

The Primacy of Poetry: Oral Culture and the Young Child

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In the beginning was the word — not the written word, the xerox, or the computer print-out — but the spoken word, the voice, the utterance. Long before there was writing, there was language and communication as sound, as an event in time that existed only in the ears and memories of its listening audience. Within such a society (termed “oral” by a people now literate), each thought to be expressed was conceived in the mind, and every fact to be recorded was stored in the mind. History and a sense of the past existed only in recollection. Ultimately, the survival of the culture depended upon the survival of individual and communal memory and on the oral transmission of that memory to other members of society.

The concept of basing a society on the ability of the human mind to retain and retrieve information is nearly incomprehensible to literate minds — minds shaped by words in writing and print. In order to function effectively, language in an oral society was given a double responsibility: It had to embody important cultural information, and to do so, it needed to be memorable. As a result, oral societies shaped their utterances to fit their needs, preserving information in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetition or antithesis, in alliterations or assonances, in epithetic or other formulaic expressions, in standard thematic settings, in proverbs which come to mind readily, or in other mnemonic form (Ong, 1982, p. 34). In an oral society, significant oral-language statements, to be memorable, were cast into an oral, poetic form. This was the cultural birth of what we have come to know as poetry.

Frequently, oral-language poetry invited participation and movement — dancing, clapping, singing, chanting and so forth — and through action and repetition the content of the utterance (really, the

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utterance itself) was committed to memory. Eric Havelock (1986b) describes the interrelationship between poetry, music, and dance in preliterate societies in this way:

It is arguable that in its various guises rhythm . . . is the foundation of all biological pleasures — all the natural ones, sex included — and possibly of the intellectual pleasures as well. However that may be, its linkage to music and dance and its involvement with the motor responses of the human body seem indisputable. Accordingly, oral societies have commonly assigned responsibility for preserving speech to a partnership between poetry, music and dance. (p. 72)

Poetry, understood in this broad sense, was central to the survival of an oral society. It became a repository for cultural information and supplied an important structural framework for retrievable knowledge. It was memorable because it was formulaic, repetitious, and participatory.

If this cultural development of literacy began with the spoken word, it is also true that human language development begins with the utterance as well. Although young pre-reading children may live and participate in a literate, print-rich society, until they comprehend meaning in this writing they exhibit a predominantly oral mindset. James Britton (1970) notes that for non-readers and non-writers, words are voices and speech is sound (p. 77). What young children learn they have received orally, and what they transfer they must communicate through the spoken word. Just as cultures can be said to move from orality to literacy, so the individual progresses (or has the potential to progress) from language as utterance to language as text (Olson, 1977, p. 262).

In the beginning is the word, and always that word comes to us first as utterance. Contemporary poet Donald Hall (1982) searches for the primitive origins of poetic thought, and he finds them in infants long before the development of words or the advent of writing. Just as Havelock sees poetry as founded in the biological pleasures, so Hall sees poetry originating in a similar set of elements that he terms “sensual pleasures”—form, rhythm, and sound. According to Hall, these sensual pleasures are “primitive, both personally (back to the crib) and historically (back to the fire in front of the cave)” (p. 149). Thus, poetry is not only the wellspring of our language culturally, as Havelock has suggested; it is the source of our language individually as well. And the power poetry derives from the sensual biological pleasure it provides is not only necessary in helping maintain an oral society, as Havelock has suggested; this power also lies at the heart of poetry as it relates to our personal development.

Hall has termed the primitive elements that make up the sensual

pleasure of poetry "Twinbird," "Goatfoot," and "Milk tongue." Twinbird is our pleasure with form, balance, and opposition in poetry. It derives from the infant's perception of his or her hands — the two strange birds that fly in front of its head. The infant "examines these independent/dependent twin birds. They are exactly alike. And they are exactly unlike, mirror images of each other, the perfection of opposite-same" (1982, p. 148).

Goatfoot, according to Hall, is the pleasurable thrill of rhythm and motion in poetry. It derives from the infant's use of his or her legs, for its "small bowed legs, no good for walking, contract and expand in a rhythmic beat. He has begun to dance, his muscles move like his heartbeat . . . his whole body throbs and thrills with pleasure" (1982, p. 148).

Milk tongue, the final element, is oral pleasure in the texture of poetic language and in the shape and the taste of poetry itself. The infant sucks at air, at the nipple, at his or her own fingers; the infant babbles, and its small tongue "curls around the sounds, the way his tongue warms with the tiny thread of milk that he pulls from his mother" (Hall, 1982, p. 148).

These are the origins of poetry in the individual: mouth pleasure, muscle pleasure, the pleasure of match-unmatch — the partnership, as Havelock puts it, between music, dance, and poetry. In an oral society, this partnership is useful because it provides a framework for organizing information and thus it serves the preservation of the culture. In the oral world of modern young children, poetry performs a similarly didactic function — it moves them from the world of utterance toward the world of text and prose. The babbling of infants is rhythmic; it is filled with rhyme and music and sound. As children grow older, they chant their vocabulary of one or two words in a rhythmic sing-song fashion while they clap or stomp or jump to the beat. The words they invent are filled with delicious sounds; as Britton (1970) has said, "A great deal of children's speech seems to be uttered for the pleasure of speaking rather than in order to communicate anything to anybody" (p. 155). Toddlers delight in creating their own rhymes by repeating two or more words in a row, and the Russian poet Kornei Chukovsky (1925/1963) noted that "the younger the child the greater is his (or her) attraction to word repetition that rhymes"—words such as "Dada," "Mama," "bye-bye," or "night-night" (p. 63). As Chukovsky puts it, "In the beginning of our childhood we are all 'versifiers' — it is only later that we begin to speak in prose" (p. 64).

If young children are indeed natural versifiers, and if poetry lies at the heart of our cultural and individual linguistic development, then it should be no surprise to find an almost universal love in children for nursery rhymes, chants, jingles, riddles, lullabies, tongue twist-

ers, and folk rhymes. Often these utterances are grouped under the title of "Mother Goose rhymes," and although recorded in writing, they have retained their oral characteristics over the centuries.

Mother Goose rhymes began orally as proverbs, weather lore, charms and incantations, pieces of historical ballads, anecdotes about historical personages, popular street songs, and fragments of political and religious diatribes (Baring-Gould, 1962, p. 12). As oral-language statements, they contain the residue of generations of oral history, but their appeal for a literate society is not so much their historical significance, but rather the job of expression they contain. Harold Rosen (1969) defines poetry as "language that exists *for its own sake* and not as a means of achieving something else" (p. 137). As oral poetry, the Mother Goose rhymes no longer need to carry relevant historical information — they relinquished that responsibility to print long ago. Still, what made the poems memorable and what ensured their preservation in an oral society gives them lasting value in a literate society as well: They represent the synthesis of dance, poetry, and music.

The Mother Goose rhymes are appealing because they contain a built-in rhythm, a sing-song rhyming quality, and a pleasurable combination of sounds that engage the very young child. The verses embody the motion of dance (Goatfoot), the balance of opposites (Twinbird), and the music of sound (Milk tongue). Through their expression of sensual pleasure, Mother Goose rhymes strengthen vocabulary and poetic sensitivity in young children. As poet Walter de la Mare (1956) wrote in defense of Mother Goose, these rhymes "free the fancy, charm the tongue and ear, and delight the inward eye, and many of them are tiny masterpieces of word craftsmanship" (p. iv).

One example of a popular nursery rhyme which contains dance, poetry, and music is "Ride a Cock Horse to Banbury Cross."

Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross,
To see a fine lady upon a white horse;
Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes
She shall have music wherever she goes.
(Baring-Gould 1962, p. 247)

This was traditionally a rhyme to be sung by a child while riding a rocking horse or by an adult while bouncing a baby on his or her knee (Baring-Gould, p. 244). The verse's strong trochaic meter echoes the galloping of a horse and invites dance — a tapping toe, a bouncing knee, or the motion of a rocking horse. The verse's formulaic rhyme scheme reflects the balance and opposition of poetry: The first line of each couplet readies the listener for the

concluding second line, while the end rhymes in lines two and four create a sense of resolution and provide balance not only within but also between couplets. The vowel and consonant sounds throughout the verse supply the tongue with the taste of language, for the galloping hard consonants in lines one and two give way to the musical “s” and “sh” sounds in lines three and four. Even this ditty for very young children exemplifies the synthesis of rhythm, form, and sound in oral-language poetry.

In addition, the Mother Goose verses help children understand and organize reality in much the same way that poetry aided an oral society in organizing and accessing important cultural information. Chukovsky explains that paradoxically, the very foolishness of nonsense rhymes helps the young child to gain confidence about his or her understanding of reality, to feel superior to the foolishness of the characters who populate the rhymes, and to begin to develop a sense of humor (pp. 89-107). Take, for example, a few stanzas from the well-known rhyme, “Simple Simon.”

Simple Simon met a pieman,
Going to the fair;
Says Simple Simon to the pieman,
Let me taste your ware.

Says the pieman to Simple Simon,
Show me first your penny;
Says Simple Simon to the pieman,
Indeed I have not any.

Simple Simon went a-fishing,
for to catch a whale;
All the water he had got
Was in his mother's pail.

He went for water in a sieve,
But soon it all ran through;
and now poor Simple Simon
Bids you all *adieu*.
(Baring-Gould, 1962, pp. 69-70)

Once again, children enjoy the rollicking rhythm and regular rhyme scheme of this verse. They appreciate the repeated alliteration of “Simple” and “Simon,” the assonance contained in the words “soon,” “through,” “poor,” and “*adieu*,” and the recurring internal rhyme of “Simon” and “pieman.” Not only do they relish the sound and the motion of the words; if they are old enough and knowl-

edgeable enough, they also delight in the foolishness of fishing for a whale in a bucket or of carrying water in a sieve. In this way, they not only become acquainted with the silly-fool motif that recurs throughout literature (even Shakespeare provides readers with the foolish Falstaff); they also have confirmed their own knowledge that whales do not fit into buckets and that water cannot be carried in a sieve — facts which reassure children of their superior understanding of the world and which sparks their senses of humor by use of nonsense and absurdity.

Mother Goose rhymes have been enjoyed by countless children in countless ages. They are shining examples of “oral literature” in every sense: They originated centuries ago as cultural oral-language statements; although recorded in writing, they have been passed down orally through both literate and preliterate generations; and they embody the pleasure with language that characterizes the world of early childhood, feeding a child’s desire for the sound, music, and wisdom of poetry. They have become, in many ways, the intersection of historical and developmental literacy — an intersection that is rich in rhythm, rhyme, and the music of language.

In our eagerness to “educate” young children, to progress from the world of utterance into the world of text, it is easy to rush through a child’s passion for Mother Goose in an attempt to provide more “substantive” literature and prose. Naturally, we desire to help children move into ever more complex literature. Yet we must continue to recognize that the progression to text begins with the utterance, and the evolution to literacy has its roots deep in orality. Havelock (1986a) asks, “If a child’s brain is initially programmed to master oral language and only oral language, why do we lay such stress on acquiring literacy as soon as possible?” (p. 414). Then Havelock sets forward this warning: “If we skip over the oral stage in the education process too hurriedly, if we slight its importance, we do damage to those very conceptual powers we aim to develop” (p. 415). Chukovsky, too, admits that the two-year-old’s sensitivity to and creativity with language begin to fade at the age of five and disappear without a trace by the age of eight (1925/1963, p. 7). And Hall acknowledges that Milktongue, Goatfoot, and Twinbird learn to hide themselves as infant noises become words, infant legs learn to crawl, and infant hands respond more and more to mental will.

Surely the development of literacy in children is good. Yet it is important to note that the invention of writing did not end the oral tradition, for even in a predominantly literate society, aspects of the oral tradition remain (Olson). Likewise, in the transition from utterance to text, the oral language of the nursery rhyme need not be altogether abandoned in favor of the language of prose and of text. Instead, the literacy of our classrooms should be liberally laced with

oral language experiences, our texts punctuated by the spoken word, our prose interspersed with poetry.

It is certainly desirable to instill in children an appreciation for *all* types of verse — unrhymed as well as rhymed, free verse as well as verse that is heavily rhythmic and strictly formulaic — for we do not want children to assume that poetry always has to rhyme. Yet nursery rhymes are not only for the nursery, and modern-day versifiers abound (including Mary Ann Hoberman, David McCord, Eve Merriam, Ogden Nash, Jack Prelutsky, and Shel Silverstein, to name just a few). The poems of these artists delight children far into middle and high school, for they tap a primitive pleasure with language that, if we let it, remains near the heart of us all, regardless of age. Just as preschoolers love to experiment with word changes and rhythm variations in ways that satisfy and amuse them, so “in much the same way, older children can gain an aesthetic pleasure from playing with form, sometimes lightheartedly, sometimes with the seriousness of a professional artist” (Martin et al, 1976). As Judith Saltman (1985) has put it, “A mature appreciation of literature develops from — and depends on — the experiences of childhood. The origins of all the rhythms, moods, images, and patterns of adult literature can be heard in the chorus of voices that is children’s poetry.”

As we pass from traditional nursery verse to other forms of poetry and prose, we must never abandon the rhythm, the balance, and the pleasurable taste of language as we first knew it through the oral chants, jingles, and rhymes of early childhood. For before the text there is the utterance. In the beginning is the word — and that word is the spoken word.

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