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The Authority of The Word in St. John's Gospel: Charismatic Speech, Narrative Text, Logocentric Metaphysics

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Everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is an antichrist. . . and whoever perverts *the words* of the Lord. . . and says there is neither a resurrection nor a judgment, that man is the first-born of Satan. Therefore let us abandon the foolishness of the great majority and the false teachings, and let us return to the Word which was transmitted to us from the beginning. Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians*, 7:1-2 (italics added).

The theology of the word is the end of signification and the consummation of desire in complete presence, and thus the word becomes literally flesh, the word that is a silence transcending the entire system of discourse.

Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*.

Few topics are as suited for a celebration of Walter Ong's intellectual accomplishment as the *Logos*, for the Word in its kaleidoscopic manifestations and intriguing transformations constitutes the center of his lifelong scholarly attention. A masterful practitioner of words himself, he has repatterned the entire paradigm of *Logos* and *logoi* toward a new synthesis, the relevance of which extends beyond the broad range of the humanities and social sciences to the so-called hard sciences that shape our technocratic world. The *Logos* of the fourth gospel has served as a forceful intellectual stimulus both in biblical studies and in philosophical, theological deliberations on language and metaphysics. We wish here to pursue the study of the *Logos* in these two areas of biblical exegesis and philosophical, theological reflection. Because Ong's work has awakened sensibilities that are all too often left dormant in academia, it is incumbent on us to

honor him by thinking through the issue of the *Logos* in a novel manner.

I

From Charismatic Speech to Narrative Gospel

Among the numerous studies of the *Logos* in the prologue to the fourth gospel the genetic question has principally claimed the attention of biblical scholars. This question is motivated by the conviction that genuine progress toward understanding John's *Logos* hinges on discovering its historical and philosophical background. The scholarly literature abounds with suggestions ranging from the ancient Hebrew notion of the creative function of *dabar* (=word) to Jewish Wisdom, and on to the Hellenistic philosophical traditions of a Philo, of Stoicism, Neoplatonism, and Neopythagoreanism, all the way to an assumed redeemer myth of gnostic persuasion. At present, Jewish Wisdom is the favorite candidate. It provides us with a key to the principal operations of the *Logos* in John's narrative scenario: preexistence, participation in creation, descent into a hostile world, proclamation of revelation, rejection and homelessness, and return to the heavenly abode. Within limits the genetic approach proves helpful. It also begs a number of crucial questions. Left unanswered is the question of a Johannine motivation for adopting the Wisdom model in the first place. For in order for an influence to be accepted or absorbed, a situation must first arise to greet it as an aid in interpretation. Left unanswered also is the fundamental issue of the identification of Jesus with the *Logos*. Why is he perceived as entering the darkness of the world as *Logos*, and not, for example, as light, or as Wisdom? Why *Logos*?

In an important article F.-M. Braun has observed a distinct tendency in Johannine literature to move from the plural to the singular (1978:40-67). The plural commandments (*entolai*) culminate in a "new commandment" (*entolê kainê*); Jesus' many works (*ta erga*) are accomplished in the work of his glorification (*to ergon*); the sign of the loaves of bread (*hoi artoi*) gives rise to Jesus' self-identification as the bread (*ho artos*); the disciples (*mathêtai*) find ideal representation in the Beloved Disciple (*ho methêtês hon êgapa ho Iêsous*), and so forth. On this analogy, it is tempting to assume a similar shift in emphasis from the many

logoi to the single *Logos* in John's gospel. One would, in that case, have to consider an intra-Johannine rationale linking the plurality of *words* in the gospel with the elevation of Jesus to the *Word*. A connection of just this kind is suggested by Polycarp's agonistic outburst that serves as an epigraph to this piece. Highly offensive as it appears today, it does give us insight into the heart of the bishop's anxiety. His indignation is directed at those Philipians who used the words of their Lord in ways that prompted a denial of the incarnation, of individual resurrection, and of future judgment. How is it that the words of the Lord could become the center of such a grave controversy? In all probability, Polycarp is faced here with a communal practice to let the words of Jesus be effective in their oral, life-giving sense. Words when spoken are bound to present time and in a sense advertise presentness (Ong 1967:130, 168, *passim*). The oral performance of the *logoi* of the Lord likewise manifests presence. If, moreover, in the early Christian milieu the words are spoken prophetically, i.e., in the name and on the authority of the living Lord, they could be understood as effecting both the presence of Christ and communion with him. In this essentially oral sense the *logoi* are endowed with sacral quality. Consistent with this experience of an orally induced presence, there was next to no interest in Jesus' past incarnation or in one's own future soteriological status. In the face of this distinctly oral employment of the *logoi*, Polycarp counsels a return to the *Logos* as it was in the beginning. He clearly intends to redirect attention to the singular *Logos*, the authority over the plural *logoi*. His is a reductive move which, we shall see below, epitomizes the metaphysical bent in the philosophical, theological, and hermeneutical tradition of Western intellectual history. The analogy we have observed between Polycarp's turning away from the *logoi* to the *Logos* and John's predilection for that same authoritative singular, leads us to assume an oral, efficacious operation of *logoi* in both instances. It is the kind of oral sacrality from which emergent orthodoxy in its bent for literacy will increasingly distance itself. One may suspect, therefore, a distinctively oral operation of sayings in John's community which caused the evangelist to reach beyond the *logoi*, spoken by or attributed to Jesus, back to the primordial, personified *Logos*.

The sayings tradition embedded in the fourth gospel is of massive proportions. There does not, to my knowledge, exist an

accurate count. The Farewell Discourse alone (13:31-17:26), a vast collection of speech material, has been estimated to comprise one-fifth of the gospel. If one discounts chapter 21 as a secondary addition, approximately three-fourths of chapters 1-20 consist of sayings. If the passion and resurrection narrative is disregarded, approximately four-fifths of chapters 1-17 appear to be constructed from sayings (Sneller 1985). In a study of Johannine sayings of a strictly proverbial nature, moreover, Kim Dewey has isolated and analyzed thirty-four proverbs (1980). Notably, his essay did not even intend to be exhaustive. So impressed was Dewey with the preponderance of sayings in John that he speculated the gospel may have arisen out of anthological concerns, the drive to collect sayings and to cluster them in sayings collections. However one may view the genesis of the fourth gospel, the immense amount of material that is oral in origin or by adaptation is plainly in sight.

Apart from the sheer quantity of sayings, John's gospel exhibits a pneumatic, oral hermeneutic of the functioning of Jesus' words. None of the synoptic evangelists equals John in that regard. The words, when spoken, are primarily regarded not as carriers of ideas or records of information, but as manifestations of power. They grant access to what is perceived to be real, and pose concomitant threats and danger. This concept of language as an instrument of control and revelation, of persuasion and condemnation is firmly situated in the oral sensorium (Kemp Forrest 1976).

Interestingly, the Johannine Jesus is described as a literate man (7:15: *grammata oiden*), although without formal, Rabbinic schooling (7:15: *mê memathêkôs*). And yet, the key to his person lies in the power of his speech: "Never did a man speak the way this man speaks" (7:46). When we read that his words are in effect "Spirit and life" (6:63), and powered to cleanse hearers (15:3), we know that we move in a world in which language, i.e., spoken words, are a mode of action, an event. Hearing his words and believing or keeping them is a matter of life and death. "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my words, he shall never see (or taste) death" (8:51, 52). A version of this saying is found in the gospel of Thomas, a sayings or cluster gospel, placed there programmatically at the outset of 114 sayings: "Whoever finds the explanation of these words will not taste death." Whether it is with Thomas a matter of deciphering and interpreting the sayings, or with John a matter of hearing and

observing them, they are in each case understood to give life and transcend death. Appropriately, Simon Peter's confession identifies Jesus as dominical speaker whose words hold the key to life: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life" (6:68). The authority of Jesus the speaker is strengthened and the prestige of his message is enhanced by the repeated affirmation that he speaks not his own words, but those he has heard from the Father (8:26; 15:15). Based on this logic, the words he utters and his audience hears are perceived to be the words of God (3:34). What matters about words is less what they say and more what they do. It is a principle enforced in John's gospel as Jesus the speaker makes disciples of those who abide by his words (8:31-32). The power of his words relates hearers to the speaker through the bond of discipleship. Again, words are less carriers of ideational content to be received and transported by individuals than a means of creating community and unity. Such is the authority of his words that they work for better and for worse. They can cause division among those who reject and others who accept (10:19-21), and bring about judgment upon the former (12:48). Considering the effects his words may have, they can be disregarded only with the gravest of consequences. In short, Jesus' words in the fourth gospel are not conceived as signs committed to space but as vocalization, and not as content encased in texts but as events in time effecting life as well as condemnation.

One of the most characteristic forms of speech in John's gospel is the *egô eimi* saying. As is well known, the fourth gospel carries more "I am" sayings than any of the synoptic gospels. At frequent intervals the Johannine Jesus employs the self-authenticating formula, "I am the Light of the World" (8:12), "I am the Good Shepherd" (10:11), "I am the Bread of Life" (6:35, 48), "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (11:25), and so forth. One may presume here a classic oral principle in operation according to which the speaker of words is as important as the message he delivers. In a comparable, though extravagant sense, Jesus the speaker of words of revelation acquires the status of revelation himself. It is this extravagant sense, however, that requires additional explanation. In the ancient Near Eastern and Hellenistic world, gods and goddesses, or their prophetic spokespersons, manifested themselves by way of *egô eimi* language. In the early Christian tradition it was primarily prophets who employed this self-authenticating form of speech (Woll 1981:150-51,

n. 11). It is fair to assume that the *egô eimi* style in John carries similar implications. The Jesus who legitimates himself by way of *egô eimi logoi* speaks not only authoritative language, but specifically prophetic language. He speaks rather like an early Christian prophet.

Prophecy is a category that has shaped crucial features of the Johannine Jesus (Aune 1972:88, *passim*; Boring 1978:113-23; Käsemann 1968:38, *passim*; Michaels 1975:233-64). A classic enunciation of his prophetic function is found in the witness of John the baptizer: "For he whom God has sent speaks the words of God; truly boundless is his gift of the Spirit" (3:34). The verse delineates rather precisely the office of the prophet. The sending formula, regularly associated with Jesus in John, designates him as the prophetic representative and mouthpiece of God. In prophetic fashion he acts as spokesman of the One who sent him, and as dispenser of the divine Spirit. Those who hear his words are invited to believe not only the speaker, but the One who sent him: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word, and believes Him who sent me, has eternal life" (5:24). Word and Life are the principal goods negotiated by the prophetic speaker. Just as the Apocalypse was written by someone steeped in prophetism, and the Johannine letters grew out of a prophetic milieu, so also did the fourth gospel originate from circles in which prophetic, oral speech was very much alive (Boring 1982:48-50).

The prophetic sending formula has deeply affected the narrative world of John. At the very outset, the baptizer himself is introduced as one commissioned by the highest authority: "There was a man sent by God, whose name was John" (1:6). As the baptizer is sent in prophetic fashion, and as Jesus is sent following him, so also will the Paraclete be sent when he comes to replace Jesus (14:26; 15:26). Sent like a prophet, the Paraclete manifests himself in a characteristically oral manner. "Every verb describing the ministry of the Paraclete is directly related to his speech function" (Boring 1978:113). Speaking and hearing, pronouncing and receiving, teaching and bringing to remembrance, bearing witness and guiding in the truth, glorifying and convicting, he fulfills the function of "a pneumatic Christian speech charisma" (Boring 1978:113). Significantly, the Johannine Jesus applies the sending formula toward the end of his career even to the disciples: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (20:21). Since in the fourth gospel the disciples constitute

not merely the Twelve but the believers at large, the consequences are startling. Jesus represents the One who sent him (12:44), and in like manner, those who are sent by Jesus, the disciples, represent Jesus, or even the One who sent him (13:20).

This pervasive function of the prophetic sending formula brings us to suggest that we are dealing here with a projection of a prophetic, charismatic self-consciousness of the Johannine community. In other words, if we conceive individual believers as speaking words of Jesus in prophetic *egô eimi* fashion, then the Johannine Jesus and other figures in the gospel are to some extent at least “comprehensible as a projection (or retrojection) of the religious needs and experiences of the Johannine community. . .” (Aune 1972:77). One may thus plausibly contend that aspects of the socio-religious and oral-rhetorical milieu of the Johannine community have impressed themselves upon the gospel text.

There is an additional feature that we propose to examine only in the most general fashion as it relates to the gospel’s matrix. In his discussion with the Pharisee Nicodemus, Jesus articulates his own authority in the following manner: “And no one has ascended into heaven, except he who has descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (3:13). The statement has a polemical ring to it. There must not be ascent unless there is first descent! It postulates the priority of descent (*katabasis*) over ascent (*anabasis*). The polemic is directed toward an assumption or experience of *anabasis* without prior descent. The context suggests a Mosaic reference (3:14). Moses’ ascent to Sinai, often interpreted as a heavenly journey, preceded his descent from the mountain to deliver the commandments of the Lord (Smith 1973:237-43). If the Mosaic pattern was one of *anabasis* followed by *katabasis*, the pattern instituted by the Johannine Jesus is one of *katabasis* followed by *anabasis*.

It may not be entirely amiss, however, to sense a reservation not only toward a Mosaic *anabasis* tradition, but toward a Christian *anabasis* experience as well. If Sinaitic theophany traditions were part of the Jewish legacy of the Johannine community, John’s specifically Mosaic polemic against a *visio Dei* becomes intelligible (Aune 1972:98-99). This brings us to the visualist language which permeates the gospel alongside its oralist language. The seeing of God, and perhaps of the risen Christ, is an issue in the fourth gospel. But just as *anabasis* experiences are discouraged, so are also direct visions put under restraint. The

prologue itself, for example, culminates in a severe restriction on heavenly visions: "No one has ever seen God at any time; it is God the only Son, even at the Father's side, who has revealed Him" (1:18). By implication, the Son is exceptional in having access to the Father. As such he alone bears witness to what he has seen (3:11). A very similar view is expressed in the Bread of Life discourse: "Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father" (6:46). Restrictive language of this kind appears to be designed to elevate the authority of Jesus. But if one inquires more deeply into the motives for heightening christology, one wonders whether the promotion of Jesus to the status of sole visionary is not meant to curb *anabasis* experiences among the believers in John's community. Philip wishes to see the Father, and Jesus responds that seeing him (=Jesus) equals seeing the Father. It is a motif repeated several times in the gospel (12:45; 14:7; 17:24). It is worth mentioning in this connection that John narrates neither a baptismal story nor a transfiguration story. This may be significant in that both accounts in the synoptic tradition depict the open heavens, a motif John appears to be reluctant to encourage. The only time he refers to the open heavens is in one of the most puzzling statements found in the gospel: ". . . you will see heaven opened and angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (1:51). Whatever else this saying may mean, it does not promise individuals direct access to power, but rather a vision of the Son of Man as sole communicator with the heavenly world (Bultmann 1971:105, n. 3). Individual believers are advised to work through the one who possesses sole access to power. Hence, the one reference to the open heaven does more to curb than to promote ascent mysticism.

The social and linguistic world that emerges from behind the gospel is one constituted by the Spirit manifesting itself in efficacious speech and perhaps heavenly visions. The preponderance and oral functioning of the *logoi*, the *egô eimi* diction, the egalitarian practice of discipleship, the prophetic shaping of principal characters in the gospel, and a preoccupation with accessibility to the heavenly world are all features that will have been nourished by a profoundly oral, prophetic, charismatic community. The believing disciples carry the *logoi*, speaking them in the name and on the authority of the risen, living Christ. The rite of baptism may well have played a greater role in this

community than the narrative will let us know. Through word and sacramental rite the *praesentia Christi* inhabits the individual and communal experience. Perhaps the presence of the Spirit encouraged heavenly visions or journeys. When seen in this perspective one wonders whether we are not here in a situation similar to the one castigated by Polycarp. The deeply oral sense of pleromatic presence is ill-disposed to favor reflection on Jesus' past incarnate life or one's own future soteriological fate. One lives in the presence of the Word.

One of the reasons for an exacting treatment of oral performance and communication, Walter Ong has taught us, is "not to reject the later media, but to understand them, too, better" (1967:314). In the case of the fourth gospel, a substantial measure of oral ethos has become absorbed into the written narrative. Yet the overall function of this gospel is not to produce an unedited version of oral verbalization, but to recontextualize orality, and to devise a corrective against it.

John's narrative logic suggests that Jesus exercises authority by virtue of his heavenly *katabasis*. Coming from above, he is "above all" (3:31), setting a norm critical of unreserved *anabasis* mysticism. Descent also provides the presupposition for narrating the incarnate life. By elevating the earthly Jesus to normative significance, the evangelist introduces a historicizing dimension and a sense of pastness that is not directly translatable into pleromatic presence. The focus of the narrative, moreover, falls on Jesus' death which is interpreted as his being "lifted up" (*hypsôthênai*). This "lifting up," metaphorically understood as ascension, transforms death into the hour of glorification (17:1). Significantly, John does not narrate an ascent story in the Lukan sense of Jesus being lifted up into the heavens (Lk 24:51; Acts 1:2,10). In this gospel ascent is synchronized with death, and death serves to consummate the prophetic *egô eimi* identity of the Son of Man: "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he" (8:28; cf. 3:14; 12:34). When taken as a narrative whole, the gospel does not seem to benefit the desire to gain full life in the present, be it through the power of the *logoi* or in visions. For the *logoi* are enlisted in the service of the written narrative. To what extent they can still be extracted so as to function in their lifegiving sense is an exceedingly difficult hermeneutical question. Suffice it to say that their principal responsibility is now to their new narrative world. And the norm set by this narrative is Jesus'

life and death. Is it too much to assume that henceforth the way to life leads not through the sounding of the words, but through the silence of death?

Earlier we observed how some christological features were modeled after the figure of the early Christian prophet. In other ways, however, the Johannine Jesus distances himself from what he regards as excesses of prophetic self-consciousness. He does, for example, find it necessary to protect himself against *autodoxology*, the drive to seek one's own glory. Given the oral, prophetic matrix of the gospel, at least some of those speaking in the power of the Spirit could conceivably have developed a weighty sense of self-identity. Indeed, could not pneumatic speech and heavenly visions have engendered a feeling of superiority even over Jesus himself? This may be suggested by the intriguing *Logos* that the disciple shall not only do the works of Christ, but "greater works than these shall he do" (14:12). Against this background it is comprehensible why Jesus would lay down the rule differentiating legitimate from illegitimate successorship: "The one who speaks from himself, seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him, he is true, and there is no unrighteousness in him" (7:18). In a similar vein, the Johannine Jesus twice counsels that ". . . a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him" (13:16; 15:20). This is language designed to correct not merely the universal human disposition toward vanity, but the specific problem of charismatic self-consciousness. In this way, the Johannine Jesus, though modeled after the prophet-disciple, nonetheless sets critical accents with respect to a charismatic discipleship that placed itself above tradition and traditional authority (Woll 1981:80-92).

In the wake of Jesus' *anabasis*, the disciples live under the guidance of the Paraclete. They live, therefore, in the age of the Spirit (20:22). Still, theirs is not a life in unlimited pleromatic bliss. They were clearly not in a position to return with Jesus to the place of his departure (13:33). "His access to the Father is direct, unmediated; theirs is mediated" (Woll 1981:31). To be sure, the Paraclete functions as surrogate for Jesus. Yet he can come only after Jesus has departed (16:7). He is, therefore, an *altos paraklêtos* (14:16), a successor not fully identical with Jesus. The time of the presence of the Paraclete is thus also a time of the absence of Jesus who is with the Father. For the time being, the disciples are orphaned (14:18). It is, moreover, one of the

functions of the Paraclete to “teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all I said to you” (14:26). This remembering activity of the Paraclete has no parallel in the New Testament and should, therefore, be taken seriously as a distinct concern of the fourth evangelist. Remembering entails a retrospective point of view. What is to be remembered is everything Jesus ever said. This motif is closely tied in with the narrative logic of the gospel. While the disciples are depicted as lacking full understanding during the earthly ministry, they are promised remembrance at the time of glorification and with the coming of the Spirit (2:22; 7:39; 12:16). The Spirit’s arrival marks the hermeneutical turning point separating the time of concealment from the time of remembrance. This remembrance is more fully accomplished with the production of the narrative text itself, for it incarnates retrospectivity in a sense orality never could. It sets the norm for what is henceforth to be remembered: the Jesus tradition written by the evangelist and sanctioned by the Spirit (Woll 1981:103; Bultmann 1971:576, n. 2). This does not bind believers slavishly to textuality in the sense that all oral sensibilities are extinguished. One of the functions of the Paraclete is to teach what the earthly Jesus did not and could not say (16:12-13). Creative, pneumatic speech will continue in the age of the Spirit. But all *logoi* will from now on be measured by a norm, i.e., the authoritative record of the written text.

This brings us back to our principal topic of the authority of the Word in John’s gospel. We remember Polycarp’s anxiety over the Lord’s sayings whose life-giving performance left little, if any, room for incarnational christology, for individual resurrection and future judgment. The bishop had coped with what appeared to him to be a problem by deflecting attention away from the controversial *logoi* to the authoritative *Logos* that was from the beginning. Not unlike Polycarp, John the evangelist coped with a world in which the sense and function of Jesus’ words were utterly oral. Responding to a multitude of words and authoritative speakers, John articulated singular authority by personalizing the Word and lodging it at the beginning. Once the speaker of *logoi* was elevated to the *Logos*, he assumed a position of control over the *logoi* material. Placed in authoritative position, the *Logos* took charge of the *logoi* in and through the narrative text. There is a sense in which the sayings, once situated in the narrative, are taken away from their speakers outside the text. Not that a text

can ever put an end to speaking. But when operating vis-à-vis a world dominated by the spoken word, texts create new worlds and set new standards. Whether oral in origin or by adaptation, most *logoi* are now put in the mouth of a Jesus who speaks prior to his *anabasis*. As such they are distinctly his own words, grounded, as it were, in a historicized framework. They are not, thereby, repudiated, but recontextualized, or perhaps more to the point, reincarnated into the new medium of textuality. Now the incarnate Christ himself harbors and administers the oral treasure. Seen in these perspectives, it may well seem appropriate that Jesus presides as *Logos* over a narrative that sets standards for oral proclamation and prophetic authority, and revises a christology and a notion of discipleship that are both deeply rooted in the oral matrix.

II

Logocentrism versus Textcentrism

Our thesis of the incorporation of the *logoi* in a text that is presided over by the *Logos* does not, of course, exhaust the Johannine hermeneutics of orality and textuality. We shall in this second part go beyond the shift from charismatic speech to narrative gospel, and focus attention on the status of the *Logos* as determiner of the text. Our concern here is with a particular philosophical and theological view of language, both written and oral, that entails the assumption of, or inspiration for, metaphysics.

Central to the hermeneutics of John is the notion of the preexistence of the *Logos*. Being with God *en archê*, he is situated prior to the realm of history and outside the reality of the text. In this position he constitutes something of a metaphysical reference point without which world and text are deprived of orientation. It follows that the text cannot really be accorded full self-referentiality, let alone ultimate significance. This does not detract from our earlier observation concerning the normative function of the written gospel. When viewed in relation to the *logoi*, the text operates normatively. When viewed in relation to the *Logos*, however, it appears in a less prominent position. Subordinated to the metaphysical authority of the *Logos*, the text is but a transition, a detour even, toward what is considered to be real. In current linguistic parlance, John's *Logos* is a typical, and perhaps the leading, case of *logocentrism*. Coined by Jacques

Derrida (1976:11, *passim*), the term refers to the Greco-Christian or Platonic-Johannine tradition according to which language, above all written language, belongs to the realm of the contingent and imperfect, while true knowledge and being pertain to the plane of the immutable forms or the preexistent, personified *Logos*. It is a school of thought which both derived from and contributed to the metaphysical tradition in the West. In our time, *logocentrism* has been widely displaced by non-metaphysical and antimetaphysical thought in religion, linguistics, and philosophy. When seen in these broader philosophical perspectives, the historic nature of the Johannine *Logos* leaps to the eye. A useful way of highlighting its increasingly precarious role in Western intellectual and religious history is to discuss three schools of thought that are antithetical to *Logos* metaphysics: Rabbinic hermeneutics, the Anglo-American New Criticism, and the grammatological philosophy of Derrida.

To Susan Handelman goes the honor of having explicated Rabbinic hermeneutics vis-à-vis a Gentile, Christian, and specifically Johannine *logocentrism*. Her book, *The Slayers of Moses* (1982; cf. also 1983:98-129), is a work of profound intellectual insights. In it she notes that Judaism, once robbed of its central place in 70 C.E., reasserted itself in the Rabbinic mode which cultivated the book as the new center. The Rabbis became the foremost experts in reading and interpreting texts. Theirs was a world of Scripture which called forth a relentless concentration on written words and their interrelations, “including even the physical shapes of letters and even the text’s punctuation” (1982:17). Intertextuality and interpretation was the condition of the Exile. There was no metaphysical escape from the text, no exit toward sacred place or sacred person. Interpretation moved from one sense to another, shunning the temptation to lift itself from the visible to an invisible realm of true being (1982:21). In the absence of extralinguistic standards of correctness, texts in the Rabbinic tradition “echo, interact, and interpenetrate” (1982:21). The Rabbis practiced and generated interpretation, endlessly searching and probing texts, often through methods akin to free association, writing commentaries on texts and commentaries in turn on commentaries. This “horizontal interplay” (1982:65) of interpretation created a space of difference and conflict, of contradiction and cacophony, never permitting the many meanings to be gathered up into the one meaning. One does not move in Rabbinic hermeneutics, as one does in John, from the plural to the

singular. There is only plural. All the elements in the text are potentially equal, the particular not being inferior to the general, and the general incapable of predicating an essence beyond the particular (1982:65). In classic linguistic, theological terms, words are never understood as signs pointing beyond themselves to a metaprinciple governing all language and interpretation. Words only point to other words. "God's presence is inscribed or traced within a text, not a body. Divinity is located in language, not person" (1982:89). Meaning is accomplished by displacements in and of texts; it is not to be displaced away from texts. In this manner, Rabbinic hermeneutics illustrates the eternal desire to sustain the productivity of the text, revising it, re-creating it, reversing it in interpretation after interpretation.

When seen from the Rabbinic vantage point, *logocentrism*, the displacement of meaning away from the text, suggests the end of signification, the suppression of the fertility of texts. This is the meaning of Handelman's epigraph to this piece. A theology of the Word, transcending the realm of textuality and intertextuality, abolishes the space of difference, consummates desire, and puts an end to what matters most in human life: interpretation.

The kind of text-bound thinking advanced by the Rabbis made headway in the non-Jewish culture as well, putting *logocentrism* increasingly on the defensive. In academia, *textcentrism* manifested itself with intellectual sophistication in the Anglo-American New Criticism of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s (Ransom 1941). One of its ideological underpinnings was a formalist understanding of language which, when reduced to a simple formula, states that language, above all written language, has a life of its own. Culture and history are no longer taken seriously as a causal or contributing factor in the making of texts. Genetic considerations were held to be fallacious at worst and irrelevant at best as far as a proper understanding of texts was concerned. There is thus no way texts can either be reduced to or explained by anything extraneous to written language. They are assumed to be generated from no other order but that of other texts. Tradition, a significant value for the New Criticism, was seen to be embodied above all in intertextuality. In this climate, the objective of literary criticism was to explore how words hang together inside texts and how they relate to words in other texts, but not to test texts against something before or behind them. Little, if any, attention was given to world outside of texts. What

mattered was the presentation or transcription of world inside of texts. In one sense stridently anti-Romantic, the New Criticism served as a healthy antidote against naively psychological notions of authorship and crudely representational ideas about language and its relation to non-linguistic actuality. How texts relate to oral utterance, however, or how the structure of language and the texture of existence correlate, or at least interact, were simply not regarded as viable issues.

In view of its unswerving loyalty to the world of stable texts the New Criticism is in some quarters described as the product of a self-absorbed, bourgeois middle-class mentality (Hawkes 1977:154-55). Perhaps this is too ideological a judgment that does not quite get to the heart of the matter. More to the point is Ong's observation that the New Criticism was "a prime example of text-bound thinking" (1982:160). Treating texts as self-maintaining and self-referential artifacts, it bespeaks a desire to reduce language to closed systems. As Ong has made clear, this closed-model thinking epitomized by the *textcentrism* of the New Criticism flourished at a stage in the cultural, intellectual history of the West when the technologizing, objectifying impact of printing had reached a high point (1977:305-41). This requires a brief exposition.

Spoken words are bound to the authority of the speaker and inseparable from auditors and their lifeworlds. Lacking a visual presence, they are uncontainable in formal models. To regard speech as knowable in terms strictly of itself is a notion that has no conceivable reality in oral culture. Oral utterance cannot exist in transauthorial and transcommunal objectivity. As we turn to scribality, we note that ancient and medieval manuscripts were rarely, if ever, thought to be fully closed or to reflect their own internal relations (Bruns 1982:44-59). Both the manufacture and use of manuscripts readily interacted with orality, be it through dictation or recitation. Moreover, handwritten texts were generally understood to reach out toward and communicate with readers, or more likely hearers, so as to please, persuade, or stir them to action. While chirographic culture was by and large unfriendly toward fully closed systems, typography, the art of printing, increasingly fostered closed-model thought. With printing technical control over words reached a state of perfection unimaginable in scribal, let alone oral culture. More than ever words took on the appearance of objectivity and semantic self-reliance. That language

exists in the space of impersonal neutrality could become a perfectly reasonable and academically acceptable assumption. If we imagine centuries of interiorization of the typographic, objectifying management of words, we can understand in direct consequence of it not only the New Criticism, but also the Russian Formalism, different schools of structuralism, as well as the Saussurian principle of language whereby meaning is figured as relations between words and not as reference to something outside of them. When thus placed in the broader setting of cultural history, the apotheosis of the text as a closed system, and the implied fading of *logocentrism*, can readily be seen as an outgrowth of the typographic age.

Textcentrism sought and found its elaborate philosophical self-justification in the work of Derrida. Taking up a position of privileging *écriture*, he delivers in *Of Grammatology* (1976) an uncompromising critique of *logocentrism*. From this very textcentrist position he chooses to read Western philosophy and theology not as we did in terms of a fading of *logocentrism* and the rise of *textcentrism*, but rather as a stubborn clinging to the illusions of *logocentrism*. There is no disguising the fact that Derrida confronts us with abysmal depths or, as the case may be, voids in our being—if being were a concept acceptable to him. Few, if any, have reflected more keenly and more abstrusely on the high-risk area of language, exposing us to its dangers, deceptions, and displacements. This one must grant him, as it must also be granted that he has never acknowledged familiarity with the work on orality undertaken by Eric A. Havelock (1963, 1978), Albert B. Lord (1960), Walter J. Ong (1967, 1977, 1982), and many others.

The subject of Derrida's discussion in *Of Grammatology* and the principal source of his distress is the referential paradigm of language. He views it as a root cause of *logocentrism*. With force and great persuasive powers he inveighs against a longstanding convention of thinking of linguistic values as referring to something outside of language. Nowhere does he find referentiality more subtly and insidiously entrenched than in the linguistic, theological concept of the sign. According to a prominent Western tradition, ranging from Plato to Stoicism, and from Augustine through medieval theology to Ferdinand de Saussure, the linguistic sign is defined by the *signifier* and the *signified*. In brief, the *signifier* constitutes the visible marks committed to stone, papyrus, or paper, and the *signified* the so-called meanings we attach to them. Whether we speak with the Latin tradition of *signans* and

signatum, or with Saussure and Derrida of *significant* and *signifié*, the two constituents determine the character of written language in terms of a bipolarity of the sensible versus the intelligible. More implicitly, they suggest referentiality, treating language as written exteriority, the *signifier*, capable of mediating the essential referents, the *signified*, as long ago pronounced in the medieval dictum: *aliquid stat pro aliquo* (Derrida 1976:13).

As Derrida assesses the history of the sign in Western philosophy and theology, the *signified*, the meaning attached to the *signifier*, came to take on a reality in its own right. Indeed, its reality acquired greater prestige than that of the signifying marks on surfaces. One fell into the “naive objectivism” (1976:61) of attributing transcendental significance and ontological status to the so-called referent of language. The *signified* was assumed to be imaginable as a *res* or *ousia*, and thinkable as being “in the eternal present of the divine logos and specifically in its breath” (1976:73). In this way, linguistics collaborated with theological speculations on a presence alleged to be outside of *signifiers* and summed up in the plentitude of the logos. This desire to ascribe transcendental significance to the signified, and to strive after *parousia* and underived origin, Derrida calls *logocentrism*, or *logocentric metaphysics* (1976:43).

Logocentrism, firmly entrenched in the linguistic-theological concept of sign, manifests itself in numerous dichotomies: body versus soul, culture versus nature, letter versus Spirit, form versus essence, derived versus underived, and so forth. What they all have in common is a craving for the “metaphysics of presence” (1976:49), making us believe that we live out of eternal verities and elementary unity, making us yearn for the underived origin, making us deny the derived self, and making us feel we experience full being.

One of those logocentric dichotomies to which Derrida directs his special attention is that of textuality versus orality. In the logocentric climate of Western theology, philosophy, and linguistics, orality has traditionally been treated as a transcendental *signified*, with textuality playing the role of the *signifier*. Consequently, the human voice transmits the elementary and unitary experience, while writing is consistently viewed as the outer face of it. The internal, truly valuable, oral speech is set above the exteriority of writing. Speech is assumed to be innocence, and writing fall from innocence. The pure originality of oral verbalization is disrupted

by the original sin of writing. An artful and contrived technique forced itself upon the natural condition of the Word, violating it, and raping it. Writing is forced entry. The outside erupted within the inside, invading a living presence and violating the soul. In thus setting the autoproduction of speech against the alienation of written language, and nature against nature denatured, the Western tradition has tended to operate in terms of a "reduction of writing to the rank of an instrument enslaved to a full and originarily spoken language" (1976:29). Assuming the soul of oral speech, writing would always be humbled to being mere body.

In the end, *Of Grammatology* intends to erase the logocentric illusion of the transcendental *signified* in whatever form one encounters it. Not surprisingly, the exposure of orality's status as *signified* throws us back upon the text. Engulfed by textuality, we are called in effect to replay the Rabbinic experience in its most radical sense. To have shown this connection between Rabbinic hermeneutics and Derrida's post-modernist philosophy remains the superlative achievement of Handelman. As the Rabbis engaged in the interminable play with the *signifiers*, so does Derrida invite us to "think of writing as a game within language" (1976:50). Both choose the exile of grammatology over ontology, which is either assumed or declared to be absent. For the Rabbis, as for Derrida, the text constitutes the space of difference, misspelled by Derrida as *differance* so as to protect himself and us from privileging language with final reference. For written language is form and not substance. Lacking constitutive meaning, it harbors merely a *trace* which "does not let itself be summed up in the simplicities of the present" (1976:66). And finally, as the Rabbinic tradition postulated the preexistence of written language in the scroll of the Torah (shab. 88b), so does Derrida claim *arche-writing* (1976:56, *passim*), essentially suggesting that there was differentiation prior to unity, and lack of innocence without an anterior state of purity.

As we move toward the end of the twentieth century, with yet another holocaust behind us, the Rabbinic hermeneutic of deferring and differing has gained wide acceptance in modernity and post-modernism, while logocentric hermeneutic, the reduction of language and meaning to ultimate referents, appears more difficult than ever to affirm. Given the present climate, the most thoroughgoing demythologizing would be the deliberate erasure of the *Logos* and the acceptance of exile in the space of written

letters. Yet this cannot be the objective of this piece. Having experienced the power of the grammatological tradition, it behooves us to return to the logocentric gospel, and to relearn its textual valence, its treatment of the *logoi*, and its subordination to the *Logos*. In keeping with the orality-literacy topic of this paper, we shall formulate these concluding observations linguistically rather than in classic christological terms.

The presupposition of John's gospel, as of all narrative gospels, is that divinity was incarnated in a person. While alive, this person was of course manifest, both visibly and audibly, to those who saw and heard him. A performer of deeds and a speaker of *logoi*, he attracted some and offended others. The sword of his mouth cut both ways. Oral utterance is capable both of strengthening human bonds and of severing them. A good many other hearers were puzzled and alienated. The riddling nature of his words has left its mark on the Johannine vocabulary (Leroy 1968). Once his earthly life was accomplished, he continued exercising influence by passing fully into language. Charismatic speakers in the Johannine community resumed the genre of the *logoi*, speaking in the Spirit and on his authority. Using the presenting power of oral speech to full advantage, they rendered him present in the community, or at least they claimed they did. It was, however, a form of presence that precluded the incarnational dimension. Propelled by breath and attuned to the spirit, the *logoi* tended to promote the living, spiritual Lord to a degree that eclipsed the incarnate Jesus. Polycarp, speaking on behalf of orthodoxy's rapid adjustment to literacy, had astutely observed and angrily denounced the performative powers of the *logoi*. The bishop interpreted the phenomenon as a "perversion of the words of the Lord." Of course, stories must have circulated about this person, and stories have a retrospective bent. Still, as long as stories remain unwritten, they retain a contemporizing actuality. Spoken stories accommodate to the hearers' present more than written ones. Full retrospectivity and the retrieval of a fully incarnate life followed by death is thus the achievement of textuality. In this sense, orality-literacy reflections cast fresh light on John's textual performance and on incarnation, this text's leading motif. Medium and message are connected by the compelling logic of incarnation. The Jesus who is mediated through language accomplished his entry into the flesh of humanity by full implementation of the powers of textuality. Linguistically

speaking, the *Logos* incarnated himself in a hostile world by choosing the exile of textuality.

No text grows directly out of lived experience. Words are related to other words, both oral and written. The text of John's gospel is conspicuous by the presence of a massive amount of speech material. Yet matters of orality and textuality have been curiously confused in Johannine studies. The last two decades saw a preoccupation with John's use of other texts, primarily the so-called *Gospel of Signs* (Fortna 1970; Nicol 1972; Teeple 1974). Inspired by the typographical model of intertextuality, scholars felt inclined to apprehend the text's diachronic history almost exclusively in textual terms. A more discriminating assessment of the *logoi* tradition could not have overlooked the extent to which oral verbalization and values are stored in the Johannine narrative. Indeed, the gospel's commitment to the genre of the *logoi* is far more in evidence than its reliance on another gospel text. As is often the case in the study of orality-literacy relations, the failure to come to terms with a text's oral legacy in turn impedes apprehension of the text itself. In Johannine studies one tendency in recent years was to emphasize the *textual* nature of the history of the tradition, while another was to read the text itself as if it were an *oral* proclamation. Speaking on behalf of a majority of scholars, Ernst Käsemann illustrates the latter: "The *praesentia Christi* is the centre of his [John's] proclamation" (1968:15). If this were truly John's principal concern, would he not have better stayed with the oral powers of prophetic speech?

Lest we play lightly and loosely with the metaphysics of presence, this might be an occasion to dialogue with Derrida. Oral utterance evokes presence as writing never does. Contemporary electronic communication, termed "secondary orality" by Ong (1977:298-99), confronts us with history as an urgent present in a sense unknown to previous, print-dominated times. One could meet Derrida halfway by conceding that speech already represents alienations and pretenses, and that the ideal of presence is problematic when claimed for speech and hearing. This must not exempt us from exploring orality and literacy, their differences, relations and complex interactions, a task which Derrida along with many others has failed to undertake. For to postulate *arche-writing* without a prior grasp of what oral utterance was and is smacks of a projection of typographic sensibilities. When it comes to the matter of textuality, however, Derrida proves to be a

safer guide, especially in advocating the incompatibility of writing with the metaphysics of presence. Texts cannot be entirely supportive of oral attributes and values, and often are subversive of them. The *logoi*, when placed in the Johannine narrative, are deprived of the kind of powers they exerted when spoken by prophetic speakers. Nor does the written text about the incarnate Jesus operate in the best interest of the presence of the living Christ. Incarnation mediated by textuality is one thing; the *praesentia Christi* experienced in orality another.

Incarnation and textuality, one mediated through the vehicle of the other, constitute basic norms promoted by the gospel. Once the text is in existence and in fact privileged by canonization, it is inevitably caught in the chain of interpretation. The narrative that is itself interpretation engenders more and more interpretation. There does not seem to be an end to it. This is the *grammatological* destiny shared by all texts, including this one. Like any other text, the gospel invites or, as the case may be, condemns us to engage in the “horizontal interplay” of the *signifiers*.

I do suspect, however, that for the most part of its history the gospel was read *logocentrally*. Hearers, or readers, let themselves be guided by the narrative dynamic to move from plural experience to singular authority. While text and incarnation were understood normatively, they nevertheless served the larger ends of transtextual realities. The text was thus not taken with ultimate seriousness. This is hard to comprehend in the *grammatological* age which has come to view language and literature as closed systems. However, with the exception of Rabbinic hermeneutics, Western literary history has only recently begun to view textuality as an end in itself. What used to matter in Western literature was not primarily the intratextual construction of meaning *per se*, but rather the textual strategies to affect readers’ intellect and imagination.

Still more difficult to grasp for the age of *arche-writing* is the idea of the preexistent *arche-Logos*. Indeed, the very notion of the preexistence, according to which human beings are fashioned after some model that existed before they did, has no place in *grammatology*. In fairness to John it should be stressed that the *Logos* represents not an *extralinguistic* mode of authority, but an *extratextual* one. This gospel knows no pre-word or non-linguistic metaphysics! It rather is fundamentally Word-centered, and the

Word undoubtedly epitomizes oral utterance. Again, what is unthinkable in the age of *grammatology* is not altogether alien to historical periods when linguistic properties were defined largely in oral terms. The privileging of the *Logos* in a time still dominated by orality should not surprise us any more than the privileging of writing in our own present. That the *Logos* incarnates itself in textuality and texts emanate from orality constitutes common thinking in antiquity about the relations of speech and writing. By oral standards, not even the personification of the *Logos* is entirely baffling, for what typifies oral verbalization is the inseparable unity of speaker and message.

Logos, finally, is also the appropriate metaphor for transcendence. Like oral speech, the *Logos* is ephemeral. It has at its disposal no visual or physical means of preservation. It is, therefore, inaccessible to any standards of measurement. Like oral speech, the *Logos* manifests itself in the moment of verbal action. Its prime potency is sound. As such it is elusive presence. These are attributes of divinity.

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