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Form as a Mnemonic Device: Cultural Texts and Cultural Memory

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Benedict Anderson defined nations as “imagined communities,” implying that there are communities that are not imagined but based on some kind of “hard” essential reality such as family, clan, tribe, and so forth.¹ On closer reflection, however, it becomes clear that all communities or, to be more precise, all collective identities are imagined. It is not “blood” or “descent” as such that keeps a group together but the shared *consciousness* of it, the idea of common descent. The same applies even to personal identity. Even the self-image of a person may be seen as an imagined entity. Identity, on all its levels, from the individual person to large groups such as nations and religious communities, is a product of imagination and of mental representation.

The constitutive role of memory in this process of self-image making or identity formation was identified by the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s² and is constantly confirmed and expanded by modern psychology, psychotherapy, and brain research.³ “We are what we remember.”⁴ In the context of this discourse, memory is usually understood as a function of the human brain and as a matter of brain cells and their connections. Halbwachs decisively expanded this narrow notion of memory by showing its social dimension. Individual memory is a social fact; it develops by socialization and communication. The same applies, as

George Herbert Mead has shown, to personal identity, to the category of selfhood that is formed by processes of mirroring or triangulation in relation to "significant others."⁵ Thus, the slogan "we are what we remember" must be complemented by the phrase "we are what we belong to," since remembering and belonging are so closely interconnected. In this respect, a person may be defined as the juncture of two dimensions: the social dimension and the dimension of time. Our memory enables us to orient ourselves in both the temporal and the social dimension, to "belong" in the broadest sense, to form relations with others. Memory as a means of orientation has to be understood as a faculty of remembering and of forgetting. Those who remember everything are unable to orient themselves in time and society in the same way as those who notice everything are unable to orient themselves in space. Orientation requires selection. The function of memory is orientation, not the storage and reproduction of true and objective representations of the past.

For Halbwachs, the cement that keeps groups together, the principle of connectivity, from family to nation to religious communities, is emotion. He defined groups as *communautés affectives*. Emotion is certainly an important factor in the formation of collective self-images or imagination in the sense of Benedict Anderson. What seems much more important in this context and is being constantly undervalued, however, is the role of symbolization, of "symbolic forms" in the sense of Ernst Cassirer, whose work on the philosophy of symbolic forms⁶ appeared simultaneously with Maurice Halbwachs's work on the social frames of memory. The human being as the *animal sociale*, the "*zōon politikon*" of Aristotle, is not so much the emotional but the symbol-using animal.

The notion of symbol forces us to transcend the frames of body and consciousness and to take into account the whole range of cultural expression, of texts, images, and actions, as carriers or representations of memory and identity expressive of time, selfhood, and belonging. It is not adequate to restrict the notion of memory to the individual psyche, as the psychologists do, or to the sphere of communication in the wake of Maurice Halbwachs and the social psychologists. My concern is to open up the sphere of culture—or at least a core domain comprising religion, art, history, and morality—to research into memory and to investigate what we call "cultural memory" in its forms and functions. In the following brief survey, I explain the memory function of cultural objects, which I divide into material objects, actions, and texts—or *deiknymena*, *drōmena*, and *legomena*, to use the terminology of the ancient mystery cults.

Material Objects

In the sphere of material objects, the memory function becomes manifest in a will to form or formative intention, which informs the productions of human activity so as to make them share a set of distinctive features or acquire a kind of family resemblance. The formal repertoire of tools, weapons, pottery, pictures, and buildings—in fact, all kinds of artifacts that, as traces of human existence, reach back over many millennia—is informed by a strict regularity that renders it accessible to morphological analysis, in the same way as the forms of nature. This regularity makes it possible to identify a singular object in terms of date, provenance, and function.⁷

The will to form leads to the formation of traditions and ensures cultural continuity and identity.⁸ In this respect, we may speak of a *memory-function of culture*, even of material culture. This morphological tradition or memory is the basis of prehistory and archaeology and all other disciplines of cultural studies dealing with human artifacts. Art history, musicology, philology, literary studies, and so on reflect in their methodology the morphological features of cultural products that are expressive of the memory function of culture. There is a *will to form* that is a will of transmission, of transmitting a distinctive cultural identity to further generations. In its earliest stages, it must not necessarily have had a conscious purpose, and the formation of tradition among the first tribes of human beings was probably not very different from nature's ways of stabilizing traditions. Animals do things, such as building their homes, in forms that show a much more striking family resemblance, in fact, a complete identity. Seen this way, the principle of human ways of forming traditions seems to be variation rather than identity, in contrast to the animal world, where we see identical repetition and replication.

The principle of variation becomes more and more important with the advance of cultural evolution. We must not forget, however, that in the human world, family resemblance or distinctive features in artifacts do not stem from a natural, that is, instinctive disposition but from free choice among alternative solutions. Free choice requires orientation, and orientation is provided not by instinct, that is, biological memory, but by cultural memory. Thus we may say that, going back to a very early stage of the production of artifacts, a distinction between a functional, or primary, aspect and a symbolical, or secondary, aspect is possible, the primary being its function as a tool, the secondary consisting in its belonging to a tradition of tool making. An arrowhead, for example, shows in its primary aspect its function with regard to which it has been shaped by its maker,

and it shows in its secondary aspect its stylistically distinctive features that tell us something about its date and provenance, its belonging to what prehistorians call a "specific culture." From its functionally distinctive features we learn that it is an arrowhead (and not a macehead), and from its stylistically distinctive features we learn that it belongs to a certain North American tribe of two thousand years ago.

From a certain time onward—which is usually connected with the invention of agriculture and pottery, that is, the "Neolithic revolution"—the distinction between the primary and the secondary level of shaping becomes even more obvious by the introduction of a new principle of form giving, *decoration*, which belongs exclusively to the second level. A knife and a jar do not fulfill their function any better by being decorated with ornaments or figures, but they gain immensely in morphological features, or pregnancy, permitting their identification with regard to provenance, date, and cultural context. At this stage, at the latest, we may confidently say that the distinction between the primary and the secondary was consciously made and practiced by the producers and users of cultural artifacts, for decorated artifacts do not carry these features just as symptoms that tell only the modern connoisseur about their contextual circumstances but display them as symbols conveying a certain message to the contemporary user and observer. These artifacts undergo a secondary formalization, enhancing not their functionality but their meaning, a meaning that aims at making visible certain elements of the semantic universe and the identity of the group. This is how the aesthetic makes its first appearance among the material productions of human culture.

The function of decoration is not to be described as "disinterested pleasure" (*interesseloses Wohlgefallen*, Kant's definition of the aesthetic experience) but as a kind of memorization technique by which the semantic universe is made not only visible but permanent and transmittable. Second-level formalization serves, within the sphere of objects of everyday life, as a principle of connectivity, stabilizing and transmitting cultural knowledge and symbolizing norms, values, and myths that constitute collective identity. In these early times, "before the era of art," the aesthetic seems inseparably linked to the mnemonic.

Action

The will to form imprints itself not only in artifacts belonging to the *entourage matériel* but also in actions, particularly in actions that were

meant to be efficient beyond the moment of performance and thus to create and support memory. In the sphere of actions, the distinction between a primary and a second level of formalization becomes inevitable. This is the distinction between routines and rites, or "routinization" and "ritualization." In the case of routines, formalization is meant simply to relieve effort in the pursuit of a certain goal. This primary (functional) level of formalization already fulfills a mnemonic function. But there is also a possible secondary (symbolical) level of formalization in which the mnemonic function is much more prominent.

This secondary level of formalization may be called "ritualization." Rites are symbolic actions whose meaning exceeds the primary purpose of the action. The reaping of grain, for example, is an action that is usually heavily formalized in its technical performance without being, for this reason, a rite. Its only purpose is the fulfillment of an important step in the grain harvest. This is what we may call the "primary purpose," and the only function of routinization lies in paving the way to its easy achievement. In the ancient Egyptian festival of Min, on the other hand, the reaping of grain was celebrated with great solemnity in order to ensure not only the abundance of present and future harvesting but also the stability and legitimacy of the reign of the pharaoh as the guarantor of fertility and abundance. This goal exceeds by far the primary purpose of cutting grain. In this case, we are dealing not with a routine but with a rite. Routinization is just formalization and nothing more; in the case of ritualization, however, formalization fulfills the additional function of semiotization, of charging the action with meaning. Rites are "symbolic actions" referring to and acting upon the "semantic universe" (*Sinnwelt*) of human existence.

To give a more familiar example: eating and drinking are actions that on the primary level of routinization usually tend to undergo a certain formalization in family life. On the second level of ritualization, the eating of bread and the drinking of wine in Jewish families is celebrated on the eve of Shabbat as a "mnemonic mark," or *zikkaron*, both of the seventh day of creation and of the exodus from Egypt (*yitsi 'at mitsrayim*). In Christianity, the eating of bread and the drinking of wine is celebrated with greatest solemnity as the sacrament of the Eucharist. This rite was explicitly instituted with the words "Do this in remembrance of me" as a *zikkaron* in order to commemorate the death of Christ and to provide participation in its redemptory significance.¹⁰ Even in cases in which the memory function is not made explicit, we are dealing with a form of memory. Every rite is a *zikkaron*, a commemorative symbol that refers either to a historical event, such as the exodus from Egypt and the crucifixion of Christ, or to

a mythical event such as the seventh day of creation or the institution of pharaonic kingship.

Language

If we turn from objects and actions to speech and language, the distinction between a primary and a secondary level of formalization appears in a new light. *Language* is the generation of sounds with the purpose of denoting and expressing meanings. Here the semiotic function is already operative on the level of primary functioning. Speech is in itself already symbolic action¹¹ without, however, being ritual. Language, like any other kind of action and artifact, serves a certain function in everyday life—communication. This is its primary level, and the correspondent ways of primary formalization and routinization consist in the formation of traditions of articulation and formulation in everyday communication, in genres of speech or ways of saying things. In some cases, however, the second level of formalization becomes prominent, which has to do with the will of or need for transmission. In the sphere of language, the alliance between the aesthetic and the mnemonic becomes most obvious. If an utterance is designed to be preserved and to stay efficient beyond the moment of its pronunciation, that is, to serve the secondary purpose of becoming a mnemonic mark, it has to be submitted to a process of secondary formalization. Only by acquiring certain additional distinctive features of form and genre is an utterance capable of staying in memory and remaining accessible to later recourse, repetition, elaboration, and commentary. A formalized utterance is a carrier of memory, a mnemonic mark in being both an element of tradition (which is in itself a form of memory) and memorable for future recourse. It employs memory and creates memory.

Therefore, in speech and language, formalization acts as a means of stabilization. Its only purpose is to render meaning permanent. This is what Eric Havelock called “preserved communication.” In my terminology, formalization is what turns an utterance into a text. “Text,” in everyday use, means “formalized utterance,” formalized, that is, in view of being remembered, transmitted, and repeatedly taken up. Text is speech in the status of a mnemonic mark. With the category of text, language passes, in my terminology, from the level of communication to the level of memory.

For this reason, the laws of morphology apply to language as well as to all of the other human artifacts. Also in the utterances designed for later use, which I propose to call “texts,” there is manifest a will to form,

which attempts to stabilize the word beyond its moment of pronunciation. Rhyme, assonance, parallelism, alliteration, meter, rhythm, and melody are devices of stabilization meant to render permanent the volatile words in the flow of time; in the same way as with material artifacts, these features render for the philologist a text definable in space and time in terms of style, genre, function, situational context, *Sitz im Leben*, and so forth.

In the following, I show that writing is just another kind of secondary formalization. Writing was invented and applied, in the first place, to linguistic units unfit for the usual poetical means of formalization. Writing was first invented for recording and preserving the prosaic and contingent data of economics and administration in the early states—that is, the data that could not possibly be memorized. No human memory and no memorization technique would be able to handle these data. Writing made it possible to turn lists of names, numbers, and objects into texts to preserve them for later reference and repetition without any further formalization.

What Is a “Text”?

Transmission and the “Extended Situation”

What is a text? The word *textus* is derived from *texo*, “to weave”; it indicates tissue, connection. Quintilian takes this metaphor to denote the connection of words, the structure and coherence of speech. There does not seem to exist any equivalent for this term in ancient languages outside Latin.¹² Quintilian refers to the rhetorical notion of “text.” The rhetorical tradition distinguishes between information and message, subject matter and the act of speaking. This distinction is constantly blurred in oriental languages. Egyptian *mdt* and Hebrew *dabar* denote both speech and what speech is about. Whoever refers to something that has been said or written is unable to make clear whether he or she refers to the *form* or the *content* of speech. In the words of Werner Kelber,

Writing is the technique of making words visible. This exteriorization of language tends to foster the impression of visible signs in separation from the actuality they refer to. In linguistic terms, writing forces the distinction between signs on surfaces, the signifiers, and the content with which they are being charged, the signified. It lies in the nature of written language that it can be abstracted from its signification. Spoken words are not visible

apart from their signifiers. In the absence of exterior manifestations, oral discourse appears to be more intimately allied with the actuality to which it refers. When sounded words are thus known to be effective in the act of speaking, it takes but one small step to regard them "as being of the same order of reality as the matters and events to which they refer."¹³

This is quite true: the non-distinction between signifier and signified is typical of the oral situation. However, writing does not automatically bring about an awareness of the distinction, nor is this awareness restricted to writing. In the context of rhetoric, we are dealing with texts that are orally delivered though often literally composed. What is decisive is the emergence of a level of meta-textual communication, in which it is the words and the way of formulation that matter more than, or along with, but in any case distinct from the subject matter.

Later, philology adopts the new notion and applies it to the object of its own profession, opposing *textus* and *commentarius*. *Textus* is what a *commentarius* refers to, and *commentarius* is the kind of discourse that has a *textus* as its object. Philological work transforms a chain of words into a *textus* in making it the object of its operations: text critique, establishing a text, comparison of variants, commenting, translating, exegesis. As a rule, linguistic utterances as such are, at least originally, not meant as texts. A poem, for instance, aims at being the object of any kind of enjoyment—pleasure, reflection, learning—but not of philological treatment. Philological treatment belongs to a level or horizon that is secondary and posterior to the primary horizon of communication and reception. Within this primary horizon, the notion of "text" has no natural evidence whatsoever. Therefore, it is unknown in most ancient languages. It arises only in the context of rhetoric and philology, that is, of meta-textual reflection. "Text," in other words, is a notion that belongs to meta-language, not to object language. It is a meta-textual term.

In everyday language, "text" is mostly associated with writing. A linguistic unit becomes a text when it is written down. In linguistic terminology, however, the word "text" denotes the highest meaningful unit of language—in opposition to "paragraph," "sentence," "phrase," "syntagma," "word," and finally "morpheme," the smallest meaningful unit—independently of whether or not this highest unit appears in oral or written form. The linguistic definition of "text" is the complete inversion of its traditional and everyday meaning. While I asserted above that text has no natural existence on the primary level of communication, it is, in the view of modern linguistics, the only unit in which language naturally occurs in

communication, whereas all the other units are artificial subdivisions and analytical constructs. We communicate in texts and not in phrases, words, syllables, and morphemes. This notion of text, however, is much too general and indistinct to be useful to this chapter's argument. Texts may consist in just one word such as "hello" or in lengthy recitations such as *The Odyssey*, but they are the only natural communicational unit. However, in the present context we are interested not only in communication but also and above all in memorization and transmission. For these purposes, the everyday concept of "text," with its connotations of literacy, seems much more pertinent.

Konrad Ehlich, a scholar of Hebrew and of general linguistics, has formulated a linguistic concept of "text" that integrates some decisive semantic elements of the everyday concept.¹⁴ Ehlich defines "text" as a message that is repeated, remembered, recovered, and referred to. The primal form of "text," not in the etymological but in the pragmatic sense, is the message that is delivered. The common denominator between the literary work that is commented upon and the message that is delivered is the act of reproduction. It is not the original speaker who generates the text, but the repeater—the messenger and the commentator. The decisive text-generating factor is the separation of the message from the situation of immediate communication, in other words, the creation of an "extended situation" (*zerdehnte Situation*) in which speaker and hearer, encoder and decoder are no longer co-present within the spatial and temporal limits of the human voice. In these cases, the original speech act has to be preserved beyond the limits of the original situation in order to be transported and repeated in a second situation. The messenger has to learn the message by heart in order to be able to deliver it at another time and another place to the addressee.

In this case, we may rightly speak of the "text" of the message. The written form of the message is not what is decisive, but the acts of storage, transmission, and reproduction are. The immediate situation is replaced with the extended situation unfolding in at least two and, in the case of literature, virtually infinite concrete situations that may stretch in time as long as the text is preserved and the conditions for its readability and understandability are assured. This notion of text replaces the narrow and technical correlation of *textus* and *commentarius* with the much more general correlation of text and transmission. Texts are speech acts in the context of extended communication situations. This concept has the great advantage of overcoming the all-too-close association of texts with written language; it allows for the idea of oral texts, but at the same time it retains a central semantic element of the philological and rhetorical

tradition by connecting “text” with transmission and reproduction. Text is the unit of speech that, on the side of the speaker/encoder, is connected with a need for transmission beyond the boundaries of an immediate situation and, on the side of the receiver, with a need for retrieval and reactualization.

Institutionalizing the “Extended Situation”: Cultural Texts and Cultural Coherence

“*Cultural texts*” are a sub-group of texts that are constantly taken up and reproduced by a whole society. The concept of “cultural texts” includes much more than just “texts” in the sense of a linguistic unit. It refers to every semantic unit that is encoded in symbolic forms such as images, gestures, dances, rites, festivals, customs, and even landscapes such as the Australian “song lines,” the German Rhine valley, or the medieval pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela, as long as they are to be understood as semantic and not just geographic units and as long as they are reproduced, that is, reenacted or reactualized in the life of the community.¹⁵ Clifford Geertz introduced the term “cultural text” decades ago with respect to the Balinese cock fight, and I use it in this wide sense. In what follows, however, I will concentrate on verbal cultural texts. Cultural texts exert a binding energy on the community in a normative and a formative sense. Normative cultural texts codify the norms of behavior and range from simple proverbs to educational literature and books on manners and finally up to canonical and semi-canonical texts such as the Torah and the *Shulkhan Arukh* in the Jewish tradition. Formative texts formulate the self-image of the group and range from tribal myths and sagas of origin to literary works by Homer and Virgil, Dante and Shakespeare, Milton and Goethe. By the transmission of cultural texts, a society or culture reproduces itself in its “cultural identity” through the generations.

Extended situations do not occur naturally; they have to be culturally institutionalized. They cannot develop and persevere without institutional support and framing. This applies already to the institution of the messenger. It must be ensured that the messenger reaches his or her destination, that he or she is admitted to the addressee of the message, and that the addressee will recognize the messenger as representative of the sender: *hashaluah kasholeah 'oto* (“the messenger is like the one who sent him” as the Hebrew phrase goes).¹⁶ The institute of the messenger is

a kind of contract involving the sender, the transmitter, and the receiver of the message. The sender must trust the messenger that he or she will faithfully pass on the message, the messenger must totally identify with his or her role of transmitter and must stick to the wording and meaning of the message, and the receiver must treat the messenger as the representative of the sender. Every act of transmission and every kind of extended situation implies something of this contractual aspect. The fact that texts may be read over long temporal and cultural distances rests on institutional frames of this kind.

Time-Structure

“Culture” may be understood as the cover term for the sum total of extended situations or, rather, the extended hyper-situation including all other situations in which cultural texts are encoded, transmitted, and reenacted. To be sure, this is not meant as a definition of culture, but just as a way to highlight one specific aspect of culture. The extension of the situation of communication past the limits of direct interaction, as well as the creation of a hyper-situation extending over several millennia, is an achievement of memory; it is this temporal aspect of culture that highlights its memory function. Writing is just one form of transmission and reenactment, albeit a very decisive one. The use of writing in the transmission of cultural texts changes fundamentally the time-structure of cultural memory. All the other forms of institutionalizing an extended situation depend on time and place, on temporal recurrence and/or spatial translocation. You have to wait for a feast to return or a rite to be performed, and you have to go to an image, a monument, a sacred place in order to reconnect with its meaning.¹⁷ To reconnect with the meaning of written cultural texts, you do not have to wait for the next performance, you just have to read them.

The difference may be illustrated by a quotation from Flavius Josephus, who opposed Jewish and Gentile forms of cultural participation:

That high and sublime knowledge, which the Gentiles with difficulty attained unto, in the rare and temporary celebration of their Mysteries, was habitually taught to the Jews, at all times. . . . Where, in any place but in this, are the whole People, by the special diligence of the Priests, to whom the care of public instruction is committed, accurately taught the principles of true piety? So that the body-politic seems, as it were, one great Assembly,

constantly kept together, for the celebration of some sacred Mysteries. For those things which the Gentiles keep up for a few days only, that is, during those solemnities they call "Mysteries" and "Initiations," we, with vast delight, and a plenitude of knowledge, which admits of no error, fully enjoy, and perpetually contemplate through the whole course of our lives.¹⁸

The Gentiles have to wait until the next celebration of their mysteries, but the Jews are in constant and continuous possession of their cultural texts, because they are "habitually taught" by "public instruction." Their "mysteries" are permanent. Their form of community or "body politic" coheres and reproduces itself not by way of ritual but by means of teaching and learning. When Josephus speaks of "teaching," he does not just think of teaching how to write and read, but of interpretation, or exegesis. To ensure the continuous readability of written cultural texts over a long stretch of time, which inevitably brings about changes of language and historical reality, the meaning of the texts must be kept alive by constant adaptation to changing circumstances. Otherwise the texts' meaning gets lost within three or four generations of social memory. In a literate culture such as the Jewish society Josephus describes, continuous exegesis fulfills the function of institutionalizing the extended situation of cultural coherence, which in the pagan world is fulfilled by ritual repetition.

This case may be generalized. Cultural texts form the cement or connective backbone of a society that ensures its identity and coherence through the sequence of generations. Leaving the sphere of material objects aside, we may say that the dominant principle of coherence can be institutionally realized either in ritualistic or "textualistic" form. Ritual coherence is the predominant principle of cultural reproduction, in which the cultural texts are performed in the ways that Josephus ascribes to the Gentiles: feasts and rites. Textual coherence prevails when the cultural texts are reproduced by ways of teaching and learning, which do not require much ritualization and formalization. Textual coherence requires institutions of learning and interpretation. Oral societies need a memorization technique of transmission and a ritual or ceremonial organization of performance. Writing or notational systems of pre-writing such as knotted chords and pictography might play a subsidiary role for the specialists in helping them to remember long stories or lists in the right order. But memory remains always the main carrier of the central stock of cultural knowledge, and ritual performance remains the dominant form of reproducing the cultural texts. The more literate a society, the more

continuous, de-ritualized, and individual is the form of participation in cultural texts. The greatest change in such participation has been brought about by the printing press.¹⁹

Text-Structure: *Mouvance* and Exegesis

“Textual coherence” requires not only the use of writing but also a continuous long-term readability of the written texts. The language of the texts must not deviate too much from the spoken language, and the textual world must correspond to the actual world people are living in. Josephus, speaking of the Jewish case, refers to the “care of public instruction” and “accurate teaching” as devices the Jews employed in order not to lose contact with the meaning of their texts. The Jewish case, however, is extreme in that the cultural texts were not only written down but brought into the form of a canon, meaning that they must not be changed, neither in the stock of texts selected for canonization nor in the wording, the surface structure of the singular texts. If the texts themselves must not be changed, exegesis is the only solution to ensure textual coherence.

Before the canonization of texts and the rise of exegesis, however, the texts themselves were changed, that is, reformulated, amplified or substituted by other texts. Their “surface structure” was sacrificed in order to save at least part of their meaning. This is why even written texts tend to exist over a longer stretch of time in many different versions. In order to remain understandable, they are constantly rewritten, enlarged, continued. The continuous growth of the book of Isaiah, first into Deuterothen into Trito-Isaiah, is a typical case of how a cultural text changes in what the Assyriologist Leo Oppenheim called “the stream of tradition.”²⁰ The epic of Gilgamesh developed in the course of its transmission and redaction from a cycle of sagas into the “twelve-tablet composition,” as it appears in the Neoassyrian library of Assurbanipal at Niniveh. In a similar way, the Egyptian Book of the Dead developed from just a pool of unconnected spells out of which every individual funerary papyrus picked its own specific selection into a real book with a fixed selection of 167 spells in a particular order. Written texts, in this stream of tradition, share to a certain degree a sort of oral text. The medievalist Paul Zumthor, in his *Introduction à la poésie orale*, coined the term *mouvance*, by which

he understands the flexibility even of written texts to adapt to changing audiences.²¹

This flexibility is categorically stopped and excluded by the process of canonization. A cultural text that becomes part of the canon shares the absolute fixation of its surface articulation with sacred texts. Sacred texts are not necessarily cultural texts; they can be magical spells only a few specialists know, whereas cultural texts are by definition the common property of the community or at least representative elite. Sacralization and canonization are different phenomena. They share the common principle of fixed wording but stem from different motives. The notion of "canonization" should be reserved for literate culture, concerning a specific form of the transmission of written texts, whereas sacralization occurs also in oral tradition. The borderline case of the Rgveda, which is an orally transmitted canon of sacred texts, must be explained separately and should not blur this necessary distinction. Sacred texts are verbal enshrinements of the holy. In sacred texts, not a syllable may be changed in order to ensure the magical power of the words to "presentify" the divine. In this context, it is not understanding that matters but the correctness of pronunciation, the ritual purity of the speaker, and other requirements concerning proper circumstances of performance. This principle of inflexibility and absolute fixation applies to sacred texts independently of their oral or literate form of transmission. Sacred texts, therefore, are exempt from the pressure to adapt to the hermeneutical conditions of a changing world.

In the process of canonization, the principle of sacred fixation is applied to cultural texts. They are treated like verbal temples that enshrine divine presence, but at the same time they require understanding and application in order to exert their formative and normative impulses and demands. The solution to this problem is exegesis. Exegesis, or hermeneutics, is the successor of *mouvance*. In the *mouvance* stage of literate transmission, the commentary is worked into the fabric of the text. This method has been shown by Michael Fishbane to be typical of the biblical texts in their formative phase.²² They are full of glosses, pieces of commentary that later redactors have added to the received text. In Babylonia, the closure of the verbal surface structure of a text was applied not only to sacred but also to literary texts as early as the end of the second millennium BCE, when Mesopotamian scribes started inserting blessings and curses in their colophons of literary texts in order to prevent not only material damage of the tablet but also willful alteration of the text: "Neither add nor subtract!"²³ Once the text is closed by canonization, the commentary must stay outside and accompany the written text by separate ways of transmission, which

are very often oral, as is still the case in a traditional Islamic *madrassa* or a Jewish *yeshiva*. Also in oral recitation, canonical texts are often set off from commentaries using a formalization of recitation typical of sacred texts. They are sung instead of spoken.²⁴ The difference between singing and speaking is as important for the performance of cultural texts as the difference between orality and literacy for their transmission.²⁵

The “Cultic” and the “Classic”

To sum up: the main function of cultural texts may be defined as a connective principle working in both the social and the temporal dimensions, a kind of normative and formative cultural program that conveys and reproduces cultural identity from one generation to the next. This constitutes what may be called their “identity function.” The original and traditional locus of cultural texts is memory (for storage and transmission) and ritual (for reproduction). Rituals provide the context for the ceremonial recitation, circulation, and communication of cultural texts. Although the evolution of literate culture and the invention of the printing press have led to a general accessibility of cultural texts, some traces of this original ritual framing are still preserved even in modern culture. In Germany you have to wait until Christmas for a public performance of the *Christmas Oratorio* and until Good Friday to listen to the *St. Matthew Passion* and *St. John Passion* by Johann Sebastian Bach; these rank among the cultural texts. This condition might be due to their religious meaning, but the same applies also to secular texts. *Die Fledermaus*, by Johann Strauss, is linked to New Year’s Eve and *Parsifal*, by Richard Wagner, to Good Friday. But these are exceptional cases. Normally, our modern culture is characterized by the principle of ubiquitous and simultaneous accessibility of everything. Nevertheless, DVDs have not supplanted movies and plays, and CDs have not suppressed concerts. On the contrary, the concept of “live performance” has acquired a new importance in the age of technical reproduction and general accessibility. A performance receives its special status as “live performance” only through the existence of technological recordings, in much the same way as a linguistic unit receives its status as a text through the existence of its commentary or an “original” through the existence of copies.

Cultural texts partake of the cultic and the classic. With this I would like to come back to the point from which I started: the need for transmission and the will to form, both answering the specifically human

condition of being in time, of existing in a temporal horizon extending the life span of an individual. In their cultic aspect, cultural texts (and I am again referring to "texts" in the broad sense of the term, including pictures, rites, dances, films) aim at participation, at shaping a community of participants; in their classic aspect cultural texts realize the will to form in an outstanding way and aim at imitation, variation, quotation, recycling. The cultic is related to the social dimension, the classic to the temporal dimension. A classic is an artifact that survives the changes of fashions, remaining a model of beauty and perfection because of its unsurpassable formal and symbolic pregnancy,²⁶ whereas the cultic binds a community of believers or simply lovers (and sometimes only a short-lived generation of fans, buffs, aficionados) under its spell because of the religious or otherwise compelling magnetism of its theme. In cultural texts, both principles combine, but in different proportions. Culture comprises much more than cultural texts, and however one defines the problematic concept of "culture," I am not arguing for its reduction to memory. By focusing on a section both of culture and of memory at which these notions intersect, we can see how cultural texts fulfill the memory function of culture, which is certainly not its only function but the one without which culture as a whole would not work.