

Activation and Preservation: The Interdependence of Text and Performance in an Oral Tradition

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Background

In recent discussions of the metaphorical aspects of human experience, attention is drawn to the way in which we in Western culture conceive of language and linguistic meaning. As Reddy (1979) has shown, language in our culture is conceived of in terms of a *conduit* or a *container*, a vehicle for the transmission of messages (the “content” of the linguistic “container”). This “conduit metaphor” is, in Lakoff’s and Johnson’s (1980) sense, a genuine “metaphor we live by”: the conception of ideas as objects, of linguistic expressions as containers of these objects, and of “communication” as the transmission of these packaged ideas, is pervasive in all folk or pretheoretical conceptions of language. To an even greater extent it governs the largely unquestioned assumptions about language and meaning in the linguistic theories of the twentieth century, with their sharp dichotomy between form (structure) and content (meaning, function), and their tendency to reduce speech to an abstraction of what it really is; a characteristic example is Roman Jakobson’s famous “Closing Statement” (1960), where speaking is equated with “sending,” the transmission of signals from a *sender* to a *receiver*.

This conception may be our culture’s real experience of language, but as has often been pointed out, it is incomplete and inadequate. The present paper intends to discuss some aspects of language use where this inadequacy is especially striking. As a background and starting point for this discussion, I would like to suggest that the conduit metaphor and related conceptualizations result from the unconscious equation in Western culture of linguistic expressions with *written* linguistic expressions, a conclusion that would imply that the functions and properties we attribute to language are abstractions, based on the functions and properties of written

communication in our literate culture. As far as theoretical linguistics is concerned, this is all the more ironic, since from its structuralist beginning, twentieth-century linguistics has been “axiomatically” concerned with the absolute primacy of speech over writing. But the failure to “defamiliarize” our cultural and professional habits and preconceptions (that is, to make them meaningful by consciously thinking about them) certainly does not apply to linguists alone.

Information

Very simply and generally, the function of written texts in our culture (and hence the source of the conduit metaphor) is the *transmission of information*. The writer of a text may have a multitude of reasons for writing the text, and the text, accordingly, may have as many purposes and functions; but stripped to its bare essence, a text is a channel through which information of some sort flows from the writer to the reader. The notion of information is one of the most elusive concepts of our Western notional apparatus and hardest to pin down. To a certain extent everything that reaches our minds by way of language or through the senses is “information” and to that extent the concept is automatically used by almost anyone; “information” in Western culture has reached the status of a “dummy” concept, universally applicable and applied, and in many cases waiting to be complemented by more specific information.

The notion of information can reach its generic status as a default concept precisely because it is so important: it specifies what we think communication really *is*, and as such it lies at the heart of our (academic) ways of analyzing texts, language, and meaning. Information as a semantic concept in Western culture is strongly associated with *knowledge* and is typically conceived of as something that is maximally meaningful and salient when it is *new*, where “new” can be defined as “adding to our knowledge” and therefore not “known” before. The newsworthiness of “information,” furthermore, is typically something that is unstable: information is new at first and adds to our knowledge, but once it has been “processed” by the cognizing human mind, it rapidly turns into old and known.¹ The knowledge-based conception of information, with the ensuing

¹ From Lyons (1977:33), an authoritative introduction to the issues discussed here (authoritative, that is, precisely because it testifies to the assumptions that I am trying to defamiliarize): “‘Communicative’ means ‘meaningful for the sender.’ But there is another sense of ‘meaningful’; and for this we will reserve the term ‘informative’ and the cognate

distinction between “new” and “old” information, has resulted in many conspicuous features of Western “informational” mentality. Of these we need but mention the preferred *newsworthiness* of texts (in fact the first and foremost prerequisite for communication at all), the mandatory *originality* of (literary) texts, and, generally, the conception of *repetition* as something to be avoided.

Old information may suffer from a lack of salience, we find, but in practice the repetition of what was said earlier cannot be avoided. In modern linguistics and discourse analysis, for example, the structure of linguistic expressions (from isolated sentences or rejoinders in conversation to extended coherent texts) is analyzed as a sensible compromise between “new” and “old,” on the basis of general perceptual principles (e.g., Givón 1979:348-49): from the point of view of cognition, new sensory information (a salient perceptual stimulus, a *figure*) can only be processed against a background of already processed (known) visual information (the *ground*).² Similarly, a “text” (or even “sentence”) can only be experienced as meaningful when the new information it contains is couched in what is already known:³ a text that consists exclusively of “new” information is incomprehensible, too much at variance with the reader’s existing knowledge, whereas a text that contains only “old” information is considered to be dull, predictable, and therefore not worth reading.

Without challenging the perceptual and cognitive principle on which the modern analysis of the “information structure” in texts is based, I wish to question the automatic connection between visual information-processing and knowledge, and the association of “old information” with what is “known,” perceptually non-salient, and therefore dull: indeed what is “known” (and therefore “old information” in terms of knowledge) can be highly salient in terms of perception. The concept of information, I

expressions ‘information’ and ‘inform.’ *A signal is informative if [...] it makes the receiver aware of something of which he was not previously aware.* ‘Informative’ therefore means ‘meaningful to the receiver.’ If the signal tells him something he knows already, it tells him nothing” (emphasis added).

² See for example Krech et al. 1974:264: “As we look at the parts of any differentiated field, we notice that almost invariably one part (the *figure*) stands out distinctively from the rest (the *ground*).”

³ Notice that “focus,” a term that is widely used in linguistics to refer to that part of sentence that contains the “new information,” derives from the domain of vision and perception.

suggest, is grossly underspecified, in that it is indiscriminately applied to both perception and knowledge.

A more cautious and precise use of the term is suggested by the dynamics and complexities of *speech*, ordinary everyday speech in general, and the speech of oral epic traditions in particular. I believe that the notion of information and its “transmission,” and the distinction between “old” and “new” information, being essentially based on written communication, does not do full justice to these complexities. Furthermore, I believe that the notion of information, being based on written communication in *our* culture (transfer of knowledge), is anachronistic, or inappropriate, when applied to written texts in older, or other, cultures than our own. Let us first turn to speech.

Activation

In actual speech-events, information need not be new to be effective—in fact, effective speech need not be information at all in the sense that new knowledge is transmitted to a hearer. Speakers do much more than just transmit new information to one another, and the speaker whose conversational skills do not go beyond the “informative” level is the ultimate bore. What speakers (socially behaving humans) are typically concerned with is not attacking each other with new information, but with what has been called *interpersonal involvement*, a state of mutual rapport between humans that is to a large extent tied up with their language behavior (e.g., Tannen 1989:9-35). Contrary to what (most) linguists and philosophers claim, what speakers typically say (or *do*) is not the assertion of facts or the expression of beliefs, but in the first place either a symptom of the mutual involvement they have reached with their addressee, an attempt to reach it, or (in less felicitous cases) an attempt to hide the lack of it. Thus it is the notion of involvement, more than anything else, that embodies the inherent unity of the typical speech event, and that has gotten lost in our literacy-dominated conceptions of communication, with their characteristic segregation between writer and reader, writer and world referred to, text and world, form (“container”) and content (message).

As far as involvement and rapport are concerned, anything is permitted, even saying things that have to be categorized in the conceptual system of Western informational semantics as “old” information and therefore dull. Speakers may even debase themselves to the point of saying the same thing twice, or using idioms, prefabs, and formulas that are in all

respects modeled on previous speech, the logician's ultimate horror and seemingly the apex of meaninglessness. What matters to speakers, however, is the establishment of a common ground, which consists of their minds and those of their listeners being set on the same topic. It is this involvement that makes speech coherent and meaningful, not as information, but, much more essentially, as an instance of human behavior.⁴

Interpersonal involvement is not just a social phenomenon; it is in the first place a matter of consciousness and experience. Speaking as a cognitive process means, in the perspective of the linguist Wallace Chafe (e.g., 1987; in press), the focusing of a speaker's consciousness on a given idea, and the subsequent turning of this piece of conscious experience into observable sound, or speech. Focusing on an idea means that this idea is *active* in the speaker's consciousness. The activation of a concept in order for it to be turned into speech is obviously not a solipsistic, private affair: the very point of the activation is that the same, or a sufficiently similar, idea is activated in the listener's consciousness, irrespective (and this is important) of whether it is judged to represent information that is new to him or her. What matters in speech is not whether something is new or old information (knowledge) but the dynamic cognitive process of *activation*, the appearance in the speaker's and listener's consciousness of an idea out of inactivity.

We see, then, that beside the usual dichotomy between "old" and "new" information, a new distinction begins to emerge, that between active and inactive concepts.⁵ The active-inactive distinction does not necessarily supplant the new-old distinction: in "involved" discourse, too, people add things to each other's knowledge, obviously. But the new distinction is an essential addition, in that it can be very meaningful for "old information" to be active in people's minds, or to *become* active. The new distinction has a totally different experiential load (or perhaps we should say that it has an experiential load at all), which ultimately amounts to the distinction

⁴ For a similarly "anti-informational" approach to human speech behavior, see Smith (1978:85ff.). Instead of "involvement," however, Smith uses a less altruistic concept to characterize general human speech behavior: manipulation and power ("We perform verbal acts as well as other acts, that is, in order to extend our control over a world that is not naturally disposed to serve our interests" [85]).

⁵ I have to add here that Chafe's conception of "activation" is more elaborate and sophisticated than would appear from the necessarily sketchy presentation in this article. For one thing, Chafe distinguishes *three* states for a given piece of "information": active, inactive, and the intermediate state of being *accessible*. (See Chafe 1987; in press, ch. 6).

between *present* and *absent*: what is active in both the speaker's and listener's mind is present in a real sense, as a shared experience and thereby a source of involvement; what is inactive, on the other hand, is absent, out of the perceptual and experiential scope of the speech participants.

After this short discussion of involvement, consciousness, and activation in ordinary speech, let us now turn to an oral epic tradition, specifically the Homeric tradition of ancient Greek epic.

Re-enactment

Epic in societies that are not, or not yet, governed by literacy and information, like ours, is obviously not just "poetry," in the sense of a literary genre; it is not even *oral* poetry, for the simple reason that this term suggests a special type of what *we* think is poetry, that is, written poetry (see Nagy 1990a:18), and thereby reveals a literate bias. Rather, and from the point of view of the epic singer and his audience, epic is speech *par excellence*, a strong intensification of the cognitive features (including the imagination) and social dynamics of the ordinary spoken word.⁶

To begin with, an oral epic, like the *Iliad*, in its essential quality of speech and performance, is activation in the full sense of the term, a dynamic appearance out of absence.⁷ The epic performance can be considered as the *re-enactment* of an event sequence that is crucial enough to be foundational for the collective experience of the community. More than that, the re-enactment of the epic story is a reactivation, a re-creation of the epic past in the here and now of the performance shared by the performer and his audience. The reactivation of the epic in performance creates a strong overarching sense of involvement in which the entire community participates, by the simple fact that the re-enacted, reactivated epic world and its heroic and dramatic features are in everyone's mind during the performance, a collective psychic state for which there is ample

⁶ For the reversed argument concerning speech and poetry, see Friedrich 1986, who argues that all ordinary language is inherently intensely poetic, a basis on which he states that "poetry" is where language reaches its most typical expression, its "quintessence of linguistic form" (27). Both arguments, to be sure, amount to one and the same thing, in that the boundary between "poetry" and "speech" is not a clear-cut one.

⁷ It has to be stated at this point already that this performance quality is independent from whether a *written text* of the *Iliad* exists or not; see further below.

evidence in classical sources.⁸

Speech in general is always modeled on previous speech, without being felt as repetitious by speakers. For grammar, we have to notice, is a *traditional* vehicle, and tradition consists in the *re-instantiation* (reactivation, re-creation) of a given token, rather than in the *repetition* of any “first” (normative, original) token.⁹ Similarly, the speech of the epic re-enactment is always modeled on previous re-enactments. This means that as far as the collective experience of the community is concerned, an epic performance is never the first one in a series, a totally “original” enterprise, in the Romantic (and equally Western) sense of poetic creation *ex nihilo*. But it also means that the epic re-enactment is in no way “secondary” with respect to any “original” predecessor: like language itself, traditional epic is a re-creation each time it is performed, rather than a mere repetition (e.g., Foley 1991:56-57) and this applies to the numerous formulaic “repetitions” within the epic no less than to the epic story as a whole.

If epic, in its essential quality of speech, intensifies ordinary speech, then it should also increase the problems related to the notion of “information” as a means to characterize language behavior and “communication.” From the fact that the epic performance is never the first one, it follows, obviously, that the audience knows beforehand what will be re-enacted in the performance (a simple point that has been made numerous times for many epic traditions). In terms of knowledge and “informational semantics,” therefore, the *Iliad* is definitely old information, lacking to a

⁸ The classic statement on the irrational aspects of the public performance is of course Havelock 1963. One of the more accessible ancient sources is Plato’s *Ion*, a short dialogue dealing with the pro and contra of the art of the rhapsode (the professional performer of [Homeric] poetry). In general, the ancient rhetorical tradition abounds with remarks on the effects that language (or better its user) can produce on a listener, remarks that testify to the predominantly performance-based view of language in antiquity (even *late* antiquity) as opposed to our own text-dominated conceptions.

⁹ The insight that “repetition” (or re-instantiation, formulaicity, idiomaticity) is crucial, not incidental, to grammar and speech is gaining ground in modern linguistics. Central here is the awareness of “routinization” as a pervasive feature of speech: a given expression may prove so useful as a method of coping with a given recurrent speech situation that it becomes standardized, and the model of future expressions to be uttered under similar circumstances. This process of what the linguist Paul Hopper (1988) calls *grammaticalization* reaches its strongest form in idioms and formulaic rejoinders, that is, in precisely the type of expression that defies grammatical analysis in “traditional” structuralist theory. In a wider perspective, the insight that language is modeled on previous language is crucial in the work of Bakhtin.

very large extent what in modern terms would be the newsworthiness and salience of new information that adds up to our knowledge-base. This applies in any case to the global level of the “plot” of the epic, but probably also to lower-level events, like individual killings in battle narrative (though not necessarily to all), and it applies most certainly to the characters, even the minor ones, in the epic story. To take a simple example, the death of Achilles’ friend Patroklos, the turning-point in the plot of the *Iliad*, is, in terms of information, known and “old”; at any rate, it is known that Patroklos will die, and his death is anticipated numerous times in the preceding parts of the *Iliad*. Patroklos’ death is indeed very different from the sudden and unexpected finding of a new body in P. D. James or a Tony Hillerman mystery novel, the ultimate in carefully introduced new information in written fiction.

But that does not mean that the death of Patroklos is less moving or effective in the story of the *Iliad*. On the contrary, Patroklos’ death and its anticipation is effective, not as information that was not known before, but as an experience experienced again. Just as the skillful manipulation of new information in the modern mystery novel is highly typical of our information-craving literate culture, so we may say that anticipation of the reactivation/re-enactment of what is “known” is the quintessence of verbal experience in an oral society, where “new” is associated with appearance and activation in the experiential here and now, rather than with knowledge and information. Something need not be “new information” to be effective, and much that is old information in terms of *knowledge* is highly salient in terms of *perception*.¹⁰ It seems to be useful, then, to question the automatic extension of the notion of information from knowledge to perception; and as far as (Homeric) epic is concerned, it may even be preferable to abandon the concept altogether and to use conceptual categories that seem to be more suitable for the analysis of speech: qua information, the *Iliad* is dull, qua re-enactment, however, it is thrilling.

But the notion of activation is not limited to re-enactment in performance and the continuous salience of successive re-creations of an epic; it is also associated with *remembrance*, and this brings me to what I call the poetics of fame.

¹⁰ Experiments in cognitive psychology have also confirmed that even in the case of the experience of stories whose outcome should be transparent to subjects, “suspense” is by no means ruled out; see Gerrig 1989 (I owe this reference to David C. Rubin.)

Preservation

The repeated mentioning of a hero in an epic tradition is much more than the mere repetition of a name. Mentioning a hero, especially with one or more epithets added to his name, is a *re-instantiation* of the concept of this hero, a small-scale re-enactment within the encompassing framework of the epic re-enactment as a whole.¹¹ Repeated mention of a hero is not just the activation and reactivation of the idea of a person in the performer's and the listeners' minds; rather, it is the repeated activation of the *theme* that the concept of the hero represents.¹² This "theme" is conjured up (activated) by each new mentioning of the hero in question, not only in the current performance but also in all the other re-enactments of the same epic, or of *other* epics in which the hero also occurs.¹³ The result of repeated mention is a continuous state of activation (in the consciousness of members of the community and of the community as a whole) of the idea of the hero and the themes (indeed stories, epics) associated with it. This state of activation is the glory that poetry can confer: repeated mention establishes a hero's fame, or, in the Greek term, his *kleos*.¹⁴

A hero mentioned with any frequency is rescued from the forgetfulness that results from inactivity and absence from people's consciousness. He is present, not only privately in the individual minds of the poet and the members of the audience during the performance, as a consequence of their being involved in it, but also publicly in the community as a whole, not only as it witnesses and experiences the

¹¹ Cf. also Foley's (1991) notion of "traditional referentiality" as a metonymic concept: a given token contracts a *pars pro toto* relation with the traditional idea of which it is an instantiation.

¹² On the connection between "theme" and the traditional epithet attached to a hero's name, see Nagy 1990b:23.

¹³ The paradigm example here is Odysseus' epithet *polutlas* ["much-suffering"], which is associated with the theme of Odysseus' homecoming (*nostos*), but which is added to Odysseus' name throughout the *Iliad*, that is, where events are related that happened, chronologically, *before* Odysseus' *nostos*. In Nagy's words (1990b:23): "The *Iliad* is recording the fact that Odysseus already has an *Odyssey* tradition about him."

¹⁴ In what follows I have no intention to add to the extensive discussions that Nagy (e.g., 1979; 1990a) has devoted to *kleos* in early Greek poetry; my aim is merely to provide a motivation for *kleos* in terms of the dynamics of speech.

performance, but also *in between* performances, during everyday life. In other words, as a real compensation for physical death, he is immortal in a sense, due to the power of speech, a compensation that is termed *kleos apthiton* (“imperishable fame”).¹⁵

You get *kleos apthiton* when people just talk about you, an index of the fact that you are an idea that is easily activated in people’s minds.¹⁶ This state of continuous near-presence, the very opposite of the undesirable condition of being forgotten, has to be fed by a continuous series of activations (mentions) in public performance. The singers in these performances are in a real sense “ministers of *kleos*”; it is their skill in transforming activated and reactivated concepts into effective special speech that makes them the collective memory of their community, and as such they are in close contact with the divine. In fact, it is the daughters of *Mnemosyne* (“Remembrance”), the Muses, who have to be invoked by the poets. These invocations, it must be noted, tend to occur when the poet is concerned with *exhaustive* and/or *exact* mentioning, for example when it comes to the presentation of lists (or *catalogues*) of chieftains, including their epithets, biography, and genealogy, that is, the fullest re-instantiation of their tradition that is possible within the framework of the full-length re-instantiation of another hero’s tradition (Achilles’ tradition in the case of the *Iliad*).

It is the Muse, an external personification of mental faculties like memory and imagination in the psychology and poetics of archaic Greece, who stands at the basis of activation and remembrance in the poet’s mind and who in that capacity is a safeguard against forgetfulness, and eventually absence and death. What is activated is saved from *Lêthê* (“Forgetting”) and is thus *a-lêthês* (“free from *Lêthê*”), an adjective that in later Greek comes to mean “true.”¹⁷ The truth of epic tradition, however, is very far removed from the philosopher’s notion of true and false statements: what is

¹⁵ E.g., Nagy 1979:117-19; 1990a:201-4; 225-27; on compensation, Nagy 1979; 1990a:151.

¹⁶ Chafe would call this “accessible,” an activation-state in between “active” and “inactive” (see also note 5 above). But whereas in Chafe’s data ideas are most often “accessible” because of previous mention within the same discourse, in the case of the epic tradition, ideas are continuously accessible (e.g. “Achilles”) because of recurrent mention in *previous* discourses.

¹⁷ On *Lêthê* (“oblivion,” “forgetting”), *Mnêmosunê* (“remembrance”), and *alêtheia* (“truth”), see Nagy 1990a:58-60.

true in the epic tradition is what is active and thereby “present” or easily activated and thereby “near.” Even more importantly, “true” is what is *preserved* by being *repeatedly and officially active* in the ongoing series of epic performances. The epic tradition, then, is concerned above all with *preservation*, preservation through activation as a recurrent process that is strongly grounded in the dynamics of speech.

The Interdependence of Text and Performance

The poetics of fame is thus quintessentially oral, but I wish to emphasize that the fame scenario I have been describing is by no means incompatible with the existence of a written text. It has sometimes been stated, and very often it has been tacitly assumed, that everything that is characteristic of an oral tradition is lost irretrievably the very moment the tradition gets written down. This proves quite wrong and another example of the treacherous ways in which we Western academics are stuck with certain one-sided and culture-bound preconceptions concerning language, meaning, and, above all, texts.¹⁸ The crucial connotation that comes with the concept of “text” was discussed above in terms of “information” and knowledge: a text in our culture is something that has to be *read* by someone, and furthermore, we like to think of this reading as something that makes sense—what we read as literate beings should be “informative,” or otherwise we are wasting our time on known information. In short, we conceive of texts in terms of the transmission of what is new information to a reader.

The production of texts in archaic Greece, however, was not concerned with new information; in fact, it was not even concerned with readers at all in the sense in which Western culture speaks of “readers.” Whoever produced a text in, say, the seventh century B.C. was not concerned with what we would call the expression or communication of ideas: if he wanted to “express” or to “communicate,” he would not have known how to do so in writing; maybe he would not even have realized that one can use writing for these purposes at all. Writing was instead an act of

¹⁸ Of interest here is the insight that is being developed and elaborated upon in medievalist circles to the effect that “orality” and “literacy” are not antonyms, but rather blend with each other in various ways. The key concept here is represented by Zumthor’s term “vocality” (*vocalité*), meant to characterize the essential voice and speech quality of (early) medieval poetry in performance. The fullest discussion of “vocality” to date is Schaefer 1992.

fixation, the codification of what is “known” already. The physical result of this fixation, the written text, be it an inscription on stone or pottery, or signs on papyrus or wood, can be seen as a *representation*, a substitute of the activity that led up to its existence, and this activity is nothing other than speech. The necessary authoritativeness of this speech—casual speech is not worth recording—inevitably lent authoritativeness to the representation of this speech as text. Inscriptions, for example, were not meant to be, nor used as, bearers of information, to be read by passers-by; rather, these texts served the purpose of embodying the authority of the original statement.¹⁹

Who writes in Archaic Greece, then, is concerned not with the transmission of messages to readers (the text being a container for these contents), but with the fixation, and thereby the *preservation*, of what binds container and content together into an indissoluble whole, that is, speech. Similarly “reading” a text that is meant to represent (authoritative) speech is very different from processing information and adding it to one’s knowledge-base. If a text owes its existence to the authority of a (public) statement, then “reading” the representation of this statement is nothing other than the *re-enactment* of it, or better its reactivation.²⁰ It appears, then, that the usual distinctions between “speaking” and “writing” and “writing” and “reading” begin to break down: if speaking is a matter of cognition, of the activation of ideas in one’s consciousness, as was stated above, then “reading” is a matter of the “*re-cognition*” and reactivation of these same ideas, both in the reader’s and in the listeners’ consciousness.²¹ Writing and reading, in short, are related to each other as performance and re-performance.

This applies, I suggest, with full force to the writing of the *Iliad*. Whoever did this, or gave orders for it to happen, did not thereby turn the

¹⁹ Cf. Thomas 1989:46-48, 60-61. See also Havelock’s conception of inscriptions as documents of a “craft literacy,” “in which the public inscription is composed as a source of referral for officials and as a check upon arbitrary interpretations” (1963:39, 53n7). For “early” manuscripts in general and their use, see Clanchy 1979.

²⁰ See the interesting discussions of Svenbro (1988), who connects the reading of inscriptions in archaic and classical Greece with Nagy’s ideas on *kleos* (the voice of the reader being an instrument in the preservation and distribution of *kleos*).

²¹ I owe the play on cognition and recognition to the meaning of one of the Greek verbs for “reading”: *anagignôskein* (“to know again,” “recognize”); see Svenbro 1988:30, 183-84, Nagy 1990a:171.

Greek epic tradition into literary communication in our sense; nor did he intend to abolish the public performance tradition of the Homeric epics. On the contrary, he wanted to secure this tradition by regulating the ongoing flow of performances and supplying them with a firm basis, in the form of a written, authoritative, text. The writing of the *Iliad* did not constitute the “first” literary text, with a strong footing in the oral tradition; nor did it constitute the often mentioned “culmination” (as well as “end point”) of the epic tradition, in the form of a “last” epic performance. The writing of the *Iliad* was not a “literarification” of an oral tradition, unless one sees this process as indissolubly connected with the “oralification” of a text. The original text was meant to represent the *Iliad* in its essential quality of speech and performance, and to be as such a normative model for re-enactment. As the fixation of an ideal performance, the original text of the *Iliad* was an attempt (successful we may say!) to establish a *canon*, a means to exert power over future performances in the Homeric tradition.²²

The writing of the *Iliad*, then, is necessarily linked up with what is obviously most crucial about an epic tradition: speech. Instead of killing the epic tradition, the writing of the *Iliad* actually reinforced it, by strengthening the already strong mutual bond between the two interrelated concepts that are more than anything else constitutive of the epic tradition— activation and preservation. If epic speech in performance amounts to the activation of concepts (stories, themes, whole epics) in order for them to be preserved, then the writing down of the epic tradition (itself necessarily a way of speaking already) amounts to the preservation of these same concepts in order for them to be activated, an activation that in its turn will serve the purpose of preservation, that is, the purpose of epic speech in general. “Writing” and “reading” in this scenario turn out to be far removed indeed from the sending and receiving of messages and information. Instead of being the segregated components of the modern (literate) transmission-event, both writing and reading in the epic tradition are a matter of performance, the latter being a succession of reactivations of the former, which in turn is a reactivation itself in an ongoing series of re-instantiations of the tradition. “Writing” and “reading,” then, strengthen and regularize the recurrence that is inherent in (epic) speech.

We can only speculate on the exact reasons why the performance of

²² Of interest here is Bäuml’s (in press) discussion of the function of texts in Carolingian Christianization politics. On “canons,” “value,” and “power,” see Smith 1983. See now also Nagy’s re-examination (in press) of the so-called “Pisistratean recension” of the text of the *Iliad*, a presentation with which the present discussion finds itself in concord in a number of ways.

the *Iliad* came to be written down, and on how “literary” these reasons may have been. Sociologically oriented responses to this question might be prompted by Nagy’s ideas on “Panhellenization,” a rising sense of “generic Greekhood” in the seventh century, with the ensuing need of common property binding all Greek tribes together, like Panhellenic games or a “national” epic statement. From this perspective, the writing of the Homeric epics is seen as the result of a gradual textual fixation, a “cumulative process, entailing countless instances of composition/ performance in a tradition that is becoming streamlined into an increasingly rigid form as a result of ever-increasing proliferation” (Nagy 1979:8; cf. 1990a:52ff, in press). Such ideas go against the grain of a philological discipline whose very identity has always been the notion of personal authorship, and many classicists, I suspect, will find more congenial a conception in which a master poet made the most ambitious poetic statement he could make, in the form of a written (dictated) text.

In any case, the frequently recurring opinions to the effect that the writing of the *Iliad* was an act of volitional poetic expression and literary communication have to be taken, in my opinion, with much circumspection. Such opinions, if anything, testify to how difficult it is to get rid (or even become aware) of our academic preconceptions regarding language, meaning, and text when it comes to the study of oral traditions.²³

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