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# OF TRANSCRIBING AND SUPERLITERACY

*Ellen Dissanayake*

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**R**ather like the legions of illegal aliens behind the scenes who chop the vegetables and wash the dishes for New York City's restaurants, there is another invisible underclass, one to which I belong, that performs menial but essential operations upon print for the city's voracious consumers of information and entertainment. These verbal *Gastarbeiter* are aliens of another sort—impecunious and obscure writers, actors, directors, musicians, and dancers. While we struggle for a better life and a chance to show our worth, we support ourselves in part-time, night-time, weekend, or other marginal literate occupations—reading proof, processing words, and—my particular *métier*—transcribing audiocassettes.

Transcribers are certainly more than the automata we resemble as we sit before our keyboards, linked by earphones to dictaphones, one foot on the pedal that admits the voices into our ears. Far from being simply a mechanical occupation that requires fast fingers and good eye-ear-hand coordination, transcribing also requires a special facility

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with language—both the rudiments, like punctuation and spelling, and a sensitivity to the way words are used so we can anticipate what's coming or guess what was inaudible or unintelligible. Transcribers need good general knowledge (and have the opportunity to acquire more) as we make transcripts of such phenomena of the modern age of communications as professional conferences, lectures, business meetings, brainstorming sessions, even wiretaps. Ninety percent of our transcriptions are for television, primarily interviews with experts, celebrities, and other noteworthy subjects.

The very existence of transcribing and proofreading as menial, marginal occupations is an indication of how much our society depends on print and takes it for granted. Reading, if not writing, is as much a routine part of modern lives as breathing or eating. In fact, we often read *while* eating, certainly while traveling, and frequently while on the toilet. We feel as helpless without a book on our vacation as without a credit card.

To readers born into a tradition of reading it is not immediately evident that generating print—what writers do laboriously and transcribers do automatically and casually—was once a cognitive conceptual leap of staggering magnitude, a miracle of transformation akin to that of the blacksmith who turns raw earth into iron, or the alchemist who changes base metal into gold. Trivial as it may seem, transcribing really is a kind of magic mind-“reading,” if you will. A wordsmith, I transmute spoken utterance into written words, with my fingers convert speech into prose.

Everyone knows that what writers do is magical. They take fleeting, amorphous feelings, ideas, experiences, observations, and imaginings and shape and

fix these in enduring, finely wrought, and ornamented literary compositions. But in the lesser legerdemain of transcribing, where impermanent vibrations in an ear are transformed into tangible marks that occupy space, one performs a related kind of magic and, what is more, is privy to an insight that is usually ignored. A transcriber is continually vividly reminded of the *differences* between the spoken and the written. For what we “write” (i.e., type, as transcribers) rarely looks like anything we write (i.e., compose, as writers) or that anyone reads. A writer who is also a transcriber appreciates every minute how monstrously artificial and contrived a thing writing is, how unlike the spoken idiom that was its origin.

To be sure, this appreciation has been around for some time, even if not gained in quite the same way. Writers have surely always known that what they do with their pens or typewriters is far different from what they do with their vocal apparatus. More than two hundred years ago, Rousseau considered the privileged nature of speech over writing, an insight appropriated, deconstructed, and expanded upon by Jacques Derrida. Even Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, has Socrates discourse on the superiority of the spoken word and the dangers inherent in writing. Yet Plato, for whom writing was inferior insofar as it was a mere copy of speech, and Rousseau, who considered that writing dealt with reason and speech with emotion, both assumed that their relationship was essentially mimetic: writing was in some way a picture of verbal language.

Today the scouts on the frontiers of language study know how naive this view of language is. It is perhaps ironic that in its humble, routine way, the activity of transcribing invites the kind of

awareness of the limitations and artifice of writing that the most intellectually rarefied poststructuralist philosophers and literary critics have occupied themselves with for the past quarter of a century. But being closer to spoken language, a writer/transcriber offers a view from be-

to transcribe and hence immobilize, dissect, and examine living speech. The growing recognition of the important and irreversible effects of literacy on the human mind and subsequent delineation of the opposed characteristics of "oral" and "literate" societies is the most recent language-

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low that is denied to those who are trapped in and blinkered by superliteracy (my term to describe poststructuralist and postmodern theories that view literature and literacy from above), and may even claim to rescue "language" from their baroque and disdainful manipulations.

Although secretaries have taken dictation for as long as people have known how to read and write, an awareness of just how unlike spoken and written language are had to wait until the appearance of mechanical devices for voice recording and reproduction—on disk, wire, or electromagnetic tape. In particular, the dictaphone, from which a verbatim transcription can be readily made, permitted people for the first time to see easily and read exactly what they or others actually informally say and hear. I think it is not too much to suggest that this century's preoccupation with language—*langue* and *parole*, Whorf and Sapir, Wittgenstein, McLuhan, signifiers and signifieds, speech acts, transformational grammar—has been, if not wholly generated, certainly aided and abetted by the ability

focused enterprise.

Marshall McLuhan, twenty-five years ago, vividly described the social and individual effects of aural and visual media. He suggested that after centuries of being dominated by "cold" and remote print we are now reverting to a new involvement with the engaging "hot" face-to-face encounter of the oral tradition, but in a new medium—television. The implication was that literacy (reading and writing) was degenerating and becoming unnecessary.

Certainly few would deny that television has contributed to an entire generation being deficient in the kind of knowledge that comes from books. Teachers justifiably bemoan their students' inability to write. Still one need not conclude that because people do not read and write as much or as well as they used to that literacy—in the broad sense of certain effects on the mind—is no longer the dominant influence in present-day Western culture. In insidious ways, the literate mentality—like mercury in fish or DDT in mother's milk—has irreversibly permeated everyone in American society, even those

who can't read or write at all or very well. Certainly the hot, oral, image-saturated medium of television is dependent on literacy—hence my job as transcriber. Editors use our verbatim transcripts in order to prune and shape the final program in tele-literate, not oral, ways. Much as writers rewrite, interviewers repeat questions in order to elicit increasingly literate—succinct and precise—replies.

Oral societies, by far the most numerous in human history and prehistory, are those without a system of writing, thus requiring that all knowledge be preserved in the human head and transmitted orally from generation to generation. In literate societies, information can be recorded, stored, and retrieved outside the head. But accompanying these differences in the “technology” of handling and communicating knowledge are profound differences in the mental operations required to utilize the two. Walter Ong, in *Orality and Literacy*, has claimed that readers of books such as his (or an essay like this one) are so literate that it is very difficult to conceive of the universe of oral communication or thought except as a variant of the literate universe. But with a transcriber as guide, let us try.

#### THE REALM OF ORAL COMMUNICATION

**W**e can pause for a moment and try first to appreciate what a truly remarkable thing it is to be able to transform thoughts in a head or sounds from a voice—transitory, evanescent, intimate, immediate—into their opposite, something visible, stable, impersonal, public, enduring. Electrochemical brain impulses or sound waves, that is what the

stuff of language really is as it evolved to become an innate propensity and defining characteristic of the human species. The naive assumption that writing is simply a visual record of speech or thought, a sort of picture or verbatim transcript of what we say (which itself is presumed to be what we think), is belied by looking at an exact copy of spontaneous speech. A faithful transcript does not look like any written document, neither dialogue in a novel, reportage in a newspaper, nor any other kind of writing.

People rarely, for example, speak in sentences, but instead in what the linguist, Wallace Chace, has called “idea units.” A transcriber becomes aware that nearly everyone, not only Dwight Eisenhower, speaks in a manner that looks “illiterate” when stop-framed in print—episodic, redundant, choppy, with non sequiturs, detours, unfinished thoughts, grammatical inconsistencies.

Here are two examples, chosen at random, of interviews I have transcribed. The first is with a doctor, talking about the inspection of laboratories that analyze Pap smears.

A: We think it's more preferential that our inspectors do it, because that helps us both with the inspection part, because when they go out to do the testing, when they carry these slides out to the lab, they're also inspecting the laboratories, which gives us a rather comprehensive viewpoint of the conditions of the laboratory. Now the best way to do this is something that we're working on at the present time but I think is going to defy us for awhile but we're going to try it. We're going to try it down the line. And that's if we could send slides in from an outside physician, unmarked, and nobody knowing that we

were doing it. That becomes very difficult logistically but it certainly is the optimum that would be, would be the thing that we and others would love to be able to do.

Q: How many labs do you think are going on, nobody's even looking at them,

role is interesting, you know, he can become—he's an actor, you know. You can become something. And I actually prefer actors when they are playing a character and they're not playing, you know, they seem—Hollywood seems to have gone through a trend, especially with its

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around the country?

A: I don't know. New York state, we, for instance, outside of New York City area, let's say we have half the, roughly an equal distribution—total clinical laboratories, including cytopathology, including chemistry, including everything that you could call a medical laboratory, we'd probably have around 1,300 laboratories. That's, includes New York City plus upstate. So that—and we're, let's say California would be maybe closer to 1,500, you know, just in terms of population and everything, you scale back from that.

And here's a Hollywood film producer:

Well I've, I've learned a lot about my personal thing, you know, tastes with actors, and that is, you know, I don't, I don't subscribe to the Hollywood that somebody's hot or not hot. I mean somebody's either good and you just try to imagine them in different roles. And I mean I think, again, and Michael I think would be the first one to say, if a

bigger, like young comic stars, is like yeah, you know, they get a script where they play a young, glib guy. Some action, some romance, kinda funny, you know. Zillion of those. And they just never work. I mean, or maybe one works out of a hundred.

Even the most literary people are often poor talkers. Sometimes hesitant and slow, but more frequently jumpy and fragmented, as they answer questions their thoughts dart around (like the producer's), requiring emendation or negation.

Reading a transcript of unedited spoken language, one might wonder how children ever learn to talk, so patchy and diffuse is what people say. They learn to do so, of course, because speaking is not a skill or craft like reading or writing: it comes "naturally." It is the written word with its authority and aloofness that is unnatural and difficult. Habitual literates—we who read for style as well as content and can be considered addicted to print—tend to think of speech as an inferior form of literature. It is, however, literature that is an artificial and deviant off-



■ *The Book Worm*, K. Spitzweg

spring of spoken utterance and the two, like parent and grown child, while dependent on one another in certain important respects, lead almost separate lives. Oral languages can exist, evolve, and flourish without writing, yet they require the memories of living people in order to survive and thus will disappear without a

trace if their users perish. Although a written script preserves living languages, if its users disappear (like the Etruscans or Zapotecs), their inscribed words exist, to be sure, but are mere tantalizing traces like fossil footprints of an extinct creature whose living existence, its flesh and blood, we can never know.

## THE WESTERN LITERATE HERITAGE

It has been argued that the greatest hallmark of Greek classical civilization—the development of analytic, critical, rational, reflective thought, which has made possible our Western

guistic sounds, mentally matching these with their semantic equivalents. The efficiency and ease is something like dealing with a host of individual objects by sorting them quickly into categories rather than considering each as having a different name and separate existence.

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### *Literature is an artificial and deviant offspring of spoken utterance.*

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philosophic tradition and scientific-technological culture—came about more than anything else as a consequence of using the written rather than the spoken word for preserving knowledge and learning about the world. And what made Greek literacy different from all other ancient forms of writing was its use of an alphabet that included both consonants and vowels; its Phoenician prototype used only consonants, so that “consonants” would be written “cnsnts” and could be mistaken for “consents.”

Rather than having to learn an immense set of hieroglyphs or pictographs that stand for individual words or ideas, using an alphabet of some two dozen marks that can represent the sounds of one’s language, including its vowels, means that any word can be represented and understood immediately by a reader who has learned that alphabet. Reading, then, is not the effort of retrieving the referents of tens of thousands of laboriously memorized complex pictorial designs but a matter of recognizing a relatively small set of inscribed shapes that roughly but automatically stand for a multitude of lin-

With the alphabet, reading could become widespread, not the elite preserve of scribes and priests. This easy availability was not seen as a keenly desired improvement, even in democratic Athens. Like a fallen woman, knowledge loses its mystery and hallowedness when it is there for the taking by anyone. Indeed, in the *Phaedrus*, writing is called “promiscuous” (compared with spoken teaching) because it can get into anyone’s hands, even the ignorant and unsympathetic.

Also undesirable to Plato was the realization that reading and writing undermine memory, for when things can be written down they do not need to be remembered. (This recalls modern misgivings about calculators or spell check features on word processors). Knowledge in books deceptively resides outside the head, as today in students’ highlighted textbooks or unrevised class notes. To Plato, true learning or wisdom is more than just information recorded and looked at with one’s eyes. It dwells securely within the mind and soul.

Unlike a teacher who instructs verbally, the written text cannot answer your



questions or tell you more: It goes on saying the same thing forever, every time you look at it. A speaker can defend his thought by rephrasing and elaboration. In an autobiography, called appropriately *The Words* (divided into two sections, "Reading" and "Writing"), that arch-litterateur Jean-Paul Sartre remembered the shock of hearing his mother read to him for the first time a story from a book, when previously she had told him stories. From her "masklike face" came a "plaster voice," emitting sentences,

rich in unknown words, [which] were in love with themselves and their meanderings and had no time for me: sometimes they disappeared before I could understand them; at others, I had understood in advance and they went rolling on nobly towards their end without sparing a comma.

To precocious but preliterate Jean-Paul, it was obvious that these storybook words were not meant for him; impersonal and relentless, they made him feel that his mother was someone else and he, too, not himself but "every mother's child."

While writing may allow memory to dwindle and the personal touch to atrophy, it enhances some mental operations that in oral societies are only rudimentary. Where records are kept in the form of lists and tables, items can be compared back and forth, separated and classified into increasingly abstract categories—"items for trade" and "items for use" rather than corn, wheat, and oil. Precision and exactness can be achieved and insisted upon in activities as diverse as cooking and playing music, as one can follow instructions to the (exactly specified) letter, number, or phrase-mark. Analogies

between previously unrelated things or inconsistencies leap out from the page, whereas in speech they may pass by and vanish unremarked.

It is analysis, abstraction, and objectivity more than poetry and narrative (which after all exist in oral societies too) that are defining features of minds that have been shaped by literacy. Insight into this aspect of literate tradition comes from transcribing seminars about single-premium deferred annuities or tax-advantaged limited partnerships (which, to be honest, seems no less mind-numbing than holding a jackhammer all day or lifting baskets of french fries from boiling oil, occupations less dependent than transcribing on literate predilections).

It is evident that the speakers at these seminars have replaced the literati as the revered guardians of the arcana of present-day society. While not "literate" in any previously recognized sense of the word, finance and corporate people have undeniably developed, in their expertise with basis points and the bottom line, a highly proficient literate mentality that is comfortable with data, calculations, and mechanical processes of information storage and retrieval. It is even true that when interviewed they tend to have better-organized utterances than other people, largely because they speak in clichés and jargon and have often been sent by their employers for training (unlike university teachers or medical doctors) to learn to speak smoothly with authority and confidence.

Nevertheless, unlike nonliterate, oral societies in which rhetorical skill and well-turned phrases are widely possessed and admired, the corporate-financial "universes" or "cultures" (as these businesses refer to themselves) care little about richness and nuance of vocabulary or arrest-



ing and elegant phrases. They are by far the biggest source of hideous neologisms—"incentivize," "impactful," and "outsource," or "migrate" and "leverage" as transitive verbs. I've noticed that more than a few of the younger, probably more "aggressively" successful corporate em-

of human nature. We say nonliterate do not know what they are missing; someone in a nonliterate society might say we do not know what we are missing by not being able to experience our world at first hand.

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*Unlike spoken language, literacy is a dispensable attribute of human nature.*

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ployees affect a sort of sloppy growl, swallowing words (a verbal equivalent of poor handwriting) as if they are exempt from the obligation to speak distinctly. It's a sort of reverse snobbism that reminds me of the "ain'ts" and common slang, in a quite different milieu, of the Duc de Guermantes. Every time I transcribe one of their tapes I remember wistfully the delightful individual expression, interestingness, and vivid language of an interview with Milt Hinton, the octogenarian jazz bass player and photographer whose verbal ability and facility was not acquired at college or business school.

In present-day America we tend to assume that nonliterate people are inferior, that they are ignorant, stupid, or miserable. This assumption may be at least partly accurate for those who lack literacy in a literate society, since reading and writing and the habits of mind they foster have become essential for full participation in the modern world. Yet for millennia, and still in many parts of the world, people have lived fully human, fully satisfying lives without it. Unlike spoken language, literacy is a dispensable attribute

#### CONCOMITANTS OF LITERACY

**L**ike circumcision or cannibalism, literacy is a cultural invention; those who have grown up with it think it is the most unexceptionable practice and one that bestows undeniable and highly desirable advantages. Without denying the importance and urgency of giving people everywhere in the modern world opportunities to acquire and better their literacy, it is also instructive to try to imagine life without it. Imagine a Martian or Tasaday paying a visit to the New York Public Library. What are people doing!—sitting for hours in a big, silent room wearing slightly pained, closed, preoccupied expressions, looking passively if diligently at little black marks. Compared with people's faces that are looking actively at something in the world, the difference in naturalness and immediacy is obvious.

As we become educated, writing is the way we experience and learn about the world. Sartre tells us that in his childhood, books were his birds and nests, his household pets, his barn and countryside. He found books to be more real than life which

was "a graveyard of banality." In books he found wildness, an acquaintance with valuable and inspiring deeds and emotions. Today's child uses television (itself often a graveyard of banality) rather than books, but once in school we begin to extract from books what our early ancestors learned from life itself.

We also show the measure of our mastery or knowledge or worth by the written test, term paper, dissertation, or published work. Writing replaces the harpooning of a seal, the accurate and compelling recitation of tribal lore, the curing of an affliction, the bewitching of an audience.

Only with writing comes the possibility, or the thought of the possibility, of fame, of immortality, the preoccupation with posterity's remembering or at least being able to rediscover one's words and thoughts—one's life. The craving to be published—to have the precious, fragile product of one's mind preserved and stored away like this year's peaches—before writing no one spent time longing for this.

What did we do instead? What did born writers, compulsive writers like Thomas Wolfe, do before the invention of writing? Joyce Carol Oates surely must be writing all the time—this very moment as I write this or you read it. How would she have spent her time if she had lived in pre-Homeric Greece or in a present-day New Guinea village? One might reply, these people would have been storytellers or shamans, in touch with mysterious well-springs. But I wonder. Writing is more than, less than, different from storytelling. It is, as I have emphasized, monstrously unnatural. Learning to write is in a sense learning what cannot be said, a kind of working and reworking, crafting, troping, turning mind into matter. Storytellers tell the same tales again and again. They perform a social act, born of conviviality and

the desire to reconfirm and rearticulate old, traditional social values. Writing is solitary, private, even secretive, insidious, subversive. It is asocial; the reader, like the Walkman-listening zombie, is imprisoned inside a head, experiencing the resonances of another, not even her own thought.

While the widespread ability to read is surely a major cause of modernity—contributing to the standardization, efficiency, mass education, objectivity, and rationality that make modern technological life possible, it seems to me that the need to write is itself a consequence of or a response to modernity. The self-preoccupation and self-assertion required by an individualistic society, the self-creation necessary in a pluralistic one, find their apogee in the compulsive diarist like Anais Nin or Arthur Inman who don't seem to live their lives as much as write them. Such people, like all contemporary writers to one degree or another, are aware of the literary possibilities in the occurrences of their lives as they occur. They hardly finish experiencing before beginning to write—to catch, transmute, fix what has happened in the amber of the inscribed page and only then truly experience it, in words. Sartre said that an eagerness to write involves a refusal to live.

The apotheosizing of the self (its reactions and self-reflection) in writing has become not only a way of life or of self-validation but a way of knowing: writing as therapy or self-knowledge. Not only can one buy a book that tells you how to keep a diary, one can take an "Intensive Journal Workshop" course and discover oneself. Learning to write tells us who we are and lets us tell others, who presumably are making identical efforts back in our direction. Interestingly, in this ultraliterate labor of writing in order to know ourselves, we are asked to strive for what amounts to preliterate perception and experience—original, unin-

fluenced, direct response.

Few of us wish to have original, direct response to much of contemporary life—to subways and their more unfortunate denizens, or to the jackhammers, reboiled oil odors, and green screens of our daily experience. We are only too happy to thicken our

literate tradition, those theories fashionably promulgated by Derrida, Barthes, and the rest, is a realization that might well come from unsophisticated, nonliterate tribes-people who would be surprised to be told that marks on a page were simulacra of the real world.

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carapaces with distancing maneuvers like objectification or abstract humor, survival gear that literate culture bestows as replacement for the myths and unselfconsciousness that enable preliterate to survive with bare skin.

With regard to green screens, it seems to me that the use of computers for writing, where words are processed (like products are migrated or accounts leveraged) only reinforces the peculiar pronouncements of postliterate culture. Today, for the first time in their history, written words are not engraved on stone, limned on parchment, or even printed on paper but have become mere traces of electromagnetically stored energy. Whole encyclopedias of effort like whole preliterate civilizations can vanish irretrievably if the electric supply accidentally fails, the wrong button is pressed, or somebody loses the key.

The computer's restoration to language of its innate ephemerality seems appropriate in the present rarefied atmosphere of postmodernist literary theory which magisterially proclaims that literature has nothing really to do with reality. It is indeed ironic that the end point of the

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IS THERE LIFE AFTER TEXT?

It takes a dyed-through superliterate to suppose that the actual events of his life and his efforts at communication are also to be most sensibly understood as "texts" to be interpreted or deconstructed, rather than lived, felt, and believed in. According to the mandarins of postmodernism, all experience is mediated—constructed and constricted—by language. It is difficult to imagine that the originals of the characters in stories by Marcel Pagnol or François Mauriac—people, that is, who do not live in booklined rooms in cities—would be able to come up with or comprehend such pronouncements about their lives. And, as Terry Eagleton has noted, the Nicaraguans and the African National Congress have apparently not been told either about the epistemological illusions of metanarrative.

The immigrant employees of restaurants, however, as new entrants to a society predicated on literacy, no doubt have a story to tell, as does the contemporary Papua New Guinean playwright, Russel Soaba.

## OF TRANSCRIBING AND SUPERLITERACY

Once an artist went overseas  
His father died in his absence  
and was buried in the village

He followed a rainbow upon his return  
and came to a cemetery  
he dug in search of reality  
till he broke his father's skull  
to wear its fore-half as a mask

try it  
look thru' those eyeholes  
see the old painting  
view the world  
in the way the dead had done.

It seems to be the people who have moved from oral to literate life and realize what they have lost as well as what they have gained—the energizing differences (hardly enervating *differance*) from what they are accustomed to—who write the most passionately and compellingly today. Not yet fissured from their experience, and its meaningfulness, they still have something to say.

Salman Rushdie's vigorous, prodigious, and now notorious novel, *The Satanic Verses*, is one of a number of books by Third World writers that is concerned with the transformation of being that takes place when one relinquishes an oral culture for a literate one. But in its wider cultural repercussions, the whole horrifying Rushdie-Ayatollah event encapsulates and illustrates the differences between an oral culture (authoritarian, sacred, where the Word is divinely revealed and therefore humanly unassailable) and a literate one (questioning, secular, where the individual author is omnipotent, revealing the magic and multiple uses of individual words). As Salman, the Persian scribe says, in an irreverent and prescient nutshell, "It's His Word against mine!"

The excesses of the Ayatollah in l'affaire Rushdie must make the readers of this essay clasp their hands and fervently exclaim, "God be praised for literacy, which has freed us from such fanaticism!" But even though no one will die or kill for them, the sacred doctrines of superliteracy in their own abstract way exert a stranglehold on the academic and literary Establishment. Viewed from midway on the oral-literate continuum by a transcriber, these seem as extreme and indefensible as the dogmas of the most bigoted fundamentalist sect.

For example, a basic presupposition of twentieth-century philosophy (including the Anglo-American philosophers of language as well as the continental poststructuralists) is that thought cannot occur without language (or "signs"). But this postulate is entirely, if unconsciously, based on language-as-written. I daresay that if the gentlemen who profess it had read fewer philosophical tracts and looked instead at transcripts of their own informal conversations, they would have had perhaps a less exalted and lopsided notion of language and consequently a less restricted view of what thought is. Or they could have paid more attention to their own preverbal children, who may not even be reliably toilet trained but already demonstrate competence in planning ahead, predicting effects from causes, recognizing their needs and making them unmistakably known, and giving other indications of being able to think and have meaningful experiences.

It is true that the confused utterances I transcribe of people thinking aloud in answer to interviewers' questions bear scant resemblance to the clear, logical, sequential arguments of philosophers. But that is just the point. As with two-year-olds' actions, thought and experience seem to be something behind or beneath spoken words, which saying helps to adumbrate and com-

municate and which writing (or rewriting) falsifies in that it turns the natural products of mentation—fluid, layered, dense, episodic, too deep and rich for words—into something unnaturally hard-edged, linear, precise, and refined. We “think” like logicians only on (and because of) paper and if

material, are great and, as a writer, I do not wish to subvert them. Neither do I wish to belittle the social and cultural importance to the unlettered of acquiring literacy. But I wonder whether perhaps we have read too much when we begin to assume that life itself is a matter of language

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we assume that thought and experience are made wholly of language it is only because, as twentieth-century superliterate, we read and write reality more than we live it.

Language-as-written is, then, a prerequisite for a very specialized kind of propositional, logico-deductive thought. Superliterate societies undoubtedly owe their scientific achievements and consequent global economic and military power to being able to think in this way just as we superliterate individuals owe our larger salaries, more interesting jobs, and relative freedom, flexibility, and higher social positions to our mastery of literate skills. But we do not thereby acquire a monopoly on thought. It is absurd to deny that people think when they draw, paint, or sculpt, listen knowledgeably to or compose music, puzzle out how a tool or mechanical device works, assess the subtleties of a social encounter, decide how best to move next in a sports activity or synchronize with a dance partner—activities that people everywhere do every day of their lives.

The rewards of literacy, spiritual and

alone. It is not only, as Faust cried, that life is short and art is long, but that life—the existence of the human species on earth—is long and literate experience very brief. It often seems to me that, especially today, what we need to learn most from books is what life was like before books.

As humans, we evolved over millennia to find meaning not only in language-mediated ideology but in stones, water, weather, the loving work of human hands, the expressive sounds of human voices, the immense, mysterious, and eternal. These cannot be deconstructed, and we do not necessarily or automatically respond to them with writing or even language. As I spend my days manipulating words—writing for love and transcribing for money—I become more and more aware of a deep, unsatisfied atavistic vein that yearns for the physicality, communality, and certainty of chants, spells, incantations, age-old expressions of age-old verities—minimalist, mindless, immersive words, like music, that do not require my cleverness or dexterity but only compliance and surrender.■