

***Memory, Memorization and Memorizers: The Galilean Oral-Style Tradition and Its Traditionists.* Marcel Jousse. Cascade Books, 2018. 434 pages.**

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It is fair to say that writing instructors and, for that matter, all of us inculcated within print culture take for granted a particular “picture” of language: language is composed of individual words with “meanings,” and they are articulated into sentences in accord with the “rules” or “conventions” of grammar. We presuppose such a picture when, for example, we ask students to write “logically,” which involves reducing words to single definitions, using them consistently as those definitions dictate, and predicating similarly singularly defined words such that no predication violates anything in the definition of any of the words being used. Few writing instructors, I assume, pursue logicity with the rigor of career analytic philosophers, but more informal injunctions and remarks on the “illogicality” of a piece of writing can impose this “picture” and the form of discipline it reproduces in arbitrary and therefore all the more confusing ways.

We now know that this picture of language is a product of writing. As David Olson (1996) showed in *The World on Paper*, writing transforms language into a disciplinary object and thereby reduces it to “units” that can be represented alphabetically and regulated rationally: phonemes, words, and sentences. What Olson was then interested in, and which a growing field of inquiry has come to explore, are the cognitive and social consequences of how writing has transformed language. But even if the assumptions about language many of us absorbed through primary, secondary, and, maybe even more so, higher and graduate education can be located historically and therefore relativized, does that make them “wrong,” or, less melodramatically, of no utility in fulfilling our own mandate, which is precisely to inculcate students into that very same print culture? Do we have—could there be—something better, pedagogically, than taking the habits of mind and identities produced by print culture as a given?

The study of the distinction between orality and literacy has not yet made the impact it should upon the teaching of writing or, for that matter, discussions of “critical thinking.” A problem, I think, has been that scholars investigating the transition from oral to literate cultures have tended, or at least have been perceived, to draw the line between media too sharply and in such a way as to imply condescension toward those located (or assumed to be located) on the “oral” side of the so-called “great divide.” This is an important issue, but it cannot be settled by those of us located in writing pedagogy; nor should we, even as we remain alert to possibly regressive uses of the oral/literate distinction, allow such qualms to interfere with the broader observation that identifiable patterns of discourse and “pictures” of language can helpfully be associated with orality and literacy, respectively.

It might help to keep in mind that the oral/literate distinction has already been carried into writing studies and pedagogy in the form of “rhetoric,” which as an ancient practice relied heavily upon memory, using written texts more as mnemonic aids and for

pedagogical purposes than as the medium of composition (or reception) itself. When David Bartholomae (2005) (to take just one example) spoke, in his “Inventing the University,” of the student use of “commonplaces” as marking the limits of the literate subject when confronted with the more advanced literacy of academic discourse, he is working with the results of studies of orality/literacy. The commonplace is a formula and the formula is the primary “unit” of language in oral cultures. Once we are speaking of commonplaces and formulas, we are invoking a very different picture of language: one in which the formula, or what Marcel Jousse called the “propositional geste” (2015, 2016), is articulated with other formulas in ways that carry forward traditions, reinforce ethnic identities, and reproduce the relations between masters and disciples in pedagogical circles. According to this picture, language use is fundamentally mimetic, which means that all language learning takes place via models—and in that case, would not the most basic marker of learning be a distinguishing between model and imitation?

As Werner Kelber (2018) pointed out in his foreword to *Memory, Memorization and Memorizers: The Galilean Oral-Style Tradition and Its Traditionists*, Marcel Jousse stands, along with Milman Parry, at the origin of orality/literacy studies. Kelber wondered why Jousse, among the founders of this field, has most faded into obscurity. Perhaps it’s because Jousse refused to fully “literacize” himself, insisting on making the participation in oral traditions a necessary part of studying them. Maybe Jousse’s commitment to retrieving (and as a priest, not a disinterested academic) certain Christian (or “Yeshuan”) traditions, which led to him challenging rigid and ideological institutions of academic Biblical study, as opposed to the somewhat less charged classical studies through which most of the insights into the formulism of the “oral style” flowed, was responsible as well. It might also be Jousse’s (2016) generation of an entirely new and seemingly idiosyncratic theoretical vocabulary or his overtly “reactionary” opposition to what he called an “algebrozed” form of literacy (in which the relation between signifier and signified is “arbitrary” rather than grounded in gesture).<sup>1</sup> But there is a Jousse revival hopefully underway, overseen largely, it appears, by Edward Sinaert, the editor of this (and other recently published) volumes of Jousse’s work. This new book gives us an opportunity to draw lessons from precisely that which makes Jousse’s work distinctive, or, if one likes, “eccentric,” but maybe for that very reason all the more pedagogically urgent.

Jousse’s immersion in orality depends upon his assumption of the mimetic roots of all human signifying activity, what he elsewhere called “mimism” (Jousse, 2016). All of reality is taken in through imitation, including “nature” and the cosmos. If culture is transmitted orally, then it is sustained through memorization, which itself depends on repetition and controlled imitation of the guardians of culture. This also means that culture is fundamentally pedagogical, and Jousse sees his own writings and teaching as no exception to this.

The book, composed of Jousse’s lectures and essays on the Palestinian oral style, of which Jousse considered Jesus the exemplary practitioner, can be seen as a study in performative memory. How would language, culture and social relations have to be organized so as to ensure that the cultural heritage of a people can be preserved in the linguistic practices of the people themselves and not merely in receptacles like books, museums, art and monuments? All discourse must be made as memorable as possible, and institutional relations and practices must be organized around strengthening and perpetuating that memory. It might help to think in terms of how you might go about

formulating something you just came to understand in such a way that not only would you remember it forever but you would be able to transmit it to others as well. First, you could take the sentences you want to memorialize and balance them against each other, internally (within each sentence) and externally (making the sentences as symmetrical in relation to each other as possible). Second, you could place the particulars of this little discourse in the frame of more permanent commonplaces and formulas, through analogies and metaphors. Take the sentence I wrote just above: “All discourse must be made as memorable as possible, and institutional relations and practices must be organized around strengthening and perpetuating that memory.” We might, for starters, get something like “Make your words to last/like the planted oak; Tend each word in its cradle/like a newborn infant,” etc. The references to planted oaks, infants in cradles and so on would embed this particular “pearl” in a “necklace” of commonplaces which can be varied and performed differently in accord with the speaker’s sense of the occasion. Jousse takes us in great detail through these “rhythm-catechistic” forms, especially in the Galilean milieu where Jesus taught, while also offering an account of Paul as an oral catechist working with various transcribers.

Needless to say, students coming into the university with their reserve of commonplaces, which they can use to answer questions, fill in gaps in their discourse, and summarize unfamiliar texts in more familiar ways, cannot be usefully compared to the oral stylists studied by Jousse. But there is one institution that Jousse, and to my knowledge Jousse alone, studied very closely and in a way that I believe is relevant to any pedagogy of literacy. It is an institution that I think Jousse placed at the center of his studies precisely as a result of his recognition of the embeddedness of all language in a people and a culture with its own idioms and gestures (and therefore the great change and loss that must come from bringing a tradition memorialized in one language over to another). This institution is what Jousse called the “transfer-translation.” Here is the problem: as even my own inadequate example above shows, the maxims, prayers, legends, laws and so on of a people are memorialized in a way very thick with the sounds, rhythms, homonyms, associations, metaphors, imagery and so on of the language. But the language changes, or evangelical teachers proselytize across cultures. In the first case, the most sacred texts continue to be remembered and certainly (although Jousse doesn’t emphasize this) written down in a language increasingly incommensurable with everyday language. This situation first emerged as the language of the Jews under Roman rule became Aramaic, while the Jewish scriptures remained written in Hebrew. In the latter case, early Christian evangelicals had to take Aramaic materials and present them to Greek-speaking audiences. So, Jewish oral pedagogues would work with translations of the Hebrew scriptures (and other written and oral materials) into Aramaic, and the Christian evangelicals with translations from Aramaic to Greek. (It is in this latter translation that Jousse felt much of the original “Yeshuan” oral style, shared by the Apostles, Gospel authors and Paul, got lost.) This is deeply problematic because it is not only words and sentences that must be translated or “transferred” but all those elements mentioned above that are embedded in discourse: a rhythm, word associations, and metaphorical systems. What Roman Jakobson and Linda R. Waugh (2002) called the “sound-shapes” of language have to be found in the target language that “matches” all those found in the source language.

Here is one result of this process:

Unfortunately, in its brevity, the transfer-targum did not always, simultaneously, embrace clear simplicity. It could not, for a variety of psychological, historical, and ethnic reasons. A targum would always, arguably and variably, confirm the maxim: *traduttore, traditore*. Therefore, in the case of the transfer-targum, it was a pedagogical necessity to carry alongside it, or better still, within it, its elucidating “explanation,” its “midrash.” From the time of the first targumization of Esdras, the entire rhythmo-catechistics of the Palestinian Rabbis were no more than a huge midrash-explication of the traditional formulae of the Hebraic Torah in scholastic Hebrew, or its Aramaic transfer-targum in popular Aramaic. (p. 336)

(Esdras is Ezra, who is credited with restoring Biblical traditions in Israel after the return from Babylonian exile.)

Jousse’s observation here is more wide-ranging and stunning in its implications than it seems to me he realized; or, perhaps, it is what I would suggest are its pedagogical implications for us today that makes it seem so. The transfer-targum (i.e., transfer-translation) will, despite all efforts, be incommensurable with the source text and tradition. This incommensurability will be brutally obvious to the guardians of the tradition. It would be impossible to ignore it. Everything possible would have to be done to bridge the gap, and, if possible, to bridge the gap, as Jousse said, within the gap, rather than alongside it. Jousse was referring here to the Jewish midrash, or the accumulation of narratives that came to accompany the collection of Jewish law and legal precedents and that ultimately became part of the mode of moral and legal reasoning of the Talmud—but exactly the same principle holds for the stories, legends, maxims, proverbs, instructions, and so on that became the early Christian traditions. The specificities of these traditions aside, the suggestion seems to me to be as follows: culture is generated by the work of the transfer-translation or, more precisely, by the effort to ensure that the translation can be recognized as a “translation,” or as the “same” text as the “original.”

Imagine this to be generally true—that culture is generated not in order to “construct identities” or some other commonplace, but, much more precisely, through the process of ensuring that some gestures, signs, actions, practices are the “same” as others and can therefore stand in and be exchanged for the others. Cultural pedagogy, then, would be a practice of identifying sameness in difference, which would also entail identifying all the differences that would need to be reconciled with the “judgment” of identity. The most productive mode of pedagogical practice, then, would be to provide students with some model—a text, if we are focused on writing—and have them “translate” that text according to some rule that will make the translated text unmistakably different from the original. The assignment would be to navigate and negotiate all those differences generated by the translation and find some way to affirm the identity of the text. Doing so would require students to both narrate and find a rule governing their practice of translation and the decisions they had to make in reconciling their “transfer-translation” with the original. All the elements that make language “work” in a particular context might be brought into play, moving from a study of what makes one idiom intelligible to what makes another “corresponding” but very different idiom intelligible. Like the generativity displayed in the interpretative work done to reconcile the two sides of the transfer-translation, students’

translation work would produce a new idiom of inquiry, one that would have reference points in both idioms. This in itself would be a mode of language learning that would transform the idioms, linguistic habits and commonplaces students bring into the classroom.

Even more, if we return to Jousse and think about more advanced forms of inquiry, his hypothesis regarding the cultural productivity of the transfer-translation suggests an intertextual practice of reading. Every text is to be read as a transfer-translation of another text, real or hypothetical, singular or plural. Of course, the transfer-translations themselves are the results of pedagogical practices through which some other transfer-translation was reconciled. It might be against one Joussean “spirit” (that which would preserve the irreplaceable popular heritage embodied in the oral style) but in another (collaborative, open-ended, pedagogical) to suggest a mode of research, both complex and readily available to students: a mode of research that would have students guided by the problem of finding candidates for the “source” of which they treat the text assigned to them as the transfer-translation “target.” In other words: you have this text—now, go and find (according to some specified parameters) texts that might plausibly be treated as texts this one is translating, and explain what would make it a translation of that text. The more texts are placed next to each other in these terms, and the archives activated, or “revivified,” as Jousse spoke of elsewhere (Jousse, 2015), the more a culture of shared inquiry specific to the class as a disciplinary space is formed. In this way, writing as critical thinking becomes a practice of the continuous emergence of literacy.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup>For a recent discussion of Jousse which explores the complexity and singularity of his work and historical location, see Haun Saussy (2016), *The Ethnography of Rhythm: Orality and Its Technologies*, chapter four, “The Human Gramophone” (pp. 127–155).

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