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The Shifting Relationships between Speech and Writing

Peter Elbow

Paradoxes . . . beset the relationships between the original spoken word and all its technological transformations. . . . [I]ntelligence is relentlessly reflexive, so that even the external tools that it uses to implement its workings become "internalized," that is, part of its own reflexive process. (Ong, *Orality*, 81)¹

We have seen interesting work in recent years on the nature of speech and writing and the mentalities associated with each. The insights from these investigations are extremely valuable, but a dangerous assumption is sometimes inferred from them: that speech and writing are distinctly characterizable media, each of which has its own inherent features and each of which tends to foster a particular cognitive process, or "mentality."² I am interested in the cognitive processes associated with speech and writing, but instead of saying that each medium has a particular tendency, I will argue that each medium can draw on and foster *various* mentalities. This essay is a call for writers and teachers of writing to recognize the enormous choice we have and to learn to take more control over the cognitive effects associated with writing. This essay is in three parts—each showing a different relationship between speech and writing.

I. The Traditional View: Indelible Writing, Ephemeral Speech

Obviously writing is more indelible or permanent than speech. Speech is nothing but wind, waves of temporarily squashed air, waves that begin at once to disperse, that is, to lose their sound. Writing, on the other hand, stays there—"down in black and white." Once we get it on paper it takes on a life of its own, separate from the writer. It "commits us to paper." It can be brought back to haunt us: read in a different context from the one we had in

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mind—read by any audience, whether or not we know them or want them to see our words.

Where the *intention* to speak usually results automatically in the *act* of speech, writing almost always involves delay and effort. Writing forces us not only to form the letters, spell the words, and follow stricter rules of correctness (than speech); we must also get into the text itself all those cues that readers might need who are not present to us as we write, who don't know the context for our words, and who don't know us or how we speak. In addition to this "contextualizing," we must capture onto the page some substitute for all those vocal and visual cues for listeners that we give without effort or attention in speaking. We can take nothing for granted in writing; the text has to say it all.

In the effort to do all these things as we write, how can we help but pause and reflect on whether what we are engaged in putting down is really right—or even if it is, whether it is what we really wanted to say? If we are going to take the trouble to write something down, then, we might as well get it right. *Getting it right*, then, feels like an inherent demand in the medium itself of writing.

Research (see Tannen, "Oral and Literate Strategies") shows that speech tends to carry more "phatic" messages than writing—messages about the relationship between the speaker and the listener or between the speaker and his material (e.g., "I know you're my friend"), even when the ostensible function of the spoken words is purely substantive or informational. Thus writing tends to carry a much higher proportion of "content" messages to absent readers—more permanent messages which are judged for validity and adequacy, not just accepted as social interchange.

This feeling that we must get things right in writing because written words are more indelible than speech is confirmed when we look to the *history* of speech and writing. The development of writing as a technology seems to have led to the development of careful and logical thinking—to a greater concern with "trying to get it *really* right" (see Ong, *Orality*, and his other works; Goody, *Domestication*; Havelock, *Plato*). Ong claims that the development of writing gave us a new "noetic economy," that is, a wholly new relationship to words and knowledge—new habits of shaping, storing, retrieving, and communicating what we know.³

We see a parallel argument about the teaching of writing. That is, leading theorists tell us that the poor thinking we see in many of our students stems from their not yet having made that great developmental leap from oral language strategies to written or literate language strategies (Lunsford, "Cognitive Development"; Shaughnessy, *Errors*.) Obviously, students can think better when they can examine their thoughts more self-consciously as a string of assertions arranged in space. The technology of indelible writing permits students in a sense to step out of the flux of time: to detach themselves from oral discourse, from the context in which words are uttered and first thought

about, and from the tendency in speech to rely on concrete and experiential modes of discourse. As Havelock emphasizes, writing helps to separate the knower from the known.

This contrast between the two media is reinforced when we turn to the story of how we learn to speak and to write as individuals. We learn speech as infants—from parents who love us and naturally reward us for speaking at all. Our first audience works overtime to hear the faintest intention in our every utterance, no matter how hidden or garbled that meaning may be. Children aren't so much criticized for getting something wrong as praised for having anything at all to say—indeed they are often praised even for emitting speech as pure play with no message intended.

What a contrast between that introduction to speech and the introduction to writing which most children get in school. Students can never feel writing as an activity they engage in as freely, frequently, or spontaneously as they do in speech. Indeed, because writing is almost always a requirement set by the teacher, the act of writing takes on a "required" quality, sometimes even the aspect of punishment. I can still hear the ominous cadence in my ears: "Take out your pens." Indeed, in the classic case of school punishment the crime is speech and the punishment is writing ("I will not talk in class. I will not talk in class."). Do some teachers still insist, as some of mine did, that ink must be used? The effect was to heighten our sense of writing as indelible, as the act of making irrevocable choices—as though there were something wrong about changing our minds.

I don't want to imply gradgrindish conditions which may no longer be widespread. But the school setting in which most of us learn to write and have most of our writing experiences till we leave school is just one more reason why we experience writing as more indelible than speech—and why we experience writing as inherently a medium for *getting it right*.⁴

But we need to turn this accustomed picture upside down.

II. *Speech as Indelible, Writing as Ephemeral*

As Roland Barthes says, "it is ephemeral speech which is indelible, not monumental writing. . . . Speech is irreversible: a [spoken] word cannot be retracted . . ." ("Death of the Author"). Precisely because speech is nothing but temporary crowdings in air molecules, we can never revise it. If we speak in the hearing of others—and we seldom speak otherwise—our words are heard by listeners who can remember them even (or especially) if we say something we wish they would forget. Once we've said (as a joke), "I've never liked that shirt you gave me," or (in a fight), "Well damn it, that *is* a woman's job," or even (in a seminar, without thinking about what our colleagues might think of us), "I've never been able to understand that poem"—or once Jesse Jackson refers to Jews in public as "hymies"—once any of these words are spoken, none can be undone.

Speech is inherently more indelible than writing also because it is a more vivid medium. When we speak, listeners don't just see our words, they see us—how we hold and move ourselves. Even if we only hear someone over the phone or on the radio—perhaps even someone we've never met—still we experience the texture of her talk: the rhythms, emphases, hesitations, and other tonalities of speech which give us a dramatized sense of her character or personality. And if we *don't* reveal ourselves more through our speech than our writing, that too is taken as a revelation: someone will say, as of Gary Hart, "he seems a bit cool and aloof."

But perhaps you will reply that *casual speech* is more ephemeral than writing. Yet there are plenty of occasions when we are trying as hard as we can to "get it right" in speech—because our speech is "a speech," or an "oral report," or discourse to strangers; or for some reason we feel we are being carefully judged for our speech, as in a job interview. Perhaps casual speech is more common in our culture—or in literate or print cultures—than in others. In oral cultures such as the Homeric Greek, the Anglo-Saxon, and the Native American, there was scorn for anyone who spoke hasty unplanned words. Perhaps we fall into the assumption that speech is ephemeral because we live in a blabbing culture.

In short, our sense of speech as ephemeral and writing as indelible stems not so much from the nature of speech and writing as media but from how and where they are most often used. (And researched. See Schafer, "Spoken and Written," for a corrective view.) Our paradigm for speech is casual conversation among trusted friends; our paradigm for writing is more formal discourse to a little-known audience or an audience that is likely to judge us on our utterance.

So far from speech being ephemeral, then, the problem with speech is that it isn't ephemeral enough. What we need is a mode of discourse that really *is* ephemeral—we need the luxury of being able to utter everything on our minds and not have anyone hear it until *after* we decide what we really mean or how we want to say it. Interestingly enough, the most indelible medium of all is also the most ephemeral: writing.

However indelible the ink, writing can be completely evanescent and without consequences. We can write in solitude—indeed we seldom write otherwise—we can write whatever we want, we can write as badly as we want, and we can write one thing and then change our mind. No one need know what we've written or how we've written it. In short, writing turns out to be the ideal medium for *getting it wrong*. (This evanescence of writing is enormously enhanced by the new electronic media where words are just electrical or magnetic impulses on a screen or a disk.)

Perhaps there's nothing new in the idea of writing as ephemeral. Perhaps the phrase from Barthes has tempted me into that Gallic weakness for trying to phrase the obvious as a scandal. In the days of parchment people wrote to last, but now we are flooded with ephemeral temporary documents.⁵

But though we float on a rising tide of ephemeral writing, our writing habits and instincts are dominated by the old assumption that writing is indelible. That is, most people, even when they are writing a draft that no one will read, nevertheless write by habit *as though readers were going to see it*. Do I exaggerate? Plenty of people experiment or make a mess as they write. Yet what do most people do when they are writing along and they suddenly wonder whether they really believe what they are about to write, or whether it holds up on examination, or even whether it is well phrased. Most people stop writing and don't resume writing till they have figured out what they want to say. This *feels* like a reasonable and normal way to behave, but notice the assumption it reveals: that the function of writing is to record what we have *already* decided—not to figure out *whether* we believe it. If we were speaking, we would be much more likely to speak the train of thought as it comes to mind even though we're not sure of our final opinion—as a *way* of making up our minds. It is almost as though we fear, as we write, that someone might at any moment swoop down and read what we have just written and see that it is rubbish.

Thus writing for most people is dominated by the experience of not writing: of elaborate planning beforehand to decide what to write and frequent pausing in midcourse to search for the right word or the right path. This non-writing behavior is not surprising since *planning* is probably stressed more than anything else in advice to writers. (This advice is stressed not only in traditional textbooks but in recent ones such as Linda Flower's.) But because of my own difficulties in writing, I have come to notice the enormous cognitive and linguistic leverage that comes from learning to avoid the mentality dominated by the indelibility of writing and learning instead to exploit the ephemeral or "under" side of writing. It feels very different to put down words not as commitment but as trial, or as Barthes and some of the deconstructionists say, as play, *jouissance*, or the free play of language and consciousness. Thinking is enriched. Writing in this mode can produce an *immersion in discourse itself* that doesn't occur when we sit and think—an immersion in language that can entice us into ideas and perceptions we could not get by planning.

Exploiting the ephemeral quality of writing is often a matter of exploiting chaos and incoherence. Often I find I cannot work out what I am trying to say unless I am extremely disorganized, fragmented, and associative, and let myself go down contrary paths to see where they lead. (Note that what one is *trying to say* is more than what one *has in mind*—see Perl on "felt sense" in "Understanding Composing.") I can't be that incoherent when I start off trying to write it right. I can't even be that incoherent in speech. My listeners are too impatient for sense, for my main point. (Now I know why I often close my eyes when talking about something difficult: it is an instinctive attempt to blot out the audience and their implicit demand that I be clear and come to the point.) So when trying to write it right, and even in speaking, I must

usually settle for the short run of *some* coherence—making *some* sense—and abandon the thread (only it's not really a thread because it's so broken) of the long-run, incipient, more complex meaning which has been tickling the back of my mind. But when I write in the ephemeral and fully exploratory mode for myself alone, I can usually find that meaning by inviting myself to wander around it and finally stumble into it. Thus whereas the commonsense view is that planning is more appropriate to writing than to speaking, the opposite is also true: we badly need arenas for *nonplanning* in our discourse, and speech is too constricting. For nonplanning we need private writing.

We think of the mind's natural capacity for chaos and disorganization as the *problem* in writing—and before we finish any piece of indelible public writing, of course, that incoherence must be overcome. But what a relief it is to realize that this capacity for ephemeral incoherence is valuable and can be harnessed for insight and growth. The most precious thing in this kind of writing is to find one contradicting oneself. It guarantees that there will be some movement and growth in one's thinking; the writing will not just be a record of past thoughts or prejudices. (Good teachers, in commenting on student papers, have learned to see contradictions in the text as positive opportunities for mental action and growth, not just as problems.)

But even when we have the safety of knowing that our words are private and ephemeral and that we will revise them into coherence, we often feel there is something dangerous about letting ourselves write down what is wrong or doubtful or ungainly, or even just something we are not sure we believe. To do so seems to violate a taboo that derives from a magical sense that writing is indelible even if no one else ever sees the words. We stop and correct our words or crumple up the sheet because it feels as though if we leave the wrong words there, they will somehow pollute us. Words on paper will "take"—debilitate the mind. Yet we cannot exploit the ephemerality of language unless we are willing to take the risk.

But why not use the *mind* for all this ephemeral work? Would God have given us a mind if he'd wanted us to waste all this paper writing down what's wrong or badly put? But that internal thinking process lacks a dimension which writing provides. When we just think inside our heads, the cycle of language is incomplete; we are prey to obsession. The thoughts, sentences, images, or feelings that play in our heads continue to play round and round. But when we write down those thoughts or feelings, the sterile circle is often broken: they have a place on paper now; they evolve into another thought or even fade away. Writing is a way to get what is inside one's head outside, on paper, so there's room for more.⁶ (Of course speaking too can have this same function—"getting things out"—but sometimes the presence of a listener is a hindrance.)

I come here to what I most want to emphasize: the *mentalities* related to speech and writing. Ong and the others emphasize how the use of writing enhances logical, abstract, and detached thinking. True enough. But there is a very different kind of good thinking which we can enhance by exploiting the

underside of writing as ephemeral. And like the effect Ong speaks of, this kind of thinking is not just an occasional way of considering things but a pervasive mode of cognitive functioning. I'm talking about the mentality that gradually emerges when we learn how to put down what's in mind and invite that putting down to be *not* a committing oneself to it but the opposite, a letting go of the burden of holding it in mind—a letting go of the burden of having it shape our mind. Having let it go, our mind can take on a different shape and go on to pick up a different thought.

In this way writing can function as a prosthesis for the mind—a surrogate mind instead of just a mouthpiece for the mind. For the mind is a structure of meaning and so too is a piece of writing. The mind, as a structure of meaning, can grow and develop through stages and so too can a piece of writing. Thus writing provides us with two organisms for thinking instead of just one, two containers instead of just one; the thoughts can go back and forth, richen and grow. We think of writing as deriving meaning from the mind that produces it, but when all goes well the *mind* derives meaning from the text it produces. (Organization, or meaning, or negative entropy, can flow in both directions.)

I don't mean to sound too mysterious here. I am just talking about the common phenomenon of people's ideas developing and changing as a result of their thinking. It often happens as people live and talk and write over months and years. But in truth, people tend to stay stuck in their points of view. They are prevented from growing until they get out of or move past the structure of meaning that *is* their mind. Ong might say that indelible, careful writing enhances such growth. Yes, that's true when all goes well. But the crucial mental event in growth is often the *abandonment* of a position we hold. Ephemeral writing is usually better than careful writing at helping us abandon what we start out thinking. (See Elbow, *Teachers*, Appendix essay.)

Thus the potentiality in writing that I want to highlight here does not just involve generative techniques for getting first drafts written quicker, but rather a genuine change in mentality or consciousness. The original development of writing long ago permitted a new mentality that fostered thinking that was more careful, detached, and logical. But along with it and the indelibility that makes writing valuable came also a mentality that tends to lock us into our views once we have carefully worked them out in writing. In contrast, the cultivation of writing as ephemeral fosters the *opposite* mentality whereby we use discourse (and writing in particular) not so much to express what we think but rather to develop and transform it.

Before going on to Section III, I should emphasize that the opposite claims in the first two sections—that writing is both *more* and also *less* indelible than speech—do not really undercut each other. My celebration of writing as ephemeral in no way diminishes the fact that writing is also the best medium for being careful, for getting things right, for “quality.” I am unrepentant about insisting that we can have it both ways—if we learn how.

We need writing to help domesticate our minds (the title of Goody's book

about the development of literacy is *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*), but we also need writing as a way to unleash some cognitive savagery—which is often lacking in a “literate” world too often lulled into thinking that picking up a pencil means planning and trying to get things right. And speech, being a social medium, seldom leads us to the conceptual wilderness we sometimes need.

For not only is there no theoretical contradiction between the two functions of writing, it turns out that they enhance or reinforce each other. People can be *more* careful and get their final drafts *righter* when they spend some of their time unhooking themselves from the demands of audience and inviting themselves to get it wrong. And contrarily, people can be more fruitful in the mentality of nonsteering when they know they will turn around and shift consciousness—impose care and control and try for indelibility—before their text goes to the real audience.

III. Writing as Similar to Speech

Having indicated two ways in which speech and writing are *different* or *opposite* from each other, finally I want to argue how they are or can be essentially similar. I will proceed by focusing on a series of features characteristic of speech, and argue in each case why we should seek to foster them in writing.

To exploit the speech-like qualities of writing as we teach is a way of teaching to strength: capitalizing on the oral language skills students already possess and helping students apply those skills immediately and effortlessly to writing—a way of helping with the crucial process Ong calls the “internalization of the technology of writing.”

(1) In informal speech situations we can utter our words spontaneously—comfortably, naturally, unselfconsciously—with full attention on our meaning and no attention on how we actually *form* the signs or symbols that convey our meaning. We can come close to achieving this situation in writing through the use of “spontaneous writing” or “freewriting”: writing in which we put down whatever words come to mind—without regard to the conventions of forming words and without regard to the quality of the writing. We don’t give the writing to an audience—or if we do, the audience merely “listens” to it for the meaning and doesn’t respond (see Elbow, *Power*, 13-19). The work of Graves and Calkins shows how much we have tended to overestimate the amount of special knowledge or control of the medium people need for fluent and comfortable writing.

Speech is usually social and communal, writing solitary. But we can make writing communal too by having people write together and to each other in ways that are worth spelling out in more detail below.⁷

(2) Speech usually responds to a particular occasion and fits a particular context. It’s not usually meant to last or be recorded—it’s for a particular audience which is right there when the discourse is uttered and hears it right

away. We can make all this happen in writing if we have students write in class or in small groups—particularly if they write about some issue or situation in which they are involved—and have them immediately share with each other what they write. The audience is right there and known; the writing is part of the context and the interaction of a particular group on a particular day. In speech, when something isn't clear, the audience asks for clarification right away. We can invite this naturally to happen in response to writing.

(3) In speech, the response—immediate, of course—is usually a *reply* to *what* has been said, not an *evaluative comment* on *how* it was said. And the reply is almost invariably an invitation to the speaker to reply to the reply. We can make this happen too in our teaching (though students often need coaching to get out of the assumption that the only way to respond to a text is to criticize it).

For of course the point of speech is often not to be a final or definitive statement but rather to keep the discourse going and produce more discourse in response—to sustain an ongoing dialogue or discussion. We can easily give writing this quality too by making our course a forum for constant writing-in-response-to-each-other's-writing, that is, by stressing the ways in which writing naturally functions as an invitation to future writing or a reply to previous writing—which is how most writing in the world actually occurs. Paradoxically, it turns out that if we invite much of the writing in a course to be more temporary and speech-like (that is, if we relax some of the pretense of chirographic, i.e., formal, definitiveness), students often manage to achieve *higher* levels of text-like definitiveness or indelibility on the fewer pieces where we stress revision and transcendence of local context.

For obviously I am not arguing that we should exploit similarities to speech in *all* the writing we ask of students. Many of our assignments should stress indelibility—stress the need for tight, coherent, final drafts which are statements that could survive outside the context of local author and local audience. We can decide on how much writing to treat in one mode or the other depending on the students we are teaching. For example, if the course is for weak students who are scared or uncomfortable in their writing, I would go quite far in exploiting speech similarities.

Thus the teaching practices I have just described *could* be called condescending strategies: ways to manage the writing context so as to *relax* temporarily some of the inherent difficulties in writing as a medium.⁸ But I wish to go on now to stress how writing of the very highest quality—writing as good as any of us could possibly hope to achieve—not only can but should have many of the essential qualities somewhat misguidedly labelled “inherent in speech.”

(4) The best writing has *voice*: the life and rhythms of speech. Unless we actively train our students to *speak onto paper*, they will write the kind of dead, limp, nominalized prose we hate—or *say* we hate. We see the difference most clearly in extreme cases: experienced teachers learn that when they get a student who writes prose that is so tied in knots that it is impenetrable they need

only ask the student to *say* what she was getting at and the student will almost invariably speak the thought in syntax which is perfectly clear and lively, even if sometimes inelegantly colloquial. If the student had known enough to "speak the thought onto paper" and then simply cleaned up the syntax, the writing would have been much better than her best "essay writing."

(5) Excellent writing conveys some kind of involvement with the audience (though sometimes a quiet non-obtrusive involvement). This audience involvement is most characteristic of oral discourse. The best writing has just this quality of being somehow a piece of two-way communication, not one-way—of seeming to be an invitation to the audience to respond, or even seeming to be a reply to what the audience had earlier thought or said. This ability to connect with the audience and take its needs into account is *not* lacking in most students—contrary to much recent received opinion. Students use this social skill quite spontaneously and well in much of their speech to a present audience, but they naturally enough neglect to use it in much of their writing since the audience is less clear to them. We can easily help students transfer to writing their skill in connecting with an audience by having them write more often in a local context to a limited and physically present audience (as when they talk).

I am speaking here to what I see as a growing misconception about the inability of adolescents to "decenter": a dangerous tendency to make snap judgments about the level of a student's cognitive development on the basis of only a text or two—texts which are anything but accurate embodiments of how the student's mind really operates. Teachers and researchers sometimes describe the weakness of certain student writing as stemming from an inability to move past oral language strategies and a dependence on local audience and context.⁹ But in reality the weakness of those pieces of writing should often be given the *opposite* diagnosis: the student has drifted off into writing to *no one in particular*. Often the student need only be encouraged to use *more* of the strategies of oral discourse and the discourse snaps back into good focus, and along with it usually comes much more clarity and even better thinking.

(6) Commentators like to distinguish speech from writing by saying that speech is reticent: it invites listeners to fill in meanings from their involvement in the context and their knowledge of the speaker. Good writing, on the other hand (so this story goes), must make all the meanings explicit, must "lexicalize" or "decontextualize" all the meanings, and not require readers to fill in. But here too, this talk about the inherent nature of speech and writing is misguided. It is precisely a quality that distinguishes certain kinds of good writing that it makes readers *contribute to* or *participate in* the meanings, not just sit back and receive meanings that are entirely spelled out.

Deborah Tannen, a speech researcher, illuminates this confusion ("Oral and Literate," 89):

If one thinks at first that written and spoken language are very different, one may think as well that written literature—short stories, poems,

and novels—are the most different from casual conversation of all. Quite the contrary, imaginative literature has more in common with spontaneous conversation than with the typical written genre, expository prose.

If expository prose is minimally contextualized—that is, the writer demands the least from the reader in terms of filling in background information and crucial premises—imaginative literature is maximally contextualized. The best work of art is the one that suggests the most to the reader with the fewest words. . . . The goal of creative writers is to encourage their readers to fill in as much as possible. The more the readers supply, the more they will believe and care about the message in the work.

Although we can *maximize* the unstated only in imaginative literature, nevertheless, I believe it is unhelpful to go along with Tannen's oversimple contrast between imaginative and expository writing. Surely it is the mark of really good essays or expository writing, too, that they bring the reader *in* and get him or her to fill in and participate in the meanings, and thereby make those written meanings seem more real and believable. (I think of the expository writing of writers like Wayne Booth, Stephen Gould, or Lewis Thomas.) And even to the degree that imaginative literature is different from expository prose, we must not run away from it as a model for what gives goodness to good expository prose.

If we accept uncritically the assumption that "cognitive development" or "psychological growth" consists of movement from concrete "oral" modes to abstract "literate" modes, we are left with the implication that most of the imaginative literature we study is at a lower developmental and cognitive level than most of the expository writing turned in by students. I'm frightened at the tendency to label students cognitively retarded who tend to exploit those oral or concrete strategies that characterize so much good literature, namely narration, description, invested detail, and expression of feeling. I'm not trying to deny the burden of Piaget, Bruner, etc., etc., namely, that it is an important and necessary struggle to learn abstract reasoning, nor to deny that teaching it is *part* of our job as teachers of writing. Again I claim both positions. But there is danger in *overemphasizing* writing as abstract and non-speech-like. (Even Bruner makes a similar warning in his recent work "Language, Mind.")

(7) Commentators on orality and literacy tend to stress how speech works in time and writing in space. Ong is eloquent on the evanescence of speech because it exists only as sound and thus is lost in the unstoppable flow of time. In speech, past and future words *do not exist* (as they would do if they were part of a text): the only thing that exists is that fleeting present syllable that pauses on the tongue in its journey to disappearance. Speech and oral cultures are associated with narration—which takes time as its medium. Writing and literate cultures are associated with logic—which exists outside of time.

This is an important distinction and people like Ong are right to exploit its remarkably wide ramifications, but there is a danger here, too. In truth, writ-

ing is also essentially time-bound. Readers are immersed in time as they read just as listeners are when they hear. We cannot take in a text all at once as we can a picture or a diagram. We see only a few written words at a time. It is true that if we pause in our reading, we can *in a sense* step outside the flow of time and look back to earlier sections of the text, or look forward to later sections; I don't mean to underestimate the enormous contrast here with speech where such "back-" or "forward-scanning" is impossible. Nevertheless the essential process of reading a text is more like listening than looking: the essential phenomenology involves being trapped in time and thus unable to take in more than a few words at a time.

This point is not just theoretical. The problem with much poor or needlessly difficult writing is the way it pretends to exist as it were in space rather than in time. Such writing is hard to read because it demands that we have access all at once to the many elements that the writer struggled to get into the text. The writer forces us repeatedly to stop and work at finding explanations or definitions or connections which he *gave*, it is true, or *will* give in a few pages, but which he does not bring to our minds now when we need them. (It often feels to the writer as though he's *already* given us the material we need when we are reading page two—even though we don't get it till page six—because he's *already* written page six when he rewrites page two.) Poor writers often assume that because they are making a document rather than a talk, they are *giving us a thing in space* rather than *leading us on a journey through time*, and that therefore they can pretend that we can "look at the whole thing."¹⁰

One of the marks of good writers, on the other hand, is their recognition that readers, like listeners, are indeed trapped in the flow of time and can take in only a few words at a time. Good writers takes this as an opportunity, not just a problem. The drama of movement through time can be embodied in thinking and exposition as naturally as in stories. And the ability to engage the reader's time sense is not a matter of developing some wholly new skill or strategy, it is a matter of developing for writing that time-bound faculty we've all used in all speaking.

(8) By reflecting on how writing, though apparently existing in space, is essentially speech-like in that it works on readers in the dimension of time, we can throw important light on the peculiar *difficulties of organizing or structuring a piece of writing*.

In thinking about organization in writing we are tempted to use models from the spatial realm. Indeed our very conception of organization or structure tends to be spatial. Our *sense*, then, of what it means to be well organized or well structured tends to involve those features which give coherence to space—features such as neatness, symmetry, and non-redundancy. Giving good organization to something in time, however, is a different business because it means giving organization or structure to something of which we can grasp only one tiny fraction at any moment.

A thought experiment. Imagine a large painting or photograph that looks well organized. Imagine next an ant crawling along its surface. How would we have to modify that picture to make it “well organized” for the ant? Since he cannot see the picture all at once, we would have to embed some tiny, simplified reductions or capsule “overviews” of the whole picture at periodic points in his path—especially where he starts and finishes. Otherwise he could never make sense of the barrage of close-up details he gets as he crawls along; he would have no overall “big picture” or gestalt into which to integrate these details. But if we should make such modifications we would make the picture much “messier” from a visual point of view.

The plight of our ant points to the interesting work in composition theory and cognitive science about “chunking” and short- and long-term memory and the magic number seven. (In effect, the ant needs the visual information “chunked” for him.) Because language is time-bound, its meanings cannot actually enter our minds through our eyes—its meanings must detour through memory. If eyes were enough, “chunking” would be much easier, for as gestalt psychology has shown, vision as a cognitive process involves the making of gestalts, i.e., automatic chunking. (See G. A. Miller’s classic essay, “The Magical Number Seven.”)

Thus the test of good organization in writing—as in speech—is not whether the text *looks* neat when diagrammed in an outline or some other visual scheme, but whether it produces an *experience* of structure and coherence for the audience in time. But how is this effect achieved? The issue is complex, but I would suggest that certain common features of speech help discourse function as coherent in time—and thus are helpful for creating the sense of good structure in a text. We are more likely in speaking than in writing to give the quick forward- and backward-looking structural aids that readers need when they are trapped in the flow of time. When we are speaking we are less likely to put our heads down and forget about the structural needs of our audience because our audience is right there before us.

Discourse is sometimes given coherence by the use of cyclical or spiral patterns characteristic of speech—or a kind of wave-like repetition in which new material is introduced only after some allusion (however brief) to the past material needed for understanding the new material. This is the archetypal back-and-forth movement of waves on a beach which Auerbach (*Mimesis*) relates to the rhythm of Old Testament poetry—or the homely “mowing long grass” pattern of movement where repeatedly you push the mower forward four feet and back two feet, so each piece of ground is covered twice: there is always a quick summary before going forward.¹¹

Oddly enough, *lists* (that feature of oral and epic poetry) are remarkably effective ways to give structure to discourse in time. As researchers into document design have noticed, written texts are often much more coherent to readers when a connected chain of statements is reshaped into a main statement and a *list* of supporting or following items. Lists have an interesting cognitive

characteristic: as we take in each item we tacitly rehearse our sense of what that item is an instance *of*. Thus, a list is a way of increasing unity and also giving readers a reiterated sense of the main point without having to repeat it explicitly for them.

Discourse is sometimes given coherence in time by the use of recurring phrases, metaphors, images, or resonant examples (not merely decorative or illustrative but structural) which “chunk” or function as micro-summaries. Such recurring miniature units are characteristic of oral discourse (and music). A phrase can continue to ring in the reader’s ear or an image continue to appear in the mind’s eye while trapped in the underbrush of prose, and thus give structure or coherence to an experience in time.

The big picture problem is really a problem of how to get readers to hold in mind a *pattern* or *relationship* among elements while having to focus attention on only one of those elements. Imagine an essay with three major points or sections (as with the present essay). If we think of it “structurally” or “from above”—that is, spatially—we see three emphases or focuses of attention, as so many paintings and photographs are organized triangularly. But what holds the picture together is the fact that in the realm of vision we can focus on one of the three main areas yet simultaneously retain our view of the other two and our sense of how they relate to the one we are looking at. With an essay, on the other hand, we can read *only* one small part at a time, and so it is hard to experience the *relationship* or *interaction* of the three parts.

Thus the problem of structure in a temporal medium is really the problem of how to *bind time*. Whereas symmetry and pattern bind space (and also bind smaller units of time—in the form of rhythm), they don’t manage very well to hold larger units of time together. What binds larger units of time? Usually it is the experience of anticipation or tension which then builds to some resolution or satisfaction. In well-structured discourse, music, and films (temporal media) we almost invariably see a pattern of alternating dissonance-and-consonance or itching-and-scratching. Narrative is probably the most common and natural way to set up a structure of anticipation and resolution in discourse.

But how do we bind time with patterns of anticipation and resolution in *essays or expository writing*?¹² Here the tension or itch that binds the words is almost always the experience of some *problem* or *uncertainty*, that is somehow conveyed to the reader. Unless there is a felt question—a tension, a palpable itch—the time remains unbound. The most common reason why weak essays don’t hang together is that the writing is all statement, all consonance, all answer: the reader is not made to experience any cognitive dissonance to serve as a “net” or “set” to catch all these statements or answers. Without an itch or a sense of felt problem, nothing holds the reader’s experience together—however well the text itself might summarize the parts. (This is a common problem in the essays of students since they so often suppose that essays are only for telling, not for wondering.) I wish workers on coherence and cohesion would focus more on the ways in which writers convey a sense

of felt problem or itch. Surely that does more to hold texts together than repeated words or phrases.

If it seems as though I'm trying to fiddle with our sense of structure in texts, I must plead guilty. For I think that we often call texts well structured when they are merely "neat" or symmetrical, but really don't *hold* together: we "look through" our temporal experience of the text to a projected outline of the meanings. Particularly as academics, we are trained to read this way. Other readers—"popular" or informal readers—often do not notice that atemporal neatness and so feel such texts as incoherent. Yet on the other hand such readers are sometimes *satisfied* with the structure of texts that are less "neat"—we would call them sprawling—because the writer has been able to string those sprawling elements together experientially in time.

Have I gone too far? Obviously this is a tangled matter. For we yearn for neatness, economy, and spatial structure in our texts: poor writing is often poor because of the lack of these features. The problems of structure in writing are subtly difficult. Because of the confusion introduced into our very notion of structure by the pervasive metaphor of space, I suspect that we are still waiting for the help we need in showing us simple and valid models of good structure in time. If we want to explain the structure of well-ordered expository writing, we probably would do well to look to studies of the structure of music and film and poetry. (See, for example, Meyer and Zuckerkandl on music.)

Yet we mustn't plead ignorance too fast. As speakers, everyone has had extensive experience organizing discourse in time to make it coherent to listeners. (I admit that coherent speech is rare—but not as rare as coherent writing. And it is true that we speak in dialogue more often than in monologue—but we have had more experience with monologue than with writing.) Thus, continual experience with speaking of all sorts—even experience in not being understood and then clarifying our meaning—has built up for all speakers extensive intuitive skill at organizing discourse in time.

Thus we do well to exploit these intuitive, time-oriented speech skills when we try to organize our writing (particularly expository or conceptual writing where organizational problems are most difficult). When we tell ourselves to "be careful about organization" or to "give good structure" to our text, we tend to think in terms of building blocks laid out in space, and thus we often fail to give our readers an experience of coherence and clarity (however neatly we pattern our blocks). If, on the other hand, we think of our structural problem as that of trying to speak a long monologue so it is coherent to listeners in time, we are more likely to invoke crucial temporal organizational skills at two levels:

(a) In the large, overall structure of our text, we are more likely to "tell the story" as it were of our thinking. This doesn't usually mean turning it into actual narrative (although that needn't be ruled out as the most natural and effective structure for thinking), but rather saying, "Where does this thinking

start? Where is it going? And where is it trying to get to?" Our attempt to speak a monologue will get us to find the larger *movement* of thought and help us intuitively to appeal to the faculty of hearing and memory, not visual schematics.

(b) In the smaller structures of our text, we are even more likely to appeal directly to hearing if we think of ourselves as speaking a monologue, and this will help us naturally chunk shorter sequences of information or thinking (from one to several paragraphs) into "heard" units which will cohere and thus be more easily understood and remembered.

So here again my point is that in order to make writing good we should try to make it like speech. When we structure speech we naturally exploit our time sense, our hearing, and our memory; and we naturally build in patterns of tension and resolution, not just arrangement of parts.

(9) A final reason why writing needs to be like speech. Perhaps it is fanciful to talk of speech having a magic that writing lacks—call it presence, voice, or *pneuma*—but the truth is that we tend to experience meaning somehow more *in* spoken words than written ones. (Socrates and Husserl make this point: See Searle, "The Word Turned Upside Down.")

This vividness of speech is illustrated in academic conferences where people speak written papers out loud. Because we are listening to *writing* presented orally, we may notice in a curiously striking way how it seldom seems as semantically "inhabited" or "presenced" as speech.

Of course most of us can convey *more* meaning by reading a written essay out loud than by trying to give a speech from notes—more precisely, clearly, and quickly too. Yet the moment-to-moment language of a recited essay (even if more precise) is almost invariably less "full of meaning" than the language of our actual live speech (even if that speech has some stumbling and lack of precision). In short, writing seems to permit us to get *more* meaning into words (get more said more quickly), but speech helps get our meanings integrated more *into* our words.

But why should it be that we seem to experience the meaning more in spoken words than written words? Is it just because spoken words are *performed* for us and so we get all those extra cues from seeing the speaker, hearing how she speaks—all those rhythms and tonalities? That is important, but there's something else that goes deeper: in listening to speech we are hearing mental activity going on—live; in reading a text we are only encountering the record of completed mental events. It's not that the audience has to *receive* the words while the mental activity is going on, but that the language has to be *created* while the mental activity is going on: the language must embody or grow out of live mental events. The important simultaneity is not between meaning-making and hearing, but between meaning-making and the production or emergence of language. The crucial question for determining whether discourse achieves "presence" is whether the words produced are *an expression of something going on* or *a record of something having gone on*.

To speak is (usually) to give spontaneous verbal substance to mental events occurring right at that moment in the mind. Even when we are stuck or tongue-tied we seldom remain silent for long: Billy Budd is the exception. Usually we say something about our inability to figure out what to say. To write, however, is usually to *rehearse* mental events inside our heads before putting them down. (Someone's speech usually sounds peculiar if he rehearses his words in his head before speaking them.)

My hypothesis then, is that when people produce language *as* they are engaged in the mental event it expresses, they produce language with particular features—features which make an audience feel the meanings very much *in* those words. Here then is an important research agenda for discourse analysis: what are the language features that correlate with what people experience as the semantic liveness of speech? (See Halpern, "Differences," for a start at this job.)

Such research would have very practical benefits for writing theory, since of course writing *can* be as alive as speech. What characterizes much excellent writing is precisely this special quality of lively or heightened semantic presence. It's as though the writer's mental activity is somehow there in the words on the page—as though the silent words are somehow alive with her meaning.

When a writer is particularly fluent, she has the gift of doing less internal rehearsal. The acts of figuring out what she wants to say, finding the words, and putting them down somehow coalesce into one act—into that integrative meaning-making/language-finding act which is characteristic of speech. But even beginners (or writing teachers) can achieve this liveliness and presence when they engage in freewriting or spontaneous writing. It is this semantic presence which often makes freewriting seem peculiarly lively to read. One of the best directions for coaching freewriting is to tell oneself or one's students to "talk onto the paper."

Of course we cannot usually produce a carefully-pondered and well-ordered piece of writing by talking onto paper. In any piece of writing that has been a struggle to produce, there is often a certain smell of stale sweat. And freewriting or spontaneous speech may be careless or shallow (the meaning is *in* the words but the *amount* of meaning is very small). But if we learn to talk onto paper and exploit the speech-like quality possible in writing, we can have the experience of writing words with presence, and thereby learn what such writing *feels* like—in the fingers, in the mouth, and in the ear. This experience increases our chances of getting desirable speech qualities into the writing we revise and think through more carefully.

IV. Conclusion

I have argued three contrary claims: writing is essentially unlike speech because it is more indelible; writing is essentially unlike speech because it is more ephemeral; and writing is essentially *like* speech. My goal is to stop peo-

ple from talking so much about the inherent nature of these media and start them talking more about the different ways we can *use* them. In particular I seek to celebrate the flexibility of writing as a medium, and to show that we need to develop more control over ourselves as we write so that we can *manage* our writing process more judiciously and flexibly. Let me end with three images for the writer (one to match each claim)—and with each image a mentality.

First, I see the writer clenched over her text, writing very slowly—indeed pondering more than writing—trying to achieve something permanent and definitive: questioning everything, first in her mind before she writes the phrase, then after she sees it on paper. She is intensely self-critical, she tries to see every potential flaw—even the flaws that some unknown future reader might find who is reading in an entirely different context from that of her present audience. She is using the “new” technology of indelible writing that Ong and others speak of and thereby enhancing her capacity for careful abstract thinking by learning to separate the knower from the known. She is learning the mentality of detachment.

Second, I see the writer in a fine frenzy: scribbling fast, caught up in her words, in the grip of language and creation. She is writing late at night—not because of a deadline but because the words have taken over: she wants to go to bed but too much is going on for her to stop. She has learned to relinquish some control. She has also learned to let herself write things she would never show to anyone—at first anyway. By exploiting the ephemeral underside of writing, she learns to promote the mentality of wildness with words—the mentality of discourse as play. And perhaps most important, she has learned to promote the mentality of involvement in her words rather than of detachment or separation. But because that involvement is so totally *of the moment*, she knows she may well write a refutation tomorrow night of what she is writing tonight. She writes to explore and develop her ideas, not just express them.

Third, I see the writer at her desk conjuring up her audience before her in her mind’s eye as she writes. She is looking *at* them, speaking *to* them—more aware of the sound of her spoken words in her ear than the sight of her written words on paper. She is the writer as raconteur, the writer with the gift of gab. She is not “composing” a text or “constructing” a document in space—she is “uttering” discourse in time; she is not “giving things” to her readers, she is leading readers on a mental journey. She is a bit of a dramatist, using discourse as a way to *do* things to people. She is involved with her discourse through being involved with her audience. Often her audience is a genuine community and her writing grows out of her sense of membership in it.

Is one of these modes of writing better? I don’t believe so. Yet in the end I think there *is* a single best way to write: to move back and forth among them. And I believe there is a particular mentality which the technology of writing is peculiarly suited to enhance (as speech is not), namely *the play of mentalities*.

We can learn to *be* all three writers imaged above. Writing can show us how to move back and forth between cognitive processes and mentalities which at first may seem contradictory, but which if exploited will heighten and reinforce each other.

Notes

1. For quotations and references I give an abbreviated title and page number for works listed in the bibliography at the end. I am grateful for feedback by colleagues here at Stony Brook, the Breadloaf School of English, and the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition—where I read earlier drafts of this paper.

2. See Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 1982, for a powerful summary of his extensive work in this area and his wide-ranging citations to others working in it. For welcome warnings about stereotyping the mentalities associated with orality and literacy, see Cooper and Odell, "Sound in Composing"; Harsre, "Assumptions"; Scribner and Cole, *Psychology of Literacy*; Heath, "Oral and Literate Traditions"; and Robinson, "Literacy." A number of the essays in Kroll and Vann, *Exploring Speaking-Writing Relationships*, e.g. O'Keefe, also warn against oversimplifying the contrast between speech and writing as media.

3. Ong focuses on the development of writing, but it is important to stand back and take a longer perspective. That is, the biggest boost to careful thinking came earlier with the birth of *language itself*—original spoken language. "As long as we carry intuitive belief without a symbolic representation, we are one with it and cannot criticize it. But once we have formulated it, we can look at it objectively and learn from it, even from its rejection." (Karl Popper, cited in Kroll and Vann, *Exploring Speaking-Writing Relationships*, p. 151.) See also Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, on the effect of language itself as a "second signalling system."

4. It may be, however, that many of the effects we are tempted to ascribe to literacy are really effects of schooling. See Gere, "Cultural Perspectives"; Olson, "Languages of Instruction"; and Scribner and Cole, *Psychology of Literacy*.

5. Literate people like to complain that the telephone and other electronic media have almost destroyed writing by permitting people to do most of their business orally and refrain from writing unless there is some pressing need for "hard" (i.e. indelible) copy. But I suspect that more people write more now than ever before. Engineers are estimated to spend from a quarter to a third of their working time involved in some kind of writing. See Faigley et al, "Writing After College." The spread of radios and phonographs raised fears that people would no longer go to concerts or play musical instruments: the opposite has occurred.

6. This somatic perspective heightens the paradoxes. Writing is the external indelible medium—yet is the most easily changed. Thinking is the most internal and changeable medium—yet from another point of view it is the most intractable to change: try removing or changing a thought you don't like. Speech, chameleon-like, is in the middle.

7. In enumerating these characteristics of speech I am drawing on Tannen, "Oral and Literate"; see also Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning." In describing some ways to provide speech conditions in a writing class I am drawing on a discussion with members of the fall 1983 teaching practicum at Stony Brook—for whose help I am grateful.

8. I don't really grant this point, however. Though these procedures are particularly suitable for basic students, they are also the kinds of writing that occur in many workplace settings (for example with a research team, an investigative committee, or any other working group whose members communicate to each other in letters, queries, and rough position papers). Sometimes people who talk about the "inherent difference" between speaking and writing get carried away and ignore the brute fact that much of the writing in the world—perhaps even most of it—takes place in a strongly social or communal context: the writing is in response to an earlier discourse and gives rise to subsequent discourse and is asked for and read by particular people whom the writer knows—people who share a common context and set of assumptions with the writer.

9. See Lunsford, "Cognitive Development," and Shaughnessy, *Errors*. Instead of just talking about "oral interference" as a problem, I would also use the term in the positive sense: oral skills and habits can "run interference" for writing—knocking down some of the obstacles that make writing difficult.

10. This is particularly a problem in certain technical documents and reports, and it is interesting to see how canny readers of such genres have learned to accommodate to the bad treatment they receive: they "read" such documents as though they were looking at a diagram rather than reading a text—namely, by quickly scanning through it, perhaps more than once, trying to develop an overview and a sense of perspective which they know the writer does not provide. Being trained and consenting to read in this way, in a sense they perpetuate the problem.

11. Theorists of style in general and of cohesion and coherence in particular talk about this phenomenon at the sentence or syntactic level (see Joseph Williams, *Style*), but I'm not sure that there's enough recognition of it at the level of the whole. See, however, the reference to beginning work on the "macrotheme-rheme" problem in Witte and Faigley's "Coherence, Cohesion."

12. We should recognize how often good essays or books are actually held together by being stories: "here is the story of my thinking," or "here is a ride on the train of my thought," or even just, "this and this and this, and here is the moral."

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Note: For two rich bibliographies on the relation between speech and writing, see the Kroll and Vann volume noted below, and the annotated bibliography by Sarah Liggett in the recent *CCC*: 35 (October, 1984), 334-44.

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