Coolabah, Vol.4, 2010, ISSN 1988-5946 Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona

Why should Aboriginal peoples learn to write?

Carles Serra Pagès

ABSTRACT: Cultures and worldviews are inscribed by means of 'writing', or what Derrida calls 'the perdurable inscription of a sign' (*Of Grammatology*). A sign is the union between signifier and signified. The signifier may be natural (clouds indicate that it is going to rain) or artificial. All cultures are made up of relations that stay at the level of signs, that is, everything that belongs to culture is empirical and conventional. In this regard, both Aboriginal and Western culture remain at the same level. Moreover, both cultures produce objectivity by means of contrast and experimentation, in the design of a sharp object, for example an arrow or a knife. In Ancient Greece, Havelock contends that the invention of writing dramatically increased the possibilities of objective thought (*The Muse Learns To Write*), but it also created a logic of binaries that transcended the objectivity of science and transpired into the ideology behind colonialism. In this context, the role of writing is analyzed in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*. How does writing affect Gemmy all throughout the book? Already in the first Chapter, the teacher and the minister of the colony analyze Gemmy 'in writing'. Gemmy knows what writing is but hasn't learnt its 'trick': he does not know how to read or write. All he can see is that what he tells about his life, all his pain and suffering, is translated into marks and magic squiggles on the paper: only the spirit of the story he tells is captured. But little by little, the cognitive effects of writing get hold of Gemmy, until he starts to understand his life within the framework of the logic of binaries and identity upon which all reflective thought and science rest. All in all, this deconstructive reading can be seen as a critique of Europe's modern idea of the autonomy of reason, in the name of a heteronymous rationality in the form of writing.

In this text we analyze the leap that goes from orality to writing in the context of postcolonial Aboriginal Australia. The thesis is that the transformation that goes from myth to logos, or from primitive to civilized cultures is a linguistic revolution: the discovery of writing and, more particularly, of alphabetic writing. The theoretical standpoint from which we are going to carry out this analysis revolves around Havelock's *The Muse Learns to Write*, which is a study of the role of writing at the origin of Western philosophy and science, and Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and *Speech and Phenomena*. In the light of these authors, we are going to analyze some passages that deal with writing in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon.* In the course of our analysis, we are going to ask ourselves some questions about the essence of language and about the role it plays in the construction of the physiognomy of cultural identity.

The special theory of orality by Havelock revolves around the idea that philosophy and sciences were born in Greece between the 8th and 4th century b.C. and thanks to the Greek discovery of phonetic writing. The Phoenicians already had a sort of alphabet, but it was the Greeks who introduced what Havelock calls "the pure consonant", by adding a vocalic sound in the formation of the consonant (which literally means to "sound-with", *sum-phona).* This discovery allowed the Greeks to use a form of writing that represented oral discourse, the alphabet, which could be universally applied to represent all natural languages. The use of phonetic writing brought about a gradual change in Greek thought and culture. Before the appearance of writing, Greek culture and tradition were guarded and transmitted by means of what Havelock calls "primary orality". The function of "primary orality" was to unite society, to guarantee its laws and customs, and to transmit valuable information regarding agriculture, important dates, festivities, tactics of war, the land, etc. An oral culture relied on particular mechanisms of memorization, such as rhythm, synonymy and antonyms, and it required the audience to assimilate the information by means of mimicry and identification. The troubadour, to whom the task of keeping up with the oral tradition was explicitly assigned, would set the facts of his account in a mythical time, and would prioritize the account of concrete actions over abstract thought in order to make memorization easier.

The advent of writing liberated living memory from the effort of investing most of its psychic potential in retaining the information that was being transmitted. There was a scission between the person that used language and language itself. Language appeared as visual and exterior to consciousness in the physical medium of writing. In the same way, there appeared a distance between what is known and the knower, and the term logos came to mean that through which it is possible to have access to knowledge and truth. Two heterogeneous and contradictory types of discourse appeared: an oral one and a theoretical one, which was born with writing. "Primary orality" is characterized by its liveliness, transitory nature, richness of images and it is a language of action, and it opposes itself to a philosophical language that pays more attention to what is permanent, stable, and true. There also increasingly appears the use of the third person singular of the present simple, which allows for analyses of essence, of what "is". In a single stroke, writing marks the birth of science, philosophy, literature and history because writing allows the difference between what "is", in a universal and necessary ideal cosmos (cosmos means "order"), and mere appearance bound to worldliness, to the earthly and to historicity.

In his redefinition of the concept of writing, Derrida retains the nucleus of essence of Havelock's concept of "primary orality". We will recall that the main function of "primary orality" is to retain in the living memory of the community its culture and traditions, and to guarantee social unity. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida defines writing in the same terms, as "the durable inscription of a sign", the unity of a sign and a meaning:

> If "writing" signifies inscription and especially the durable institution of a sign (and that is the only irreducible kernel of the concept of writing), writing in general covers the entire field of linguistic signs (*Of Grammatology* 44)

Since both oral culture and written culture (in the form of libraries, law, etc.) are inscribed by means of signs, that is, since both of them 'make present' what makes up a

culture, oral culture by means of living memory and written culture by means of linguistic signs, both cultures share a unity of essence. (Obviously, we are not saying that oral cultures have no writing. They have no phonetic writing, but they have other forms of inscription, other forms of writing: marks, drawings, etc.)

Whereas Havelock is more interested in the cognitive change implied by the advent of a culture of writing in the classical period, Derrida discovers in the notion of writing the condition of possibility of all the discourses of culture: philosophy, religions, science, literature, poetry, etc. Consequently, writing is a mere technique, something worldly and exterior, it does not belong to a particular nation or people. It is a structural possibility inscribed in every culture, before it can be labeled oral or civilized, and its de facto existence depends on contingent factors. Even if phonetic writing and, consequently, philosophy and science were historically born in Europe, the possibility for a nation or a particular people of freely choosing its own destiny, unbiased by prejudice and oppression, that is, the ideal of a rational culture is a possibility that is not essentially European.

In *Remembering Babylon,* Malouf tells the story of Gemmy, a man of British descent who spends 16 years among Aboriginals, and then joins a white settlement near Brisbane. In the book, there are several examples of what Havelock calls "primary orality": Gemmy's bold assessment "I am a British object", which he utters at the very instant he is exposed to the white settlement for the first time (p. 3); the words he proffers to get rid of the impressions caused by his nightmares ("… out of habit muttered syllables that were a formula against bad magic…", p. 28) ; what Gemmy calls "the language of the land" ("There was no way of existing in this land, or of making your way through it, unless you took into yourself, discovered on your breath, the sounds that linked up all the various parts of it and made them one", p. 58); etc.

But we are going to focus on the specific role that phonetic writing plays in the book. When Gemmy arrives in the colony, we will recall that the first thing that the minister and the young schoolteacher do is to "examine" him "in writing":

> It was the minister, Mr. Frazer, who examined him, in the hot little one-roomed schoolhouse, and the schoolmaster, George Abbot, who did the writing up (p. 14)

We are told that Gemmy, for his part, knows what writing is but has never learnt how it works: he does not know how to read or write. After a long and theatrical session where Mr. Frazer and Mr. Abbot try to interpret the half-words, signs and gestures that Gemmy acts in answer to their questions about his life, Mr Frazer handles Gemmy the seven written pages for him to see. At this point, Gemmy believes his life has been written down and has no doubt that "magic has been the essence of the occasion", and that the smell of earth of the black ink contains his own blood:

> Was that the smell of his life, his spirit, the black blood they had drained out of him? No wonder he felt so weak. (18)

But most importantly, even though Gemmy knew what writing is, until then he had not closely experienced its cognitive effects. We are told that Gemmy is not able to properly

learn the language of the settlers, beyond the few words he already knew. The fact that he is aware that they have been writing down his life does not familiarize him with the technique of writing, only with its psychological effects, which he labels as "magic". How else can you put the essence of life in a physical domain, in the form of a book or else? Before answering the questions about his life, Gemmy has to divide himself as subject who narrates from himself as an object about whom he is talking about and, when Mr. Frazer gives Gemmy his written life for him to "see", he is as shocked as we would be if we were told that the marks on the page contain indeed the essence of our own lives. This first encounter with writing brings about the beginning of a reflective attitude upon Gemmy, which I would doubt in labeling "epistemic" at this point.

This is how Malouf tells us about the cognitive effects of writing in Gemmy. There is quite an explicit and classic Biblical reference as well:

> All the events of his life, all that he had told and not told, and more, much more, now that it had begun to stir and move, which he was just beginning to recall, had been curled up in him like an old-man carpet snake. It was awake now. Lifting its blind head it was emerging coil on coil into the sun (19)

Gemmy's experience with writing deepens as he helps Mr. Frazer in his botanical studies. On these occasions the experience is more lenient, perhaps because the object of study is not his own self. As he sees it, writing, or, in this case, drawing is a matter of undressing reality from mere appearance, of dispossessing the world of its materiality and gently laying "these outlines on the page that were all pure spirit, the product of stillness and silent concentration" (60). And a little latter, Malouf describes the meaning that Mr. Frazer's drawings have for Gemmy in the following terms:

> The drawings for him have a mystical significance. They are proof that Mr. Frazer, this odd whitefeller, has grasped, beyond colour or weight or smell, the *spirit* of what he has been shown (p. 118).

In analyzing the role of writing and its cognitive effects upon Gemmy, one is led to ponder whether the crisis that takes hold of him is not the result of that first contact with writing. The gesture of giving Gemmy the seven papers where Mr. Frazer and Mr. Abbot had written down his own life for him to see initiated a slow but irreversible process of self-reflection which was to inevitable end in a break down. The episodes of bullying and his nightmares at Mrs. Hutchence's house were only to speed the process.

This is a final quote from *Remembering Babylon:*

> He began to sicken, and saw at last that what he was suffering here had to do with the sheets of paper where, months ago, Mr. Frazer and the schoolmaster had set down his life. It was from there that the events of his former existence came and demanded to be turned back again from magic squiggles into the pain, joy, grief he was torn by, and which his present body was too weak to endure.
> More and more now he was haunted by those sheets, seven in all, he had not forgotten the number, that Mr. Frazer had folded and put into his pocket, and which he had never seen again; till he was convinced that the only way to save himself from so much racking, and despair and sweat, was to get them back

> again. They would be in one place or the other, those sheets; either at Mr. Frazer's or at the schoolhouse. All he needed was the strength to get there. But that was just what their magic had drawn from him (p. 140-141).

The question which we leave for everyone to answer for him or herself is whether in the light of these analyses, one can conclude that writing in general is at the origin of rationality and science, as Havelock and Derrida contend, or whether it has been the result of an autonomous rational process of emancipation and rational deliberation, as we contended in a paper that was delivered in Barcelona last July and in the light of Husserl's *Krisis* and life-world phenomenology. Has writing objectified Gemmy's life in a reflective way?

In conclusion, when we consider the experiences of Gemmy with writing in the light of David Malouf's account and the theories of Havelock and Derrida we are enlightened as to what makes writing work in the constitution of alphabetic societies, which today are hegemonic. On the one hand, in front of a piece of writing, we never deem what is being communicated as exterior to consciousness. We do not believe that a biography contains the true essence of the life of a man out there, in the physicality of the book. On the contrary, the comprehension is within us, in our understanding of what his life was. This privilege of inner consciousness and of the understanding is what Derrida labels as "metaphysics of presence". The function of writing is not completely exterior, as Gemmy believes, but neither is it completely interior as Western thought only too readily tends to assume. On the other hand, we may add that the problem is that Gemmy has not incorporated the essence of writing within himself: the recipient of essence, of what is, remains exterior. He is not aware that even though he gets at essence thanks to the technique of writing, which is exterior, this technique just activates a mental process by means of which essence is constructed.

Bibliography:

DERRIDA, J. *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973.
DERRIDA, J. Of Grammatology, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997.
HAVELOCK, E.A. *The Muse Learns to Write. Reflexions on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Preset*, Barcelona, 2008.
MALOUF, D. *Remembering Babylon*, Vintage, London, 1994.