that states rather than the book that contains, of a matrix of speech in which person confronts person, not fact fact, of language generated by continuous acts of discourse rather than language delivered over to typographic storage. (48)

Kenner apparently had second thoughts about the “uniqueness” in the West of Ireland’s uncompromising orality, for seventeen years later he was to make a similar argument about the largely Scots-Irish American South. Specifically, he discusses Faulkner’s work as an amalgam of oral tradition and typographic experimentation. After acknowledging that “[t]he base of Faulkner’s storytelling was oral” (“Faulkner” 186), Kenner shows that readers attempting to appreciate Faulkner’s fiction on the level of traditional narrative are betrayed by “the coinages, the neologisms, the inner monologues and resonant italics—all the contrivances of literary technology” (195). He concludes with a description of the unique role that must be played by Faulkner’s readers, whom he describes as “seeing folk material imitated, synthesized, by the devices of the twentieth-century avant-garde” (195). Like Joyce, Swift,

and Sterne, Faulkner is “detached from the assumptions of typography” and can therefore see possibilities held by the medium that are invisible to his counterparts in more highly literate societies. Although their arguments are somewhat at odds with one another—Davidson emphasizes traditionalism, Kenner innovation—both of these critics are essentially explaining Faulkner’s achievement in terms of Southern orality.

The social construct known as the South was woven out of strands of various progenitorial cultures, the two most significant being Celtic (especially Scots-Irish) and African. If the Celtic strand has always been, as Kenner has written, “unintimidated by literacy’s pretensions” (*A Colder Eye* 16), the African strand provides a much more direct link to primary oral culture.<sup>1</sup> In his landmark book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that the vernacular tradition, especially such folk rituals as signifyin’, the dozens, and the swapping of lies, is a controlling force not only over individual literary works (as evidenced in the free indirect discourse of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) but also over the ways in which these works respond to—indeed, signify on—each other (as evidenced in Ishmael Reed’s parodic novel *Mumbo Jumbo*). For Gates, African American literary texts are “speakerly” in their refusal to divorce themselves from oral tradition, yet they are also “double-voiced” in their indebtedness to the Western literary tradition:

A novelist such as Ralph Ellison or Ishmael Reed creates texts that are double-voiced in the sense that their literary antecedents are both white and black novels, but also modes of figuration lifted from the black vernacular tradition. One can readily agree with Susan Willis that black texts are “mulattoes” (or “mulatas”), with a two-toned heritage: these texts speak in standard Romance or Germanic languages and literary structures, but almost always speak with a distinct and resonant accent, an accent that Signifies (upon) the various black vernacular literary traditions, which are still being written down. . . .

Anyone who analyzes black literature must do so as a comparativist, by definition, because our canonical texts have complex double formal antecedents, the Western and the black. (xxiii-xxiv)

While Kenner contrasts Irish orality with English textuality, Gates contrasts African orality with Western textuality—and Kenner’s Irish would presumably be included among Gates’s literary Westerners. In some ways, the two arguments are contradictory, but, if we strip away Kenner’s and Gates’s respective ethnocentric tendencies, we see that these two critics are in fact making very similar arguments about how residual orality operates within literary tradition. In essence both men are showing how writers from oral cultures “remediate” (in the sense

made popular by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin) vernacular traditions using the most typographic-literary of devices. From both perspectives, residually oral authors amalgamate oral and literary strategies in order to produce work that is richly textured and *sui generis*; to put it another way, residual orality manifests itself in writing in forms that have commonly been regarded as genius: Joyce's super-typographic precision and allusiveness, Faulkner's unselfconscious bardic absorption, Hurston's double-consciousness.

It is not my intention in this study to question the validity of Gates's racial approach to what Havelock has called "the oral-literate equation" (*The Muse* 5). Certainly there are distinctions to be made between white and black oral traditions—as has been empirically shown by Shirley Brice Heath (149-89). The simple fact is that orality-literacy research has been successfully applied to African American studies but *not* to Southern studies.<sup>2</sup> My primary purpose here is to bring the full force of media ecology to bear on the question of Southern literary distinctiveness; therefore, in the following pages I will deal with the Southern oral tradition as a single phenomenon that in many ways transcends differences in race, rather than as two discrete traditions existing in tandem.

Chapter One, "The Oral Character of Southern Culture," will provide the background necessary to establish the extent to which a living oral tradition has been influential in the formation of Southern

cultural identity. Literacy, education, writing, and publishing will be discussed. Again, because African American folk tradition has been well documented elsewhere, it will not form a major part of this discussion. Chapter Two, "Toward a Poetics of Southern Orality," will synthesize research on oral language with stylistic analyses of Southern literary works, specifically James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* (1927) and Eudora Welty's *The Ponder Heart* (1954), in order to illustrate the oral bent of Southern writing. "Orality and Southern Narrative: Pattern and Structure," the third chapter, will examine two well-known Southern short stories, William Gilmore Simms's "Sharp Snaffles" (1870) and William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (1930). While "Sharp Snaffles" corresponds to a well-documented and ancient oral narrative pattern, "A Rose for Emily" is an essentially typographic story that is organized according to an oral narrative structure. Finally, Chapter Four, "Southern Epistemology and the Psychodynamics of Orality," will compare the characteristically oral modes of thought and expression as cataloged by Ong to certain well-known theories of Southern exceptionalism, especially those outlined in the Southern Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) and Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934). These oral Southern epistemologies will be shown to be significant to Hurston's classic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and to the poetry of Donald Davidson. The ultimate yield of these discussions will be a greater

understanding of the nature of Southern literature—of its artistic achievement and larger cultural significance.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>According to the 1790 census, the European majority in the Southern states were Celts (Scottish, Irish, Scots-Irish, Welsh, and Cornish), and by the time of the Civil War the region's white population was over 75 per cent Celtic (Helen Taylor 340). For an interesting, though flawed, discussion of the significance of Celtic roots to Southern identity, see McWhinney.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Berry and Blassingame, Brewer, and Dundes.

CHAPTER ONE  
THE ORAL CHARACTER OF SOUTHERN CULTURE

Wandering through the Southern countries teaching  
The A B C from Webster's spelling-book;  
Gallant and godly, making love and preaching,  
And gaining by what they call "hook and crook,"  
And what the moralists call overreaching,  
A decent living. The Virginians look  
Upon them with as favorable eyes  
As Gabriel on the devil in paradise.  
—Fitz-Greene Halleck, "Connecticut" (71-72)

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Neil Postman forcefully argues that the culture of nineteenth-century America was an almost completely typographic one. After all, even between 1640 and 1700 the literacy rate for the male population of Massachusetts and Connecticut was between 89 and 95 percent, "quite probably the highest concentration of literate males to be found anywhere in the world at that time" (31). And in 1776, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* was popular enough to sell approximately 400,000 copies to an American population of only three million (using Howard Fast's calculations, Postman shows that a late twentieth-century book would have to sell twenty-four million copies to do as well [35]). So, Postman reasons, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the United States was "a fully print-based culture in all of its regions," including the South (38).<sup>1</sup> Between 1825 and 1850, the number of American libraries tripled; between 1836 and 1890, the



*McGuffey Reader* sold 107 million copies to schools alone; and throughout the century Americans of all classes “devoured” newspapers, magazines, Sunday school tracts, and novels (38-39). To Postman, all of this shows the “typographic bias” (36) of a nation that was “as dominated by the printed word . . . as any society we know of” (41).

Writing only two years after Postman, Gerald Graff, in *Professing Literature*, his history of English studies, offers a startlingly different assessment of the same time and place. Far from seeing nineteenth-century America as “a fully print-based culture,” Graff identifies an “oratorical culture” that “pervaded” the post-secondary study of language and literature, situating it firmly in the classical tradition—as exemplified by such oral exercises as disputation, declamation, and forensic oration—until well after the Civil War (36-51). Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran expand on Graff’s idea in *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993), offering a more complete counter to Postman’s “typographic America” by arguing that oratorical culture pervaded more than college life in the nineteenth century: “American politics and society during this period were informed by a discourse inherited from the Revolutionary period, a discourse drawn self-consciously on the model of classical Roman rhetoric” (1-2). According to Postman, the turn of the twentieth century saw a shift away from a print-based public discourse and toward an electronic discourse represented by radio and, later, television. According to Graff, Clark, and Halloran, it

saw a shift away from an orality-based public discourse toward one more highly textual, what Graff terms “the professional era.”

These two descriptions appear at first to be inconsistent to the point of mutual exclusiveness, but if we examine them in the light of orality-literacy studies, we see that they may in fact be equally (though, in each case, only partially) accurate. As explained in the introduction to this study, Ong and others have shown that “oral” and “literate” exist on a continuum rather than as polar opposites, so that even cultures that have known writing for millennia may exhibit varying degrees of oral residue, may in fact be simultaneously highly literate and residually oral. A tension between an emerging typographic literacy and a lingering orality has marked the United States for most if not all of its history, and the nation’s most powerful concentration of oral residue can undoubtedly be found in its southern region. By no means do I wish to make the essentialist argument that the Mason-Dixon line served as the border between a completely print-based culture and a completely oral one. But, if America exists on Ong’s continuum, somewhere between orality on the left and typographic literacy on the right, then the South has always fallen considerably left of the North.

This fact, if not its full significance, appears to have been comprehended some eighty years before Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*, when historian William Garrott Brown wrote that in the Old South “it was the spoken word, not the printed page, that guided thought, aroused

enthusiasm, made history” and even that “it is doubtful if there ever has been a society in which the orator counted for more than he did in the Cotton Kingdom” (125). And in 1929, Northern novelist Joseph Hergesheimer, after traveling through the South, observed that

[t]he orators were at once a source of emotion and a principal education of the deep South. They had incalculable power. The people as a whole were unlettered and violently impressionable; they had a few generally shared simple conceptions; their minds were not troubled by new, by foreign ideas. They were as a people hostile to outside influences and facts. When the orations came to an end, when the musical and adroit voices ceased, and they went back to the isolation of the canebrakes, to the loneliness of a primitive soil, their minds and mouths were charmed and elated by ringing phrases. (38)

In the decades following Hergesheimer, somewhat less condescending commentary on the oral character of Southern culture was to be offered by journalist W.J. Cash (1941), who observed in the region a “love of rhetoric” that “required the immediate and directly observable satisfactions of speech rather than the more remote ones of writing” (97); historian Clement Eaton (1967), who referred to a “passionate addiction of Southern people to florid and emotional oratory” (*The Mind* 275); literary critic Cleanth Brooks (1983), who identified “a vigorous unwritten

literature sponsored and promulgated through a living oral tradition” that “has been powerful among our Southern folk” (“Southern Literature” 14, 13); and speech communications specialist Waldo W. Braden (1983) who wrote that “an oral tradition . . . pervaded southern living from the cabin to the statehouse and found expression in storytelling, courtroom pleading, revival preaching, and, of course, in electioneering” (ix).

### **Literacy and Education**

Clearly, Postman’s characterization of the nineteenth-century United States as “a fully print-based culture in all of its regions” (38) does not tell the whole story. He is quite correct when he notes the extraordinarily high literacy rates of the Northeast. According to the U.S. census, in 1850 a mere 1.89 percent of New England’s white population over twenty could not read. But the illiteracy rate for this same group in the South was 8.27 percent (Owsley 146). Thirty years later, 5.5 percent of the total population of New York was illiterate, while South Carolina’s illiteracy rate was 55.4 percent (Winston 16). In 1920, at the dawn of the Southern Literary Renaissance, a similar lack of balance was evident: Vermont’s illiteracy rate was 3.0 percent, while Louisiana’s was 21.9 percent (Winston 16-17).

Postman’s observations about libraries, textbook sales, and Americans’ “devouring” of novels seem strange in light of the history of literacy in the South. While the nationwide number of borrowing libraries did increase dramatically in the first half of the century, this fact should

not be taken to indicate a uniform American love affair with the printed word, for these libraries were not evenly distributed throughout the country, and all libraries are not created equal. For example, in 1850 the Northern college library with the greatest number of holdings was that of Harvard, at 84,200, while its Southern counterpart, the South Carolina College library, owned 18,400 volumes.<sup>2</sup> The North's second most heavily stocked academic library, Yale, boasted 50,481 books, while the University of Virginia was just behind South Carolina at 18,378. The non-academic library with the largest collection in the country was the Library Company of Philadelphia, with 60,000 volumes (the Library of Congress owned only 50,000), while the holdings of the South's most voluminous "public" library, the Charleston Library Society, numbered 20,000 (Jewett).<sup>3</sup> Not only were Southern libraries poorly stocked, but they also attracted relatively little patronage. Michael O'Brien offers an analysis of the activities of the Savannah Library Society between the years 1822 and 1826. The fourth U.S. census of 1820 reports the city's population as 7,523, of which 3,929 were free whites (United States Census), yet only 131 of these people held library memberships in the five years studied by O'Brien. These members discharged 3,890 items, meaning that on average a patron would borrow six items a year (*Conjectures* 1: 497-508). Postman presumably did not have the people of Savannah in mind when he characterized nineteenth-century Americans as "devourers" of printed materials.

As for the popularity of such textbooks as the *McGuffey Reader*, this too was an American phenomenon that left the South more or less untouched. Braden has suggested that there were five nineteenth-century Southern “school readers”: *The Southern Reader and Speaker* (1848), Jonathan J. Judge’s *The Southern Orator* (1853), D. Barton Ross’s *The Southern Speaker* (1856), Richard Sterling’s *Southern Orator* (1856), and Sterling’s *Little Southern Orator* (1872) (4-5). (Note the oratorical emphasis shared by all five titles.) However, he has not shown that any of these five books was ever actually used in a Southern classroom. Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest that they were not used to any significant degree. Concerns over the *lack* of Southern textbooks were commonly expressed in the periodicals of the Old South. In 1842, for example, an anonymous writer for the *Southern Quarterly Review* observed:

There is no subject more deserving of regard by the people of the South than the proper selection of books to be used in Colleges and elementary schools. Owing to the greater facilities for publication at the North, most of our books are obtained from that quarter. . . . We have seen books, even those intended for very young children, containing not only inuendos [*sic*], but oftentimes open declamation against the South and Southern institutions. (“School Books” 265).

Ten years later, *De Bow's Review* noted, "We do not remember a single text-book of the schools printed or published south of Mason and Dixon's line. . . . If there are such, they have but slight circulation," and then denounced the use of textbooks that "*originate* in the North," calling for the creation of new publications that would be consonant with "southern life, habits, thoughts and aims" ("Southern School-Books" 259-60). In 1857, *Putnam's Monthly* reported that Tracy Tupman, speaking at the recent Southern Convention at Savannah, had bemoaned the total lack of Southern textbooks: "He thought they could get text-books at home, without going to either Old England or to New England for them" and that doing so would "elevate and purify the education of the South" ("Southern Literature" 88-89). Four years after that, as the Civil War approached, *De Bow's* suggested that the situation had not changed: "[O]ur school books are written, printed and published at the North. . . . [The South should] cease longer to use Northern books, and to supply their place by better ones (if we can make them), but certainly home productions" ("Future Revolution" 608-09).

It would appear that the rhetorical primers of Judge, Ross, and Sterling intended to provide just such a service but were not popular simply because, however much the intellectual minority that published in literary reviews may have wished otherwise, formal schooling was less important in the South than in the North, and that which did take place

in the region was considerably less text-based. Educational historian John Hardin Best explains:

[I]n the southern cosmology textbooks did not matter all that much . . . the New England *Peter Parley* or the western *McGuffeys* were an acceptable enough frame for the limited degree and function of schooling offered across the South. The curriculum itself was a less than crucial enterprise for the young in that the teaching that really mattered would come from family, church, and social relationships, entire systems of thought quite free from northern influence. (11)<sup>4</sup>

An essay by Ellwood Fisher published in *De Bow's Review* in 1849 supports Best's contention: "Virginia has a system of oral instruction which compensates for the want of schools, and that is her social intercourse" (312). This system of oral instruction was free from Northern influence, as Best argues; it was equally free from the influence of textuality in general. That the anti-textual impulse of Southern education survived to some extent even into the twentieth century is suggested by Georgia author Flannery O'Connor, who writes of Hazel Motes, the reluctant Southern preacher from her 1959 novel *Wise Blood*, "He had gone to a country school where he had learned to read and write but that it was wiser not to" (23).

The relatively few Southerners who did proceed beyond *Peter Parley* and *McGuffey* to attend college often went north to do so.



Generally, they were ill-prepared for the rigors of a Northern college, as noted in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918). Adams, who belonged to the Harvard Class of 1858, describes his Southern classmates (most notably Robert E. Lee's son Rooney) as being "as little fitted for [Harvard] as Sioux Indians to a treadmill" (56) and goes on to observe: "Strictly, the Southerner had no mind; he had temperament. He was not a scholar; he had no intellectual training; he could not analyze an idea, and he could not even conceive of admitting two; but in life one could get along very well without ideas, if one had only the social instinct" (57-58). Adams's dismissive attitude toward the Southern mind reflects a cultural bias that is similar to that of many literate commentators on oral cultures, but his observation about the tendency of nineteenth-century Southerners to be comparatively unmarked by the kind of formal, analytical, abstract thought associated with typographic literacy is probably not inaccurate.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Adams's fellow Bostonian, James Russell Lowell, writing in 1866, expressed similar prejudices about the civilization of the Old South: "There were no public libraries, no colleges worthy of the name; there was no art, no science, still worse, no literature but [William Gilmore Simms's];—there was no desire for them" (537).

Perhaps one reason Lowell considered Southern colleges unworthy of the name was that they provided a much more orally-based education than their Northern counterparts. Students of these institutions were

assigned very little writing, but were constantly required to perform oral declarations and recitations. A letter penned by Charles Woodward Hutson, an 1860 graduate of South Carolina College, recounts a typical day's schoolwork at that institution: "[Professor] LeConte called me up for the second time this morning, and [Professor] McCay just now (midday). I have only been called up to recite three times [today]" (Knight, *Documentary* 431). In northeastern colleges, instruction centered less on being "called up" to engage in oral performance and more on the written word. Before even being admitted to Harvard, students were expected to display a certain level of writing competence, as the following passage from the school's 1872-73 catalog demonstrates: "Correct spelling, punctuation, and expression, as well as legible handwriting, are expected of all applicants for admission; and failure in any of these particulars will be taken into account at the examination" (Brereton 34).

The demand here for "correct" use of language reflects a definite print bias, as McLuhan has shown:

It is presumably impossible to make a grammatical error in a non-literate society, for nobody ever heard one. The difference between oral and visual order sets up the confusions of the ungrammatical. In the same way the passion for spelling reform . . . arose from the new effort to adjust sight and sound. (239)

To a large extent, this particular print bias is the result of the influence of eighteenth-century Scottish “New Rhetoric,” particularly George Campbell’s *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) and Hugh Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), both of which sought to systemize writing in order to ensure the “purity” of the language employed (Blair 68) and both of which were required reading at Harvard in the 1850s (Wozniak 236).

In general, Blair’s lectures exerted a powerful influence over American rhetorical education. James A. Berlin calls them “the most popular treatment of rhetoric until after the Civil War,” citing the fact that 130 editions of the book were published in England and the United States between 1783 and 1911 (25). Nan Johnson writes that Blair’s work “more than any other was responsible for popularizing the belles lettres approach to rhetorical theory and practice in the nineteenth-century” (32). Predictably, however, this influence was much less pronounced in the South.<sup>6</sup> At the state college in Georgia, the lectures were available in the library but not a part of the curriculum (Reed 33), and although they were read by freshmen at South Carolina College, this instruction was followed in the sophomore year by Thomas Sheridan’s much more oratorical *Lectures on Elocution* (Knight, *Documentary* 101). In his letters home from the latter institution, Hutson does not mention any demands upon the correctness or “purity” of his language; indeed, Edgar Knight has shown that in the South the study of grammar was

regarded as an “advanced” subject that was added “to the curriculum very tardily” (*Public Education*, 270-71).

Also added tardily to Southern curricula was an emphasis on endowing students with literary taste: “there was in the Old South,” Jay B. Hubbell notes, “no intimate relation between literature and educational institutions” (352). In his contribution to the 1930 Southern Agrarian symposium *I’ll Take My Stand*, poet John Gould Fletcher observes:

The graduation exercises of . . . old Southern academies (some of them survived down to the twentieth century) provided an almost undisciplined orgy of political oratory and of civic patriotism—with very little top-dressing of literature, aesthetics, and philosophic criticism. For this defect the peculiar social structure of the older South was largely responsible. . . . But it would have been better, no doubt, if the older Southern academies could have frankly encouraged literature, drama, the essay and the liberal arts from the beginning. We might then have easily challenged the North’s beginning in these fields, and given America a very different History of Letters. (104)

The North’s apparent superiority to the South in the area of aesthetic instruction is closely related to its appropriation of Scottish belletristic rhetoric. Blair devotes four lectures to taste, which he defines as “the

power of receiving pleasure from the beauties of nature and of art” (37). This “power” is an essential one to his system, for it “is always appealed to, in disquisitions concerning the merit of discourse in writing” (37). In fact, Nan Johnson identifies “the distinctive characteristic of [Blair’s] belles lettres approach to rhetoric” as being “a theoretical attention to taste as a human faculty and to those qualities of rhetorical style that most effectively move the faculties of reason and the passions to higher thought and emotion, a state synonymous with the exercise of taste” (31-32). This theoretical attention to taste is a prime example of Blair’s print bias. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein has traced the notion of aesthetic sensibility from “[b]efore the advent of mass literacy, [when] the most popular works were those which appealed to diverse groups of readers and not just to the plebes” (*Printing Revolution* 32) to the post-Gutenberg “rise of intellectuals as a distinctive social class” which resulted in the immense gulf that “separated the most eminent culture heroes, such as Erasmus and Voltaire, from the unknown Grub Street hack” (98-99). In doing so, she has shown the very concept of taste to be essentially a typographic construct, a “faculty” that has little meaning or relevance to oral cultures.

Blair’s emphasis on the typographic notion of taste comprised one of his most significant contributions to the teaching of rhetoric in nineteenth-century America, a fact well illustrated by Samuel P. Newman’s *Practical System of Rhetoric* (1827). This volume, the first

American rhetorical textbook to gain widespread popularity, did so almost exclusively in the North and “was clearly in the mold of Blair” (Clark and Halloran 15).<sup>7</sup> Importantly, Newman devoted a substantial portion of his presentation (120 pages, over half the book) to a discussion of the formation of literary taste. Like the Scotsman, Newman shifted rhetoric’s focus away from oratory and towards various textual forms—history, drama, biography, poetry, and scientific writing (Blair focused only ten of his forty-seven lectures on oratory, and Newman hardly treated the subject at all—both of these writers apparently took an approach to rhetoric quite different from that of Judge, Ross, and Sterling, authors of the Southern textbooks examined by Braden). Significant to the current discussion, two facets of Newman’s system to be derived from Blair are the emphasis on communication over persuasion and the preference given to an unemotional and economical style over excessive ornament.

The first of these is made evident on the very first page of Blair’s lectures. Taking a cue from Adam Smith, Blair establishes rhetoric as “the power of communicating [one’s] thoughts to . . . another” (30)—a definition in stark contrast to Aristotle’s “power of finding the available means of *persuasion* in any situation”—thus broadening the context of rhetoric from persuasion to virtually all forms of communication. Newman, perhaps imposing on Blair’s lectures the common misreading that they offer a merely stylistic rhetoric, then narrows this

communicative focus to style, commenting in his preface that “[t]he instructions of Rhetoric are twofold;—those which point out the excellencies of style, and those which give cautions against its most frequent faults” (1). Thus, through both direct readings of Blair’s lectures and the simplified version they received via Newman, students at Northern universities were taught an essentially non-argumentative rhetoric that centered on belle lettres, as the following Harvard writing assignment from 1888 clearly demonstrates:

Write a composition—with special attention to clearness of arrangement, accuracy of expression, and quality rather than quantity of matter—on one of the following subjects:—

1. The Story of Viola.
2. Viola’s Errand to Olivia.
3. How Malvolio was Tricked.
4. Sir Andrew Aguecheek’s Challenge and What Came of it.
5. Mr. Darcy’s Courtship. (Brereton 59-60)

Here, the clarity, conciseness, and quality of writing are emphasized; students are not required to make an *argument* about *Twelfth Night* or *Pride and Prejudice*.

That such a shift away from debate is consistent with a growing typographic literacy is explained by Ong:

Many, if not all, oral or residually oral cultures strike literates as extraordinarily agonistic in their verbal performance and indeed in their lifestyle. Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. It separates the knower from the known. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle. Proverbs and riddles are not used simply to store knowledge but to engage in verbal and intellectual combat. (43-44)

In *College Life in the Old South*, his 1928 history of the University of Georgia, E. Merton Coulter offers an account of the “verbal and intellectual combat” that made up education in rhetoric at what was then Franklin College. While at Northern colleges such as Brown and Yale “oratory (with its belletristic flourishes) dwindled into rhetoric, and rhetoric gradually lost its oral emphasis, finally giving way to the exclusively written focus of English composition” (Scholes 10), rhetorical activities at Franklin College remained for a century largely the province of two debating societies, the Demosthenian and Phi Kappa.<sup>8</sup> As described by Coulter, debates were not mere academic exercises but the extraordinarily agonistic verbal performances of an oral culture—and the oratorical rivalries very often became quite personal:



They were seriously bitter and lasted in some instances throughout the period of college life and long thereafter. There are instances where reconciliations were never made until old age had crept upon the participants. The intense rivalry that prevailed between these two societies is eloquent proof of the large part they played in the lives of the students. (108)

It is also eloquent proof of the intensely emotional oratory that became associated with the university in particular and the South in general. In his unpublished "History of the University of Georgia" (written between 1945 and 1948), Thomas Walter Reed describes the adjustments that had to be made by Josiah Meigs, the former Yale tutor who became Franklin College's second president in 1800, when he established a "forensic disputation" requirement based on the New Haven model:

. . . President Meigs soon found that the oratory of his Georgia students was of a different brand from that of Yale. It probably suited him better than the Yale brand, for he was of an emotional temperament and something of a "fire eater." There was more fire and enthusiasm in this Georgia brand, more tendency to a generous flow of language, more emotional display. It may have been that there was less of the close reasoning of the New England type, thus calling on him to offer extra training in the preparation of the speeches

by the students. The young Georgia orators evidently did not intend that their hearers should go to sleep on them, even if they had to somewhat curtail statistics and other like arguments in their debates. (781)

Both the “emotional display” and the “generous flow of language” here are consistent with Ong’s characteristics of oral expression. Discourse in an oral culture tends to be “empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced,” whereas “writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for ‘objectivity,’ in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing” (45-46). In his own way, Blair himself appears to recognize this fact when he observes that ancient orators “used a bolder manner than what the greater coolness of modern taste will readily suffer,” and accordingly urges his readers to “avoid carrying the tone of declamation to a height that would now be reckoned extravagant” (104). As for the “generous flow of language,” this too is identified by Ong as being characteristically oral: “copious” language “is in a profound sense more natural to thought and speech than is sparse linearity. Sparsely linear or analytic thought and speech is an artificial creation, structured by the technology of writing” (40). Once again, Blair reveals his typographic bias by insisting that perspicuity is “a quality so essential in every kind of writing, that for the want of it, nothing can atone” (67) and that a necessary part of this essential perspicuity is precision, the “retrenching [of] all superfluities, and

pruning [of] the expression, so as to exhibit neither more nor less than an exact copy of his idea who uses it” (69). (Note the significance of typographic perspicuity and precision to the Harvard writing assignment, which calls for “special attention to clearness of arrangement, accuracy of expression, and quality rather than quantity of matter.”)

Blair’s lectures remained a part of the Yale curriculum at least until 1860 (Guthrie 62), no doubt influencing the placid and precise “Yale brand” of oratory to which Reed alludes. Indeed, they were taught at various northeastern colleges as late as 1880 (Wozniak 250). Furthermore, in *A Practical System of Rhetoric*, Newman lifts not only the emphasis on literary taste but also such typographic concepts as correctness (“incorrectness in the use of words and in the construction of sentences . . . is considered as evidence of careless intellectual habits and an unfinished education” [157]), emotional distancing (the best writing “excites emotions more calm and permanent” [197]) and precision (“the fewer words used . . . the greater will be the vivacity of the sentence” [173]) directly from Blair, thus, along with various other Blair imitators, carrying their influence well into the twentieth century (Hewett 180).

The ultimate result of this cumulative belletristic influence was the movement of rhetoric away from the public sphere and into the personal domain. Robert J. Connors notes that by the end of the nineteenth-century writing assignments were focusing more on students’ personal

experiences and feelings than they had in earlier times. This shift toward more subjective writing, Halloran suggests, “reflects the same concern with private, individual experience that marks imaginative literature, particularly that of the romantic and post-romantic period, in contrast to traditional oratory’s focus on culturally sanctioned commonplaces” (165). Thomas P. Miller laments the fact that through Blair’s influence “the essay became divorced from the political contexts and purposes that shaped its composition and reception” (249), the effect of which was the marginalization of “rhetoric’s practical involvement with the production of public discourse” (251). All of these observations serve to show a rising typographic literacy and a consequent fading away of traditional oral expression, in which, according to Ong, “the individual’s reaction is not expressed as simply individual or ‘subjective’ but rather as encased in the communal reaction, the communal ‘soul’” (46).

Importantly, this transition did not occur as rapidly in the South. The extent to which rhetoric in the region remained encased in the communal “soul” rather than individual and subjective is well illustrated by the public spectacle that was most often made of oral performances and examinations at Southern colleges and private academies. Richard Malcom Johnston, a middle Georgia commissioner of education and sometime novelist, comments on community interest in such “exhibitions”:

Whenever a master remained until the end of the spring term, it closed with an examination of the pupils on the last day and what was called an “exhibition” at night. A rude platform was built in front of the door, and an arbor covered with branches of trees extended far out. Many hundreds attended the examinations and many more the exhibition. To the latter people came from all distances up to 10 and 15 miles, often to the number of two and three thousand. . . . No occasion in that rural region brought more hearty enjoyment to the vast crowds assembled to honor it. (1727-28)

Although Johnston does not discuss the subject matter of these oral performances, they were clearly significant to the public in ways that the simple personal expression of young people would not be. Moreover, the declarations appear to have served an important community function far beyond the enrichment of the students who performed them. The fact that Johnston wrote this description in 1895, seven years *after* students of Harvard were being asked to produce non-argumentative essays on such topics as “Mr. Darcy’s Courtship,” strongly suggests that the South was a more residually oral culture than the North in the nineteenth century, and that rhetorical education in the region was to a great extent marked by this oral residue.

## Writing and Publishing

Also marked by the oral character of the Old South was the region's general attitude toward writing and literature, which was very distinct from the prevailing American attitude. Early in the nineteenth century, there was alive in the North an active, concerted effort to promulgate an American literature. Calls for a national epic were commonplace and were even made by figures no less lofty than John Adams, who wrote, "I should hope to live to see our young America in Possession of an Heroick Poem, equal to those the most esteemed in any Country" (qtd. in Gray, *History* 90). As unsuccessful as the many attempts at an American epic were (the oft-ridiculed *Columbiad* [1807] by Connecticut's Joel Barlow was the most significant of the lot), the desire for a national literature grew into a Yankee obsession. The following exhortation, made by Samuel Lorenzo Knapp of Massachusetts in his 1829 *Lectures on American Literature*, is typical of the endeavor:

What are the Tibers and Scamanders, measured by the Missouri and the Amazon? Or what the loveliness of Illysus or Avon by the Connecticut or the Potomack?—Whenever a nation wills it, prodigies are born. Admiration and patronage create myriads who struggle for the mastery, and for the olympick crown. Encourage the game and the victors will come. (qtd. in Trent, et al. vi-vii)

However naïve Knapp's aphorism about prodigies may be, at least in this particular case it seems to have proven true. By the time the nation erupted in Civil War, such authors as Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had effected an American Renaissance. Among the canonical antebellum writers of imaginative literature, however, there are only two Southerners, Edgar Allan Poe and William Gilmore Simms; of these, Poe is of marginal Southernness, Simms of marginal canonicity.

Such a poor showing is hardly a surprise. Put simply, the South wanted no part of the "American literature" project. In 1831, an article in the *Southern Review* responded to the efforts of Knapp and others on behalf of the region: "We do[,] . . . in the name of the good people of the planting States, utterly disclaim . . . having even the humble part, which is assigned to us, in a separate school of writers, dignified with the title 'American.'"<sup>9</sup> Next, the contributor identified the "general feeling of aversion to authorship in the South" and, amazingly, went on to suggest that this aversion "may be said to prevail, for the greater part, precisely in proportion to good education and cultivated taste." In other words, only the poorly educated, bereft of cultivated taste, would engage in literary pursuits. Tellingly, this commentator's preferred alternatives to

fiction and poetry were “politics and eloquence” (that is, *oratory*), which he or she termed “the active powers” (“American Literature” 438).<sup>10</sup>

Five years later, Poe lambasted “the long indulged literary supineness of the South” (“Georgia Scenes” 287), and five years after that Simms was more bitter still in his claim that “the failure of the South to possess a literature of its own, arises not from any want either of her own men or her own material, *but from the absolute and humiliating insensibility of the great body of her people to the value of such possession*” (“Southern Literature” 71, Simms’s emphasis). Two of Simms’s fellow Charleston writers, Paul Hamilton Hayne and Henry Timrod, expressed similar frustrations in 1859. In a letter to Lowell, Hayne complained of “the *unliterary character* of the Southern People” and confessed, “Sir, to a young literary aspirant, it is very hard to know that his *very profession* is looked upon with contempt . . . by those he would fain delight, and satisfy” (qtd. in O’Brien, *Conjectures* 1: 580, emphasis Hayne’s). But it was Timrod who expressed the absurd position of the Southern writer most forcefully and memorably:

We think that at no time, and in no country, has the position of an author been beset with such peculiar difficulties as the Southern author is compelled to struggle with. . . . In no country in which literature has ever flourished has an author obtained so limited an audience. In no country, and at no period that we can recall, has an author been



constrained by the indifference of the public amid which he lived, to publish with a people who were prejudiced against him [i.e., Northern publishers]. It would scarcely be too extravagant to entitle the Southern author the Pariah of modern literature. (83)

The region's lack of a reading audience resulted in a lack of publishers, thus the Southern writer's need to seek publication from "people who were prejudiced against him" or her. The analogy Timrod draws between literary figures of the South and the disdained "low caste" of southern India sounds like hyperbole today, but in the Old South it was all too accurate.

Many professionals, most commonly lawyers (for no one in the Old South made a living by writing alone), who did indulge in literary pursuits did so under pseudonyms, so disrespected was the enterprise.<sup>11</sup> Mere novel-reading, regarded as being at best frivolous and at worst wicked, was commonly forbidden at women's colleges (O'Brien, *Conjectures* 2: 743).<sup>12</sup> This "unliterary character" was not driven from the South along with slavery in 1865. In fact, in the second half of the twentieth century, William Faulkner said that Southerners "simply do not read books. They are good people but they just do not read books" (Gwynn and Blotner 136), and James B. Meriwether wrote, "[B]y and large it is still true today, as it has always been, that the South is the

worst book market in the nation; though Southerners write books, they don't read them" (146).

Meriwether is echoing an 1843 *Southern Quarterly Review* article, conjectured to have been written by Simms: "[The South] constitutes a small portion of the American book-reading public."<sup>13</sup> This writer proceeds to make an observation that is, at least for the purposes of this discussion, extremely important: "We have no great publishing houses here, and but few authors. Newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets make up our principal literature" ("International Copyright" 2). Actually, periodicals other than newspapers were little more popular in the South than books. Simms himself bitterly wrote to the editor of the newly formed *Magnolia*:

I have had so much experience, either as an editor or as a contributor, in the making of Southern Magazines, and know so thoroughly their history, and the inevitable event [their failure], that my conviction of the almost certain fate that awaits them, inspires me with a feeling, very like disgust, when I am told of any new experiment of the kind in contemplation. ("Southern Literature" 1)

The comparative importance of pamphlets and newspapers, on the other hand, is indisputable and merits discussion.

Although it is true that pamphlets and newspapers were widely read in the South, it is important to note that both of these printed forms

had strong ties to orality. Southern pamphlets in fact were usually nothing more than textual reproductions of oral addresses, such as sermons, political orations, or academic lectures, and they were characterized by oratorical language. Bishop Stephen Elliott of South Carolina, for example, began an 1860 pamphlet with the salutation “Gentlemen of the Clariosophic and Euphradian Societies” (3), making no attempt to adapt his language to print, and ended it in much the same way: “Before I close this address, I would speak, if possible to the hearts of these young gentlemen who have done me the honor of bringing me here” (19). Though written eighty-five years earlier, Thomas Paine’s great Northern pamphlet *Common Sense* is written for an audience of readers, not listeners, and employs language that is self-consciously typographic. It opens, “Perhaps the sentiments contained *in the following pages* are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor” (3, my emphasis), and closes, “On these grounds I rest the matter. And . . . no offer has yet been made to refute the doctrine contained *in the former editions of this pamphlet*” (52, my emphasis).

The disparity between the oral South and typographic North is equally evident in the newspapers of the respective regions. In general, American newspapers served an important social and cultural function quite early in the nation’s history. In *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* (1803), the Northern author and Presbyterian minister Samuel Miller wrote of “the *Gazettes*,” “They have become the vehicles of

discussion in which the principles of government, the interests of nations, the spirit and tendency of public measures, and the public and private characters of individuals are all arraigned, tried, and decided” (251). Miller then goes on to describe the “spectacle” of the emergence of American print culture:

[The American newspaper] is the spectacle, not of the learned and the wealthy only, but of the great body of the people; even a large portion of that class of the community which is destined to labor, having free and constant access to public prints, receiving regular information of every occurrence, attending to the course of political affairs, discussing public measures, and having thus presented to them constant excitements to the acquisition of knowledge, and the continual means of obtaining it. Never, it may be safely asserted, was the number of political journals so great in proportion to the population of a country as at present in ours. Never were they, all things considered, so cheap, so universally diffused, and so easy of access. (253)

Miller’s portrait of a people voraciously participating in a newspaper-based republic of letters, so consistent with Postman’s “typographic America,” more accurately reflects his native Northeast than the nation as a whole.

In the South, newspapers were the most commonly read printed materials; still, they were distributed less widely than in the North.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Southern newspapers were fairly insubstantial. Usually they were four- or six-page broadsides containing mostly advertisements, with some items reprinted from other publications, and very little original material. As Frank Lawrence Owsley has noted, the plain folk of the Old South were more likely to keep abreast of current events by attending weekly church meetings than by reading newspapers (96).<sup>15</sup>

The one significant contribution made by Southern newspapers to literary history is the humor of “the Old Southwest” (Georgia, Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri), a genre typified by such writers as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (*Georgia Scenes*, 1835), William Tappan Thompson (*Major Jones’s Courtship*, 1843), Johnson Jones Hooper (*Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs*, 1845), Thomas Bangs Thorpe (*The Mysteries of the Backwoods*, 1846), Joseph Glover Baldwin (*The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi*, 1853), and George Washington Harris (*Sut Lovingood: Yarns Spun by a “Nat’ral Born Durn’d Fool,”* 1867). Each of these authors penned humorous sketches that were immensely popular in newspapers (and later collected in books) and that are commonly recognized as being rooted in the region’s oral tradition.<sup>18</sup>

Although it was the Southern humorists who proved influential and are best remembered today, newspaper humor was by no means a strictly Southern phenomenon in nineteenth-century America. In fact,

two years before Longstreet, the earliest Southwest humorist, began to publish his sketches, Seba Smith of Maine was contributing comical “Jack Downing Letters,” written in dialect, to the Portland *Daily Courier*. Other important figures of so-called Down East humor included Frances Whitcher of New York, Sara Payson Willis Parton (“Fanny Fern”) of Boston, Thomas Chandler Haliburton (“Sam Slick, Yankee”) of Canada, and Charles Augustus Davis of New York City. While it is likely that the popularity of the humorous sketch in Northern newspapers inspired similar creations in the South, the latter works took on a life of their own and embodied a brand of humor which differed from its counterpart to the north as greatly as Franklin College oratory differed from that of Yale.

The distinction between Northern and Southern newspaper humor can perhaps best be understood in the terms outlined by Mark Twain in his famous essay “How to Tell a Story” (1895). Twain distinguishes the humorous story (clearly the form that he prefers) from the comic (or witty) story. The former “depends for its effect upon the *manner* of the telling,” the latter “upon the *matter*” (3, Twain’s emphasis). While the comic story is tightly structured and deliberate, always ending “with a point” (3) or a “nub” (4), “[t]he humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular” (3). After providing the example of expert storyteller James Whitcomb Riley,<sup>16</sup> who tells stories “in the character of a dull-witted old farmer” who “gets all mixed up and wanders helplessly

round and round” (7), Twain summarizes the features of the humorous story in the following way:

To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the basis of the [humorous story], if my position is correct. Another feature is the slurring of the point. A third is the dropping of a studied remark apparently without knowing it, as if one were thinking aloud. The fourth and last is the pause. (8)

Although his phrase “thinking aloud” is highly suggestive of oral culture (in fact, Barry B. Powell uses this exact phrase to describe the speech-acts of the Homeric bard [223]), nowhere in the essay does Twain explicitly ally the humorous story with orality or the comic story with textuality. Implications of these associations, however, are pervasive. For example, Twain writes that “[t]he humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it” and that when the story contains a punch line or nub “the listener must be alert, for in many cases the teller will divert attention from that nub by dropping it in a carefully casual and indifferent way, with the pretense that he does not know it is a nub” (4-5). The practitioner of the comic story, on the other hand, does not “slur the nub”; rather, “he italicizes it, puts some whooping exclamation-points after it, and sometimes explains it in a parenthesis. All of which is

very depressing, and makes one want to renounce joking and lead a better life” (5). Not only does Twain assert that the humorous story centers on *the performance* (including such elements as slurring, pausing, and thinking aloud that cannot easily be understood in terms of writing) while the comic story centers on what might be called the *text*, but he also employs diction that suggests the more typographic nature of the latter form.<sup>17</sup> The humorous story has a *teller* and a *listener*, while the comic story employs *italics*, *exclamation-points*, and *parentheses*. Furthermore, the “wandering” nature of the humorous story is consistent with oral narrative structure, something that will be made obvious in Chapter Three.

Although relatively little research has been conducted on the differences in kind between oral and literate humor, the existence of such differences has been acknowledged by folklorist G. Legman.<sup>19</sup> As humorous tales and stories have been more and more absorbed by print, Legman writes, they have

become increasingly different—not only in matter but in form—from the older tales and jokes. The folk nerve has been almost completely cut. Page after page and at machine-gun speed, these publications shoot out their hopeless puns and “one-liners,” with less and less emphasis on art in the telling, or in fact on almost any verbal art; and with more



and more reliance on . . . the brief and unsatisfying climactic pleasure of the verbal explosion or punch line. (235)

Twain's "humorous story" form, with its reliance on "art in the telling," is rooted in orality, while his "comic story" form, with its reliance on the "punch line" or "nub," is rooted in typography.

Rather than identifying the humorous story as the property of the frontier (the South and West) and the comic or witty story as the property of New England, Twain writes that the former is "an American Development" while the latter is European (3). Of course, Twain is writing in 1895, after the folkish humor native to the Old Southwest, thanks in part to his own work, had gained popularity throughout the United States. Antebellum Down East humor generally had more in common with the literary comic or witty story (and, for that matter, with the Addisonian essay) than the oral humorous story, to which the following passage from an 1843 *Knickerbocker* review of Haliburton's *The Attaché* (1843) attests:

[Sam Slick] has lost none of his shrewdness, his acute observation, nor his sparkling humor . . . he has more genuine wit than is to be found in all the "down-east" letters which have been inflicted on the public *ad nauseam* . . . Mr. Slick's originality is the originality of *thought*, [rather] than of *manner* . . . while he equals [Charles Caleb Colton's] *Lacon* in saying "many things in a few words," he never sacrifices

truth to the external form of sententiousness. In his descriptions he is never striking at the expense of verisimilitude; nor does he permit his observation of character to be diverted from its naturalness by over-cumulative features in his picture, which destroys so many otherwise clever limnings. (382, emphasis in original)

Down East Humor, as represented by Haliburton, is the antithesis of Twain's "humorous story" form. It offers "genuine wit" as opposed to feigned witlessness, a reliance on "thought" (matter) rather than manner, an economy of style rather than "wandering" prolixity, "truth" rather than purposelessness, and verisimilitude rather than absurdity. Northern humor, perhaps from its inception, was identifiably print-based, while Southern humor, generally consistent with Twain's description of the humorous story, remained largely tied to the "folk nerve" well into the twentieth century.

As has been pointed out by numerous critics, most notably Carolyn S. Brown (1987), Southwest humor had strong ties to the tall tale, a folk tradition that, according to Franklin Julius Meine, "had [in the antebellum period] no counterpart in the humor of any other section of the United States. It was distinctly and peculiarly Southern; and it was provincial, wholly local" (XVI). This tradition was inextricably woven into the fabric of Southern culture. Owsley has observed that in the Old South no social event was "permitted to come to an end without tall tales

and spicy anecdotes going their rounds” (97). One attempting to describe the practice of telling tall tales could scarcely do better than Twain’s “basis” of the humorous story: “To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities. . . .”

Examples of the accuracy of this description are abundant in Harris’s Sut Lovingood yarns. One of the most frequently anthologized of these sketches, “Sicily Burns’s Wedding,” represents not only the popular folk motif of the bull ride, but also the formal elements of the oral tall tale. As the story begins, the rube Sut, speaking to the genteel narrator George, aimlessly rambles, making outlandish observations (that, significantly, have no real relevance to the narrative he is preparing to relate) with an air of total seriousness:

George, every livin thing hes hits pint, a pint ove sum sort. Ole [Reverend] Bullen’s pint is a durn’ed fust rate, three bladed, dubbil barril’d, warter-proof, hypockracy, an’ a never-tirein appertite fur bal’-face. Sicily Burns’s pint am tu drive men folks plum crazy, an’ then bring em too agin. Gin em a rale Orleans fever in five minits, an’ then in five minits more, gin them a Floridy ager. Durn her, she’s down on her heels flat-footed now. Dad’s pint is tu be king ove all durn’d fools, ever since the day ove that feller what cribb’d up so much co’n down in Yegipt, long time ago, (he run outen his

coat yu minds.) . . . I used tu think my pint an' dad's wer jis' the same, sulky, unmix'd king durn'd fool; but when he acted hoss, an' mistook hossflies fur ho'nets, I los' heart. Never mine, when I gits his 'sperence, I may be king fool, but yet great golly, he gets frum bad tu wus, monstros fas'. (87-88)

In addition to displaying the wandering purposelessness of the tall tale, Sut's opening remarks explicitly identify him as a "durn'd fool." He is in fact a clever storyteller who, like James Whitcomb Riley, adopts the persona of a "dull-witted" country bumpkin for humorous effect.

Eventually Sut gets around to the central story of how he has disrupted the nuptials of Sicily Burns, the eternal object of his lust, and Clapshaw the circuit rider, with the simple act of placing a basket over the head of Sock, the Burns family bull. Similar to the oral tall tale, Sut's yarn begins plausibly only to become increasingly outrageous as it progresses. Blinded, Sock knocks over "the bee-bainch" unleashing "at leas' five solid bushels" of the angry insects, enough to cover him "frum snout tu tail" (91). Like many tall-tale animals, the bees are drawn as impossibly self-aware and motivated by malice: "They am pow'ful quick-tempered littil critters, enyhow. . . . [A]n' they wer a-fitin one anuther in the air, fur a place on the bull. . . . [They were] the madest army ove bees in the world" (91). When the blinded, bee-covered bull stumbles into the Burns home during the wedding reception, the tale enters even more

absurd territory. Eventually, Sock has effectively stacked numerous tables into a tall pile, with Sicily's new mother-in-law perched on top, clinging for her life; Mr. Burns has landed astride the convulsing bull; and the guests have suffered so many bee stings that "[t]har warnt an' 'oman, ur a gal at that weddin, but what that frocks, an' stockins were too tite fur a week" (96). Like Twain's prototypical humorous storyteller, Sut appears innocently unaware that the occurrences he relates are patently absurd. Mody C. Boatright has noted that in Old South folk humor, such exaggerations were invariably accompanied by comic understatement (98). In keeping with this tradition, Sut observes of the enraged bull that has suffered bee stings all over his body, "his temper, too, seemed tu be pow'fully flustarted" (91) and describes the wedding attendees who manically run for their lives as the "livelyest folks I ever did see" (95). Finally, Sut does not conclude his yarn with the punch line or nub associated with typographic humor. There are in fact two features of the story's conclusion that are characteristic of oral tale-telling. The first of these is Sut's seemingly sincere commentary on the lessons of the experience: "Hit am an orful thing, George, tu be a natral born durn'd fool. . . . Ef I wer jis' es smart es I am mean, an' ornary, I'd be President ove a Wild Cat Bank in less nor a week" (97). The second is the transition that he makes to another, related story: "how old Burns finish'd that onspeakable Bull-ride, an' how I won my race agin all his sons, thar houns, an the neighborhood ginirally" (98).

Many commentators on Harris and the other Southwest humorists have incorrectly identified the sketches as substantively ironic: rogues such as Simon Suggs and Sut Lovingood, they argue, are being satirized rather than extolled. Irony is indeed present in these sketches, but it is not the kind of dramatic irony that would make Sut funny for reasons of which he is unaware. Sut's yarns are funny in precisely the way that he intends. The irony of Southwest humor is the irony of Twain's humorous story: the speaker describes absurd, often impossible occurrences as if they were both factual and commonplace. As Robert J. Biggs has pointed out, Southern humor is not satirical (21).

Down East humor, on the other hand, typically took the form of political satire, and, as Walter Blair has pointed out, these "satirical touches" were often responsible for a humorist's popularity; Charles Augustus Davis became more popular than Seba Smith, for example, because "his political satire was more apt, more biting, than that of Smith" (*Native American Humor* 44). The Southwest humorist's preferred mode of ridicule is the burlesque, in which the linguistic peculiarities of an individual or group are mimicked for comedic effect. In a sketch included in Baldwin's *Flush Times*, the pedantic oratorical flourishes associated with educators and clergymen are lampooned by the courtroom testimony of Burwell Shines, a Methodist minister and former school teacher, who describes a decidedly rough-and-tumble scrape between himself and the defendant, local ruffian "Buck" Jones:

As I reached the fence and was about propelling my body over the same, felicitating myself on my prospect of escape from my remorseless pursuers, they arrived, and James William Jones . . . seized a fence rail, grasped it in both hands, and standing on tip-toe, hurled the same, with mighty emphasis, against my cerebellum: which blow felled me to the earth. . . . At length, when thus prostrate to the ground, one of those bright ideas, common to the minds of men of genius, struck me: I forthwith sprang to my feet—drew forth my cutto—circulated the same with much vivacity among their several and respective corporeal systems, and every time I circulated the same I felt their iron grasp relax.

(80)

The humor here derives not from the tale itself, but rather from the incongruity between the earthy subject matter and the ludicrously ornate language in which it is couched.

Backwoods dialect was used by the Southern humorists in a similar way. In Henry Taliaferro Lewis's well-known burlesque sermon "The Harp of a Thousand Strings," the dialect of the speaker is incongruous with both the ecclesiastical context and the prideful attitude he exhibits (just as these are incongruous with one another):

You see me here today, my brethering, dressed up in fine close; you mout think I was proud, but I am not proud, my

brethering; and although I've been a preacher uv the gospel  
for twenty years, and although I'm captin uv that flat-boat  
that lies at your landing, I'm not proud, my brethering. (388)

Although Down East humor also made use of dialect, it did so to different effect. To Southern readers dialect sketches were merely printed versions of the kind of verbal play they enjoyed in the oral tradition, but in the North similarly rustic language was humorous simply because it “seemed ludicrous to a group of readers whose reading was still largely made up of heavily rhetorical language thoroughly divorced from the speech of country people” (Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* 45).

W.H. Auden (1966) has offered a brilliant discussion of humor which suggests that Northern satire is inherently literary while Southern burlesque is inherently oralistic. Auden draws a distinction between the satirical and the comedic: the former seeks to reform evils within society; the latter chronicles certain foibles of humankind, but accepts them as inevitable. Unlike the satirical, the comedic, analogue to the burlesque, is conservative, its aim being to preserve the *status quo* rather than alter it. “Satire,” Auden writes, “is angry and optimistic—it believes that the evil it attacks can be abolished; comedy is good-tempered and pessimistic—it believes that however much we may wish we could, we cannot change human nature and must make the best of a bad job” (xi). In *Comedy: The Irrational Vision* (1975), Morton Gurewitch takes the distinction farther, replacing Auden’s “comedy” with “humor”: “Traditional satire excoriates



folly, finding it ridiculous but also corrigible. Humor seeks, not to expunge folly, but to condone and even to bless it, for humor views folly as endearing, humanizing, indispensable” (9-10). Likewise, Carolyn Brown has shown that oral frontier storytellers “find too much joy in their yarning to create the coolness or bitterness of irony. More often the tall tale is warmly humorous, celebrating the humanness of people who find, create, or must cope with absurd situations” (27). Satire—which essentially is an endeavor of intellectual innovation, putting forth a *new* way of thinking that it hopes will replace an older way of thinking—is not at home in oral culture. Havelock has noted that the formation of western literacy brought about a “prose of ideas” that did not previously exist (*Preface* 304). Primary oral cultures, for obvious reasons, are fundamentally concerned with *preserving* past and present thought; only with literacy does *challenging* the *status quo* become conceivable. Moreover, burlesque concerns itself with oral performance and emphasizes manner rather than matter, while satire concerns itself with abstract ideology and emphasizes matter rather than manner. In short, Southwest burlesque, an example of what Auden would call comedy and what Gurewitch would call humor, is consistent with orality; Down East satire is consistent with textuality.

That the burlesque remained central to Southern oral tradition long after the period of the Southwest humorists may be inferred from accounts of “Cotton Tom” Heflin, the twentieth-century Alabama

Congressman and noted storyteller. In *Dixie Demagogues* (1939), Allan A. Michie and Frank Ryhlick explain that Heflin's storytelling career began in his childhood when he would visit African American camp meetings: "When he came home, his father would take him aside and ask what the preacher had said. The boy would begin to tell him in his own words, but his father would insist, 'No, Tom, how did the preacher say it?' Then Tom would mimic the preacher" (253). This style of mimicry, with the effect of the tale depending upon the manner of telling rather than the tale itself, was to characterize Heflin's storytelling until his death in 1951.

One final example of the oral character of Southern newspaper humor can be found in the attitude toward literacy evident in these sketches. A leitmotif of the genre is the gullibility and lack of common sense associated with bookish intellectuals. For example, in Baldwin's "Samuel Hele, Esq.," a Yankee schoolmistress who, spelling book in hand, has "come out as a missionary of light to the children of the South, who dwell in the darkness of Heathenesse" (213) is tricked into deserting her post and returning North by the silver-tongued Hele, who terrifies her with his hilarious exaggerations of the savagely violent practices of the local citizenry. It may be Hooper's Simon Suggs, however, who gives the Southwest's final word on bookishness:

Well, mother-wit kin beat book-larnin, at *any* game! . . .

Human natur' and the human family is *my* books, and I've never seed many but what I could hold my own with. . . .

Books aint fitten for nothin' but jist to give to children goin' to school, to keep 'em outen mischief. As old Jed'diah used to say, book-larnin spiles a man ef he's got mother-wit, and ef he aint got that, it don't do him no good. (53-54)

Such was the attitude toward literacy evident in the most widely-read writing of the South during the period of the North's great literary renaissance. Even the Northern writers who did make use of folk materials, such as Hawthorne, did so without being particularly influenced by the spoken word. Leslie A. Fiedler has noted that "in an age of public speaking . . . Hawthorne was without a platform presence, a platform voice. His works are essentially anti-rhetorical, neither overheard private speech nor public address; written to be read in silence, they gain nothing when recited aloud—tend to lose in reality" (488). The Southwest humorists, on the other hand, created a genre of writing deeply rooted in the oral. Arthur Palmer Hudson has best articulated their achievement:

In my opinion, the reason why Longstreet, Baldwin, and the lesser fry from the lower South originated something new in writing was that they had the wit to realize that something old in talking might look new in writing. For the kinds of stories they told are, with due allowances for "literary" finish, exactly the kinds of stories one can hear to-day [in 1936] on the "front galleries" of farmhouses all over the South—stories

told by men who never heard, and whose granddaddies perhaps never heard, of Longstreet or Hooper. . . . The [Southern] talent for imaginative construction in words has tended to oral rather than literary expression; the taste for enjoyment of its products, to speech rather than print. The large amount of oratory that happened to get published, the power which the spoken word still exercises in the South, are witness to the fact. (16-17)

Such was the world of the South, and such was the inheritance of the Southern writers, both African American and white, who were to exert such a powerful influence over American literary history in the twentieth century. The following chapters of this study will explore the literary writing of the region and the various ways in which the oral character of Southern culture has been significant to its development. By identifying precisely how Southern writers have made something old in talking look new in writing, I hope to arrive upon the essence of Southern literature and its cultural contribution.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Postman acknowledges that “[t]he South had lagged behind the North not only in the formation of schools (almost all of which were private rather than public) but in its use of the printing press” but nevertheless insists that “toward the end of the eighteenth century, the movement of ideas via the printed word was relatively rapid, and something approximating a national conversation emerged. For example, the *Federalist Papers* [1787] . . . were read almost as widely in the South as the North” (38).

<sup>2</sup>If Georgetown College is to be considered Southern, its library, with 26,100 volumes, has this distinction. This number, however, is still less than a third of Harvard’s holdings.

<sup>3</sup>“Strictly speaking, there were no ‘public’ libraries in the Old South, since all required membership of some sort” (O’Brien, *Conjectures*, 1: 488).

<sup>4</sup>In her research on oral tradition in Carolina Piedmont mill towns, Heath has found that this ethos is still very much alive. In one particular white community, she writes, “parents and teachers appear to see no conflict between the expectations of the home and church and those of the nursery school and the formal education system ahead. It is as though the school is not expected to link with or reinforce the norms of story-telling in the home, church, and community” (166).

<sup>5</sup>In a journal entry written some eighty years before Adams's autobiography, Emerson expresses more or less the same opinion about Southerners' having temperament rather than intellect: "[Southerners] are more civilized than the Seminoles, however, in my opinion, a little more. Their question respecting any man is like a Seminole's, —How can he fight? . . . His pugnacity is all they prize in man, dog, or turkey" (313).

<sup>6</sup>In an 1859 essay originally appearing in *Russell's Magazine*, Timrod specifically decries Blair's influence (85).

<sup>7</sup>Hewett reports that the book was required reading "at colleges in Amherst, Delaware, Wabash, and Michigan" (180). Wozniak identifies five schools that used Newman's text, all of them Northern: Bowdoin, Hamilton, Hobart, Middlebury, and New York University (237). Knight catalogs fifty rhetorical "readers" in use in the South before 1860; Newman's book is not among them (*Public Education* 275-76).

<sup>8</sup>Admittedly, literary societies played a significant role on Northern campuses as well. However, Braden has shown that they were much more important to students of Southern colleges, and that Southern literary societies attracted attention from the local public at large in ways that their Northern counterparts did not (38-40).

<sup>9</sup>This often-cited, unsigned article has been variously attributed to Edward W. Johnston (Hubbell 217, Thorp 7) and Hugh Swinton Legaré (Bassett 45).

<sup>10</sup>This view appears to have been commonly held in the Old South.

One historian has written:

The ante-bellum Southerner, it is generally conceded, could hold his own vocally, whether in public or private, against any rival. In fact his intense desire to master the spoken word was one of the factors in his neglect of the profession of letters. The cherished ambition of almost every young Southerner was for a public rather than a literary career. (Dabney 80)

<sup>11</sup>William Wirt, a noted biographer and essayist of the period, is a prime example. In 1828, Legaré wrote, “[T]hroughout the Southern States . . . a taste for literary studies (much more any serious . . . continued application to them) stands very much in the way of a young man in the pursuits of active life” (510). Dabney has observed that in the Old South “a desire for distinction in the field of prose or poetry, rather than in that of politics, was frequently looked upon as a species of eccentricity hardly compatible with the finer instincts of a properly reared Southern gentleman” (80). A friend of Philip Pendleton Cooke is said to have asked the Virginia poet, “Why do you waste your time on a damned thing like poetry? A man of your position might be a useful man” (qtd. in Dabney 81).

<sup>12</sup>O’Brien offers a great deal of documentation of Old-South contempt for novel-reading. In an 1841 diary entry, South Carolina

seminary student Basil Manly Jr. wrote of novels, “I am ashamed to be seen reading them which certainly shows that there is in my mind an impression that it is wrong. It is therefore sin to *me* if to no one else” (qtd. in *Conjectures* 2: 744, Manly’s emphasis). And in 1851, Martha Brookes wrote in a letter to her minister father, “Your remarks about Novel reading are very good & would have applied to myself years ago; for then I did indiscriminately read a great deal of trash: & at the time when I ought to have been storing my mind with useful knowledge, by attending to my school-tastes” (*Evening* 60).

<sup>13</sup>O’Brien attributes this unsigned article to Simms (*Conjectures* 1: 570).

<sup>14</sup>“In 1850 the per capita circulation of newspapers and periodicals among the white population of the South was eight copies annually, which was less than one third of the per capita circulation in the North” (Eaton, *Freedom* 78).

<sup>15</sup>This Southern practice is rooted in pre-typographic European tradition, as Eisenstein notes:

As communion with the Sunday paper has replaced churchgoing, there is a tendency to forget that sermons had at one time been coupled with news about local and foreign affairs, real estate transactions, and other mundane matters. After printing, however, news gathering and circulation were



handled more efficiently under lay auspices. (*Printing Revolution* 94)

<sup>16</sup>Although a lifelong resident of Indiana, Riley had a special relationship with the South. He was extremely popular throughout the region as a lecturer, and it was here that he made many of the friends, most notably Joel Chandler Harris, who would influence him as a humorist, local colorist, and dialect writer. He spent so much time at Harris's Atlanta residence, sitting on the front porch with the creator of Uncle Remus, swapping stories and discussing each other's writing, that Harris referred to the house as Riley's "other home" (Julia Collier Harris 528). Doris Lanier summarizes the significance of Riley's Georgia connections:

At a time when sectionalism was still alive in Georgia and when many Northerners received, at best, a cool welcome, Riley captured the hearts and imaginations of Georgians with his Hoosier characters as he toured the state. Georgians liked his nostalgic look at the past, his joy in the simple pleasures of life, his praise of the common virtues of the common man, his compassion for their hardships, and his gentle laughter at their weaknesses. . . . Riley was influenced by the Georgia regionalists and admitted early in his career that Harris was the model he followed in writing dialect. (189)

And so, though Riley was not a Southerner, his style of storytelling, as described by Twain, is generally more consistent with Southern than with Northern humor.

<sup>17</sup>In fact, the terms *humorous* and *comic* themselves suggest this distinction. *Humorous* originally referred to one's personal manner, while *comic* is derived from the dramatic (literary) genre of comedy.

<sup>18</sup>In *Fetching the Old Southwest* (2004), his monumental study of the genre, James H. Justus writes, "What is most apparent in the written humor is the authors' attraction to and dependence upon the oral tale (tall or otherwise), a pervasive form of entertainment at all levels of society in the Old Southwest" (392). For other discussions of the oral roots of Old Southwest humor, see Walter Blair ("Traditions"), Carolyn S. Brown (39-88), Budd, Hubbell (660), McHaney, Turner, and Wimsatt ("The Evolution").

<sup>19</sup>For more on the contrast between oral and literary humor, see Bronner.

## CHAPTER TWO

### TOWARD A POETICS OF SOUTHERN ORALITY

[T]he strength of even the more formal Southern writers stems from their knowledge of and rapport with the language spoken by the unlettered.

—Cleanth Brooks (*Language* 17)

It has long been commonly conceded that Southerners are distinct from other Americans in nothing so much as their peculiar linguistic habits.<sup>1</sup> Certainly there are various factors at play in the creation of a uniquely Southern English, including Scots-Irish antecedents, African influences, and rural isolation.<sup>2</sup> The oral character of Southern culture established in the previous chapter may be an important factor as well.

Daniel Boorstin has observed that the departure American English took from its British origins during the colonial period was directly related to literacy:

[T]he most important distinction between English and American pronunciation [is] the American tendency toward “spelling-pronunciation.” Very early, Americans began trying to discover how a word “ought” to be pronounced by seeing how it was spelled. This seemed to provide a ready standard of pronunciation in a land without a cultural capital or a ruling intellectual aristocracy. . . .

The ritual of the spelling-bee . . . tended to preserve the full pronounced values of syllables, and to promote literalness in pronunciation. (285)

The South, so significantly less influenced by literacy than the North, would clearly not be as prone to “spelling-pronunciation.” In *The Language of the American South* (1985), Cleanth Brooks specifically identifies a resistance to spelling pronunciation as a determinant of Southern linguistic exceptionalism:

Let’s take [the] example [of] the so-called dropping of the *-g* in such words as *going, doing, thinking*. Apparently as late as the nineteenth century everyone in England, including the educated classes, dropped his *-g*’s in such words. . . [A]nd, as your own ears will inform you, here in the South many still do, for the South remains the most conservative part of the United States. My guess is that the restoration of the *-g* was a spelling pronunciation, the result of the Victorian schoolmarm and her American counterpart, who insisted that these words must be pronounced just as they were spelled: don’t let a perfectly good *-g* go to waste. (4-5)

The dropping of the final *-g* is only one of hundreds of linguistic features of Southern English—phonological, lexical, grammatical—that can be attributed to the South’s oral tradition, which took the place of magazines and spelling-bees in shaping the language of the region.

It was inevitable that the oral nature of the Southern language would impress itself upon the literature of the region. Certainly Stephen M. Ross is correct in describing William Faulkner, that most Southern of literary geniuses, as “one of the most strongly ‘voiced,’ ‘oral,’ or ‘colloquial’ writers in American fiction” (100). African American texts, so essential a part of Southern literary history, are marked by, in the words of Henry Louis Gates Jr., “a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use. And the repository that contains the language that is the source—and the reflection—of black difference is the black English vernacular tradition” (xxii-xxiii). Recently, Jill Terry has gone so far as to declare, “[o]rality may well be one of the most significant characteristics of writing described as ‘Southern’” (519).

While many critics have been quick to observe an oral flavor to Southern literary style, few have subjected Southern writers’ recreations of oral performance to systematic analyses based on empirical research on oral communication.<sup>3</sup> This chapter will employ such an approach in order to determine the “oral” authenticity of two important Southern texts: James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927) and Eudora Welty’s *The Ponder Heart* (1954). These two books both take the form of oral performance—Johnson’s represents the formal orality of public performance, Welty’s the informal orality of interpersonal communication—and both, as I will show, possess

structural and stylistic attributes that reveal their authors' intimate familiarity with the oral tradition.

### **James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones***

Although it has been called "Johnson's greatest contribution to Afro-American poetry" (Fleming 53), *God's Trombones* has received little critical attention, and those scholars who have addressed it have experienced confusion over exactly what it is. The book has been variously described as "transcriptions of seven sermons often delivered by African-American preachers" (Carroll 57) and as a collection of "literary poems, not oral folk sermons, [which] moving though they may be . . . are not of a kind with the authentic items" (Rosenberg, *Can These* 6). In fact, the poems are neither transcriptions nor inauthentic literary recreations; rather, they lie somewhere between these two extremes. Richard A. Long, the earliest critic to analyze *God's Trombones* in a scholarly essay, shows the most accurate understanding of the nature of the work when he writes, "The principles [Johnson] employed in writing these poems [were] based closely on the practice of the folk preacher" (379). That is, the poems are literary creations carefully crafted by Johnson (over a ten year period, in fact), but were created according to the "practice" (not merely the subject matter) of the folk preacher, which had been familiar to him since his youth in Jacksonville and Atlanta, where he frequented black churches.

The “practice” of the folk preacher—the formal and stylistic elements of the folk sermon—has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly research. In fact, the first application of oral-formulaic theory to an English-speaking tradition was devoted to the chanted or “spiritual” sermons of Southern preachers, most but not all of whom were African American.<sup>4</sup> This research was conducted by Bruce A. Rosenberg, who documented his findings in three books (1970, 1985, 1991). In short, Rosenberg found that the sermons, which are orally composed, are every bit as formulaic as the epics of Homer or the Slavic *guslars* recorded by Parry and Lord.<sup>5</sup> They represent a true oral art form, and in terms of social function and the emotional responses elicited from audiences, the spiritual ministers are on par with the bards of antiquity.

In his preface to the volume, Johnson shows an understanding of the oral art employed by the preachers as well as its power:

The old-time Negro preacher of parts was above all an orator, and in good measure an actor. He knew the secret of oratory, that at bottom it is a progression of rhythmic words more than it is anything else. Indeed, I have witnessed congregations moved to ecstasy by the rhythmic intoning of sheer incoherencies. He was a master of all the modes of eloquence. He often possessed a voice that was a marvelous instrument, a voice he could modulate from a sepulchral whisper to a crashing thunder clap. His discourse was

generally kept at a high pitch of fervency, but occasionally he dropped into colloquialisms and, less often, into humor. He preached a personal and anthropomorphic God, a sure-enough heaven and a red-hot hell. His imagination was bold and unfettered. He had the power to sweep his hearers before him; and so himself was often swept away. At such times his language was not prose but poetry. It was from memories of such preachers there grew the idea of this book of poems. (5)

Johnson's own description of the art of the folk preacher points to the impossibility of writing a "book" of such sermons: the "rhythmic intoning," the all-important "voice" with its dexterous modulations of pitch, volume, speed—the very qualities most crucial to the impact of the sermons are precisely what cannot be removed from the oral-aural context. And yet, as we shall see, Johnson's intimate knowledge of the black sermonic style allowed him to create authentic literary versions. As L. Susan Bond warns, there is no single, monolithic African American preaching style; still, there are certain features that are common enough to the black sermon to be called standard, including call-and-response antiphony, a "text-and-context" structure, and, most important for our purposes, formulaic repetition.

One of the best known features of African American spiritual preaching is the "call-and-response" technique, which involves an



interchange between speaker and audience, such as this one recorded in an African American church by E.T. Sithole in 1972:

PREACHER: Can these bones live?

CONGREGATION: Ahah

Yes

PREACHER: Son of man, you are an engineer.

CONGREGATION: Yes

Show the light

PREACHER: Can these bones live?

CONGREGATION: Yes

Yeah—

All right

(qtd. in Edwards and Sienkewicz 73)<sup>6</sup>

In *God's Trombones*, Johnson provides only the words of the preacher, with no congregational responses. There are, however, certain hints of antiphony in the text. In *Black Preaching* (1970), Henry H. Mitchell writes, "Many preachers who pause momentarily for breathing or other reasons receive a response from the audience" (167). Rosenberg identifies certain "hortatory formulas" used by pastors—"Can these bones live?" in the passage above would surely be considered one—the purpose of which is "to get a response" (*Can These* 80). As Grace C. Cooper has shown, Johnson frequently uses dashes to effect the standard sermonic pause (15). When dashes are joined by hortatory language, such as second

person or vocatives, the verse seems particularly demanding of a response, as in the opening of “Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon”:

Weep not, weep not,  
She is not dead;  
She’s resting in the bosom of Jesus.  
Heart-broken husband—weep no more;  
Grief-stricken son—weep no more;  
Left-lonesome daughter—weep no more;  
She’s only just gone home. (27)

The most famous stanza of the book, immortalized in the title of Vinnette Carroll’s Broadway musical, is another such elicitation: “Young man— / Young man— / Your arm’s too short to box with God” (21).

By far the most common organizational pattern for African American sermons is the “text-and-context” structure. This pattern begins with a passage from scripture which is elaborated upon colorfully by the preacher, often with extra-biblical, anachronistic detail. The scriptural exemplum is then applied to contemporary affairs or morals (Rosenberg, *Can These* 18). Of the seven sermons in *God’s Trombones*, four use a clear text-and-context structure. “The Prodigal Son” retells Jesus’ famous parable, with the addition of lurid descriptions of the sinful life into which the title character falls when he quits his father’s house in favor of “Babylon.” Upon completion of the story, the speaker

shifts from third to second person, directly addressing his congregation as if they are all prodigal sons:

Oh-o-oh, sinner,  
When you're mingling with the crowd in Babylon—  
Drinking the wine of Babylon—  
Running with the women of Babylon—  
You forget about God, and you laugh at Death.  
Today you've got the strength of a bull in your neck  
And the strength of a bear in your arms,  
But some o' these days, some o' these days,  
You'll have a hand-to-hand struggle with bony Death,  
And Death is bound to win.

Young man, come away from Babylon,  
That hell-border city of Babylon.  
Leave the dancing and gambling of Babylon,  
The wine and whiskey of Babylon,  
The hot-mouthed women of Babylon;  
Fall down on your knees,  
And say in your heart:  
I will arise and go to my Father. (25)

“The Crucifixion” follows an account of Christ’s death with a personal expression of culpability which includes the audience:

Oh, I tremble, yes, I tremble,  
It causes me to tremble, tremble,  
When I think how Jesus died;  
Died on the steeps of Calvary,  
How Jesus died for sinners,  
Sinners like you and me. (43)

The most overtly political moment of the book comes at the end of “Let My People Go,” when the story of Exodus is augmented by the following post-script, a warning to modern-day, slaveholder-style oppressors:

Listen!—Listen!  
All you sons of Pharaoh.  
Who do you think can hold God’s people  
When the Lord God himself has said,  
Let my people go? (52)

Finally, in “The Judgment Day,” a description of the end times as accounted in Revelation is followed by an exhortation, again in second person:

Oh-o-oh, sinner,  
Where will you stand,  
In that great day when God’s a-going to rain down fire?  
Oh, you gambling man—where will you stand?  
You whore-mongering man—where will you stand?

Liars and backsliders—where will you stand,

In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire? (55)

Striking in this passage is the repetition of the phrase “Oh-o-oh, sinner” from the concluding stanzas of “The Prodigal Son” quoted above. A variation of this formula also appears in “Noah Built the Ark” (35). Formulaic repetition is the feature of the African American sermon that most convincingly links the form to an oral tradition stretching back to Homer. Rosenberg identifies several categories of spiritual-sermonic formulas, including parallelism, anaphoric repetition, vocatives, appositives, and refrain or “stall” formulas (*Can These* 70-85).

Syntactical repetition or parallelism is a near-universal feature of oral poetry (Finnegan 90). The technique helps the orator recall the material, helps the audience receive and retain the material, and creates a syncopated, even musical rhythm that makes the performance aesthetically appealing and emotionally moving. One of the many examples recorded by Rosenberg from African American sermons is this account of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse:

They tell me

In the mornin’

When the horses

Begin to come out

And the riders on the horses

Want ’em to come out

God from Zion  
Riding a red horse  
There's somebody gonna say  
Is that the general  
That I was fighting for  
And I heard another cry  
Saying no-oo  
That's not the one  
That you been fightin' for  
Another one rode out  
Riding a black horse  
Is that the man  
That I been fighting for  
I heard another voice say  
No, no-oo  
That's not the general  
That you been fighting for  
Another one rode out  
Riding a pale horse  
Is that the general  
That we been fighting for  
A voice said no  
That's not the one

That you been fighting for  
Another one came out  
God from Zion  
Riding a white horse  
Rainbow round his shoulder  
Hark Hallelujah  
Dressed in raiment  
White as driven as the snow  
From his head down to his feet  
God from Zion  
In his—from out of his mouth  
Come a two-edged sword  
Cuttin' sin  
Both right and left  
I heard a cry  
Is that the man  
That we been fightin' for  
They said yes. (Rosenberg, *Folklore* 174-75)

The first three events—the arrivals of the red, black, and pale horses—are parallel: in each case, the horse arrives, someone asks if the rider is the commanding general, and the speaker replies in the negative. The fourth event parallels the other three in all ways but one, for the rider of the white horse is in fact the general for whom the speaker has

fought, the God of Zion. The parallelism and final reversal adds emphasis to the moment when Christ finally returns, providing the description of the second coming with the appropriate intensity.

Johnson uses the technique repeatedly in *God's Trombones*. "The Crucifixion," for example, opens with three parallel stanzas:

Jesus, my gentle Jesus,  
Walking in the dark of the Garden—  
The Garden of Gethsemane,  
Saying to the three disciples:  
Sorrow is in my soul—  
Even unto death;  
Tarry ye here a little while,  
And watch with me.

Jesus, my burdened Jesus,  
Praying in the dark of the Garden—  
The Garden of Gethsemane.  
Saying: Father,  
Oh, Father,  
This bitter cup,  
This bitter cup,  
Let it pass from me.



Jesus, my sorrowing Jesus,  
The sweat like drops of blood upon his brow,  
Talking with his Father,  
While the three disciples slept,  
Saying: Father,  
Oh, Father,  
Not as I will,  
Not as I will,  
But let thy will be done. (39-40)

The three stanzas are parallel, although, as would be the case with an oral sermon, not precisely. Each begins with the formula “Jesus, my \_\_\_\_\_ Jesus,” with “gentle,” “burdened,” and “sorrowing” alternating as the third word. The first and second stanzas follow this line with the formula “\_\_\_\_\_ in the dark of the Garden—” and then “The Garden of Gethsemane,” but the third stanza does not retain this symmetry. The fourth or fifth line of each stanza begins with the word “Saying,” followed by a statement Christ makes which reveals his state of mind. His first statement, to his disciples, “Tarry ye here a little while, / And watch with me,” reveals his uneasiness over his impending fate, and his desire to postpone it. His second statement, this time to his heavenly Father, expresses even more doubt: “This bitter cup, / This bitter cup, / Let it pass from me.” The third statement parallels the second in its invocation “Father, / Oh, Father” and in its use of repetition in the two lines that

follow, but this time Jesus' statement is quite different: "Not as I will, / Not as I will, / But let thy will be done." The parallel syntax underscores the contrast between Christ's earlier feelings of doubt and his final acceptance of God's will. The passage is ingenious not only in its symmetry but also in its imperfections. The alternating first-line adjectives, for example, are arbitrary; they do not appear to have been hand-picked to introduce their respective stanzas. Why is Jesus "sorrowing" when he accepts his fate but "gentle" when he struggles with doubt? A more literary approach would reverse these two adjectives, or more likely employ diction that is even more precise. The lack of exactness in word choice lends the poem a strong oral quality.

Anaphoric repetition includes not only actual anaphora, the repetition of an initial word or words, but also epistrophe, the repetition of a concluding word or words, as in the five consecutive lines ending with the word *Babylon* in the "Prodigal Son" quotation above. Rosenberg notes that the use of anaphora by preachers "can have a profound cumulative dramatic impact" (*The Art* 259). Such an impact is palpable in the following excerpt from an African American radio sermon transcribed by Rosenberg:

Oh my friends upon that cross of Calvary Jesus died for you  
and me

While blood flowed from His hands

While blood flowed from His feet

While blood flowed from His sword-pierced side  
While blood flowed from his forehead  
While blood flowed down upon that rocky crag of Golgotha's  
heel (*Can These* 152)

A similar cumulative effect is achieved by the repetition of "Sinners" in the following passage from "Noah Built the Ark":

Sinners came a-running down to the ark;  
Sinners came a-swimming all round the ark;  
Sinners pleaded and sinners prayed—  
Sinners wept and sinners wailed—  
But Noah's done barred the door. (36)

Even as simple a word as "and," repeated anaphorically, can have a mesmerizing effect when properly intoned, resulting in a heightened emotional intensity, as in this passage from "Let My People Go":

And God unlashd the waters,  
And the waves rushed back together,  
And Pharaoh and all his army got lost,  
And all his host got drowned.  
And Moses sang and Miriam danced,  
And the people shouted for joy,  
And God led the Hebrew Children on  
Till they reached the promised land. (52)<sup>7</sup>

Shirley Brice Heath has shown that vocatives are noticeably abundant in orally composed prayers—much more so than in scripted prayers. The following excerpt from an orally-composed prayer recorded by Heath in a black Southern church illustrates this characteristic:

We thank thee for watchin' over us, *kind heavenly Father*  
Through the night.

We thank thee, *Oh Lord*.

For leadin' 'n guidin' us.

We thank thee, *kind heavenly Father*.

For your strong-arm protection around us.

*O Lord*, don't leave us alone. (209, my emphasis)

Johnson's "Listen, Lord—A Prayer," the very title of which includes a vocative, is similarly marked:

*O Lord*, we come this morning

Knee-bowed and body-bent

Before thy throne of grace.

*O Lord*—this morning—

Bow our hearts beneath our knees,

and our knees in some lonesome valley. . . .

*O Lord* — open up a window of heaven,

And lean out far over the battlements of glory,

And listen this morning. (13, my emphasis)

The poem is made up of twelve sentences, all but one of which contain a vocative: “O Lord,” “Lord,” or “Lord God.”

With regard to the frequent use of enjambment in the chanted sermon, Rosenberg writes, “One—but only one—of the reasons enjambment occurs is the frequent use of nouns, noun compounds, and substantives in apposition” (*Can These* 82). It is difficult to determine a relationship between enjambment and appositives in *God’s Trombones*. Although in these poems appositives are plentiful, enjambment is almost constant and occurs whether apposition is employed or not. Still, the two do appear to work together at times:

And the old ark sailed that lonely sea—  
For twelve long months she sailed that sea,  
A sea without a shore. (36)

Jesus, my gentle Jesus,  
Walking in the dark of the Garden—  
The Garden of Gethsemane . . . (39)

And they take my blameless Jesus,  
And they drag him to the Governor,  
To the mighty Roman Governor,  
Great Pilate seated in his hall,—  
Great Pilate on his judgment seat . . . (40)

“Whatever its effect on the audience,” Rosenberg writes, “the use of appositives gives the preacher more time to think about what is coming after” (*Can These* 82). In this sense, it belongs to the family of formulas that Rosenberg calls “refrains” or “stalls” (*Can These* 78-79). These formulas are stock words or phrases that “do not advance the narrative or develop an idea” but exist only to allow the preacher time to think of what to say next. A few of the many stall formulas collected by Rosenberg include “Hark Hallelujah,” “God from Glory,” “I know that’s right,” and “Do you know what I’m talkin’ about” (79).

Obviously, a written text such as *God’s Trombones* has no need for stall formulas, as the author can take as much time as he needs in composing each line. Still, many phrases repeat within and across these poems. “Hebrew Children” and “God of Israel” each recur six times throughout the book. What might be termed “the throne formula” (“Great White Throne,” “thy throne of grace”) recurs five times. “Children of Israel” recurs four times, and “Lord God” repeats eight times, five times as part of the “Lord God of” formula (“Lord God of Israel,” “Lord God of the Hebrews,” or “Lord God of Hosts”). Excluding the title “Go Down Death,” the phrase “go down” repeats ten times. If we examine formulas that recur within one poem only, the results are even more striking.

The opening stanza of “The Judgment Day” reads:

In that great day,  
People, in that great day,

God's a-going to rain down fire.

God's a-going to sit in the middle of the air

To judge the quick and the dead. (53)

The phrase “in that great day,” which is used five times in “The Judgment Day,” appears here twice, as does “God’s a-going to,” the most frequently recurring formula in the poem, with twelve occurrences. “Rain down fire” occurs a total of four times, and “in the middle of the air” will be repeated once in the fifth stanza. If we assume that the vocative “People” and the familiar phrase from the Apostle’s Creed “To judge the quick and the dead,” neither of which appears anywhere else in *God’s Trombones*, might nevertheless be considered sermonistic formulas, then the stanza does not contain a single non-formulaic word. And, because the vocative “sinner” and the interrogative “where will you stand?” recur in the poem six and five times, respectively, the same might be said of the concluding stanza: “Sinner, oh, sinner, / Where will you stand / In that great day when God’s a-going to rain down fire?” (56).

“The Prodigal Son” is even more formulaic. Although the sermon recounts a New Testament parable, it uses the word *Babylon* twenty-four times, and the specific “the \_\_\_\_\_ of Babylon” formula (“the whiskey of Babylon,” “the women of Babylon,” and so on) no fewer than thirteen times. “Young man,” with seventeen occurrences, is the most repeated phrase in the poem—four times it appears as two complete, consecutive lines. Other formulas that repeat in the poem include, but are by no

means limited to, “and he [verb]” (twelve occurrences), “father’s house [or plow or goods]” (six occurrences), “my father” (four occurrences), “his father[’s]” (four occurrences). Of the 121 lines of the poem, seventy-five contain at least one such formula, or about 62 percent. (This figure does not include phrases such as “fires of hell” [23] or “fatted calf” [25], which, if we were to look at the entire tradition of the African American sermon, might well be found to be popular formulas.) Note the astounding oral effect of the poem’s eighth stanza, which features not only numerous formulas, but also instances of vocative, pause indicated by dash, anaphora, epistrophe, apposition, enjambment, and, since it interrupts the parable in order to comment on contemporary morals, text-and-context structure. More formulaic language would be difficult to imagine:

Young man—

Young man—

You’re never lonesome in Babylon.

You can always join a crowd in Babylon.

Young man—

Young man—

You can never be alone in Babylon,

Alone with your Jesus in Babylon.

You can never find a place, a lonesome place,

A lonesome place to go down on your knees,



And talk with your God, in Babylon.

You're always in a crowd in Babylon. (23)

Carl Van Doren has summarized Johnson's artistic achievement with a pithy metaphor: "He is an alchemist—he transformed baser metals into gold" (qtd. in Wilson xv). The "baser metals" are the African American folk materials on which he drew for his poetry, fiction, and music. "Gold" is indeed an appropriate term for Johnson's literary output, to which *God's Trombones* attests, yet the original materials from which that output is derived are hardly base. Johnson, like so many Southern writers, is not so much an alchemist as a prospector: finding the gold already there in the unlikely mines of the oral tradition.

### **Eudora Welty's *The Ponder Heart***

In her memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984), Eudora Welty shares her childhood memories of weekend car trips: "[O]ne of our neighbors was often invited to go with us on the family Sunday afternoon ride. . . . My mother sat in the back seat with her friend, and I'm told that as a small child I would ask to sit in the middle, and say as we started off, 'Now *talk*'" (12-13). This young girl's love of the human voice did not subside once she entered adulthood. In fact, even after she had long dedicated herself to the literary life, she may well have agreed in a way with Edna Earle Ponder, the speaker of Welty's book-length dramatic monologue *The Ponder Heart*, who tells the visitor to whom her narrative is addressed, "And listen: if you read, you'll put your eyes out. Let's just

talk” (11). Welty’s enduring commitment to orality can be observed by comparing the stylistic features of Edna Earle’s monologue to two specific categories of linguistic data: findings concerning the special qualities of oral, as opposed to written, communication, and the special qualities of Southern, as opposed to mainstream-American, speech.<sup>8</sup>

Among the markers of Southern English listed by Michael Montgomery (1989), three of the most prominent are the “perfective” *done* used for emphasis, as in *I done told you that; liked to*, meaning “almost,” as in *I liked to die*; and frequent use of the *a-* prefix with verbs ending in *-ing*, as *a-walking* and *a-talking* (761). All three of these lexical features are used by Welty in *The Ponder Heart*:

“My wife’s done left me out there by myself in the empty house!” (51).

“So that put Uncle Daniel and me pretty close together—we liked-to caught up with each other” (9).

“Edna Earle, look back yonder down the hill at all those lights still a-burning!” (22)

Montgomery might also have included *fixin’ to*, which Cynthia Berenstein identifies as a “socially diagnostic” feature (106) which “means something like ‘about to’” (114). Uncle Daniel uses the phrase in a moment of panic—“Edna Earle! Edna Earle! Make haste! She’s fixing to cut my throat!” (59)—and also in a more languid moment: “Bonnie Dee was right—she always is—it’s fixing to storm” (74).

Grammatical structures as well as diction mark the language of *The Ponder Heart* as oral-Southern. For example, the leveling of inflections, wherein speakers regularize verb forms that in standard English are irregular, has been shown by Michael Ellis to be rooted in the Southern vernacular tradition and is employed throughout the novella. Ellis explains that “nonstandard concord in verbs other than *be* occurs [in Southern English] when these verbs are marked with –s but have something other than a third-person singular subject (e.g. *I knows*, *boys knows*)” (131-32). When presenting dialogue, Edna Earle almost always demonstrates leveling in her use of the verb *to say*. Instead of conjugating the present tense singular forms of *to say* according to the standard pattern—*I say*, *you say*, *he/she/it says*—Edna Earle uses *says*, even when the subject is *I*, as in her account of her discovery of Miss Teacake as a potential wife for Daniel:

So going out of church, I *says*, “Eureka, Grandpa. I’ve found her.” And *whispers* in his ear.

“Go ahead, then, girl,” says he. (25, my emphasis)

In a 1982 study, Wallace Chafe provides a substantial amount of data on the varying linguistic structural features of oral and written communication. Samples were collected and analyzed from four styles of language: 1) informal spoken language, from dinner-table conversations; 2) formal spoken language, from lectures; 3) informal written language, from letters; 4) formal written language, from academic papers. Chafe

identified six features common to oral communication that were either rare or completely absent from written communication. One of these, the use of direct quotations, is common to all prose fiction and thus not relevant to the current discussion. The other five include first-person involvement, references to speaker's mental processes, fuzziness, monitoring of information flow, and emphatic particles.

Chafe explains that a speaker's involvement with his or her audience is manifested in part by frequent reference to him- or herself, even when such references do not pertain to the subject at hand. Certainly much of the story that Edna Earle relates requires her to refer to herself, but many such references occur in places where they seem irrelevant. When Uncle Daniel shows up with the good news that Bonnie Dee, his estranged wife, has agreed to take him back, Edna interrupts the narrative with an odd bit of personal history:

You never saw a happier mortal in your life. He came hopping up those stairs lickety-split to tell me.

I was up there in my room, reading some directions. That's something I find I like to do when I have a few minutes to myself—I don't know about you. How to put on furniture polish, transfer patterns with a hot iron, take off corns, I don't care what it is. I don't have to *do* it. Sometimes I'd rather sit still a minute and read a good quiet set of directions through than any story you'd try to wish on me.

“Oh, Edna Earle,” he says. “What do you think? It worked!” (73)

Involvement is achieved in this digression through both first- and second-person references. Chafe writes, “Second person reference would seem to be also a symptom of involvement” (46). Edna Earle often makes references to her listener, but rarely do they serve an identifiable purpose. The first sentence of the book is a classic example of second-person involvement: “My Uncle Daniel’s just like your uncle, if you’ve got one—only he has one weakness” (7). Edna Earle describes her own uncle by comparing him to the uncle of her listener, even though she has no idea whether her listener even has an uncle.

Chafe also found that “[r]eferences to a speaker’s own mental processes” were common to oral communication “but were conspicuously absent in our written data” (46). His examples include “and I had no idea how I had gotten there”; “but . . . I can recall . . . uh . . . a big undergraduate class that I had”; “and I thought . . . am I alive?” (46). Edna Earle peppers her tale with constant references to her own mental processes: “I’ve been told I was the flower girl, but I don’t remember it” (34); “I’ve sometimes thought of turning that place *into* something” (44); “Only I couldn’t quite place it at the time” (74); “I wished that Uncle Daniel had just whipped out and taken a stick to Bonnie Dee” (153). Mental-process referencing is closely related to evidentiality, a linguistic feature that Barbara Johnstone has shown to be typical of Southern

speech. Evidential phrases, as in “You already said that once *I believe*,” indicate how the knowledge asserted in the sentence was acquired or how certain it is (“Features and Uses” 194-95). Yet another indication of the oral-Southern character of Edna Earle’s phraseology is her use of evidentials. Examples include “*You’re* only here because your car broke down, and I’m afraid you’re allowing a Bodkin to fix it” (11), and “He was the bridegroom and I believe to my soul Birdie Bodkin, the postmistress, was the bride” (34).

On fuzziness, Chafe writes, “Vagueness and hedges are also more prevalent in speaking, and may express a desire for experiential involvement as opposed to the less human kind of precision which is fostered by writing” (48). His examples of spoken fuzziness include “Since the banker is *something like* forty-seven . . .” and “moving the bridge or soundpost *a millimeter or two*” (48). Welty has her narrator make similar approximations: “Bonnie Dee was one of nine or ten” (29); “[T]o Silver City and back and to the asylum and back is just about equal distance” (38-39).

Chafe observes that speakers also differ from writers in that they monitor “the communication channel which exists with the listener” and attempt to make sure that the channel is functioning well. The speaker may do things to reassure herself that the listener is assimilating what she is saying, or to prod the listener into noticing and acknowledging the flow of information. Colloquial expressions such as *well*, *you know*, and *I*

*mean* perform one or more of these functions. Chafe found these expressions significantly present in spoken language, and entirely absent in the written samples (47). Edna Earle's narration displays this oral characteristic as well: "Well, he would have followed the Fair to Silver City when it left, if I'd turned around good" (23); "you know, you don't have to have all the brilliance in the world to sound grand, or *be* grand either" (31); "That's what I mean by a tangent" (121).

Emphatic particles "expressing enthusiastic involvement in what is being said" were also found to be typical of oral but not written discourse (Chafe 47). Chafe gives the examples of *really* and *just*: "And he got . . . really furious"; "I just don't understand" (47). Predictably, this oral feature is not absent from the first-person narration of *The Ponder Heart*: "He wasn't really sick" (56); "And all of a sudden I just felt tired" (73); "Uncle Daniel [was] really sorry" (130); "For a minute he just stood still in the hot sun" (152). In short, Edna Earle's speech, according to the standards of Wallace Chafe, is authentically oral; it embodies all of Chafe's linguistic structures of orality.

But Edna Earle Ponder is not just any speaker. In the words of Cleanth Brooks, she is "a high priestess of the oral tradition" (*Language* 38). Like oral bards from Homer to the African American preachers who inspired James Weldon Johnson, Edna Earle speaks largely in formulaic expressions—what some critics have derisively called "clichés." Far from denoting a lack of originality or complexity of

thought, however, these “clichés” more than any other feature lend Welty’s prose its humor, charm, and special humanity. The formulaic expressions are used too often for a comprehensive catalog to be practical, but some of the more memorable “trite expressions” (Brooks, *Language* 38) are as follows:

What you’ve got to say for yourself. (7)

He dresses fit to kill. (11)

. . . in the whole shooting-match. (11)

Not one can hold a candle to Uncle Daniel. (11)

. . . make short work of them. (12)

. . . burning your bridges. (14)

. . . without saying kiss-my-foot to me. (15)

. . . from the word Go. (15)

He’s good as gold. (16, 48, 60, 124)

. . . till the cows come home. (22)

. . . pleased and proud as Punch. (33)

. . . the memory of an elephant. (34)



Couldn't you eat her up? (34, 57)

Lo and behold! (41, 58, 65, 83)

. . . to a fare-ye-well, to within a good inch of your life. (42)

. . . pretty as a doll. (42, 51, 77, 133)

Ignorance is bliss. (42)

. . . to amount to a row of pins. (43)

. . . clean as a whistle. (51)

Pretty as a picture. (62)

. . . making hay while the sun shone. (68)

. . . sure as you're born (68, 131)

. . . lickity-split. (73)

To make a long story short . . . (75)

[Dead] as a doornail. (113, 141)

Not even boo. (113)

. . . old as the hills. (142)

. . . flew the coop. (143)

. . . easy as pie. (143-44)

All dressed up and no place to go, so to speak. (155)

One final oral element of Edna Earle's language is her use of comic exaggeration. James B. McMillan's *Annotated Bibliography of Southern American English* reveals how integral exaggeration is to Southern speech: the text devotes a full section to "Figurative Language, Exaggerations, and Word Play." Welty is certainly aware of the hyperbolic orientation of the Southern idiom. In a 1965 interview, she explains her own use of such language:

I was trying to write about the way people who live away off from nowhere have to amuse themselves by dramatizing every situation that comes along by exaggerating it—"telling it." I used the exaggerations and ways of talking I have heard all my life. It's just the way they keep life interesting—they make an experience out of the ordinary. (Prenshaw 19-20)

Edna Earle is particularly adept at comic exaggeration. "Everybody missed Uncle Daniel so bad while he was gone," she says, "they spent all their time at the post office sending him things to eat" (16). She describes her young aunt's wispy physique: "Bonnie Dee was one out of nine or ten, and no bigger than a minute. A good gust of wind might have carried her off any day" (29). When she tells of leaving Bonnie Dee's retroactive allowance in the vase on the parlor table, she

apparently wishes to emphasize what a large amount of money it was: “I left [the vase], stuffed and overflowing with money. You would have wondered what happened to the parlor table” (62). When Uncle Daniel fires his lawyer, DeYancey Clanahan, for refusing to allow him to testify, his adamant stance on the issue is captured perfectly: “Uncle Daniel would have fired the angel Gabriel, right that minute, for the same thing” (136).

In “A Southern Mode of the Imagination” (1959), Allen Tate writes that “the traditional Southern mode of discourse presupposes somebody at the other end silently listening” (583). That Southern discourse, even when written, contains an oratorical dimension has frequently been assumed unreflectively. Careful linguistic analysis, however, can identify specific oral strategies and structures in order to confirm the oral character of a text. Another advantage of such an approach is that it allows us to measure with precision the achievement of writers such as James Weldon Johnson and Eudora Welty who recreate oral forms, such as the folk sermon or the family narrative, in print. As we have seen, these two Southern writers show far more than a passing familiarity with the oral traditions of their native region. Because they are themselves products of this oral culture, and yet highly literary artists at the same time, their achievement is indeed great.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>On the linguistic distinctiveness of the South, see Montgomery, McMillan and Montgomery, and Nagle and Sanders.

<sup>2</sup>On the origins of Southern English, see Algeo.

<sup>3</sup>Exceptions include Ellis on nineteenth-century Southern writers, Johnstone on Harry Crews ("You Gone"), Nickel on Mary Noailles Murfree, Rosenberg on Faulkner ("Oral Quality"), and Russel on Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O."

<sup>4</sup>Rosenberg has shown that, while most folk preachers are African American, there are still whites in the eastern Kentucky hills who preach the chanted sermons. "In Kentucky," Rosenberg writes, "white 'old-time country preachers,' as their neighbors call them, were surprised to learn that the chanted sermon was not exclusively theirs" (*Can These* 13). Hubbard (1994) makes a similar mistake, assuming that the "spiritual" sermon is the exclusive property of African Americans.

<sup>5</sup>Another well-documented and revealing discussion of the oral-formulaic qualities of the chanted sermons can be found in Davis (49-64).

<sup>6</sup>For more on the call-and-response technique, see Heath (208), LaRue (11), and Lassiter (38).

<sup>7</sup>Ong has characterized oral expression as "[a]dditive rather than subordinative" (37), meaning that such introductory *ands* are typical of oral culture.

<sup>8</sup>For further discussions on the narrative voice of *The Ponder Heart*, see Arnold, Holland, Nissen, and Pickett.

CHAPTER THREE

ORALITY AND SOUTHERN NARRATIVE:  
PATTERN AND STRUCTURE

Art is no part of southern life. In the North it seems to be different. It is the hardest minor stone in Manhattan's foundation. . . . [M]en with grey hair and paunches . . . run linotype machines and take up tickets at concerts and then go sedately home to Brooklyn. . . .

But in the South art, to become visible at all, must become a ceremony, a spectacle. . . .

We have never got and probably never will get, anywhere with . . . the plastic forms. We need to talk, to tell, since oratory is our heritage.

—William Faulkner ("An Introduction" 410-12)

Although its pessimism concerning Southern contributions to the visual arts has been severely belied by the careers of Walter Anderson, Robert Gwathmey, Jasper Johns, and others, the statement by Faulkner that provides this chapter's epigraph nevertheless contains a great deal of truth. It points to the narrative impulse that is so powerful in societies that have been relatively untouched by the isolating effects of typographic literacy and the abstract thinking that is characteristic of print culture. "Art" in the abstract, as something that exists for its own sake, is a concept unknown to primary oral cultures, for whom artistic expression does indeed always come in the form of "ceremony" or "spectacle" intended to preserve folk wisdom in the communal consciousness. Walter Benjamin (1936, 1937) has referred to the

traditional “ritual function” of art, which becomes lost in the age of mechanical reproduction, as artistic works are reduced to commodities cranked out of machines by gray-haired Brooklynites (224). In a culture of orality, Benjamin suggests, art has “cult value” (it provides a *community with experiential wisdom*); in a culture of mechanical reproduction, it has “exhibition value” (it provides *an individual consumer with empirical verification*) (224).

Elsewhere, Benjamin identifies the oral narrative as an art form particularly rife with ritual function and cult value, one that displays “[a]n orientation toward practical interests” (86) and provides “the epic side of truth, wisdom” (87). He laments that the storyteller has been usurped by the isolated (and isolating) novelist, and views this usurpation as “a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing” (87). Although the dominance of the novel is an important factor in the storyteller’s disappearance, it is to a novelist, Nikolai Leskov, that Benjamin turns to illustrate the “new beauty” now visible in oral tale-telling. Apparently, the exhibition value of typographic narrative comes in varying doses, and even in certain novelists qualities of the storyteller can be observed. Faulkner suggests the same idea: while in the North “exhibition art” rules, Southerners inclined toward creative expression essentially have

one mode available to them, narrative—and it is no accident that he uses terms of orality (*talk, tell, and oratory*) to describe the Southern proclivity toward stories. As in Leskov, in Southern fiction writers one can see quite clearly the ghost of the storyteller.

Indeed, Hudson's brilliant explanation of the genius of the Southwest humorists, that it lies in their realization "that something old in talking might look new in writing" (16-17), might be applied as well to the greater run of Southern literature. For example, in an introduction to *The Letters of William Gilmore Simms* (1952), Donald Davidson writes of the region's great literary patriarch, "the real strength of Simms is in his unselfconscious nearness to what might be called, for want of a better term, folk tradition, or, if other words are preferred, to the art of tradition, which is pre-literary or pre-bookish" (li). He then goes on to cite Simms's short story "How Sharp Snaffles Got His Capital and Wife," published posthumously in *Harper's Magazine* in 1870, as "almost pure folk tale, but lightly worked over" and insists that "[i]t stands almost without peer, surely, among the 'tall tales' recorded or written in the United States" (lii). A great deal of subsequent scholarship has explored the "appropriation" of oral tradition by Southern writers, including Simms and Faulkner, but such work tends to ignore Davidson's most important observation about the "folkishness" of Simms's work, that it "is an all-pervasive quality in Simms' best fiction. It is an organic quality, not something added for picturesqueness. It belongs to the grand and



moving comedy of the frontier as Simms conceived the image of the frontier” (lii).

In short, critics have not treated Southern orality as an organic quality, something well represented by the work that has been done on “Sharp Snaffles.” In the first detailed study of the story, for example, James E. Kibler Jr. makes a convincing case for the narrative’s inclusion of three well-established motifs from American folk tradition: the wonderful hunt, the carrying into the air of a man by wild geese, and a hunter’s being pulled from a hollow tree by a bear. These motifs are clearly shown to exist in oral tradition, but separately; they do not form an organic pattern. Similarly, the scholars who have drawn connections between “Sharp Snaffles” and such oral traditions as the European tall tales featured in *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, the folklore of the Simms family’s native Ireland, and the particular brand of courtship narrative popularized in the nineteenth century by “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” have viewed folkloric material as an outside source which Simms has borrowed from or been influenced by.<sup>1</sup>

Such work is unquestionably useful in establishing the oral character of Simms’s work, but it fails to make use of the insights of the last seventy years of orality-literacy research. While isolated folk motifs found within a literary work indicate that the author has been *consciously* influenced by oral tradition, the discovery of identifiably oral patterns and structures suggests, in the words of Ong, “a kind of

fictional complex held together largely in the *unconscious*" (25, my emphasis). It is the latter, not the former, that can serve as a barometer for the extent to which the narrative practices of a literate culture such as the South are influenced by residual orality. By applying oral narrative theory to Simms's "Sharp Snaffles" and Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (1930), this chapter will not only shed new light on these two short stories, but more importantly demonstrate the usefulness of orality-literacy studies in establishing the true significance of the oral character of Southern narrative.

**Pattern: Simms's "Sharp Snaffles"**

Immediately before launching into the tall tale that makes up the main narrative of William Gilmore Simms's "How Sharp Snaffles Got His Capital and Wife," the title character takes a gulp of peach and honey as part of a ritual that prepares him to spin his yarn. The gesture is an appropriate one, in that the story involves the unlikely discovery of honey—as part of a fabulous chain of events that includes supernatural visitations, the capture of thousands of geese with one cast of a net, and the overpowering of a bear by a single unarmed man—and the consequent bringing of the hero's precarious love affair with a squire's daughter "to a sweet honey finish" (243). The significant role that honey plays in the unraveling of the adventure has gone largely unnoticed,<sup>2</sup> which partially explains why no critic has yet recognized that this "stretcher" is not simply a hodgepodge of folk motifs, but rather fits an

identifiable oral narrative pattern, and an ancient one at that. In *The Dæmon in the Wood: A Study of Oral Narrative Patterns* (1978), folklorist David E. Bynum brings to light “certain elemental fictions which story-telling in oral tradition seems habitually to produce in any human population and in every historical period where it has been recorded” (19). One such fiction that he treats in detail, the pattern of the honey-trickster, is as well illustrated by the story with which Sam “Sharp” Snaffles regales his hunting companions as by any of the various traditional oral narratives that Bynum cites. A simple explanation of the honey-trickster tale, employing two of Bynum’s chief examples, should make this fact apparent.

The most famous instance of the pattern is found in the saga of Samson (for whom Sam Snaffles may have been named) in the Old Testament book of Judges:

Samson went down to Timnath, and there he saw a woman, one of the Philistines. When he came back, he told his father and mother that he had seen a Philistine woman in Timnath and asked them to get her for him as his wife. His father and mother said to him, “Is there no woman among your cousins or in all our own people? Must you go and marry one of the uncircumcised Philistines?” But Samson said to his father, “Get her for me, because she pleases me.” His father and mother did not know that the Lord was at work in this,

seeking an opportunity against the Philistines, who at that time were masters of Israel. Samson went down to Timnath and, when he reached the vineyards there, a young lion came at him growling. The spirit of the Lord suddenly seized him and, having no weapon in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as if it were a kid. He did not tell his parents what he had done. Then he went down and spoke to the woman, and she pleased him. After a time he went down again to take her to wife; he turned aside to look at the carcass of the lion, and he saw a swarm of bees in it, and honey. He scraped the honey into his hands and went on, eating as he went.

(14:1-9)

The honey-trickster pattern begins with the hero's making a proposal of exogamous marriage not to his beloved but to a male of a different generation (in this case, Samson's father) who has the authority, though not the inclination, to permit the union. After the request is made, and received with some resistance, the hero takes a short but vitally important journey, during which, with the help of a supernatural force ("the spirit of the Lord"), he kills an animal and discovers honey, both under fantastic circumstances, and these miraculous feats give him a sudden advantage over the family of his beloved, with whom he is engaged in a war of wills. The conflict between Samson and his bride's kinsmen is part of the background of the story from the beginning, as the

Philistines have conquered the Israelites, and it moves to the foreground when the protagonist wagers thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes that his new male in-laws cannot solve a riddle that he has devised. The fabulous manner in which he has discovered the honey gives Samson the upper hand over his rivals, for it is precisely the impossibility of bees nesting in the carcass of a lion that makes the riddle impossible to solve: “Out of the eater came something to eat / out of the strong came something sweet” (14:14).<sup>3</sup> In this way, the fantastic hunt and discovery of honey endow Samson with the powers of a formidable trickster.

Bynum has identified astonishingly similar transformations in what may be the richest cache of honey-trickster tales, the folklore of the Lamba tribe of Central Africa, a people for whom the hunting of wild honey was for centuries a basic and essential part of life.<sup>4</sup> One of these stories, “What a Little Thing Did,” focuses on the rivalry between a son-in-law and father-in-law and, like the story of Samson, begins with a petition for exogamous marriage:

[A man’s] first father-in-law died, and his mother-in-law remained. One day a certain man came and said, “I (want) to marry your mother-in-law, my son-in-law.” . . . And sure enough he came and married his mother-in-law.

One day he said to his son-in-law, "Come, son-in-law,  
let us go into the bush, that we may eat some honey." Ah,  
and the son-in-law went with him into the bush. (Doke 193)

The story begins quite plausibly, not unlike the yarn that Sharp Snaffles spins at the "Lying Camp," which opens with such verisimilitude that it is at first harshly criticized by Jim "Big Lie" Fisher for coming "too close upon the eternal stupid truth" (242). But in the Lamba tale, as in Sharp's, "the truth's nothing but a peg in the wall that [the storyteller] hangs the lie upon"<sup>5</sup> (Simms 242):

Then as they went along, the father-in-law said, "Son-in-law, here are bees!" When the son-in-law had gone, [the older man] found the bees in a grass-stalk; and the son-in-law thought, "What sort of a father-in-law is this, who calls me to bees in a grass-stalk?" And [the younger man] cut the honey from the grass-stalk there. (193)

In a footnote to his text of the story, Clement Doke observes that a grass-stalk is "an impossible place in which to find a nest of bees" (193). At this point in the narrative, the intended Lamba audience immediately recognizes both that the story has departed from reality and entered the realm of the supernatural, and that there is much more to the father-in-law than was at first apparent. In the Lamba psychology, he is now understood to be not an ordinary human but a supernatural being who has come to challenge the son-in-law.

This fact becomes even more apparent when the father-in-law locates a beehive at the top of a tremendously high Wanga tree (Doke again offers a footnote: “The *Muwanga* is a tree of such hard wood, that natives seldom attempt to cut out a nest of bees located in it” [195]) and commands the younger man to climb the tree and extract the honey. Amazingly, the son-in-law completes the near-impossible task, and the two bring the honey to the village. For the next two days, the same adventure is repeated, with the father-in-law always finding honey first in a grass-stalk and then atop an impossibly high Wanga tree, and the son-in-law always extracting it. At the end of the third hunt, however, the younger man, while perched in the tree, grows tired of his subservience to the enchanted father-in-law and decides to work some magic of his own:

And he said (to himself), “Today I won’t call for a bark plate from below, I will remove a plate from the side of my leg.”

And he removed a plate from the side of his leg, and it was just there on his leg that he stripped off the string; and he tied the plate with the string that he stripped from his very leg. . . . Then his father-in-law went to the village, saying in his heart, “This son-in-law of mine is a man of tricks.” (197)

During their fourth and fifth outings, the two hunt game rather than honey. First, the elder man again reveals himself to be something more than an ordinary human when, finding a herd of buffalo, he shoots

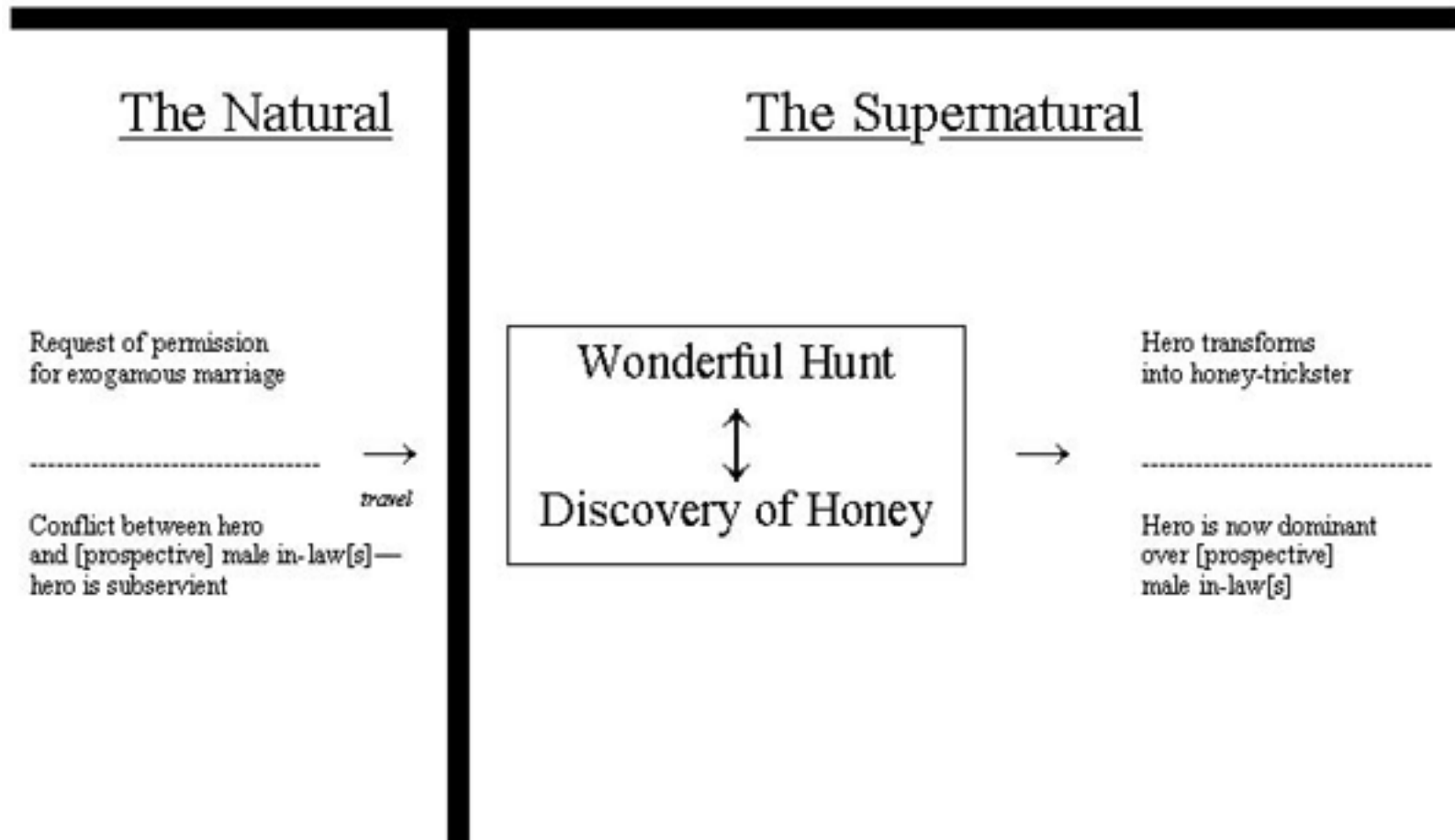
a single arrow that penetrates and kills each of the animals in turn. Even more remarkable is the fact that the hunter has somehow transported himself inside one of the animals. The son-in-law recognizes what has happened and calls for the older man to come out, after which the two return to the village with the meat. The next day, the young man once again responds to his father-in-law's magical acts by surpassing them. Coming upon a herd of eland, he shoots both an arrow and himself through each animal and then through an orange which is swallowed by a crocodile, which is in turn swallowed by a hippopotamus. The elder man, as his son-in-law had done the day before, calls to his companion within the carcasses, but to no avail. He returns to the village alone, and only two days later does the young man reappear.

By the sixth and final hunt, the son-in-law and father-in-law have exchanged places: the former is now the powerful, supernatural trickster figure, and the latter the comparatively ordinary human who is both easily duped by the honey-trickster and very much at his mercy. The hunt begins with the by now familiar discovery of honey in a grass-stalk, but when the son-in-law ascends the Wanga tree to retrieve the second hive, he falls to the ground, breaks into pieces, and turns to dust. The father-in-law, convinced that his rival is dead, returns to the village, and the son-in-law reconstitutes himself as a beautiful woman. The next day, when the older man returns to the scene of the younger man's apparent demise, he finds the beautiful woman and declares, "I am going to



divorce my old wife, and I shall marry this beautiful one that I have seen” (201). The woman spends one night with him as his bride before transforming back into the young man in order to humiliate and discredit him. The father-in-law, outraged at this deception, brings suit against his son-in-law, accusing him of “always performing wonderful miracles” (201). When called upon to defend himself, the young trickster recounts the elder man’s own magical acts, after which the people of the village declare, “It was you, father-in-law, who began it!” (201), and find in favor of the son-in-law. Like Samson, the Lamba son-in-law has departed the natural world and entered the realm of the supernatural and has thus been granted powers of trickery that have made him suddenly dominant over his affinally related adversary. The pattern as a whole is expressed visually in Figure 1.

The parallels of both of these honey-trickster tales to “Sharp Snaffles” are striking, to say the least. All three stories begin with a desire for exogamous marriage (for Snaffles, the exogamy is socio-economic) which is complicated by a conflict between the suitor and a male relative or relatives of his beloved. Of the three would-be bridegrooms, Sam Snaffles, who is deeply in love with Merry Ann Hopson, his “very yaller flower of the forest” (242), finds his intentions met with the most opposition. Merry Ann’s father, Squire Jeff Hopson, who fancies himself a high-ranking member of the community, sizes up Snaffles and determines him ill fit to be his son-in-law. In a scene that



**Figure 1: The Honey-Trickster Pattern**

will gain significance at the end of the story, young Sam (who has not yet acquired the wife that will earn him his nickname) asks Hopson for Merry Ann's hand, and the elder man leads him to a mirror and entreats him to "obzarve" himself and to determine "ef you honestly thinks you're the sort of pusson to hev *my* da'ter!" (247, Simms's emphasis). The squire explains to Snaffles that he is unworthy because of his current financial situation: "You may think, in your vanity, that you air a man; but you ain't, and never will be, onless you kin find a way to git *capital*; and I loves my gal child too much to let her marry any pusson whom I don't altogether consider a man!" (248-49, Simms's emphasis). John Grimstead, a comparatively affluent bachelor twice Merry Ann's age, is considered by the young woman's father to be a more acceptable suitor. Snaffles, devastated by the rejection, leaves the Hopson farm determined to secure the capital required to win the hand of his beloved, but without any idea of how to go about it.

As with the other two honey-trickster tales, it is not long after the proposal of exogamous marriage that a supernatural presence begins to guide the events of the story. First, an angelic female apparition appears to Sam in a dream to reassure him that a higher power is working on his behalf, and that the capital he seeks will be obtained in unexpected ways if he remains dedicated to virtue and making a man of himself. The next day, Snaffles sets off for the laurel hollows. Arriving at a clearing he has never seen before, he discovers a lake occupied by thousands of wild

geese. The hunter immediately recognizes the enormous flock's potential as capital, but it is only with the help of the angelic apparition that he is able to concoct a plan to ensnare the majority of the birds. He travels to Spartanburg where he buys the materials needed to construct a gigantic net in which he hopes to entangle the feet of the geese. Exactly how a man who cannot afford to feed his horse is able to purchase "all the twine and cord and hafe the plow-lines in town" (252) is never explained, but the burgeoning trickster manages to make the necessary preparations:

When I hed fixed it all fine, and jest as I wanted it, I brought the eends of my plow-lines up to where I was gwine to hide myself. This was onder a strong sapling, and my calkilation was when I hed got the beasts all hooked, forty thousand, more or less—and I could tell how that was from feeling on the line—why, then, I'd whip the line round the sapling, hitch it fast, and draw in my birds at my own ease, without axing much about their comfort. (254)

The plan itself helps to solidify the story's place in the honey-trickster tradition, for it constitutes a wonderful hunt, that is, one in which the hunter bags numerous animals with one "shot," as in the killing of several eland with one arrow in "What a Little Thing Did."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Snaffles accomplishes this wonderful hunt with the aid of the supernatural, just as the Lamba son-in-law enlists magic in killing the

eland and just as Samson is seized by the spirit of the Lord in order to slay the lion. More remarkable still is the similarity that the stringing together of geese with twine and cord bears to Samson's stringing together of foxes by tying them tail to tail. Seeking revenge on his father-in-law, who has given his wife away to another man, the biblical hero fastens a torch to each pair of tails and looses the animals onto Philistine land, where they set fire to the fields, groves, and vineyards, destroying them. In a sense, Sam Snaffles too takes revenge on his (future) father-in-law for preferring another man as Merry Ann's husband by fastening animals together in an incredible way, for the act ultimately produces the capital that the trickster uses to purchase Squire Hopson's mortgage, at which point he threatens to seize the older man's property, rather than destroy it.

But Sam's act of trickery is not as brilliantly executed as Samson's. Instead of tying his line to a sapling, he inadvertently ties it to his own leg, and the geese fly off, carrying him along with them. Snaffles is certain that the birds will carry him to "Cannidy, or Jericho, or some other heathen territory beyond the Massissipp" (256), but instead they become caught in a giant chestnut oak, depositing their captor in the hollow of the great tree, where he almost drowns in "something over two thousand gallons of the purest, sweetest, yellowest honey you ever did see" (264). It appears that he will be trapped for all eternity until a bear enters the tree, and Sam, grabbing hold of the animal's tail, rides out of

the hollow and promptly pushes the five hundred pound beast off of the top of the chestnut oak to his death.

Sharp's acquisition of honey, like Samson's, is inextricably linked to his slaying of a dangerous animal without the aid of a weapon or other human being, although with divine assistance (Snaffles credits "them blessed angels in the stars" with sending the bear, and of his amazing overpowering of the creature says, "I don't know what 'twas, Jedge, that made me do it. I warn't a-thinking at all" [260]). And in "What a Little Thing Did," although there is no explicit, logical connection between the extraction of honey from an impossibly tall tree and the killing of several animals by one simple act, the two instances of the latter are directly preceded and succeeded by instances of the former, a pattern that in effect places the fabulous discovery of honey and the fabulous bagging of game in the same family of miracles. Furthermore, the fact that Sam is carried to the honey by birds even more firmly establishes the kinship of Simms's short story to the African honey-trickster tradition, for several Lamba folktales involve characters who are led to honey by a bird known as *inguni*, which Doke translates as "honey-guide" (305). In one such tale, "The Story of Shichinongomunuma and Chilubwelubwe," the hero is guided by an *inguni* to a honey tree, where he defeats a powerful creature (an ogre rather than a bear) and thus ultimately wins not one but several brides (Doke 126-31).

Sharp Snaffles likewise finds amorous success as a direct consequence of his fantastic adventure. The geese, honey, and bear yield him sufficient capital to buy a fine farmhouse on 160 acres of land, complete with furniture, livestock, and various amenities certain to make the novice hunter more than acceptable as a son-in-law in the eyes of Jeff Hopson. Sam is even able to purchase the mortgage to the squire's own farm. When he arrives at the Hopson home in elegant new clothing, carrying bags of silver and gold and the deed to the farm, and demanding payment from the older man, the tables have clearly been turned. Hopson, who does not have the money he owes on the property, is now forced to beg Snaffles for mercy, and reminds him that he once wished to marry the young woman whose family he now prepares to make homeless. Finally, the squire actually implores Sam to take Merry Ann as his wife, and, in response, the young trickster places his adversary before the mirror for an "obzarvation": "I tell you now, look good, and ax yourself ef you're the sawt of looking man that hes any right to be a feyther-in-law to a fine, young, handsome-looking fellow like me, what's got the 'capital'" (275).

Sharp's mimicry of Hopson's behavior from the beginning of the tale accentuates the idea that the two men have exchanged roles. The reversal is astoundingly reminiscent of the one undergone by the son-in-law and father-in-law in "What a Little Thing Did." In both narratives, a conflict is established between two men, with the older man clearly

having the upper hand, but through a series of fabulous occurrences in which the young man kills many animals and collects a large amount of honey, the balance of power shifts. The young man becomes the honey-trickster and defeats his rival through deception (by pretending to be a beautiful woman, thus revealing the older man's lechery, or by pretending to be a ruthless creditor, thus revealing the older man's hypocrisy). And just as the fantastic nature of Samson's killing of the lion and finding of the honey is the source of the impossible riddle with which he tricks his in-laws, Sam's own wonderful hunt and discovery of honey are directly responsible for his becoming a formidable trickster, something metonymically suggested by his own description of his transformed self: "I felt myself sixteen feet high, and jest as solid as a chestnut oak" (275).

Indeed, all three of these protagonists, with the help of the honey they find, receive satisfaction from exacting an appropriate measure of revenge upon their affinally related adversaries, though they are not all blessed with the same amount of long-term happiness. Samson, after a series of victories and defeats, becomes judge over Israel for twenty years, and even in his disfigurement and death at the hands of the Philistines brings about the wholesale destruction of his one-time in-laws. The Lamba son-in-law defeats his rival not only in their battle of wills but also in the public arena of open court. And the hero of Simms's much lighter story puts Jeff Hopson squarely in his place and, more



importantly, wins the hand of Merry Ann, with whom, in the peculiar mathematics of the tall tale, he has thirty-six children in the ensuing thirteen years.

“The Story of Mr. Little-Hare and What Ate Wulambe” (Doke 34-39), another Lamba folktale cited by Bynum, is in some ways an even closer relative to “Sharp Snaffles” than is “What a Little Thing Did.” In it, Little-Hare wishes to marry a certain maiden, but the young woman’s mother (and she herself) will permit the union only if he slays the lion that has devoured the maiden’s brother. The hare then follows the *inguni* to a honey-tree, where he encounters the lion, whom he kills through trickery. When he returns to the family’s home with the beast’s remains, he is rewarded with the bride he desires. Because Little-Hare himself immigrated to the American South in the person of Brer Rabbit, it is not difficult to see how Simms (who, just prior to Sherman’s drive through South Carolina in 1865, owned eighty slaves) might have had direct contact with the Bantu honey-trickster tradition.<sup>7</sup> However, such conjecture is less fruitful than the simple acknowledgment that “How Sharp Snaffles Got His Capital and Wife” corresponds to a well-documented and ancient oral narrative pattern. This fact points to the powerful influence of residual orality on written narratives from the American South, a phenomenon that, as we shall now see, continued into the twentieth century.

### **Structure: Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"**

Of the many ways in which Emily Grierson, the title character of William Faulkner's best-known short story, is a perverse anachronism to her fellow townspeople, one that is seldom commented on is her refusal to accept the diminishing importance of orality in an increasingly typographic culture. When the town of Jefferson receives free postal service, Miss Emily is its only resident to refuse to have a mailbox or street numbers fastened to her house. While the town aldermen demand a written record of the remission of her taxes, Miss Emily is satisfied by Colonel Sartoris's oral explanation of the matter to her, and she expects the aldermen to be satisfied by her oral explanation to them. She puts much more stock in the traditions of the past and the position that those traditions grant her than in the abstract laws that require her to pay taxes or state her purpose in buying arsenic—a value system consistent with the psychodynamics of orality as outlined by Ong (41-42, 49-57). The one written document we know Miss Emily to have produced, her reply to the mayor's tax notice, is described as if it belongs to some early form of chirographic literacy: "a note on paper of an archaic shape, in a thin, flowing calligraphy of faded ink" (120). Even her most shockingly perverse act, revealed in the final sentence of the story, contains undertones of the orality-literacy opposition, since the corpse she has slept beside is that of *Homer* Barron. Not only is this Yankee day laborer famous locally for his oral performances, but he is also the namesake of

the legendary epic bard who, through the work begun by Milman Parry shortly before Faulkner wrote and published “A Rose for Emily,” was to become the enduring symbolic embodiment of orally-based thought and expression as identifiable phenomena. Put simply, orality is a central feature of the dead world that Emily Grierson refuses to bury.

But even as the people of Jefferson represented by the narrator pity, puzzle over, and disdain Miss Emily, their “fallen monument” to an earlier, simpler time (119), the extent to which they themselves operate within a residually oral culture is exemplified by the tale itself, an assemblage of community lore and gossip with a *plot* that, as I will show, is more characteristic of oral performance than print fiction. At the same time, the events recounted, that is to say, the *story* constructed by Faulkner, is exceedingly literary in the most fundamental and neutral sense of that term. An oral storyteller simply could not and would not have imagined such a storyline.<sup>8</sup>

As Ong has shown, the modern conception of plot as a tightly structured sequence of events culminating in closure would be completely foreign to primary oral cultures. Because of the simple realities of oral composition, transmission, and preservation, narrative without writing is necessarily episodic, nonlinear, and digressive.<sup>9</sup> It is only with writing, and especially with the deep interiorization of literacy that comes centuries after Gutenberg, that narrative becomes characterized by the climactic linear plot diagramed so famously in

“Freytag’s pyramid” (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, dénouement).

Ong observes that this pyramidal narrative structure reaches its apex in the detective story, a genre inaugurated in 1841 with Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”:

In the ideal detective story, ascending action builds relentlessly to all but unbearable tension, the climactic recognition and reversal releases the tension with explosive suddenness, and the dénouement disentangles everything totally—every single detail in the story turns out to have been crucial—and, until the climax and dénouement, effectively misleading. (149)

If we follow Menakhem Perry’s lead in distinguishing the *fabula* of “A Rose for Emily” (the events of the last forty-four years of Emily Grierson’s life in the order that, to our best estimation, they actually happened) from the *syuzhet* (the same events in the order that the narrator relates them) we see a detective story worthy of Poe. The story’s *fabula* might be constructed as follows:<sup>10</sup>

*Fabula*

- Miss Emily, at the age of 30, is still single, all of her suitors having been driven off by her domineering father (c. 1882).

- Miss Emily's father dies, leaving her only the family house. For three days she prevents his funeral, denying that he is dead (c. 1884).
- The summer after her father's death, Miss Emily is courted by Homer Barron (c. 1884-1885).
- The women of the town persuade the Baptist minister to call on Miss Emily. He does not divulge what happened during his visit but refuses to return (c. 1884-1886).
- The minister's wife writes to Miss Emily's relations in Alabama. Two female cousins arrive (c. 1884-1886).
- The town learns that Miss Emily has purchased a man's silver toilet set, monogrammed H.B., and a complete man's wardrobe, including nightshirt (c. 1885-1886).
- Homer Barron leaves town (c. 1886).
- Miss Emily purchases arsenic from the local druggist, refusing to reveal why she needs it (c. 1886).
- A week later, the cousins depart (c. 1886).
- Homer Barron is seen entering Emily's house; he is never seen in town again (c. 1886).
- Miss Emily does not appear outside for almost six months (c. 1886).

- During this time, citizens complain of a foul odor emanating from the Grierson house. Four men secretly sprinkle lime in the cellar (c. 1886).
- Miss Emily reappears. She is now obese, and her hair has turned gray (c. 1886-1887).
- Miss Emily begins giving china-painting lessons to young girls (c. 1892).
- Colonel Sartoris remits Miss Emily's taxes (1894).
- Miss Emily stops giving china-painting lessons (c. 1898).
- The next generation comes to power and insists that Miss Emily pay her taxes. She vanquishes them (c. 1916).
- Miss Emily dies (c. 1926).
- Tobe, Miss Emily's manservant, meets the women of Jefferson at the front door to let them in, then disappears, never to be seen again (c. 1926).
- The two female cousins hold the funeral on the second day (c. 1926).
- After Miss Emily is "decently in the ground," citizens of Jefferson break into a room in her house that no one has seen in forty years (129). There they find the remains of Homer Barron and, in the indentation on the pillow beside the corpse, a long strand of iron-gray hair (c. 1926, or sometime later).

Arranged in chronological sequence, virtually all of the details that Faulkner chooses to include can be clearly seen as “clues” to the horrible truth that the town ultimately uncovers. Mr. Grierson’s driving off all of his daughter’s suitors and subsequently leaving her penniless, Miss Emily’s irrational denial of her father’s death, and the disregard for societal mores inherent in her relationship with Homer Barron—all serve to establish, in legal terms, the murderer’s state of mind, the psychological state that permits her to poison her lover and share a bed with his decaying body. Other events that the people of Jefferson observe suggest what is actually going on in Miss Emily’s life, in spite of the fact that the townsfolk themselves invariably interpret the events incorrectly. That the couple are, for a time, romantically involved is observed directly, but Homer’s departure following Emily’s purchase of the clothing and monogrammed toilet set is a sign of his abandonment of her, not, as the town assumes, of his preparing for her arrival at their Northern home. The remaining events of that year (c. 1886 by my calculation) speak for themselves, but only from the perspective of the *fabula*: Miss Emily purchases arsenic (with which to kill Homer, who has jilted her); Homer is seen entering her house and then is never seen again (because she has killed him); a foul odor emanates from the house (because Homer’s decaying corpse lies in the upstairs room); and Miss Emily does not leave her house for six months (because she is on a macabre honeymoon).

Each of these details, effectively misleading when recounted, is understood at the climactic conclusion of the story to have been absolutely crucial. One of the devices Faulkner uses to throw the reader off track is a purely typographic one: limited point of view. Because the people of Jefferson, whose gossip mill is the source of the story, are privy to relatively little information about Miss Emily's thoughts, words, and deeds, so are we. We, like the narrator, can only speculate about the meaning of Homer Barron's departure because we are not given access to, for example, conversations between the two lovers immediately prior to it, let alone either character's private thoughts. Limited point of view is one consequence of the "inward turn of narrative" that Erich Kahler finds to be concurrent with the rise of alphabetic literacy in the west. Ong explains the concept in terms of the typographic detective story:

Detective-story plots are deeply interior in that a full closure is commonly achieved inside the mind of one of the characters first and then diffused to the reader and the other fictional characters. Sherlock Holmes had it all figured out in his head before anyone else did, including especially the reader. . . . The oral narrator's protagonist, distinguished typically for his external exploits, has been replaced by the interior consciousness of the typographic protagonist. (149-50).



Ong might have also pointed out that Dr. Watson, the narrator of the Holmes stories, is, at the time he is writing, also well aware of the outcome of each case and of the significance of the details he includes, but chooses to withhold this information from the reader. The same might be said of the narrator of “A Rose for Emily,” who surely, upon further reflection subsequent to the discovery in the upstairs room, has become aware of the significance of the arsenic purchase and foul odor. Like Dr. Watson, this narrator wishes to surprise his or her audience; for, like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, William Faulkner is a child of the printing press and, more specifically, of Poe.<sup>11</sup>

The other major device Faulkner uses to mislead his readers, far from being typographic, is a feature common to, if not omnipresent in, oral narrative. Many critics have commented on the nonlinear narrative structure of the story and the role that it plays in obscuring the relevance of the various aforementioned “clues.” In short, the *syuzhet* of the story, the order in which the narrator relates these clues, is not chronological:

*Syuzhet*

1. Miss Emily dies. The whole town attends the funeral (119).
2. Colonel Sartoris remits Miss Emily’s taxes (119-20).

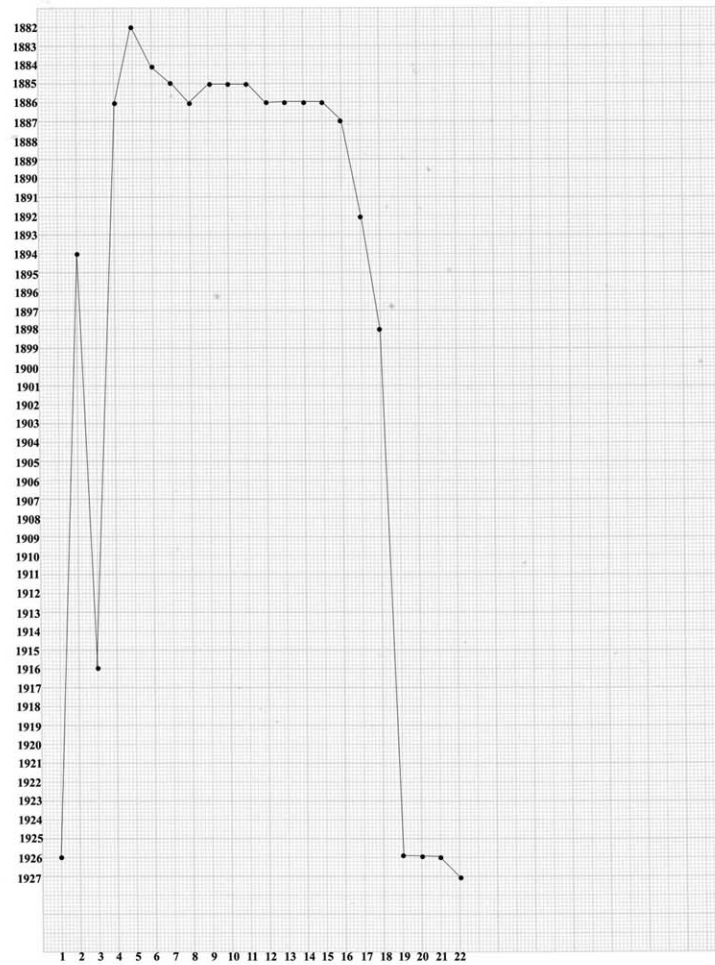
3. The next generation comes to power and insists that Miss Emily pay her taxes. She vanquishes them (120-21).
4. Citizens complain of a foul odor emanating from the Grierson house. Four men secretly sprinkle lime in the cellar (121-23).
5. Miss Emily, at the age of 30, is still single, all of her suitors having been driven off by her domineering father (123).
6. Miss Emily's father dies. For three days she prevents his funeral, denying that he is dead (123-24).
7. The summer after her father's death, Miss Emily is courted by Homer Barron (124-25).
8. She purchases arsenic from the local druggist, refusing to reveal why she needs it (125-26).
9. The women of the town persuade the Baptist minister to call on Miss Emily. He does not divulge what happened during his visit but refuses to return (126).
10. The minister's wife writes to Miss Emily's relations in Alabama. Two female cousins arrive (126-27).
11. The town learns that Miss Emily has purchased a man's silver toilet set, monogrammed H.B., and a complete man's wardrobe, including nightshirt (127).

12. Homer Barron leaves town (127).
13. A week later, the cousins depart (127).
14. Homer Barron is seen entering Emily's house; he is never seen in town again (127).
15. Miss Emily does not appear outside for almost six months (127).
16. She reappears. She is now obese, and her hair has turned gray (127).
17. Miss Emily begins giving china-painting lessons to young girls (128).
18. Miss Emily ceases giving china-painting lessons (128).
19. Miss Emily dies (128-29).
20. Tobe, Miss Emily's manservant, meets the women of Jefferson at the front door to let them in, then disappears, never to be seen again (129).
21. The two female cousins hold the funeral on the second day (129).
22. After Miss Emily is "decently in the ground," citizens of Jefferson break into a room in her house that no one has seen in forty years. There they find the remains of Homer Barron and, in the indentation on the pillow beside the corpse, a long strand of iron-gray hair (129-30).

The fluid movement of the plot through time, as understood in terms of *fabula* and *syuzhet*, can perhaps best be illustrated visually. Figure 2 shows the intersections of the dated elements of the *fabula* and the numbered elements of the *syuzhet*.

Clearly, the plot of “A Rose for Emily” does not follow the kind of linear, chronological progression characteristic of print fiction. The plot is episodic, and the narrator moves from episode to episode according to associative reasoning. He opens with the heroine’s death and funeral, a logical enough place for him to begin, in that the story he is telling is really the story of the town’s discovery, the occasion of which is Emily’s death, without which the citizens of Jefferson could not have gained access to the upstairs room. This is followed by a sort of summation of who Emily was in life: “a tradition, a duty, and a care, a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town” (119). The description is elaborated on by a discussion of the remission of Miss Emily’s taxes by Colonel Sartoris in 1894, which in turn brings up the problems that occur twenty-two years later when the next generation comes to power and does not recognize the validity of the exemption. The way that Miss Emily vanquishes the aldermen who come to collect her taxes reminds the narrator of how she vanquished the city officials who were faced with complaints of a foul odor emanating from the Grierson house thirty years earlier, and so the narrative moves backwards in time again to relate this episode. The pity that the town feels for Emily over the smell leads to a

F  
A  
B  
U  
L  
A



SYUZHET

**Figure 2: The Narrative Structure of “A Rose for Emily”**

discussion of previous occurrences that caused the town to pity her: Emily is thirty and still single because her father has driven away all of her suitors; her father has died and left her only the house; the poor, deluded woman denies his death. The narrator proceeds to tell what happens to Emily the following summer: she meets Homer Barron, a Yankee day laborer, and apparently becomes romantically involved with him. In spite of this shameful behavior, the narrator tells us, “[s]he carried her head high enough . . . as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson” (125). To illustrate this prideful attitude, he offers the example of her purchase of arsenic and refusal to honor the law requiring that she state her purpose for buying it. We are told that this episode takes place during the female cousins’ stay (which is to say, during the general period of Emily and Homer’s courtship), but not when it occurs relative to the foul odor or final appearance of Homer Barron (only from the discovery that the town makes at the end of the story can we infer that it takes place immediately prior to the last Barron sighting, which would then immediately precede the foul odor). The townspeople’s assumption that Miss Emily intends to poison herself is explained by a liturgy of the various misfortunes and embarrassments that cause them to say “Poor Emily”: her stooping to date Homer Barron in the first place, the further indignity of being jilted by him, the fact that she subsequently grows gray-haired and obese, the town’s patronizing support of her through china-painting lessons and tax

remission, the eventual termination of even those honors, and finally her sad, lonely death. At this point, we have returned to where we started, at the impetus for the story: Emily is dead; the whole town attends the funeral; some time afterwards, certain representatives of the town open the mysterious upstairs room and discover the corpse of Homer Barron and evidence that Miss Emily had lain with the corpse at least since turning gray. Each episode is connected to the next not by chronology but by association.

Diverse scholars have identified associative sequencing as being characteristic of oral narrative. Archer Taylor distinguishes folklore from literature precisely in this respect:

Folklore deals with materials which associative rather than logical thinking has shaped and handed on. A ballad or a superstition is a bit of folklore in which associative thinking has been chiefly operative in its preservation. Its form, its use, and the characteristic variations of its several versions are determined by unconscious and not conscious processes. (60)

Examinations of various oral traditions from different centuries and continents reveal associative, nonlinear sequencing to be a universal mainstay of oral discourse. Berkley Peabody observes that ancient Greek oral composition “does not show the degree of organization that we commonly associate with thought” but rather consists of a “set of

informational cores, bound together by traditional associations” (179). Of Anglo-Saxon oral literature, Bernard F. Huppé writes, “The Old English poem does not move in a straight line. . . . [A]t its most complex it is like one of the great signature pages of the Book of Kells, where the eye first sees only a maze of serpentine lines until suddenly the initial stands out in sharp relief” (xvi). Jeff Opland has found that the oral poems of the Xhosa-speaking peoples of South Africa “do not move logically from one point to the next in an ordered sequence; rather they create a universe of discrete points that relate one to the other” (*Xhosa Poets* 110). And even residually oral cultures of the contemporary United States demonstrate this brand of narrative logic. In *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*, William Labov shows the oral narratives of his African-American subjects to be digressive and non-linear, consisting of “complex chainings and embeddings” of six key “elements of narrative structure”: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, and coda (362-63).

Ong explains the matter in the simplest of terms: “[M]emory, as it guides the oral poet, often has little to do with strict linear presentation of events in temporal sequence” (147). In a sense, both narrative and poetry are inextricably involved with memory: they are originally born out of an oral culture’s need to preserve communal knowledge. As such, oral narrative has a special relationship to the past. In a culture with no written history, there is no such concept as “the past” as literates



understand it. History, as preserved in story and song, is a fount of wisdom intended to inform the present. Persons from oral cultures do not feel as though they are removed from the past; what they know of the past is a useful, even vital, part of their lives. In their famous essay "The Consequences of Literacy," Jack Goody and Ian Watt observe that in a primary oral culture "the individual has little perception of the past except in terms of the present; whereas the annals of a literate society cannot but enforce a more objective distinction between what was and what is" (34). Bakhtin has written that the novel defines itself precisely by the rejection of this "classical" (what we would term "oral") understanding of the "absolute past": "only in the novel have we the possibility of an authentically objective portrayal of the past as the past" (29).

Still, Benjamin's treatment of Leskov and my own treatment of Simms and Faulkner suggest that a novelist from a culture with a powerful, living oral tradition, such as Orel or the American South, might produce narratives that embody pre-textual characteristics. For Faulkner, these include the lack of distinction between the present and the past. In a 1956 interview, he exclaims,

I can move [my characters] around like God, not only in space but in time too. The fact that I have moved my characters around in time successfully, at least in my own estimation, proves to me my own theory that time is a fluid

condition that has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as *was*—only *is*. If *was* existed, there would be no grief or sorrow.

(vanden Heuvel 141)

Faulkner's "theory" is consistent with an oral understanding of time. It is also consistent with the perceptions of the "very old men" who attend Emily Grierson's funeral, who are described as

talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years. (129)

"A Rose for Emily" is itself such a meadow, dotted by the flowers that are the individual moments of Emily Grierson's life. In terms of both form and function, it is strikingly similar to the eulogies of oral cultures, as Opland's work on Xhosa poetic tradition makes clear. Xhosa court poetry, known as *izibongo* and generally composed and performed orally by the court poet or *imbongi*, is eulogistic, focusing on the characteristics and deeds of important public figures. In their purest form, these eulogies are not essentially narrative but rather take the structure of "a concatenation of nominal appellations" (Opland, "Structural Patterns"

96) that “may or may not be flattering” since this tradition embraces “praise and blame as twin aspects of truth-telling” (Opland, *Xhosa Poets* 92). The town of Jefferson’s “eulogy” is similarly ambivalent: admiring of Emily’s commitment to her own dignity, pitying of her loneliness and loss of social stature, disdainful of her perverseness. It also shows a marked tendency to describe Emily in terms of nominal appellations that reflect this ambivalence: “a fallen monument” (119); “a tradition, a duty, and a care” (119) a “hereditary obligation” (119); “a small, fat woman” (121); “a lady” (122); “sick” (124); “a girl” (124); “tragic and serene” (124); “a real lady” (124); “the last Grierson” (125); “dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse” (128); and of course “Miss Emily” and “Poor Emily” repeatedly. Opland also notes that, although Xhosa eulogies are not essentially narrative, they become narrative when their audience is expanded to include persons from outside the community who require explanations of the names applied to the eulogized individual. Such appears to be the case with “A Rose for Emily,” the first sentence of which contains the phrase “our whole town” (119), wording that suggests an audience of outsiders. In section III of the story, when the women of the town call on Emily after her father’s death “as is our custom” (123), this suggestion is confirmed. As with eulogies in oral cultures, the narrator’s account of Emily Grierson’s life is a spatial, not linear, concatenation of incidents and descriptions intended to preserve the memory of a significant individual (importantly, an individual considered

to be a remnant of a time now passed) within and without the community.<sup>12</sup>

That Faulkner conceived of this story as the product of oral transmission throughout a whole community over a period of four decades and then gave it the precise structure of an oral narrative serves as testament to his intimate understanding of the oral tradition, something that informed his work from “The Liar,” a New Orleans sketch that was one of his earliest publications, to *The Reivers*, his final novel, published a month before his death. And yet, John L. Skinner’s suggestion that “the story could almost pass as an example of oral composition with Faulkner himself assuming the more modest role of transcriber and editor” (43) is misstating the matter. Certainly the language of the narrator does not have the ring of spontaneous speech, to which the story’s most memorable description, with its abstract conceits and painstakingly precise diction, attests:

The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him. What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and biding dust. (130)

Such is hardly the spoken language of a small-town Mississippi storyteller. Moreover, as I have shown, the storyline that Faulkner constructed is an example of the kind of tightly structured, climactic narrative that can only be invented by a *literate* mind, one with the conscious control over his or her story, with the ability to take notes and revise and sharpen. After all, it should be remembered that Faulkner is the product of a *residually* oral culture, not a *primary* oral culture. Perhaps what best defines Faulkner's genius is his ability to wed the best of both oral and typographic discourses, resulting in works that transcend the normal limitations of both.

A similar claim might be made for Simms. What is striking about both of these writers is that they do not merely appropriate oral tradition but rather operate from within it. Simms was no more aware of universal oral narrative patterns than were the Lambas or ancient Israelites, and although Faulkner had more conscious control over his material than the typical Xhosa *imbongi*, it is extremely doubtful that any research, such as that conducted by Labov, was required on his part in order to arrive upon such an authentically oral structure. The various cultures represented here are bound together by nothing so much as the noetic systems of orality which necessitate certain narrative patterns and structures, for, while the South in the times of Simms and Faulkner was by no means pre-literate, it was to a very great extent a residually oral culture, as we have seen. And so, in order fully to understand and

appreciate the works of many Southern writers, we must situate them not only in literary tradition, but also in a tradition of oral narrative and poetics that spans five thousand years and is spread across six continents.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>On *Munchausen* as a possible source for “Sharp Snaffles,” see Alexander E. Jones. For a discussion of the story’s possible Irish folk roots, see Donovan (198-205). Wimsatt identifies the “frontier courtship yarn” as the “shell” of the story (“Native Humor” 163); for an explanation of the “Sleepy Hollow” connection, see Piacentino. Additional discussions of American folk sources for “Sharp Snaffles” may be found in Davidson (Introduction lii), Dorson (211), and Wimsatt (“Native Humor” 162-64).

<sup>2</sup>Jones calls Snaffles’s aerial adventure with the geese the “central incident” of the tale (66), and most critics addressing the story have given priority to this event, in spite of the fact that the acquisition of capital is the sole connection between the young man’s wonderful hunt and his winning of Merry Ann’s hand, and more money comes from the incident at the chestnut oak (\$1500) than from the geese (\$1350).

<sup>3</sup>Interestingly, Sharp Snaffles, upon returning to the Hopson farm after his escapade, teases Merry Ann with a riddle that, like Samson’s, is unsolvable because it is based on extremely unlikely occurrences. He tells his beloved that he acquired the necessary capital for marriage with the help of three servants: “One was a goose, one was a b’ar, and t’other was a bee” (267).

<sup>4</sup>The Lamba people are one of many Bantu tribes. In 1922, Doke compiled an extensive collection of Lamba folklore, collected in what are

now Zambia and the Congo, which is the source for all Lamba folktales cited in this chapter.

<sup>5</sup>This technique, by which the fantastic dimension of a tale is progressively amplified, is referred to by Bynum as “expanding fabulosity” (48). It is common to oral traditional narrative and is observable in all three of the honey-trickster tales discussed in detail in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup>The wonderful hunt is tale type 1890 in Aarne and Thompson. One example is, “Discharge of gun kills the heath-cock, which falls on the sprouts of the tree, which kills the bear, etc.” (Aarne and Thompson 512).

<sup>7</sup>For discussions of Little-Hare as a progenitor of Brer Rabbit, see Doke (XIII-XIV) and Werner (252-72). For an example of a Brer Rabbit honey-trickster tale, see “Brother Rabbit’s Riddle” (Joel Chandler Harris 154-58).

<sup>8</sup>The distinction I make between story and plot is the same one that Jeremy Hawthorn makes “between, on the one hand, a *series of real or fictitious events, connected by a certain logic or chronology, and involving certain ACTORS*, and on the other hand, *the NARRATION of this series of events*.” Hawthorn uses *Wuthering Heights* as an example of the distinction:

[W]ere one to be asked to give the story of *Wuthering Heights*, a suitable response would be to start with the first arrival of



the child Heathcliff at Wuthering Heights and then proceed to recount the events of the novel in chronological order until the death of Heathcliff and the (possible) reuniting of him with Cathy. But the plot of *Wuthering Heights* is these events *in the order that they are actually presented in Emily Brontë's novel*. (337, italics and capitalization Hawthorn's).

This essentially simple distinction is complicated by the fact that each of these terms has been given an opposite meaning by major critics. For the sake of clarity, I have in this chapter favored the relatively unambiguous Russian terms *fabula* and *syuzhet*, meaning story and plot, respectively, in the understanding shared by Hawthorn.

<sup>9</sup>For more on identifiably oral narrative tendencies, see Lord (92-107), Olrik, Peabody (179-83), Rosenberg (*Folklore* 108-16), and Scholes and Kellogg (207-39).

<sup>10</sup>My *fabula* for the story is indebted to the less detailed chronologies constructed by Brooks (*William Faulkner* 383-84), who drew his in turn from Going, and Nebeker, whose chronology is a revision of McGlynn's. Although there is a great deal of contention over the precise dating of the events of the story (the only date given by the narrator is 1894, the year that Colonel Sartoris remits Emily's taxes, and even the relative temporal terms offered are approximate, such as the "six or seven years" that Miss Emily gives china-painting lessons [128]), the

order in which the events occurred is generally agreed upon, and that order is more significant to the present discussion.

<sup>11</sup>For a discussion of Poe's possible influence on "A Rose for Emily," see Stone.

<sup>12</sup>For more on the structural features of oral eulogistic traditions, see Caraveli-Chaves and Nketia.

CHAPTER FOUR

SOUTHERN EPISTEMOLOGY AND  
THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF ORALITY

I begin to see deeper into the consciousness of Poe and Faulkner. Their rage is relatively noble. Rooted in a community born in the decadence of the Greek revival they were peculiarly alive to the impact of technology. Invalid or Dying from their inception, they had the hyper-awareness of the sick-man for his enemies. . . . And yet symbolically in such as [Allen] Tate and [Cleanth] Brooks, note a modest confidence in renewal of the human condition. Not the abstract assertion of such a possibility as in [Lewis] Mumford the urbanite, but the quiet cultivation of a positive grammatica. Stirrings, however dim, of a genuine culture. Knowledge and supply of a real pabulum. That's where I, too, take my stand. The view is horrible, but the garden is there too.

—Marshall McLuhan (*Letters* 184)

The central, most basic issue in Southern literary studies, as in perhaps all scholarly fields, is one of ontology: is there really such a thing as “Southernness,” in literature or in life, and, if so, *what is it?* Recent attempts to identify Southern distinctiveness have been greatly influenced by trends in literary theory, including those movements grouped under the umbrella of poststructuralism. These schools of thought are highly resistant to notions of objective truth, and thus such critics as Stephen A. Smith, Richard Gray, and Michael Kreyling have tended to see the South not as actually being “another land” (Cash vii)—that is, a coherent, homogenous place with an identifiable culture distinguishable from surrounding areas—but rather as “a concept, a matter of knowing even more than being, and as such part of the

currency of our language and perception” (Gray, *Writing* xiv). These studies deal with Southern literature as both shaping and being shaped by such “mythic” or “imagined” conceptions of Southernness.<sup>1</sup>

For much of its history, however, the South has needed no assistance from literary theory in order to view itself as a distinct region. *Distinct*, in fact, is probably far too weak a word to describe a way of life that a generation of Southerners considered worth fighting—and dying—for. If the institution of slavery was the primary force behind any unique Southern identity, as many have claimed, then “Southern” as a meaningful category might have ceased to exist after 1865. It did not. The Southern Literary Renaissance that began in the 1920s was at least as much the product of an obsession with regional identity as it was of World War I or the encroachment of modernism. The issue was in fact explored not only by creative writers but also by sociologists such as Howard W. Odum, journalists such as W.J. Cash, and historians such as U.B. Phillips, who in 1928 designated the unifying principle of “Southernism” as white supremacy: “a common resolve indomitably maintained—that [the South] should be and remain a white man’s country” (31). In *The Mind of the South* (1940), Cash discussed racism as only one expression of “the savage ideal,” the anti-intellectual *zeitgeist* of the region, a certain glandular romanticism brought on by a conglomeration of climate, clannishness, Calvinist Protestantism, and various other factors. Odum, the empiricist, preferred data to theorizing,

but in 1936 he did argue that the South suffered from “loyalties to the past and to outmoded patterns” which (as H.L. Mencken might have observed) conditioned it to “isolation, individualism, ingrowing patriotism, cultural inbreeding, civic immaturity, and social inadequacy” (13). In stark contrast to Odum’s views, the contributors to the 1930 Agrarian symposium *I’ll Take My Stand* praised and defended the region’s agrarian economy and the values associated with it as the key ingredients to the “Southern way of life” (xxxvii).

This defiant symposium by the “Twelve Southerners” now known as the Nashville Agrarians—whose ranks included such important critic-poets as John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren—intended to “support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way” (xxxvii). The particular definition of the “Southern way of life” that these men posit is important in at least two ways. First, it *accurately reflects* the commonly held, some might even say mythic, conceptions of the South (in the terminology of Benedict Anderson, how the community is “imagined”) that inform much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Southern literature and thought. Second, the book exerted an overwhelming *influence* over the shaping of such conceptions in the seven decades after its publication, especially among literary writers (as Louis Rubin, perhaps hyperbolically, wrote in his introduction to the 1962 Torchbook edition of the book, “Not a single

writer about the modern South has failed to mention and discuss it” [xxiii]).<sup>2</sup>

Essentially, the Twelve Southerners viewed the difference between the South and the rest of the nation in economic terms: “Agrarian *versus* Industrial” (xxxvii). The urban, industrial North is an environment that encourages mechanization, commercialization, isolation, conformity, rootlessness, the acquisition of material wealth, and, perhaps the most unspeakable obscenity to the Agrarians, *abstraction*. Such a society places too much emphasis on the applied sciences, which view nature as an enemy to be conquered rather than as a divine force whose mysteries should be celebrated. As a result, religion (which depends on the view of nature as “something mysterious and contingent” [xlii]), the fine arts (which depend on the “right relations of man-to-nature” [xliii]), and community (which depends on the “right relations of man-to-man” [xliii]) all suffer. By contrast, the rural, agrarian South is an environment that places great value on tradition, community connectedness, individual identity, the grandeur and mysteries of nature, concrete action rather than abstract ideology, and agriculture as both an economic and spiritual endeavor. But the conflict in values that these twelve writers regarded as economic (Southern agrarianism at odds with an industrialized America) might also be explored according to the orality-literacy model (Southern orality at odds with what Neil Postman calls “typographic America”).

As I explained in my introduction, comparative research on oral and literate cultures has allowed theorists to generalize about the psychologically transformative powers of literacy, and much of this work has been conveniently synthesized by Ong, who in *Orality and Literacy* catalogs certain identifiably non-literate modes of thought and expression. If, as we have seen, the South can be distinguished from the rest of the nation in being marked by a more powerful oral residue, then perhaps it should come as no surprise that Ong's psychodynamics of orality read like a synopsis of the "Southern way of life" as defined by the Agrarians: agonistically toned (like the title *I'll Take My Stand* itself) (43-45); homeostatic in adjusting history to current felt realities (46-49); close to the human lifeworld (42-43); situational rather than abstract (49); empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced (45-46); conservative and traditionalist rather than innovative (41-42).

This last characteristic provides the most obvious parallel to the Agrarian philosophy. The opening essay of *I'll Take My Stand*, written by John Crowe Ransom, begins, "It is out of fashion in these days to look backward rather than forward. About the only American given to it is some unreconstructed Southerner, who persists in his regard for a certain terrain, a certain history, and a certain inherited way of living" (1). The Agrarians were indeed such unreconstructed Southerners, the primary purpose of their book being to defend certain traditions that they saw as threatened by a new culture of innovation. This tendency to look

backward is perhaps the most universally recognized characteristic of Southern literature; as Fred Chappell has pointed out, a mere sampling of titles—*Look Homeward, Angel*; *As I Lay Dying*; “Ode to the Confederate Dead”; *Do, Lord, Remember Me*; *Gone With the Wind*—is enough to make this clear (477). And these ties to the past are not exclusively thematic. As late as 1985, James H. Justus was able to identify “a residual fondness for conservative forms and techniques” as one of the primary distinctive features of Southern poetry (535).

That agonistic language is far more characteristic of oral than literate culture is explained by Ong: “Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. It separates the knower from the known. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle” (43-44). Gale H. Carrithers Jr. identifies the context of struggle as being central to the work of Allen Tate, citing examples from Tate’s correspondence, which is rife with militaristic language. “In this kind of literary warfare,” Tate writes in a letter to Donald Davidson, “if we hesitated till we were sure, there would be no warfare, for you can’t *prove* things like *revenge*, etc; you have to divine them and let loose. And what is life without war?” (11 Oct. 1924, qtd. in Carrithers 48). (He also frequently signed letters to Davidson “Colonel Tate.”)



Such an agonistic tone is equally observable in Tate's contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, "Remarks on the Southern Religion," which declares that the South must "rise up" in order to resist industrial secularization. From very early in the essay, Tate's diction has an agonistic bent: "violence," "betrayal," "injure," "death" (156). By the end, Colonel Tate is in full military regalia as he addresses his troops, inspiring them to attack the enemy without mercy:

How may the Southerner take hold of his Tradition?

The answer is, by *violence*.

. . . Since he cannot bore from within, he has left the sole alternative of boring from without. This method is political, active, and, in the nature of the case, *violent* and *revolutionary*. . . . The Southerner is faced with a paradox: He must use an instrument, which is political, and so unrealistic and pretentious that he cannot believe in it, to re-establish a private, self-contained, and essentially spiritual life. I say that *he must do this*; but that remains to be seen. (174-75, my emphasis)

Carrithers attributes this "combateness [and] bellicose strategizing" apparent in Tate's letters, essays, and even poems to his "deep sense of all language as action" and, like Ong, recognizes that this proclivity is "akin to oral societies" (48).

Many of Ong's other characteristics of orality intersect, such as "[a]dditive rather than subordinative" (37), "[s]ituational rather than abstract" (49), "[c]lose to the human lifeworld" (42), and "[e]mpathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced" (45). As the classical scholar Eric Havelock notes, the additive quality of language (what he calls "parataxis"), the connecting of statements with "and" rather than through subordination, is not merely formal but helps to create "a flow of sound, symbolizing a river of actions, a continual dynamism, expressed in a behavioral syntax" (76). In other words, the importance of the additive is directly related to the importance of the *narrative*, which is an essential element of oral discourse. Havelock points out that an abstract expression such as "Honesty is the best policy" would be completely foreign to an oral culture; "An honest man always prospers" is more likely to have meaning and thus be preserved. "More likely still," writes Havelock, "instead of being isolated in a maxim, the man's performance is incorporated in a story where he performs honestly (or fails to perform honestly)" (76). So concepts like the benefits of honesty are not understood in the abstract but rather "in situational, operational frames of reference that . . . remain close to the human lifeworld" (Ong 49).

The preference for the situational over what Tate calls "[t]he enemy, abstraction" ("Remarks" 167) is something of a leitmotif of *I'll Take My Stand*. In his "Statement of Principles" which prefaces the book, Ransom writes that Southern humanism

is not an abstract system, but a culture, the whole way in which we live, act, think, and feel. It is a kind of imaginatively balanced ["homeostatic"] life lived out in a definite social tradition. And, in the concrete, we believe that this, the genuine humanism, was rooted in the agrarian life of the older South. . . . It was not an abstract moral "check" derived from the classics—it was not soft material poured in from the top. It was deeply founded in the way of life itself ["the human lifeworld"]—in its tables, chairs, portraits, festivals, laws, marriage customs. (xliv)

Clearly, the Southern humanism that Ransom describes—a "positive grammatica" as opposed to "abstract assertion[s]"—is consistent with the kinds of conceptual thinking that Ong and Havelock identify as being characteristically oral. Furthermore, when he notes the importance of "the way of life itself"—festivals, laws, marriage customs—in the structuring of a particular humanistic outlook, Ransom is demonstrating another characteristic of orality that both Ong and Havelock discuss: the idea that "learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known" (Ong 45).

The oral bard pays no tribute to "objectivity," in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing, an invention of print culture. "The 'objectivity' which Homer and other oral performers do have," Ong writes, "is that enforced by formulaic expression: the individual's reaction is not

expressed as simply individual or 'subjective' but rather as encased in the communal reaction, the communal 'soul'" (46). The oral poet is in no way detached from his community but rather has an active and very useful communal role. According to Havelock, "The poets of orality were aware of their didactic function. . . . They were even more aware of the emotional impact of the poetry and music they employed. They took pride in the pleasure produced, which was the necessary accompaniment of the instruction" (75). Donald Davidson, who might be styled the most committed of the Agrarians, was also the one most committed to the oral tradition, and most especially to the concept of poet as oral bard. "A Mirror for Artists," his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, makes this fact clear, as does much of his poetry and criticism.

### **What Once Was Sung: Donald Davidson**

Compared to the other three poets who make up the nexus of the Fugitive group of the 1920s and the Agrarian movement of the 1930s—John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren—Donald Davidson has limped far behind in the esteem of most critics. In *The Burden of Time*, John L. Stewart, who devotes entire chapters to Ransom, Tate, and Warren, only briefly addresses Davidson's literary efforts, which he finds to be riddled with "clichés from boys' books and the legend of the Old South," resulting in a poetry that, though graceful and melodious, projects an image of "the good life" that is neither profound nor believable (124). John M. Bradbury's *The Fugitives: A Critical Account*

similarly slights the “bitterly disillusioned romantic” in favor of his more famous comrades, claiming that his poems are futile attempts “to integrate his memories with his present experiences” (74). And Richard Gray is the bluntest of all, proclaiming that Davidson “is clearly not as good as the other three writers; he is less interesting and memorable than they are” (*Literature of Memory* 103). Gray attributes this “inferiority” to the same weakness that Stewart and Bradbury identify: Davidson’s treatment of the themes of the past and tradition. A close examination of these and similar studies reveals that critics have few valid complaints to make against Davidson the artist. Their real quarrel is with Davidson the unrelenting conservative, the man whose social, cultural, and political Southern traditionalism, they argue, precluded any success he might have enjoyed as a poet. Ironically, it is in fact this very commitment to tradition that makes Davidson, as both poet and critic, the figure who most completely embodies the spirit responsible for Southern literature’s unique power: the spirit of orality.<sup>3</sup>

In “A Mirror for Artists,” Davidson observes that for millennia the role of the artist, and particularly the poet, was essentially that of the Homeric bard as described by Ong and Havelock. But with the rise of Romanticism, much to Davidson’s regret, the artist became dissociated from society, a condition that would only become exacerbated in the modern, industrial age. He writes:

In Romantic poetry we have from the beginning a vast increase in lyric poetry, personal and subjective, with the objective practically ruled out. The poet sings less and less for the crowd in whose experiences he no longer shares intimately. The lonely artist appears, who sings for a narrower and ever diminishing audience; or having in effect no audience, he sings for himself. (44)

For Davidson, modern poetry has suffered the same malaise as most other aspects of modern life. The isolation of industrialism has resulted in a “schism between the artist and society” (48).

Perhaps Davidson’s most moving lament of the loss of the poet-*vates* comes in his early poem “Old Harp,” first published in the *Fugitive* in 1923, in which the speaker addresses the tool of the oral bard as it hangs in a museum:

Could thine ancient master rise  
From his dark mound by the sea,  
With what shame and hurt surprise  
Would he look on thee,  
Placarded here for eyes  
That never knew the glee.

The glee that the onlookers have never known is that of a functional poetry for the common people, one that not only instructs but also

entertains with captivating adventures. The speaker goes on to speculate as to the subject matter of the singer's songs:

Once he sang of old, old things  
In tongues men have forgot,  
Of sleeping barrowed kings  
That wait new Camelot  
With richer coverings  
Than men on earth have got;  
  
Or of shield-rimmed galleys drifting  
And Viking eyes ablaze  
To catch gray towers lifting  
Their round from bowered ways;  
Or blue cliffs slowly rifting  
That guard enchanted bays. (112)

Today, however, poetry has been reduced to mere words on a page, the scop has been silenced:

But his pliant hand is dust.  
Here is no singing tongue.  
Only the mute cool rust  
Fingers thee, loosely strung,  
And men read, as read they must,  
What once was sung.

Poetry is thus doomed to sit on a shelf unread or, if read, to fail to fulfill any communal role.

If in “A Mirror for Artists” and “Old Harp” Davidson’s argument about the damning effects that the rise of typographic literacy has had on the poetic tradition is mostly implicit, it becomes quite explicit in “Poetry as Tradition,” an essay that appeared twenty-seven years after *I’ll Take My Stand*. Here he again decries the “dissociation of the poet from society” (*Still Rebels* 3), which has resulted in modern poetry’s “guarded style” (7). Davidson goes on to describe the guarded style in language that anticipates Ong:

The metrical system is shattered into dissonance or avoided altogether. “Prose effects” are deliberately cultivated. In some extreme instances typographical oddities are used to accent the pattern of dissonance, of divergence from the traditional. “Poeticisms” and “clichés” are avoided. Metaphor becomes intricately symbolic; and its closely woven inferential and referential scheme, worked into both the texture and the structure of the poem, puts a severe tax upon the most devoted reader’s attention. The poem must be pondered like a problem; it is not made to be read aloud, but must be studied in secluded contemplation. (7)

The poetry of modernity, Davidson argues, is “the poetry composed *for* the printed page, the poetry received by the solitary, silent reader who



ponders it in voiceless seclusion” (10). By contrast, “[t]he epic of the great tradition is not a book in the post-Renaissance sense” and in fact “is not only the poetry of tradition. It is tradition itself” (11-12). Thus, the alienation of poetry from society coincides with what might be termed the textualization of poetry, which occurs “in the late sixteenth century, when printer and publisher appear as entrepreneurs between the poet and his audience” (12-13), at which time the medium of “the book becomes more and more a determinant of the poetry” (14):

This poetry now accepts the printed page as its essential medium, and it is not otherwise accessible or approachable. It is seldom quoted except in critical essays. It is all but incapable of oral dissemination. Only on the printed page can it be pondered, grasped, and absorbed. It cannot flourish widely, and in fact has no large-scale circulation now except in school and college textbooks. Therefore, it does not filter down from the highest cultural levels to the lowest, as the preliterate poetry did, nor can it, like that earlier poetry, recruit its strength by drawing upon a deep-rooted folk culture. (15)

The fate of poetry in the Gutenberg Galaxy is “a kind of death-in-life, to exist only on the printed page, not on the lips of men, not be carried by their voices and therefore almost never carried in their memories, rarely in their hearts” (20). Davidson concludes the essay with an exhortation:

“There is no place for poetry to go next unless it reasserts its old independence of the book and finds a way to restore some of its former oral character” (22). In “A Mirror for Artists,” Davidson expresses a similar plea when he suggests that the modern poet assume the role of the oral bard: “Harmony between the artist and society must be regained; the dissociation must be broken down” (50). In order to accomplish this, the artist “must enter the common arena and become a citizen” (60). In other words, he must realize the “close, empathetic, communal identification” that was so important to the likes of Homer (Ong 45).

In his 1941 essay “Yeats and the Centaur,” Davidson contrasts the early and late work of the great Irish poet in order to illustrate the proper relationship between the artist and the oral tradition. While the early Yeats wrote folk or quasi-folk ballads and songs, such as the “Ballad of the Fox-hunter,” the “Ballad of Father Gilligan,” and “Down by the Salley Gardens,” the work of the later Yeats “ceases to be narrative or in any way ‘folkish.’ The myths and popular lore become occasional references, or they become, in the modern sense, symbols, which are merged into the larger ‘frame of reference’” (*Still Rebels* 27). Yeats’s transformation is representative of the general estrangement between “high” art and folk culture (or “low” art) that has plagued the modern world. “When the ‘high art’ and the ‘low art’ of a nation or a society are out of proper relationship to each other,” Davidson writes, “the ‘high art’ becomes too ‘arty’ [thus the dissociation of the poet from society], and the ‘low art’ too ‘low’ [thus

the relegation of folk material to ‘occasional references’]” (26). Davidson explains the ideal relationship between “high” art and popular lore in the following way:

The popular lore ought to pass readily and naturally into the art; it ought not to have to be sought out by specialists in special corners, collected, edited, published, and reviewed; and then, perhaps only through some accident of taste or fashion, be appropriated, at long range, by a very literary poet. The reverse of the process ought also to work naturally and not at a forbidding long range. The art ought to pass readily into the popular lore, and not remain eternally aloof and difficult. Unless both processes continue in mutual interchange, society as well as art is in a bad state of health. (25-26)<sup>4</sup>

After acknowledging that “to use popular lore is not enough in itself,” Davidson concludes the essay with a kind of prescription for a better “state of health” for art and society:

When the . . . popular lore belongs natively to those who make the high art, as much as to the people, and does not need to be hunted or reclaimed; and when the high art is not too subtle and complex to serve as a functional instrument for the popular lore—in that time we shall approach the ideal condition. (30)

It is clear from his own poetry that Davidson the artist sought to effect this ideal condition. Poems such as “Fiddler Dow” and “The Old Man of Thorn” (both 1924) are folk performances in print reminiscent of the early Yeats. And “Meditation on Literary Fame,” an epinician ode to John Crowe Ransom written in 1958, explicitly aligns itself with the position on popular lore articulated in “Yeats and the Centaur.” The poem begins:

What net, what oar, what forest path or dream  
Retrieved for you, for us, the Theban’s lyre?  
The scholiast from Byzantium’s funeral gleam  
Plucked but the mute, the shattered frame;  
And Yeats, consorting with moon-demons, heard  
Images only, clutched at the abstract Bird  
Of charred philosophy until he lost  
Usheen, whom once he knew, and his dear land,  
And all the Celtic host.  
Fleeing that bitter choice, your reverend great-grandshire  
Sailed, where the Muses led, to this western strand.

(*Poems* 23)

As in “Old Harp,” the oral tradition here is metonymically represented by the instrument that provides the bard’s accompaniment. The anthropologist and the later, more literary Yeats are incapable of the kind of personal involvement in this tradition that the original bard and

his audience shared, however great their intellectual interest in it may be. For them, the lyre's frame is "mute" and "shattered." True, the earlier Yeats did show an understanding of Usheen (Oisín), the poet and warrior of Celtic legend who converses with St. Patrick in "The Wanderings of Oisín" (1889). The later Yeats, however, lost even this "abstract Bird / of charred philosophy," as Davidson explains in his earlier essay. The spirit of the traditional bard has survived only by fleeing to "this western strand," the American South, where, through such inheritors as Ransom and Davidson, he finds new epic heroes:

By Isis or the Thames you found none fabulous  
As those proud men at any county fair  
Who wore the Southern gray or Tennessee butternut  
As if great Pindar sat in the judge's chair. (23)

The poem ends with a proverb that essentially restates the thesis of "Yeats and the Centaur": "*Happy the land where men hold dear / Myth that is truest memory, / Prophecy that is poetry*" (24). This brief passage contains voluminous implications. The first of these three lines insists that the poetic tradition should be held dear by men; in other words, there should be no gulf between "high" art and popular lore. The third line equates prophecy, that which provides a community with guidance and coherence, with poetry; this poetic tradition, therefore, should be not only accessible but also socially functional. And an important part of this social utility, the second line suggests, involves memory. The mythic past

provided by the poet-*vates* is “truest memory,” a much higher truth than the factual accuracy offered by written history.

“Joe Clisby’s Song” (1961), one of Davidson’s most anthologized poems, provides a good introduction to his concept of poet as memory-keeper:

What did my old song say?  
Something of youth and desire  
And summer passing away;  
Yet love is a durable fire  
And will stay.

Must I think a tune like this  
Was never made for a time  
That reads only lust in a kiss  
And shreds the magic of rhyme

To hit or miss? (*Poems* 87)

The speaker, Joe Clisby, initially expresses doubt that the oral tradition, represented by his “old song,” can have any place in the modern, jaded world, where emotion is exchanged for biological impulse and poetry is characterized by the “guarded style.” But when the setting of the poem shifts to “old Bethel burying-ground,” he realizes that “old songs” can connect modern audiences not only with events of the past, but with the values of the past as well:

For the old folks that lie there  
We knew were singers all.  
They could get a song by ear  
And had a fiddle at call  
And friends near. (88)

The “old folks” buried in this cemetery represent the past generations whose memories are preserved in song. Clisby concludes by inviting the reader to join in this oral tradition and thereby arrive upon mythic truth:

If you would join their song  
But fear to raise the sound,  
Come walk with Nettie Long  
And me, by the burying-ground.  
You'll take no wrong.

Burt Whitson and his Ruth  
And many couples more  
Can tune the lips of youth  
As they did mine before  
To sing the truth. (88)

That the mythic truth provided by story and song is of a higher order than the empirical truth of modern historiography is suggested quite strongly by “Soldier and Son” (1961), a dialogue between the two

title characters in which the father is asked to “Tell me the tale you have kept so long unspoken” and responds:

It is fallow land. My friends are in the grave.  
I cannot bring them back to you with words  
If language itself at last turns mercenary.  
Go read in those who have such words to sell;  
You will be thought an educated man. (*Poems* 17)

The son wisely rejects this recommendation:

Skim milk they give and call it history.  
I have read its lies—have you not said they were lies?  
Belief I want that surpasses easy knowledge.  
When I believe you, I believe myself  
And am myself, beyond my present self. (17)

Written history does not contain lies in the sense of factual misrepresentation; even the most factually accurate history lacks truth if it does not offer “knowledge carried to the heart,” that which allows the past to become meaningful in our present lives.<sup>5</sup> Davidson’s rejection of written history is more explicitly made in a 1936 essay on H.G. Wells’s *The Shape of Things to Come*, in which he observes that Wells

cannot conceive of the fact as simply *being* in the living harmony of things and men. For him it is not a fact until it has been “retrospected” (we need a coined word here); that is, until it has been preserved in the formaldehyde pickle of a



card index and thus been made into a specimen. In the Wellsian future no moment will have a meaning until it has been seized, recorded, tabulated. (*Attack* 354)

According to Ong, “oral traditions reflect a society’s present cultural values rather than idle curiosity about the past” (48) and thus allow the society to exist “in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis” (46). Wellsian recorded history might satisfy idle curiosity about the past, but it would not help the son in his search for an identity within the context of his family, community, and region. When the soldier describes in graphic detail the violence of his wartime experiences, of ambushes opening fire and horses dragging fallen men, and of his decision to accept death in order to defend his cause, his son finally gleams from the past something usable in the present. The father concludes:

Now I know you truly are my son;  
And for my son I will awaken all  
The passionate recollections that I lulled  
To sleep, unquestioned, while this tongue was cold:  
Let them guide our feet where we shall walk. (18)

A similar critique of “textbook education” can be found in “The Ninth Part of Speech: *A Verse Letter: To Louis Zahner*” (1960), which Lawrence Dessommes has called “one of Donald Davidson’s best expressions of what he means by learning, by education, and by the

closely related subject of poetry” (21). The poem finds its speaker in an old country schoolhouse. The schoolmaster Zahner, who takes this small building as his home but is not present, is addressed:

Whoever takes a schoolhouse for his house  
Must move beyond a printed grammar’s reach  
And try some parleying among birch boughs  
With beaver, deer, and the neat scurrying grouse  
Who use what is their own.  
And from them learn the ninth part of speech  
That never yet was parsed or paradigmed. (*Poems* 4)

Davidson recognizes the importance of literacy, represented by the eight parts of speech, but asserts that true education, “belief . . . that surpasses easy knowledge,” cannot be attained from the abstraction of symbols on a page. Rather, the scholar must “link the theorem with the thing” (5), thus “[o]utwitting [John] Dewey and consolidation” (4). The ninth part of speech is that which can be learned from interaction with nature: “beaver, deer, and the neat scurrying grouse / Who use what is their own.”

The final stanza of this “verse letter” not only celebrates teachers such as Zahn who recognize the importance of the “wild particular” (what is often called the *concrete-universal*) but also expresses hope that future generations will be freed from education that is the exclusive property of “tame abstract”:

Few now are left who know the ancient rule  
That tame abstract must wed the wild particular  
In school or art, but most of all in school,  
Else learning's spent to gild a fool  
At market, altar, bench, or bar.  
The shudder in the nerves must ever vex  
Trim certainties of the vast complex,  
And ever the wildcat's scream  
Must break the Platonic dream  
Else we but skim realities  
And mock the great humanities.  
To know this secret, you were not the first,  
And will not be the last, we hope, to pledge  
Redemption if the worst should come to worst,  
And bring the schoolhouse back  
Somewhere close to a wildcat's track  
And the forest's finite edge. (7)

That the "wild particular" and "tame abstract" are representative of orality and literacy, respectively, is strongly suggested by David Abram's important book *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996). Abram takes particular aim at alphabetic literacy, which, unlike previous writing systems, established pictorial signs which represented vocal sounds rather than objects existing in the world, "*for the first time completely bypassing the*

*thing pictured.* The evocative phenomena—the entities imaged—are no longer a necessary part of the equation. Human utterances are now elicited, directly, by human-made signs; *the larger, more-than-human life-world is no longer a part of the semiotic, no longer a part of the system.*” (100-01, italics Abram’s). By contrast, in a non-literate culture both language and thought are necessarily inextricable from the “more-than-human life-world,” that is, the “wild particular” of the “wildcat’s scream”:

If we listen, first, to the sounds of an oral language—to the rhythms, tones, and inflections that play through the speech of an oral culture—we will likely find that these are . . . necessarily tuned . . . to the various nonhuman calls and cries that animate the local terrain . . . [for] sensitivity to such subtleties is a necessary element of all oral, subsistence cultures, and this sensitivity is inevitably reflected not just in the content but in the very shapes and patterns of human discourse . . .

The native hunter, in effect, must apprentice himself to those animals that he would kill. Through long and careful observation, enhanced at times by ritual identification and mimesis, the hunter gradually develops an instinctive knowledge of the habits of his prey, of its fears and its pleasures, its preferred foods and favored haunts.

(140)

An oral culture's apprenticeship in the "more-than-human life-world" of nature is exactly what Davidson means by "the ninth part of speech."

Davidson is embracing what is essentially an oral epistemology.

The idea that oral cultures are epistemologically distinct from literate cultures can be traced at least as far back as Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963), a landmark examination of the noetic effects of alphabetic literacy. Havelock argues that only with the internalization of writing in the fifth century B.C.E. did the individual self, autonomous and separate from community and tradition, become conceivable: "The doctrine of the autonomous psyche is the counterpart of the rejection of oral culture" (200).<sup>6</sup> Participants in oral tradition are not capable of separating themselves from the tradition in order to view it objectively or critically. But the literate revolution allowed for the "separation of the knower from the known": "it now became possible to identify the 'subject' in relation to the 'object' which the 'subject' knows" (201). And this possibility led inevitably to what Havelock calls the "discovery of intellection" (201). If we accept Havelock's contention that philosophy itself cannot exist in oral culture, Plato's often-pondered expulsion of poets from his republic is suddenly not so mysterious:

It was [Plato's] self-imposed task, building to be sure on the work of predecessors, to establish two main postulates: that of the personality which thinks and knows, and that of a body of knowledge that is thought about and known. To do

this he had to destroy the immemorial habit of self-identification with the oral tradition. For this had merged the personality with the tradition, and made a self-conscious separation from it impossible. (201)

E.R. Dodds has argued that the Homeric “self-identification with the oral tradition” is indicative of “shame-culture,” while the Platonic “separation of the knower from the known” is indicative of “guilt-culture” (28-63).<sup>7</sup> Oral societies are shame cultures in that their members do not have an internal sense of their own worth or identity: who they are is determined by public opinion, more specifically, what people *say* about them:

Homeric man’s highest good is not the enjoyment of a quiet conscience, but the enjoyment of *tīmē*, public esteem: “Why should I fight,” asks Achilles, “if the good fighter receives no more [*tīmē*] than the bad?” And the strongest moral force which Homeric man knows is not the fear of god, but respect for public opinion, *aidōs*. (Dodds 17-18)

In the landmark study *Southern Honor* (1982), Betram Wyatt-Brown convincingly argues that “the key to the South’s development” was primal honor, “the determination of men to have power [and] prestige . . . and to immortalize these acquisitions through their progeny” (16).<sup>8</sup> Although he does not appear to be familiar with the work of Dodds and

Havelock, Wyatt-Brown, through copious historical documentation, paints a vivid portrait of the Old South as an oral culture of shame as opposed to a literate culture of guilt. He writes that in the Old South the overriding obsession with honor was “an ethic almost entirely external in nature” (33), and that this ethic “made the opinion of others inseparable from inner worth” (45). In an 1828 speech, for example, John Randolph of Roanoke declared, “I will go back to the bosom of my constituents as man never had before . . . and I shall receive from them the only reward I ever looked for, but the highest that man can receive,—the universal expression of their approbation, of their thanks” (qtd. in Wyatt-Brown 45-46). Such notorious Old South practices as dueling and lynching were the result of this ethic, but so was Southern hospitality. As late as 1965, Walker Percy was able to observe in his home state of Mississippi that the white population constitutes “one big kinship lodge,” the result of which is “the absence of a truly public zone” (48). In an orality-based shame culture, everything is public.<sup>9</sup>

Examples of Southern *aidōs* are abundant in Davidson’s poetry. The speaker of “The Last Charge” (1938) addresses the Confederate dead:

Fated, valorous army, who watches you  
In this last darkling grapple? Who cheers you on?  
Shall you walk in the valley of death without parade,  
Knowing the taste of blood and the night too soon?  
The hands of mourners will come to gather you

Under the maples of McGavock House,  
And presently like you will moulder and sink,  
Hearing but pilgrim steps, the pelt of leaves  
That cover your ranks . . . your graves. Farewell,  
Army of Tennessee! Rough glory, rooted here,  
Feeds the lone vow, the lingering touch  
Of a late comrade sworn to remember you!  
Lights glow from river and town. The darkness stabs.  
And winter sweeps the undefended earth. (*Poems* 49)

These ghosts “moulder and stink” not because of their own misdeeds but because their exploits, heroic though they might have been, have not been remembered, spoken of, and praised by subsequent generations.

Davidson’s book-length poem *The Tall Men* (1927, revised 1938), a tribute to the honor and valor of the frontiersmen of early Tennessee “[w]hose words were bullets” (*Poems* 117) and lament over the loss of these virtues in the modern world, might be read as a paean to shame culture. Early in the poem, the life of the speaker, a modern, urban Southerner, is contrasted with those of John Sevier, Andrew Jackson, and David Crockett. These three “tall men” speak from their graves, expressing disappointment with how life in their home state has changed. Crockett explicitly singles out the loss of oral tradition: “what is this I hear?” he asks, “Tennesseans, have you forgotten the songs / Of Old Zip Coon and Turkey in the Straw?” (124). Sevier confesses that he



“loved / The praise of men in hunting shirts” and then drifts into *ubi sunt*:

Where are the rifles and the lean hunters  
Who strode the long trail with me? Have they left  
No tall sons to hate what should be hated  
And love what should be loved—the praise of men  
Speaking with quiet eyes behind long rifles? (123)

Like Sevier, Jackson views the honor engendered by *tīmē* as the highest good:

What makes men live but honor? I have felt  
The bullet biting next to my heart and yet  
I kept my life for honor’s sake and killed  
My enemy. And what else was the fire  
That fed my sickly body when I shamed  
The Tennesseans into victory  
At Horseshoe Bend? What was it then but honor  
That blazed too hot for British regulars  
At New Orleans? Then all the people knew  
That I was of their breed and trusted me.  
Cowards and lies and little men will pass,  
But honor, by the Eternal, will endure. (123)

The speaker acknowledges that the oral tradition is intertwined with this concept of honor, and mourns at the loss of both:

But shall I say the praise of men, bright honor,

The songs of my own race and the ways of fighters

Are something read in books only, or graven

Only in stone and not in the hearts of men? (124-25)

This lament might be considered an encapsulation of Davidson's oeuvre as poet and essayist. The speaker mourns what has been lost in poetry and society: "the songs" are the oral tradition, and "bright honor" is the way of life, the epistemology, the "lost cause" as Davidson conceived it, all of which is inextricably linked to the oral tradition. These can only be read about in books now, for they no longer exist in a vibrant, living, communally useful tradition that resides "in the hearts of men." Finally, this "folk-chain" (*Poems* 69) was the special property of "my own race," that is, the American South.

In "A Mirror for Artists," after reciting the damaging effects of the textualization of poetry and the dissociation of the poet from society, Davidson admits that Southern writers have suffered (even if somewhat less so) with the rest, but he points out that this is primarily because the "Southern tradition in which these writers would share has been discredited and made artistically inaccessible; and the ideas, modes, and attitudes that discredited it, largely not Southern, have been current and

could be used” (59). Here Davidson seems to equate the “Southern tradition” with an *oral* tradition of poetry as “communal identification with the known” and, conversely, the “largely not Southern” personal and subjective work of the “lonely poet” with a *literate* tradition—insofar as “[w]riting separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for . . . personal disengagement or distancing” (Ong 46).

Davidson’s poetry, far from being harmed by a fierce devotion to tradition, gains from its author’s greatest obsessions tremendous power and nobility. But then, much of the damage to his reputation has had less to do with his literary talents than with his controversial views on race, specifically his efforts to maintain the Southern system of segregation. It is interesting to note that a very different literary afterlife has befallen Zora Neale Hurston, a Southern writer of Davidson’s generation who died in obscurity but has since been resurrected and reappraised, and is now rightly considered a major canonical literary figure. Hurston’s reappraisal has been largely unimpeded by the fact that she too publicly expressed opposition to the integration of Southern schools. There is even reason to believe that Davidson considered Hurston an ally in his efforts to combat integration.<sup>10</sup> As we shall now see, Davidson and Hurston might be considered allies in other, less embarrassing ways.

## **Making the Dream the Truth: Zora Neale Hurston**

When Zora Neale Hurston opens *Mules and Men*, her 1935 anthropological study of the African American oral tradition, with the statement, “I was glad when somebody told me, ‘You may go and collect Negro folklore’” (1), she is echoing Psalm 122: “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go into the house of the Lord.’” Although wry irony is rarely entirely absent from Hurston’s work, this particular example of wordplay is less an iconoclastic mockery than a zealous exultation of the material she is collecting, as well as the project of collecting it. By giving “Negro folklore” the syntactical position of “the house of the Lord,” she is elevating something commonly regarded as low art not merely to the level of high art, but to the level of the divine. According to Hurston, the oral tradition serves not only a communal function, but a deeply spiritual one as well: it is a godlike force that can empower an individual to construct reality, including his or her own identity. So Hurston’s equating of her own project of collecting and preserving this material with the spiritual quest of King David may not be as hyperbolic as most readers would assume.

The culminating expression of this conviction comes two years later with the publication of Hurston’s second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Many critics have argued that, in the novel, Janie’s ultimate salvation derives from her claiming “active participation in the oral traditions of her environment” (Benesch 628).<sup>11</sup> But these traditions,

which include tale-telling, signifyin', the swapping of lies, courtship rituals, gossip, and the dozens, are not, as has generally been implied, merely forms that allow Janie to find her voice and thus her place in the world; they are forms that allow her to *create* her world, just as they allow Hurston herself to create the world of the novel. In this synesthetic oral culture, in which the statement "You heard her, you ain't blind" (75) makes perfect sense, the "god" their eyes are watching may in fact be orality itself.<sup>12</sup>

That orality is as important a feature to African American culture as it is to the white mountain culture celebrated by Davidson has long been a commonplace.<sup>13</sup> Certainly the influence of African Americans on the oral character of Southern culture has been great, as was observed by W.J. Cash as early as 1941:

[I]n the South there was the daily impact upon the white man of the example of the Negro, concerning whom nothing is so certain as his remarkable tendency to seize on lovely words, to roll them in his throat, to heap them in redundant profusion one upon another until meaning vanishes and there is nothing left but the sweet, canorous drunkenness of sound, nothing but the play of primitive rhythm upon the secret springs of emotion. (51)

This was a people uprooted from their primary-oral culture and transported to the heart of the Gutenberg Galaxy, where, though initially

forbidden by law to learn to read, they are forced to understand the world in terms of a typographic media ecology. In this situation, it is inevitable that traditions preserved orally would become a storehouse for the African American communal identity, and that—from “signal songs” that contained meanings hidden from whites, to folk tales used to manipulate whites, as Uncle Julius McAdoo manipulates his employer John in Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman* (1899)—orality would serve as a kind of weapon against the literate oppressors. As such, the oral tradition becomes for African Americans something quite powerful.

The extent of African American influence on Southern oral culture is made obvious by the fact that Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934) parallel Ong’s psychodynamics of orality as clearly as does *I’ll Take My Stand*. Ong’s “redundant or ‘copious’” (39-41), for example, corresponds nicely to Hurston’s “Will to Adorn” (1020-22). Ong points out that spoken communication, which cannot be “glanced back over,” requires “repetition of the just-said” to keep “both speaker and hearer surely on the track” (40). Since redundancy characterizes oral thought and speech, it is in a profound sense more natural to thought and speech than is sparse linearity. “Sparsely linear or analytic thought and speech,” Ong writes, “is an artificial creation, structured by the technology of writing” (40). Hurston sees this non-literate tendency as her people’s great contribution to American English, evident in such double descriptives as “high-tall” and “hot-boiling,” and attributes it to

the fact that “[t]he starked, trimmed phrases of the Occident seem too bare for the voluptuous child of the sun” (1021-22). Note the use of less-than-economical repetition in the call and response performance during the mule’s funeral in *Their Eyes*:

“What killed this man?”

The chorus answered, “Bare, bare fat.”

“What killed this man?”

“Bare, bare fat.”

“What killed this man?”

“Bare, bare fat.” (58)

Ong’s “agonistically toned” likewise finds a counterpart in Hurston’s essay:

[Among African Americans,] loves, fights, possessions are, to misquote Woodrow Wilson, ‘Open disagreements openly arrived at.’ The community is given the benefit of a good fight as well as a good wedding. An audience is a necessary part of any drama. We merely go with nature rather than against it. (1026-27)

Of course, Hurston does not mean only physical fights (although these are indeed an important part of traditional African American folk culture, with or without razors) but also such “verbal and intellectual combat” as lying contests, signifyin’, and the dozens. In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Hurston elaborates on this agonistic form of

expression and indicates that it is a Southern phenomenon that crosses the color line:

[The] average Southern child, white or black, is raised on simile and invective. They know how to call names. It is an everyday affair to hear somebody called a mullet-headed, mule-eared, wall-eyed, hog-nosed, 'gator-faced, shad-mouthed, screw-necked, goat-bellied, puzzle-gutted, camel-backed, butt-sprung, battle-hammed, knock-kneed, razor-legged, box-ankled, shovel-footed, unmated so-and-so! . . . [Southerners] can tell you in simile exactly how you walk and smell. They can furnish a picture gallery of your ancestors, and a notion of what your children will be like. (135-36)

At times, such struggles are purely for entertainment value, as in the “contest in hyperbole” engaged in by Jim and Dave regarding their respective affections for Daisy (64-65), but at other times war waged with words carries real power, another primary oral perception. Shortly after Janie publicly signifies on Jody’s impotence, he dies of kidney failure (a pun, Henry Louis Gates Jr. suggests, on his being “kidded” to death), freeing her from the oppressive marriage that sought to keep her silent.

Hurston perfectly explains Ong’s concept of an oral culture’s preference for the concrete over the abstract with an analogy to money. In “primitive communities” (Hurston’s term), goods are initially



exchanged for other goods; only later do coins appear as abstract symbols for wealth, then bills as abstract symbols for coins, then checks as abstract symbols for bills, and eventually, if we are to take Hurston's premise beyond her own time and into an even deeper level of abstraction, computer data as abstract symbols for any or all of the above. In chirographic cultures, language becomes more abstract—"that-which-we-squat-on" becomes "chair"—and, in typographic cultures, even more abstract terms appear, such as "ideation" and "pleonastic." But African Americans, Hurston observes, have clung largely to oral language, even when speaking the highly "literate" language of their new home:

Frequently the Negro, even with detached words in his vocabulary—not evolved in him but transplanted on his tongue by contact—must add action to make it do. So we have "chop-ax," "sitting-chair," "cook-pot" and the like because the speaker has in his mind the picture of the object in use. Action. Everything illustrated. So we can say the white man thinks in written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics. (1020)

This passage more than any other illustrates that Hurston had a perfect understanding of the concepts of oral residue and the psychodynamics of orality over three decades before such researchers as Ong and Havelock began to articulate them. And, in a way, *Their Eyes*

*Were Watching God* stands as an extended expression of hieroglyphic thought. At the beginning of the novel, Janie agrees to share her story with Pheoby so that her “kissin’ friend” might truly comprehend what Janie has experienced and the person she is because of these experiences. Pheoby will “see” these truths through the storytelling process, and Janie even uses a visual metaphor to represent this process: “Unless you see the fur, a mink skin ain’t no different from a coon hide” (7, my emphasis). Because of the concrete action that she experiences through “situational, operational frames of reference” (Ong 49), Pheoby does indeed understand Janie, who, after completing the narrative, acknowledges this understanding when she states, “It’s uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there” (183, Hurston’s emphasis). Pheoby now “knows” Janie’s heart because she has “gone” with her on this journey.

But perhaps the characteristic of orally based thought and expression that is most relevant to Hurston’s work is “homeostatic” (Ong 46-49). Oral societies, Ong observes, “live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance” (46). In other words, these societies “forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 1). Ong cites the example of the Gonja in Ghana, whose oral tradition, according to British records from the turn of the twentieth century, held

that the tribe's founder, Ndewura Jakpa, had seven sons, each of whom was ruler of one of what were at that time the state's seven territorial divisions. Sixty years later, after the restructuring of the state brought about the disappearance of two of those states, versions of the myth were recorded in which Ndewura Jakpa has five sons and in which the two extinct divisions are never mentioned. Orality enables cultures to "re-write history" or modify reality in ways that literacy simply does not. In the Gutenberg Galaxy, human beings are confined by what they perceive to be the limits of objective truth, but in the oral universe, reality is malleable—human beings have the power to *shape* it. Many critics have noted that Janie becomes empowered by her eventual participation in the African American oral tradition, an empowerment that leads directly to her emancipation, but what critics have for the most part failed to recognize is the significance of this homeostatic quality of orality.<sup>14</sup>

Janie begins her life so divorced from African American culture that she does not recognize herself as being black, and the extent to which she is removed from orality is symbolized by her childhood nickname, Alphabet—she is named after the very cornerstone of western literacy. But at the age of sixteen she begins to show signs of the ability to construct reality that is part of her oral birthright. While sitting under a pear tree, she imagines that marriage is like the meeting of bee and blossom: "She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the

ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight” (10-11). Immediately after this epiphany, Janie demonstrates how the dream can be made into the truth: “Through pollinated air she saw a glorious being coming up the road. In her former blindness she had known him as shiftless Johnny Taylor, tall and lean” (11). The reality of Johnny Taylor’s shiftlessness may be easily modified when it becomes advantageous to do so.

Unfortunately, such a modification is not seen as at all advantageous by Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, who, after observing a kiss shared by the two young people, arranges for Janie to marry Logan Killicks, a landowner who will be an acceptable provider. Logan embodies the typographic values of materialism and isolation rather than the residually oral qualities outlined by Ong and, implicitly, by Hurston. Klaus Benesch writes that Janie learns from Killicks that safety “means isolation from the black [oral] culture in favor of . . . white [literate] middle-class aspirations” (630). Janie is miserable in this “safe” world, and, although she dreams of escape, cut off from the oral tradition she is powerless to make the dream the truth.

At least until her “salvation” arrives in the person of Jody Starks. Of course, Janie’s second marriage ultimately proves to be just as oppressive as her first. Like Logan, Jody represents a print-based value system. He is obsessed with “progress” and “status”; his favorite expression, “I god,” reveals that he considers himself divine; and his

association with the literacy of whites is observed by both the narrative voice (“he was more literate than the rest” [44]) and Hicks (“he talks tuh unlettered folks wid books in his jaws” [46]). Still, by taking Janie to Eatonville, Jody exposes her to a rich repository of African American oral culture. Ironically, it is the porch of Starks’s own store which becomes the town’s primary forum for all manner of folk traditions: the swapping of lies about Matt Bonner’s yellow mule, the dozens, the playing out of courtship rituals. Starks himself predictably takes only a passive role in these goings-on, and, importantly, he forbids Janie from participating: “Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge. He didn’t want her talking after such trashy people” (50). By being denied participation in the oral rituals, Janie is denied also the power to construct reality, to make the dream the truth.

However, in spite of her husband’s protests, Janie cannot help but be seduced by the “crayon enlargements of life” (48) that she hears bantered back and forth. There are three key moments when Janie empowers herself by entering the conversation: first, when she signifies on Jody’s freeing of the mule (55); second, when she improvises a folktale in which she converses with God on the intellectual inferiority of men (70-71); and finally, and most triumphantly, the previously mentioned incident in which she publicly signifies on Jody’s impotence—“When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (75)—humiliating

him and perhaps even killing him. By the time of Jody's death, Janie has been consumed by the folk rituals and has hence become for the first time her own person.

Such critics as Benesch and SallyAnn Ferguson have suggested that Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods becomes Janie's true salvation in that he is the only one of her husbands who participates and allows her to participate in the African American oral tradition. It is undeniable both that Janie's third marriage is the happiest and that Tea Cake represents the oral value system in ways that Logan and Jody do not. However, the idyllic image that Janie offers of Tea Cake is based less on objective fact and more on her own unconscious decision to make the dream the truth and thus shape reality to fit the orgasmic vision of love she had under the pear tree. Tea Cake is actually little more than, in Michael Awkward's words, "a traditionally domineering man" (83). He tries to control Janie, bragging to a friend, "Janie is wherever *Ah* wants tuh be" (141) and even resorts to physical violence in order to reassure himself of his ownership of his wife. After all of this, she still insists on viewing him as "a glance from God" (102). However, it is indeed through her initiation into African American folk culture, something that she owes in part to Tea Cake, that Janie develops the voice necessary to construct reality.

But if Janie has indeed found this all-powerful voice, then why are we not permitted to hear her story *in* her own voice? Robert B. Stepto and Bernard W. Bell both see the usurpation of Janie's story by the

third-person omniscient narrator as undercutting the theme of the protagonist's empowerment through the discovery of her voice. This point of view, however, fails to take note of the complexity of the novel's narrative voice, particularly what Gates identifies as the use of free indirect discourse, the perspective from which the story is told, which is that of "neither the novel's protagonist nor the text's disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, an emergent and merging moment of consciousness" (Gates xxvi). Not only does the narrative voice record the oral tales told by characters within the novel, but it also engages in this practice itself. For example, the fable of the buzzards, which clearly does not take place in the same reality as the main action of the novel, is related by the narrator as if it did. This is an example of what Gates terms the "speakerly" quality of Hurston's written text, the manner in which it imitates oral tale-telling.

Although critics have generally agreed that this speakerly quality is present in the novel, few have offered suggestions as to its thematic function, other than the often-made observation that Hurston's narrative techniques mirror the orality engaged in by the characters. It is true that Janie tells her story to Pheoby out of "that oldest human longing—self revelation" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 6), but if this were what was important, we would hear the story as Pheoby hears it, in Janie's own words. When we instead receive the story through free indirect discourse, it is because

Janie's self-revelation is less important than the usefulness of the story to the community that *owns* it.

That the story will become community property is acknowledged by Janie herself at the end of the novel, when she says to Pheoby,

Ah know all dem sitters-and-talkers gointuh worry they guts into fiddle strings till dey find out what we been talkin' 'bout. Dat's all right, Pheoby, tell 'em. . . . Then you must tell 'em dat love ain't somethin' lak uh grindstone dat's de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch. Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore. (182)

Janie has willingly accepted the traditional role of the oral bard, whose didactic material serves a useful communal function. In response to Janie's story, Pheoby exclaims, "Lawd! . . . Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this" (182-83). Janie's story has served a didactic function for Pheoby, and Pheoby has no doubt passed the story on to others, who in turn passed it on to still others. And so, we are not in fact told Janie's story by an omniscient narrator who has stolen her microphone. Rather, the story is told by Eatonville's "communal soul," much as William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is told by the people of Jefferson. The story has become a part of



the town's collective heritage, and no doubt has been adapted to suit its purposes for any given moment.

Donald Davidson and Zora Neale Hurston are both concerned with orality as a bridge between the individual artist and his or her society. Davidson considers the role of the poet to be that of the oral bard, who produces work of broad appeal that serves a useful communal purpose. Hurston conceives of folk ritual in more personal terms. By participating in the oral tradition on a local level, she suggests, an individual is able to create not only her own voice but, in a sense, her own world. The uniquely Southern epistemology reflected by these two authors is rooted in the folk cultures from which they emerged: that of Eatonville, Florida, documented so memorably in *Mules and Men*, and that of the mountains of Tennessee, which Davidson sought to preserve in his folk opera *Singin' Billy*, his posthumously published novel *Big Ballad Jamboree*, and much of his poetry. But it is also rooted, paradoxically, in literary modernism. For all his objections to modernism, Davidson could have been the poster child for what Monroe K. Spears calls "temporal discontinuity," the "self-conscious awareness of a break with the past," which Spears identifies as a touchstone of literary modernism (28). As Winchell has observed, Davidson's poetry is haunted by "the sense that we have lost the bonds of tradition that once united the living, the dead, and the yet unborn" (109). Likewise, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is indeed a psalm to the "god" of orality, but, with its multiplicity of narrative voices, experimental

structure, and vacillation between coarse dialect and unbridled lyricism, it is also an innovative modernist novel. The oral tradition that Hurston wanted so badly to preserve and elevate is certainly celebrated in the novel, but that alone would not result in a work of art displaying this level of genius. Rather, the complexities inherent in a culture caught between the oral and the literate—documented in a narrative that itself exists in this gray area—are responsible for the novel’s unique and enduring power. In a broader sense, writers from the American South, a region that, as we have seen, is marked by an unusually high degree of oral residue, are in a unique position to navigate the waters of modernism. As McLuhan has observed, they are, precisely because of their native folk culture, “peculiarly alive to the impact of technology.” The fruits of this “hyper-awareness” can be seen not only in the subject matter and verbal techniques of Southern writers, but also in their epistemologies, the ways in which they understand the world and reality itself.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Kreyling in particular takes a cue from Benedict Anderson and his famous suggestion that “[c]ommunities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6).

<sup>2</sup>Kreyling argues persuasively that the Fugitive-Agrarians (Ransom, Davidson, Tate, and Warren), “[t]hrough their individual and collective contributions to Southern intellectual and literary history,” most significantly in *I’ll Take My Stand*, have almost single-handedly “determined the currents followed for most of this century” (5). More recently, Pratt has gone so far as to claim that “the Agrarians who followed the Fugitives were the most original American school of philosophers, at least as important in the intellectual history of this country as the New England transcendentalists of the nineteenth century” (406-07).

<sup>3</sup>For more on Davidson’s traditionalism, see Bradford, Jordan, and Malvasi.

<sup>4</sup>As I discuss in Chapter One, Eisenstein has shown the distinction between high and low art to be a typographic construct (*Printing Revolution* 32).

<sup>5</sup>This phrase from Allen Tate’s famous poem “Ode to the Confederate Dead” was often quoted by Davidson.

<sup>6</sup>More recently, Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders have shown that “[t]he self is . . . an alphabetic construct” (71), for “[o]nly when I have gotten used to thinking as the silent tracing of words on the parchment of my memory, can I detach thought from speech” (84, italics in original).

<sup>7</sup>The binary between shame culture and guilt culture was first suggested by Margaret Mead (1937) and later formulated more fully by Ruth Benedict (1946). Dodds’s application of the concept to classical Greek culture has remained highly influential: see Cairns and Bernard Williams (both 1993).

<sup>8</sup>Wyatt-Brown’s work on Southern honor is expanded upon by Greenberg (1996).

<sup>9</sup>Wyatt-Brown acknowledges a relationship between orality and honor, but he confuses cause and effect. “The stress upon external, public factors in establishing personal worth,” he writes, “conferred particular prominence on the spoken word and physical gesture as opposed to interior thinking or words and ideas conveyed through the medium of the page” (46-47). Instead, it was the oral character of the South that was responsible for this culture of honor and shame.

<sup>10</sup>In 1963, Jack Kershaw, Davidson’s vice president in the segregationist Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government, contacted Davidson to inquire into Hurston’s whereabouts. Kershaw hoped Hurston would be a witness for the Federation’s side in a segregation case in Savannah, Georgia (Winchell 352).

<sup>11</sup>Aside from Benesch, these include Brigham, Clarke, Donlon, Duck, Ferguson, Gates (186), Haurykiewicz, and Vickers.

<sup>12</sup>That synesthesia is typical of oral cultures is suggested by Abram, who writes, “Far from presenting a distortion of their factual relation to the world, the animistic discourse of indigenous, oral peoples is an inevitable counterpart of their immediate, synaesthetic engagement with the land that they inhabit” (130).

<sup>13</sup>In addition to Hurston’s *Mules and Men* and Gates’s *The Signifyin’ Monkey*, see J. Mason Brewer (1968), Alan Dundes (1973), Mary F. Berry and John Blassingame (1982), and Gayl Jones (1991).

<sup>14</sup>Vickers may be the one exception. She is moving towards this idea when she writes, “The folkloric tradition functions within the novel as a mode to create the illusion of reality” (303).

## CODA

On July 23, 2001, Eudora Welty died quietly at Baptist Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi. Her death marked the end of an era, for Welty had been the last of that great generation of Southern writers who had forged a literary renaissance out of the folk materials of their region. Welty and her contemporaries—including the four treated in the present study, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Donald Davidson, and William Faulkner—have exerted a powerful influence over subsequent writers, to be sure. But in a rapidly modernizing, increasingly homogenous America, where technology intrudes upon virtually every aspect of life, will the oral character that has defined Southern literature subsist or subside? Certainly there have been signs of a decline in folkishness in the Southern literary canon for decades. In 1976, Walter Sullivan wrote that Cormac McCarthy was “not merely bereft of community and myth,” but had actually “declared war on these ancient repositories of order and truth” (71). It hardly seems likely that Sullivan’s opinion was changed by McCarthy’s later, “Western” novels.

And yet Harry Crews, a major Southern writer two years younger than McCarthy, gives us folk speech of an earthiness that exceeds Sharp Snaffles or any given Snopes. In *Body* (1990), the following exchange

occurs at the “Ms. Cosmos” body-building competition between Nail Head, the boyfriend of contestant Shereel Turnipseed, and Billy Bat, a bodybuilder and suitor of Shereel’s sister:

“I know more’n you think I know, and I can at least tell you how the Cosmos works,” said Billy Bat, “if you’ll just slow down with that bottle. Ain’t no use me talking to a drunk.”

Nail passed the bottle carefully to Fonse, looking off for a moment at the horizon, and then back at Billy Bat. “You gone marry into the Turnispeed family, you gone have to learn not to be a asshole. You gone have to learn to talk right for starters.”

“I come from the same part of the country you do, old son,” said Billy Bat, shifting on his heels. “I’ll talk any damn way I please.”

“We may have to go into that another time,” said Nail.

“We can talk about it any time you want,” Billy Bat said.

“Didn’t say nothing about talking, said we’d go into it.”

“Any time, any place,” Billy Bat said.

Alphonse, who had been following the talk with his good ear, put his elbow into Nail’s ribs hard, and wheezed a

laugh before he slapped his own knees with both hands.

“Damn if I don’t believe I like this boy.” (209-10)

The dialogue of these characters is every bit as identifiably oral as the verse of *God’s Trombones* or the prose of *The Ponder Heart*. The passage illustrates not only the agonistic tone that Ong associates with oral cultures, but also the “elaborate indirect formality” identified by Johnstone as being typical of Southern vernacular (“You Gone” 281). The conversation is a ritual of carefully hedged threats, conveyed through nonstandard constructions (“Ain’t no use”), formulaic expressions (“Any time, any place”), anaphoric repetition (“*You gone* marry into the Turnipseed family, *you gone* have to learn not to be a asshole. *You gone* have to learn to talk right”), emphatic particles (“if you’ll *just* slow down”), and evidentials (“*Damn if I don’t believe* I like this boy”).

African American writers from the South have also continued to be steeped in the oral style. Although it is an epistolary novel, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) reads more like spoken conversation than a written correspondence. Celie communicates almost entirely in rhythmic, formulaic patterns:

My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She  
scream at me. She cuss at me. I’m big. I can’t move fast  
enough. By time I git back from the well, the water be warm.  
By time I git the tray ready the food be cold. By time I git all  
the children ready for school it be dinner time. He don’t say



nothing. He set there by the bed holding her hand an cryin,  
talking bout don't leave me, don't go.

She ast me about the first one Whose is it? I say God's.

I don't know no other man or what else to say. When I start  
to hurt and then my stomach start moving and then that  
little baby come out my pussy chewing on it fist you could  
have knock me over with a feather. (3)

Of the many oral qualities of Celie's "writing," a few include anaphora ("She scream at me. She cuss at me."), parallelism (the three sentences, also anaphoric, beginning "By time I git"), subject-verb concord ("He don't say"), thought-process referencing ("I don't know . . . what else to say"), and formulaic expression ("you could have knock me over with a feather").

Walker's work also reveals how the traditional oral forms of narrative have been preserved in Southern writing. For example, her short story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," as Trudier Harris has shown, follows the pattern of the conjure-woman revenge tale common to African American tradition and made famous by Charles W. Chesnutt. Like the traditional oral conjure tales, the story involves an African American (Hannah Kemhuff) who is the victim of injustice (a white woman, Sarah Sadler, refuses to give her food, which causes Hannah to lose her family and be condemned to a life of poverty, alcoholism, and prostitution). The wounded party appeals to the conjure woman (Tante

Rosie) who then uses a combination of “hoodoo” and Christian prayer to exact revenge (Sarah Sadler grows ill and dies) and thus correct social injustice. Walker moves the conjure-woman scenario from the plantations of the Old South to a 1960s Southern urban setting; still, her story belongs to this particular tradition as surely as Simms’s “Sharp Snaffles” follows the honey-trickster pattern.

The novels of North Carolina’s T.R. Pearson are also marked by oral narrative strategies, but these involve structure rather than pattern. Beginning with his first novel, *A Short History of a Small Place* (1985), Pearson has shown a tendency to indulge in the same kind of digressive nonlinearity that is so important to Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily.” While Anne Tyler acknowledges this quality with good humor, suggesting that “[l]inearity, one suspects, just doesn’t strike Mr. Pearson as much fun” (9), William Schaffer has attacked Pearson for the tedium of his digressive, repetitious style:

His basic gimmick is that everything is recited with monstrous redundance [sic]—with compulsive, discursive, digressive fluency—as the most self-important, boring hicktown taleteller might drone out the tale, larded with repetitions, straggling irrelevancies, muddled streams of consciousness, opaque personal allusions, pointless quibbles and qualifiers, etc. (319)

But where Schaffer sees ineptitude, others have seen Pearson's special brand of genius. Jack Slay Jr. argues that these digressions are not aimless storytelling but rather are sly ways in which plot is advanced and character is developed—all unbeknownst to Pearson's loquacious and supposedly naïve personas. One might reason that Pearson is a descendent of Twain's humorous storyteller, whose *manner* of wandering prolixity is more important than the *matter* of the tale he relates. But there is more to it than this. Slay writes, "The digressions serve as the narrator's search for meaning, for understanding—and, ultimately, dark though it may be, that meaning, that understanding, is discovered" (93). Pearson's use of storytelling as a means of discovery suggests what we have already seen, that orality has powerful epistemological implications.

That the oral tradition has remained an identity-defining force for contemporary Southern writers is suggested by Frenchy Jolene Hodges, an African American poet originally from Georgia, in "Belle Isle: (Central Park of Detroit)" (1975). The poem begins:

In the South  
Where I am from  
All houses have front porches  
And most houses  
Lay claim to back porches too. (lines 1-5)

It soon becomes apparent that Hodges is using the porch as a metonymy for traditional Southern rituals of talk:

Front porches

Were

‘Gal-come-in-outta-that-rain’

‘But-Daddy-the-sun-still-shinin’

Front porches

Were

‘Here-come-Mr.-Howard

I-can-tell-him-by-his-dust’

or

‘Here-comes-ol’-Red-James

With-that-guitar-he-can’t-play’

or

‘Mama-I-sure-would-like-

A-nice-cool-drink-of-lemonade.’ (lines 46-57)

Here the porch represents the informal “plain talk” or gossip embodied by Edna Earle Ponder. But it also provides the context for more deliberate storytelling:

Front porches

Were Mon [sic] and Dad sitting

Children playing in the yard

Or nearing bedtime

Stories:

If-you-do-this-that'll-happen-stories,  
The-dead-who-visit-the-living-stories,  
Daddy-you-made-it-end-wrong-stories,  
Tell-that-one-again-stories,  
That-don't-make-no-sense-stories,  
Time to go to bed  
But those stories just the same.

Front porches  
Were in the quiet of the night  
Songs:

Swing-Low-Sweet-Chariot-Another-Man-  
Done-Gone-We-Call-The-Sun-Ol'-Hannah-  
Swing-Dat-Hammer-Sometimes-I-Fell-Lak-  
A-Motherless-Child-Mighty-Lak-A-Rose-Songs.

Front porches  
Were  
'Did-I-ever-tell-yall-  
How-I-met-yo'-mama?'

or  
'I-put-the-igg-on-yo'-Daddy-  
One Sunday-in-de-church.' (lines 61-86)

Southern oral tradition also includes more formal performances: stories that instruct, frighten and entertain; songs that inspire; family histories that provide continuity and a palpable connection with the past. Perhaps most important of all, the oral tradition provides Southerners identity, a sense of who they are within familial, communal, and racial networks:

Front porches  
Were where the old ones  
Made sure you knew  
Who you were  
And who they were  
And what 'white' was.

Front porches  
Were the revolutionary cribs  
Of my race.

Front porches  
Were very important places. (lines 87-97)

The culturally deterministic powers of orality are rendered forcefully and eloquently in Hodges' poem, but one cannot help but notice her use of the past tense: Front porches *were* very important places. Did the oral character of Southern narrative and poetics die with Eudora Welty in that Mississippi hospital room in 2001? Certainly the

twenty-first century South will be much more highly literate than that of Welty, let alone Simms, and it will continue to evolve along with its media ecology. But as Bolter and Grusin have shown, new media have a way of building on older media rather than transplanting them.

In 1988, Steve Dorner of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign designed a computer application to facilitate an emerging mode of communication called electronic mail. Available for free online download and packed with unique features, the program quickly became one of the most popular of its kind. Millions still use it every day to exchange important information as well as idle chatter. Appropriately, Dorner named this e-mail client “Eudora,” after the woman who elevated interpersonal communication to the highest of arts. As good a sign as any, perhaps, that Southern orality will continue to evolve, to be sure, but will not face extinction.

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