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talking at the boundaries

A New Directions Book

1976

the sociology of art

i assume that were all here to figure out what a sociology of art might be if there was such a thing what a sociology of primitive art might be if there was such a thing it would be interesting because its obvious that there is another kind of art thats other in its whole social arrangement of making and giving and presenting and looking and reading i mean its obvious that there are other kinds of groups and ways of grouping that there are i hate to use the word other kinds of societies or cultures and that the ways of making giving and looking in those other kinds of groups are sufficiently different to justify calling them by some other name and that the ways of their being different are so much a part of their ways of arranging people into groups for the purpose of making giving looking and receiving to call our way of talking about this art a sociology that is a social logic of this art now there is something unappealing about the notion of a "primitive" art what i mean is there is something both repulsive and attractive about it because there is something inherently repulsive and attractive about the notion of "primitive people" it was a term that arose i think out of a mixture of feelings in people who felt that they were themselves decidedly not primitive primitivity is an idea that got stuck in peoples minds when they began to feel that they had "advanced" to such a terrific degree

sometimes to the degree that they felt "decadent" and they
 looked around to find things that weren't decadent and naturally
 they found these smelly little brown people who were repulsive
 and sexy and sang and danced well and told terrible lies
 and they called them "primitive" and they called their lies
 "myths" a myth is the name of a terrible lie told by a smelly
 little brown person to a man in a white suit with a pair of binoculars
 now you may not want to believe that because there were
 other men in white suits with field glasses who followed the
 first ones and sometimes they were also the first ones who
 heard these lies and said "these aren't lies they're secret truths"
 because at the back of every lie there's a truth and it belongs
 to a "primitive" culture to have a truth that's not like your truth
 and they gave these lies all kinds of values generally allegor-
 ical meanings by which I mean they constructed an ingenious
 mechanism for converting these colorful nearly incompre-
 hensible and idiosyncratic lies into a series of easily comprehensible
 and generally accepted platitudes as a matter of fact in its
 earliest uses this notion of primitive was applied to the
 Greeks to the history of the "gentile nations"

from these first men stupid insensate and horrible
 beasts all the philosophers and philologists should
 have begun their investigations of the wisdom of the gentile
 nations and they should have begun with metaphysics
 which seeks its proofs not in the external world
 but within the modifications of the mind of him who
 meditates it in such fashion the first men of the
 gentile nations children of nascent mankind cre-
 ated things according to their own ideas but they
 in their own robust ignorance did it by virtue of
 a wholly corporeal imagination and because
 it was quite corporeal they did it with marvelous sub-
 limity such and so great that it excessively perturbed
 the very persons who by imagining did the creating
 for which they were called "poets" which is Greek
 for "creators" hence poetic wisdom the first wis-
 dom of the gentile world must have begun with
 metaphysics not rational and abstract like that of
 learned men but felt and imagined as that of
 these first men must have been who without powers

of ratiocination were all robust sense and vigorous
imagination this metaphysics was their poetry

and the stories they knew to be lies they called them "fables"
and "legends" and sometimes "myths" because myths
merely meant stories the word myth means a story it comes
from a greek verb an interesting verb *mutheomai* means to
tell to talk originally what it meant was to talk
when someone gets up and starts rapping in an epic by
homer the verb that they use to describe it is *mutheomai* he
gets up to tell a story and he mythomizes so to speak he myths
the truth value is not immediately called into question that
is it doesnt mean its a lie but if i told you that president
nixon got up and "mythed" in congress youd figure that he told
a lie right? if i told you he got up and mythified "the
senator rose and mythified for several hours" that would be the
end of that on the other hand if i said he told it as it was
you wouldnt really think he was "mything" youd think he
was doing something else so it seems to me there are a number
of interesting distinctions one is that the word "myth" meant
to say or tell and nothing else and then it got specialized
for those tellings that people didnt believe anymore or felt
there was a problem about belief in now whats all this got to
do with the idea of "literal" or "oral" societies well i dont like
the word "primitive" because its wrapped up with these terrible
lies and this notion of little poetic beasts who are as tal-
ented as children or women or criminals or lunatics
some animals and all of those creatures held to be passion-
ate and stupid by all of those other people who were either
so content or so fatigued with being so dispassionate and wise
now there is another use of the word "primitive" that might
be a reasonable use but it is hypothetical i could imagine
the use of the word "primitive" the way you use the word "atomic"
everyone knows that there are no atoms that is "atoms"
dont behave as "atoms" when you deal with things as a human
being they dont exist as things you encounter atoms are
hypothetical constructions invented to support a theory and
they are in turn and its only fair supported by this theory

which they have just helped out because of this its not easy
 to speak about "atoms" outside of this theory in which they are
 merely operators but for the sake of simplification and since
 we know the theory lets say that these atoms are primitive enti-
 ties primitive whole entities and when you "break-up"
 these primitive whole entities you wind up with *parts* of atoms
 which you can consider a problem of its own the notion of
 a hypothetical part of a hypothetical primitive whole but as we
 imagine a primitive physical entity in all the simplicity of its relations
 and combining capacities we might imagine primitive
 people primitive human beings who were so to speak
 atomic in their humanness as you might imagine a pheno-
 menological universal you might imagine also modifications
 perversions? of this humanness so you might imagine
 that the idea of the "primitive" is like a kind of atomic theory of
 humanity if that was all it was and if it could be employed
 in a nontrivial way if it was possible to form such a theory at
 all we could attempt to imagine what are "natural" feelings
 what is "natural" thinking the way you can imagine of the
 body what is natural movement now you may imagine these
 hypothetical states and capacities when they are not obscured by
 responses to accidents and become congealed as habits
 under the arbitrary conditions of culture so you try to imagine
 a cultureless entity but how do you do that? imagine any
 group of people two say is it possible to believe that their
 ensemble of needs and desires demands and satisfactions
 will be perfectly matched over any significant length of time
 given even our trivial knowledge of biological systems it
 seems unlikely so the outcome of this small group situation will
 not be entirely "natural" this too will not be the place to en-
 counter truly "primitive" man probably even the situation of a
 single man alone will possess enough of the arbitrary in his/her
 relation to any given environment no its purely a theoretical
 construct primitive man like the atom itself and you
 will never be able to encounter it or anything like it and the
 value of thinking of it will depend solely upon its explanatory
 power but maybe you think this is too extreme so you
 think of something less ideal a "natural culture" say

communist utopian sylvan and you imagine these
people clad in whatever natural people more or less natural
are clad in gardening say because the earth is filled
with fruits and vegetables and animals that easily pop into your
hand and from your hand they pop into your mouth and
you imagine this primitive group of people having primitive relations
men and women distributed at random by casual pleasure
one might suppose that incest is not a primitive taboo after
all theres nothing natural about such a constraint on pairings one
might but one might not one might say that since some kind of
incest taboo is found everywhere incest is a primitive prohibition
but that seems rather silly because even if one could find
strong political social reasons why such a prohibition might
“strengthen or articulate” the group structure of the group that
practiced it theres no need to assume that natural man recognized
this or even that all kinds of groups would be “strengthened”
this way anyway maybe you dont want to think that poli-
tical effectiveness is primitive its probably easier even more
attractive to decide that the incest prohibition or more
precisely some incest prohibition was the first act of sophisti-
cated culture the arbitrary perhaps playful distinction
quite invisible between the suitable and the unsuitable
but this goes nowhere except back to the trivialities of con-
jectural history back to the fantasies of “primitive man”
which never got us anywhere anyway so lets leave primitive
alone and lets talk about something else something that by
contrast is fairly clear that before there was writing there
wasnt writing that seems like a fairly minimal assumption
before there was writing there wasnt writing we can still find
groups of people that dont have writing or until the anthropolo-
gists and missionaries got there quite recently they didnt
have writing now before people had writing they had to get
along without it we are going very slow but its a radical
assumption once there was no writing now if there was
no writing id like to call that culture that had no writing for
the moment an oral culture because in order to transmit
messages or to deal with people outside the range of an
arm and more gently than with a spear perhaps when you

couldnt push someone into a place but still wanted to bring him
 there to reach someone at the level where physical constraint
 is not possible or desirable you use language and in
 order to contain nonpresent entities to operate on nonpresent
 entities that is entities that are not present at a particular time
 or place if you have no way of preserving them in your prox-
 imity theyre not there the yam that you ate yesterday
 is no longer a yam unless you remember it was a yam if
 you remember it was a yam you remember it linguistically
 by which i mean that you remember it by a family of features
 that distinguish it from whatever else it might get confused with
 and in order to talk about that yam communicate about its
 badness say lets say it gave you indigestion and you want to
 discuss that fact that that particular kind of yam is not a good
 thing and you dont want to eat that kind of yam again
 you need some way of describing that yam some label for
 that yam or some set of instructions by which people will find
 that yam but also remember the yam that it once was and
 the class of yams it belonged to which means that you will need
 at least two categorical assignments for that yam you will have
 to have one category for the class of things you know as yams as
 opposed to other tuberous foods say and another one for things
 that make you sick poisons say all other yams may look
 alike but this one better look different feel different
 smell different or live in a different place now in
 order to remember this yam you might draw a picture of the yam
 though it is not easy to see how this will help you if the yam
 doesnt look different from other yams if there were no specially
 marked visual features that set it apart it wasnt greener say
 or more spherical or symmetrical or whatever besides which
 this whole notion of drawing is not different from remembering
 linguistically the drawing also consists of categorical assignments
 you are representing the yam among other yams and its differ-
 ences from them and the only special thing about the drawing
 will be that those differences will have to be visible but while
 all this sounds logical enough it isnt in fact the way drawings get
 made by oral cultures anyway since it would be nonsensical to
 begin by making a drawing of a yam that you didnt already know to

be the poison yam the important yam or the yam in question
 you have already started with a clear memory of that particular
 yam no drawing a picture does not replace remembering
 it is protoliterary anyway in the sense that it articulates
 fixes or freezes an already existing memory it commits you
 in some particular way to a model a particular model of a
 memory one particular remembering it is therefore a literary
 activity but talking about a yam is a bit different talking
 about a yam is not drawing a picture of a yam and remembering
 a yam is not writing a yam and you have a different way of
 communicating because you have the problem of remembering
 and remembering is a very odd form of behavior when its
 not conducted against a model think of the task of remembering
 the past a past for which you have no model im sure
 youve all had lots of conversations over the past week and im
 sure that if i asked you to remember a conversation you had
 last week you could produce something you would say was
 that conversation right? i mean if i asked you
 anybody? you feel confident? that you could repro-
 duce the conversation you had last week? or any part of it?
 think about it what do you mean by "remembering" the
 conversation i can remember conversations i had when i was four
 some of them i can remember them but i bet i cant repro-
 duce them and if i could reproduce them i dont think i could be sure
 that i could reproduce them now let me describe the difference
 between reproducing something and remembering it i did a
 piece once i did a piece in which i asked ely my wife i
 asked her to remember something i told her a story read it
 to her and i asked her to remember it and then the next
 day i asked her to tell me what she remembered and i recorded
 it and then the day after i asked her to do it again and
 then a week later i asked her to tell the story she remembered
 and then a month later i asked her to do it again and then a
 year later i asked her to tell me the story and finally just
 recently five years later i asked her to tell me the story
 once again and she really tried very hard to remember the story



the merchant of x lived in the town of L and
he came to the doctor one day very distressed
because he couldnt remember his wifes face
now i dont remember if his wife is dead or not
couldnt remember his daughters faces either he
used to draw very well he knew the whole center in-
terior of the town when hed close his eyes he could see
it before him and he could always draw it the court-
house the pergola? i think but the
merchant of x lived in the town of L in europe he
came to the analyst in great distress because he
could no longer remember his wifes and daughters faces
i dont recall whether they were alive or not but
he couldnt recall them at all he used to have a very
good memory in his business and also for the town in
which he lived he could recall every building
of the main streets he could also in fact draw
them he was able to draw geometrically
the architectural features of the courthouse the
library and various other buildings and he could
quite definitely delineate verbally a kind of
conceptual map in his head he could verbalize it
and say and describe it but as far as his
family went he could no longer do that he also
spoke several languages german french etcetera
and greek and latin it turned out that he
could no longer speak german though he dreamt in
french he had a i dont remember if it was a dream
or an experience in which he looked up and his wife
spoke to him and he didnt know it was her

*you can change your mind if you think thats not the
formulation try to remember*

his wife had dark hair he knew that but thats all
he knew this isnt a story that now in my head its
wrapped up with the "little herman" and various
things like that i see him in his library

what do you remember?

i dont think this is not from there "sitting in his
library. . ." and his wife talking to him and when he
looked up he couldnt remember her he no longer
could draw the principal streets of the town of L
 though he may have been able to draw the harbor
 he owned factories or if he didnt he should have

was he getting better or worse?

well i never quite understood his problem it was hard
to tell what his problem was

once he had a great visual memory

thats true he had a great visual memory and he knew
many languages

but after a while he lost his visual memory

yeah but i dont know

he had to train himself to go differently

oh he had to train himself oh yes with great
care he memorized the visual features that he
could no longer remember of the town perhaps
 perhaps he walked through the town again and
tried deliberately to recall everything though
i dont know if the story told this process or

*well didnt he come with a complaint? that is he came
there he had a complaint*

yeah but also i dont think he spoke the same languages
anymore i dont remember if he was melancholy
 sad or in any kind of distress i dont think so
 i dont think it was bothering him in his business
i just seem to remember

*you think he managed to get by in business without that
kind of memory?*

well business a business i guess tends to lumber
along never said what kind of business he was in

*he seems to have been a merchant it said he was a
merchant*

a merchant but i dont see why

"the merchant of x"

i dont see why his enormous memory his former
memory why its loss would have interfered with
his business

*do you remember what he used to do about accounts?
how he could remember whether he had spent or
lost money or what his books were like?*

i dont remember

*he always knew where the accounts were because he had
a visual memory of the whole system*

oh yeah he had a visual image of the whole page
he could remember in his head he could go down
the columns in his minds eye and remember i
assume how much money such-and-such owed him or
whatever the details i dont remember but all the ac-
counting pages the bookkeeping books he could
recall in his head hed close his eyes and hed see it
and he no longer saw that but of course thats
not necessary that sounds like

*when he lost that what other type of memory did he
have? was he able to go any other way?*

well as i remember he had something else and
he tried to go in that direction to compensate for his
loss it wasnt auditory he had to retrain himself
to remember all the accoutrements of his life
and of his business i dont think he regained his
memory the way it had been and i dont i think
he forgot latin and greek which he had been fluent in
and i think while he no longer spoke french
he dreamt in french

why would he have trouble with the language?

i dont see why that should have bothered him

*why would he have trouble with the language? what
part of the language would he have trouble with?*

i think in his head he couldnt remember to

himself its possible that when he spoke he could speak
it but that in his head he couldnt speak any of
those languages to himself
any of them?

i dont know if he was swiss or german
*now he knew modern greek as well but it wasnt his
native language what was the language of his child-
hood do you remember?*

french

you sure?

thats why he dreamt in french

*he spoke fluent french was french really his native
tongue?*

german?

*what are you remembering you remember it as french?
and which was the language he dreamt in?*

i remember certain noble romantic sentences

which was the language he dreamt in?

french

and he was fluent in what languages?

he had been fluent in now you say i recall modern
day greek latin and i assume german

and what had happened? i mean what had he lost?

i was never too clear what he lost i was always he
lost the ability i remember the sentence "he lost the
ability to. . ." he lost the ability to remember in
his mind that visual memory that he had had he
lost the ability to call up all those things that he used to
remember

including his wife

including his wife

visually

visually but maybe he could still speak the
languages

all of them?

i assume he could speak german

*what did he finally do what was the outcome you
remember?*

the outcome was that

the outcome was
that he had to retrain himself to sort of re-
member things i think he retrained himself to i think
he may have forgotten what the town looked like and he
retrained yeah as a matter of fact i think every time
he went through the town it was like coming to a foreign
place and he didnt recognize it and then he re-
trained himself to remember it he gave himself a map
in his head but hed have to do it redo it each
time each time it was like coming to a strange place
in fact i think now that the point of the problem
was that wherever he was it was a foreign place and he had
to make a conscious effort to hold it together in
his head i guess to say to himself "now this is the
town of L this is my town where i was born and where i
work this is my wife with the black hair dark
hair this is my house" i dont recall if after
retraining himself every time to do this it may
have been that the doctor that is it was sug-
gested to him that he retrain himself i dont recall
then if it stayed in his head or if it went away again
i dont know if he lost it or if it stayed

*now if you had to put this whole story together now as a
single narrative i mean if you had to remember the
whole story coherently how would you tell me this
story? in one piece if you were going to try and*

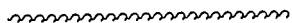
make this back into the story that it was?

the merchant of x lived in the town of L and he came to a doctor with a problem he was very distressed he had always had a superb visual memory which helped him in business he could close his eyes and visually see the page that he wanted from his books in fact he would go down the page with his eyes and scan it perhaps with a finger in his minds eye and find the information or the data he was looking for he also used to draw well and he could draw the whole town of L including the harbor and the main streets and the courthouse library etcetera in fact he could very specifically he could draw the arch that was in the "principal" i remember that word building there was an arch and he could draw that arch though is it possible he couldnt remember how it held together? i dont know anyway his problem now was that he no longer could remember his wifes face when he closed his eyes and he had lost his visual memory for his business books as well also the language of his childhood i dont recall what it was he could no longer speak and he had also forgotten modern greek which he used to know and latin he could still speak french in fact he dreamed in french he had to retrain himself to recall the town and his wifes face every time he entered the town you see the problem was that every time he entered the town it was a foreign place it wasnt as if he had been born there and had been there all his life and he had to make a conscious effort to recall the streets and the buildings and various landmarks as well as to realize every time he came to his house that it was his house "this is my house and this is my wife this is *my* house and this is *my* wife"



*mr x was a merchant born in vienna he was highly
 educated master of german spanish french greek and
 latin up to a year before he read homer at sight
 virgil and horace were familiar and he knew enough
 modern greek for business purposes up to this time
 he enjoyed an exceptional visual memory no sooner
 did he think of persons or things than features forms and
 colors arose with the same clarity as if the objects them-
 selves stood before him when he tried to recall a fact
 or a figure from his voluminous correspondence the
 letters themselves appeared before him with their entire
 content irregularities erasures and all in making
 computations he ran his eye down the imaginary columns
 of figures and performed in this manner the most varied
 operations of arithmetic he could never think of a
 passage from a play without the entire scene actors
 stage and audience appearing before him he had been
 a great traveller and being a good draftsman he used
 to sketch views which pleased him and his memory
 always brought back the entire landscape exactly if
 he thought of a conversation a saying an engagement the
 place the people the entire scene rose before his mind
 his auditory memory had always been deficient a
 year and a half ago an extraordinary change came over
 him after complete confusion there came a violent
 change between his old and new self everything about
 him seemed new and foreign although he saw all
 things distinctly and clearly he had entirely lost his mem-
 ory for forms and colors when he realized this he
 became reassured as to his sanity and he soon discovered
 that he could carry on his affairs by using his memory
 in an entirely different way he can now describe
 clearly the difference between his old and new states
 every time he returns to A from which place busi-
 ness often calls him he seems to himself to be
 entering a strange city he views the monuments
 houses and streets with the same surprise as if he
 were seeing them for the first time gradually how-
 ever his memory returns and he finds himself at home
 again when asked to describe the principal public
 place of the town he answered i know that it is
 there but it is impossible for me to imagine it and i can
 tell you nothing about it he has often drawn the
 port of A today he vainly tries to trace its principal*

outlines asked to draw a minaret he reflects says it is
a square tower and draws rudely four lines one for
ground one for top and two for sides asked to draw
an arcade he says "i remember that it contains semicircular
arches and that two of them meeting at an angle form
a vault but how it looks i am absolutely unable to
imagine" the profile of a man that he drew on request
was as if drawn by a child and yet he confessed that he
had been helped to draw it by looking at the bystanders
similarly he drew a shapeless scribble for a tree
he can no more remember his wives and childrens
faces than he can remember the town of A even after
being with them for some time they seem unusual to him
and he forgets his own face and once spoke to his
image in the mirror taking it for a stranger "my wife
has black hair i know but i can no more remember its
color than i can her person and features" now when
he looks for something in his correspondence he must
rummage among the letters like other men till he finds
the passage figures which he adds he must now whisper
to himself the words and expressions that he
recalls now seem to echo in his ear an altogether
novel sensation for him if he wishes to learn anything
by heart he must repeat it several times aloud to
impress it on his ear when later he repeats the thing
in question the sensation of inward hearing precedes
articulation this feeling was formerly unknown to
him he speaks french fluently but affirms he can no
longer think in french he must get his french words
by translating them from spanish or german the languages
of his childhood he dreams no more in visual
terms only in words usually spanish words
he is troubled by the greek alphabet



and the only way i could tell that she couldnt remember the story
as it had been or more precisely the only way i could tell
the difference between her story the story that she remembered
and the story that she was trying to remember was that i

happened to have a tape recorder and take it down now surely
 you can imagine a time when there were no tape recorders and there
 were no texts i mean if i had an extremely efficient and "exact"
 kind of shorthand thats sort of paradoxical but if i had i
 suppose i could have taken it down but as ive said if i had
 done that writing it down i would have had the story
 a telling of a story stored in a space which is again
 something like drawing but if i just told you a story and i
 asked you to tell it back to me i might think i knew whether
 you were being accurate right away though i would have
 only my confidence to rely upon but a year later how do i
 know that the story you tell me isnt the right story? it is some-
 thing of a problem if the differences seem important if i
 were to tell each of you a story now and then one year
 later ask you to tell me the story again and its not on tape
 we may have to resort to an argument to decide whether its
 the same story i may think its not the story but i sure dont
 have any way of proving that the story you told me is not the story
 though i may find certain inconsistencies and improbabilities
 in the story then we could argue it out but in the end there
 would be no absolute model against which we could check the
 story thats a very odd characteristic of places that dont
 have what i would call literal reproductive capacities a
 nonliteral society cant check against an absolute now this is a
 construction this oral society weve invented because theres
 no society in the world that doesnt have some possibility of absolute
 reference but there may be the possibility of absolute refer-
 ence and there may not be the habit of using it for example
 you live in a place and you have to get somewhere
 regularly and you have to go into places that are confus-
 ingly similar say you live at the edge of a forest and you
 have to enter that forest and then come out of it to get home
 its a simplified situation but close enough to a reality
 now when you get to where you were going and youve
 finished gathering something or other you have to get back
 and presumably you have to remember where back is there are
 a number of ways you could do it at least we could imagine a
 number of ways you might be able to do it but if you didnt

get back to the right place your memory wasnt too good and
this is one situation where you have a fairly clear test of your
powers of memory because if at the end of your wandering you
dont arrive at a familiar village and the hut on the right doesnt
contain the woman who was there when you set out you may
regard this as an improvement but it is clear that your memory
has let you down since it is obvious that most hunting or for-
aging expeditions do not result in the founding of new villages or
rounds of wife trading or life trading it seems at first that this
fact that you can get back to the place that you started from
is a fundamental challenge to our notion of the instability of mem-
ory though i dont think that it is but let us see why we
would suppose that to begin with there is the difference
between the place that youre leaving and the place into which you
must go your home your starting place camp hut
village is a human construction is humanly devised
or arranged even if it is a temporary station you will have
adapted to a human order the place that youre going into is
not humanly arranged it is the forest the desert a kind of
chaos or at least its order is "natural" rather than "human"
when you go into it you can become "lost" which
means that you cannot apprehend its order or relate its
order to your human order so what do you do? you seek
its regularities you make a map the sun rises regularly
more or less regularly in the east this is the order of
nature and it sets in the west if you face it the rising
sun your left hand points north and your right hand south
this axis is the order of culture the human order now
you lay out the space with your home at the center or at
the northern end or whatever and you place in your mental
chart all the landmarks you encounter you know how long it
takes walking swiftly more or less to reach the two tall
rocks or the waterhole and when you know all this and
you mark off proportionate distances in your picture you have
a map now anytime you are in the forest if you are con-
fused all you have to do is find out where you are in your map
to do this you look for the sun you put yourself in position
find your left and right hands and try to remember how long

you walked to the right or the left or forward or backward
and that tells you where you are and how to get back now
i dont doubt that any society any group of human beings has
this capacity to devise a whole spatial representation a
literal space chart that they can stand outside of long enough to draw
and oversee completely as a formal configuration in which
they themselves must be represented by some formal double a
dot or a cross "thats me standing by this tree" i dont
doubt it because its been done by some societies and if some
men can do it im sure all men can do it the question is whether
they do do it or whether its the only way to do it or even
the most reasonable sensible? way to do it but you
may not really appreciate how freaky a thing theyve done to
do this what theyve done is to isolate a space outside of
the one theyre in they have in some sense to alienate
themselves and their world which they have always been
inside of to put it "over there" some other place to
create a "double" for themselves and for "it" now you
may say they have to do that even if they merely tell a story about
what happened to them they have to isolate themselves from a
series of events which was up to the moment of the "telling"
with them all the time as part of a continuous a dura-
tive present now they have to cut it off and push it away
as the past and while there is some truth in this it isnt
much because a "story" is never present all at once its
beginning and end cant be surveyed at the same time so that
it never has the isolated and bounded content of a drawing or map
it is never an "object" to be handled at its most alienated
it is "material" that passes through your hand moreover
when you tell a story if you think of the great tellings
there is a progressive act of memory you gradually approach
a past you begin in the present outside it say remem-
bering only its name and you call on it and try to find your way
to it till at some point you are "in it" and it is then present
if only for a while and then you move out of it again
and there is a way of finding a place thats quite a bit more
like remembering the past than like referring to a map about a
month ago i had to go to encino which is the name of a

"town" not far from los angeles or more particularly i had to go
to an art gallery that people described as being "in encino"
i had been there before to the art gallery i had no
notion and still have no notion of what encino looks like as a
space or where it is on a map or in a picture that would
also show los angeles san diego pasadena or the pacific
ocean now i live in solana beach and i have a very adequate
grasp of what solana beach "looks like" though i dont have a
configural or aerial view of it though i could make one ive
walked out of my house and all around the town of solana beach
or more particularly that part of solana beach that is on the
ocean side of the old highway i also know how to get from
solana beach from my house to places in san diego
now how did i get to encino the gallery in encino i
walked out of my house and got into my car which i took in
the direction i had been facing when i left the house which by
the way was away from the ocean i went past the old highway
up a hill past a shopping center called "the place of the seven flags"
to a bigger road and turned onto it going left i stayed
on this road for a long time how long? i didnt look at my
watch but at some point i was passing an empty stretch with
no developments a few palms and some chaparral that
was camp pendleton sometimes you see tanks and troop carriers
there on the left side as you drive on the right side a few
stands of eucalyptus screening farms from the sea wind i passed
san clemente i could tell by the large ridges we passed and a
faint sense of discomfort in breathing we were beginning the
smog but you dont notice it right away you realize after
a while that youve been sensing a slight increase in temperature
feeling a slight effort in breathing and you know youve
been entering the smog after a while there are more buildings of
an industrial sort oil refineries cracking plants a gypsum
plant a holiday inn youre moving toward long beach
but you keep going without paying too much attention to the
road later then youre going through a long stretch of fairly empty
mountains youre getting closer you pass a funny shaped
building on your left a little science fictiony and displaced in
these mountains then there is another of a different kind

also displaced this time on the right i think its a bank
 and you approach it coming down a hill its time to make a left
 turn onto another road called the ventura freeway you
 drive on this for a short while i dont remember how long
 and theres a place to get off i cant tell you what it looks
 like but when i see it the angle of light maybe a cluster
 of eucalyptus trees and then nothing i think i get off and
 find my way left i go straight ahead until i come to a big avenue
 a kind of more open space and turn right i travel along
 this street till the businesses get a little flashier and look for the
 place when i am in front of it i recognize it now i have no
 great fund of information about the australasian aborigine but i
 have reason to suppose that in some ways he moves around or
 used to move around his own countryside somewhat in the way that
 i got to encino an anthropologist trying to make a map of the
 "territory" of certain western desert people found that "usually
 a western desert man will make a small mark representing his birth-
 place and from it run a line representing his track to farther waters
 until he has indicated all his principal camping places" as you
 can see this is not a map its a set of "driving instructions"
 and it was only by using a large number of "driving instruc-
 tions" that professor tindale was able to construct a "map" of the
 desert mans territory because a map consists of a very large
 family of driving instructions in fact once a map is put
 down from some limited number of sets of driving instructions it
 can be used to derive an infinite set of driving instructions
 because once the axis of culture the left hand right hand
 line the north south line is oriented to the axis of nature
 the east west line it is possible by counting some kinds of
 units steps? degrees? to get from any place to any
 other place within the domain of the map whether or not they
 have ever been of interest to anyone before hypothetical places
 or conjectural places can all be arrived at by reference to
 known places and the four points of the compass there are
 certainly advantages to this literal career because thats what it
 is a career and it was the career of the great astronomical
 and agricultural societies in the near east which became very
 involved with regularities absolute regularities or as nearly

absolute regularities as they could find one might imagine that
 they had a special need for such a career or rather more precisely
 that such a career was rewarded under their special circum-
 stances of farming on a flood plain where a great deal of human
 social and economic organization disintegrated when the waters
 came we don't have to hold a functionalist position to suppose
 that an ability to reinstitute land divisions on the subsidence of
 flood waters or to predict with some accuracy the approach
 of flooding or to estimate the timing of planting and harvesting
 in relation to this water clock and solar clock or to dredge
 the marshes for cultivation and allocate regular amounts of
 river water to regularly divided land parcels would pay off
 and maybe even pay off high enough stakes to enough members
 of this society in return for the loss of human freedom that the
 regularity would entail for them to put up with it and its
 not surprising to see trigonometry and geometry and map making
 all together in this growing literalist enterprise where we
 also find in this hydraulic society one great center of literacy
 which is again no accident because if you think of this
 literalism as a career you can also think of it as something like
 the career of a disease some alien element perhaps arbitrary
 a foreign body the first move toward literalism making
 a mark on a wall say producing a response to that foreign ele-
 ment recognizing it as equivalent to something or capable of
 being made equivalent to something always and extracting
 ' value from that regularity of equivalence one mark for the
 rising sun to the setting sun one mark for the number one
 that is for one of anything two such marks for two of
 anything grasping at the career of regularity in literalism but
 only grasping because in the beginning making two marks merely
 reenacts the action of counting "one [makes mark]" "two
 [makes mark]" it is still a little play "the sun [he puts his
 stick in the earth making a point and begins to move it] goes from
 here to there" it is still the *act* of drawing not a *drawing*
 but it is not a long way from drawing reenacting with the
 hand to a *drawing* the disease is spreading once you've
 benefited from any form of literalism it will be easier to try another
 and another and while all these acts of regularization pay off in

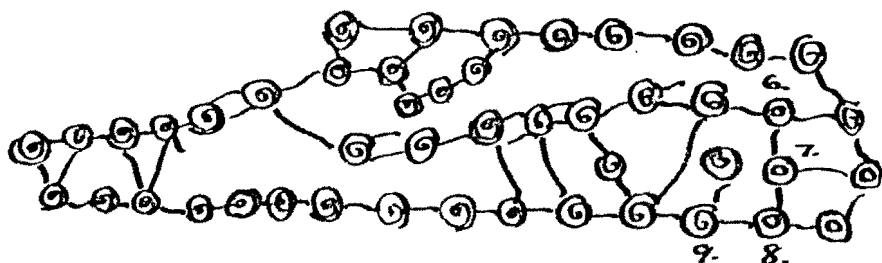
some convenience you will also pay something for them in
 this way most diseases are not so much problems but solutions
 to problems that youre paying too much for like atherosclerosis
 which was solving your diet problem and your lack of
 activity problem till it killed you well now we have a problem
 with our overlong career of literalism overlong and singleminded
 its been so long now that many of us find it hard to understand
 the terms of any other possible career so hard that we must
 insist that the western desert man was not making a map or
 not what we mean by a map its a pity that tindale doesnt give
 a precise account of what the event was like but that wasnt
 his purpose at the time so let us reconstruct the event as it
 probably happened "the western desert man will make a mark
 representing his birthplace" now how does he do that? for
 a western desert man "the place where he was born" is not so
 much the place where his mother gave birth that point on a
 north-south east-west grid counted off in meters from some objective
 physical landmark isnt that his birthplace is the "important
 place" closest to that physical birth its the nearest important
 place on the famous path of the "sacred person"
 he will be associated with a pile of rocks a small waterhole
 that will be the place of his dreaming and these camping
 places they will lie along the track of his dreaming more
 or less the desert mans territory is crisscrossed not by recurrent
 and regularly spaced lines of longitude and latitude but by
 sacred tracks of "first people" the sacred ones who wandered
 through the place sat down here went out of sight there
 and left a pile of rocks to mark the place and placed the
 important creatures and plants in the land now these paths are
 not spaced equidistantly and they do not proceed in right lines
 they wander from waterhole to clump of vegetation across an
 arid irregularly watered space covered with spinifex grass and rocks
 and scrubby little trees and because of the way the people live
 there a few hundred people living in an area of a few thousand
 square miles and having to travel in smaller and smaller bands
 as the year gets dryer and dryer most are familiar with some
 of each others famous paths within their familiar terrain
 but less familiar with others paths though they are from

the same group so what any one desert man has is a knowledge
of roads and driving instructions some roads he knows better
than others now he makes a mark the first mark he makes
is for the place he knows best you ask "how does he know
where to put it on the paper?" and thats a good question
if he happens to make this map on paper it would be inter-
esting to know does he put it in the middle or near an edge? is
he an edge person? because maybe he was born near the begin-
ning of another peoples land or something but i dont have any
answers for that professor tindale had something else in mind
and neglected to say whether the western desert man made his map
on paper or on the ground but i would suppose that it
would be very unlikely that he the western desert man would line
up the axes of the paper with the sunline and his leftright hand line
before beginning and it is probable that he would feel more
comfortable laying out his pathways in the ground with a stick
and that he would push the stick forward through the ground
as if he was walking in the direction of the stick unless the habit
of using that stick his boomerang say was to pull it toward
him as when cutting up an animal but if his working habit
didnt interfere he would probably push the stick forward and
reenact his going travelling from his birthplace to his next
camping ground try to remember that place and then go on to
his next one and so on and so on till he had gone through
all his camping places or all of them that he remembered
and while i have no evidence for this i can point to two
native maps incised on their spear throwers by pintubi tribesmen
of the western desert as these were shown and explained
to donald thomson who was exploring their country and
these are certainly not maps in our sense of the word for one
thing though both spear throwers and both maps are from
the same people the same band even they are by no means
the same one spear thrower shows forty-nine water places and
the other shows thirty-six in what seems to be the same territory
and only eighteen are the same and while this isnt terribly
surprising since the drawings the roadmaps were made by
different people most likely what is more surprising is
that these eighteen common places are not in the same place

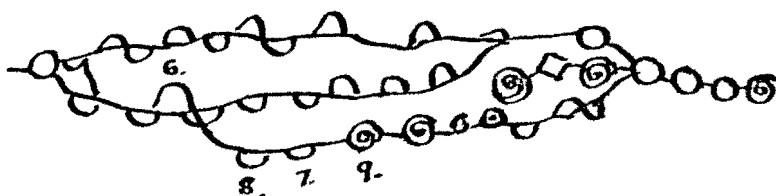
by which i mean that they are not in the same relation to each other or to the surface on which they are inscribed in the two "maps" drawings or more precisely carvings but this may take a little explaining because the carvings themselves exhibit only certain relations found in maps sequential order and approximate relative proximity and accessibility how is this the case? well the carvings consist of more or less circular marks for the camping sites and lines between them for the connecting paths all of the circles are laid out along one or the other of about three rather wavy lines that parallel the long dimension of the somewhat fishshaped spear throwers occasionally these circular watersites are connected by crosslines to an adjacent site on an adjoining longitudinal line so it seems that you can get from campsite 1 to campsite 2 and must then procede directly to campsite 3 and so on but in other parts of the map it turns out that you can get from campsite 3 to campsite 4 but also to campsite 6 because campsite 3 is connected to campsites 2 and 4 and 6 so what we have is a network of roads marking accessibility and a sort of serial order or a choice of serial order and relative proximity and thats all now you may suppose that one end of the spear thrower marks north and the other south but that is not the case because a place that is at the distal end of one spear thrower may appear either at the proximal end of the other or even at the center it seems that a sequence of camping sites arranged in the mind perhaps as an ordered list is laid out in the order in which the sites would be approached ordinarily first this one then that one but that the list is arbitrarily adapted to the shape of the spear thrower i mean any pintubi would probably know that *wakilbi* would be much further off to the left if he was going there from *kuna* but if he put it as far off to the left as it ought to be if the law of proportionality was to be obeyed it wouldnt fit on the spear thrower so wherever it should really be it still has to be made to fit on a piece of wood which was shaped before the map was made and shaped on the basis of very different considerations and while this is easy to understand and a relatively practical solution to a practical problem making a wide terrain fit on a narrow surface there is another difference between these road maps

and our notion of a map even when both maps agree on the watering places they don't always agree on the way to get from one to another for example there are four places *wirra wirra kirindji kanandibarro* and *markodarindja* and they are laid out on map 1 in just that way following sequentially a kind of right angle of which *kanandibarro* is the vertex but on map 2 they are not only laid out in a single line but in the order *markodarindja kirindji kanandibarro wirra wirra* that is they are reversed which is a trivial difference because the point of view of the map maker might have been reversed but they are also in a different order which is to say if one map has the order 6 7 8 9 map 2 has the order 9 7 8 6 where we would have expected if sequence were to be maintained 9 8 7 6 how to explain this to one who is used to our notion of maps well it isn't difficult to explain as long as we remember that this is not really a "map" an arrangement that conforms or is congruent or similar in the disposition of its elements to the elements of the real world conceived in relation to some fixed axes if it isn't we can suppose that the two waterholes *kirindji* and *kanandibarro* which we have called 7 and 8 are neither one of them much further from or nearer to either campsite 6 or 9 then these two *kirindji* and *kanandibarro* waterholes 7 and 8 can be imagined to lie more or less on a straight line in the real world at right angles to a line that might be drawn from campsites 6 to 9 the four campsites would then form a kind of conceptual diamond shaped parallelogram and it would be a matter of personal preference whether you went from *wirra wirra* our number 6 first to *kirindji* number 7 then *kanandibarro* number 8 and then to *markodarindja* number 9 or whether you went from *wirra wirra* number 6 first to *kanandibarro* number 8 then *kirindji* number 7 and then to *markodarindja* number 9 and this transposition of 7 and 8 could be made either coming from *markodarindja* number 9 or *wirra wirra* number 6 and the preference that would lead you to make either choice might have to do with the way in which your particular sacred ancestor happened to go and he may have gone one way on one occasion and the other way on another so that

Map 1



Map 2



KEY:

Path of Map 1.

Path of Map 2.

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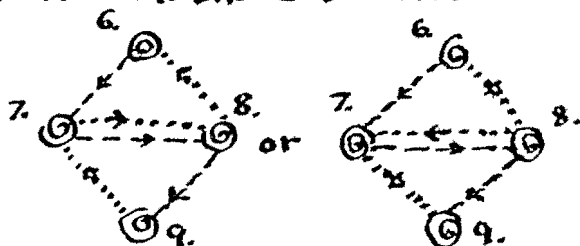
6. wirra-wirra

7. kirindji

8. kanandibarro

9. markodarindja

APPROXIMATE PROBABLE SITUATION



spear thrower "maps" drawn after photographs in d.f. thomson

"the bindibu expedition" *geographical journal* volume 128

1962 pp 262-78 the "maps" are slightly simplified in respect
of possibly significant marks of uncertain meaning on the spear
throwers the analysis is my own

this is a reason based on history rather than geography or more precisely on sacred geography rather than geometrical geography now this sacred geography or traditional geography is based on these first paths not on literal lines of longitude and latitude which are intended to replicate literally a pathway with respect to the solar path what we come back to is a memory of roads and places and it is very much a matter of memory because there is no hint on either of these spear thrower road-maps which waterhole is which this you have to remember and you do it by first remembering the first one where you were born? and then you remember the next one and then the next one and so on and if you get confused there is no one to correct you except someone elses memory and as elkin the great australian anthropologist says

sometimes the natives say they know quite well the direction and exact location of a certain sacred site [but] they seldom approach it by the shortest route indeed they frequently set out as though going somewhere else altogether or they seem unable to find their way to the place the explanation is that the sacred place must only be approached by the same path as that taken by the hero connected with it this may lead for some time away from it and some informants may have to search round until they find signs of the track before they can move with certainty

because in order to come to the right place you have to find the right way which may not mean when you are travelling that you must always travel in this order on these paths anymore than a traveller with a modern map must travel along a great circle of the globe clearly you can travel any way you want or have to for the purposes you have in hand hunting or whatever but you can always locate yourself in relation to these famous lines and water places instead of locating yourself by lines of longitude and latitude you locate yourself in relation to famous lines and famous places that have one further advantage over arbitrary ones there will ordinarily be water there you can probably also regard the celebrated and enormously complex kinship systems of these societies as also nothing more than sets of driving

instructions roadways for distinguishing landmarks in a more or
 less indistinguishable terrain of relatively equivalent things
 men and women and you don't have to suppose any charts
 or maps merely a knowledge of the rules of the road as
 provided by familiar examples say I'm supposed to marry my
 cross-cousin some girl what's a cross-cousin? in my
 case since I'm a man it'll be a girl that I should get to by
 travelling in the right way my instructions are "up one gene-
 ration..." this roadmap will lead to my patrilinear cross-cousin
 travel up one generation to a man who will turn out to be
 my father or any man who can be classed as that which
 might be any of his brothers or half brothers or classificational
 brothers drive left to his sister or any woman who can be
 classed as that turn back down any number of generations to
 whoever is classed as her daughter and marry her or any
 her you can reach by travelling that road whose father will agree to
 give her to you for whatever wives are going for that year if
 you're supposed to marry your matrilinear cross-cousin that
 merely means you drive up one generation to a female parent
 your mother or whoever you can class as that turn right to
 her male sibling a brother or whoever can class as that turn
 back down to a woman his daughter or whoever you can
 class as that and marry her for any of these excursions
 there are alternate trips what you might call the scenic route
 you can go up to your mother's mother's mother's mother
 four generations up as long as you come down four classi-
 ficational generations to her brother's daughter's daughter's daugh-
 ters daughter and at the end of that road there will be a woman
 waiting for you on the other hand if you happen to begin
 with a woman if you work hard enough and drive back-
 ward far enough there is an ancestor waiting for you
 which is to say that in kinship also it is hardly a matter of
 who you marry of finding the right person it is rather a
 matter of finding some person by going the right way and once
 again so with marriages as with campsites you may not
 choose to travel them but they mark out the terrain the
 only problem and it may not be a problem at all if nobody
 makes an issue out of it is that the memory of relations

landmarks over any number of generations may become
 somewhat vague in which case you will certainly convert any
 marriage you intend into a marriage that was arrived at in the
 right way and you will redesignate all the necessary intermediate
 landmarks relations which may not in absolute historical
 fact have been the right relations to make them the right rela-
 tions since there is no such thing as an absolute history but
 only the memory of history which you will adapt to the cir-
 cumstances of your needs and desires and your sense
 perhaps of anxiety which is to some extent the way of
 all historians and possibly it is an anxiety like this that is
 bound up with the career of writing down some fear
 of forgetting is it an accident that the dakota winter counts
 seem to coincide that is their invention and use
 seem to coincide with the sense of the alien presence of
 the white man some premonition of the loss of their history
 which is really a memory of important things dimly felt
 and worried about the time they first stole the horses with iron
 shoes when they first got smallpox the appearance of the
 white trader the small inroads spreading an anxiety that
 they might go "out of print" the recording of history will only
 seem necessary the fixing of the past in some external reservoir
 the message stick the knotted string the cylinder seal the palace
 inventory the burial inscription if there is some danger of for-
 getting or losing its an attempt to overcome the deficiencies of
 the human one deficiency of which is death by placing
 meaning outside of mind trying to find some way of bringing
 meaning out of a mind and into a place so it was appropriate
 for that mycenaean society with all its apparatus and gear
 for the minoans to have a way of keeping inventories and
 accounts but its not all that easy to understand how poetry
 came to be written down or why i mean if poetry was a
 kind of talking and it had to be if there was no writing then
 a poet was someone who could talk when the time came
 could remember other talking and could tell the important
 things how they had happened and why and what might
 have happened if these things hadnt happened in the way they
 happen to have happened now i suppose if the talk seemed

very important and sometimes it may have been say that
 the talk was a talking of law of what was acceptable and right
 and what was not acceptable and not right and what then in
 iceland every summer over every three years the law speaker had to
 stand on the law rock and recite the whole law of the land and
 the way that we understand that is that the law is already
 mixed up with writing because we think of the ten command-
 ments and the code of hammurabi "thou shalt have no other
 god than me" or "if you steal from me ill kill you" but
 the law of power is not the only kind of law that is statute
 law the law of edicts and statutes and commandments and
 pseudocommandments is not the only kind of law there is the
 notion of common law among the germanic peoples anyway
 a law expressing someones views of what is fitting among
 equals if you happen to kill someone and it sometimes
 happens you have to make restitution of some sort to his
 people if you divorce someone you have to give back her
 dowry all other things being equal "have to"? well
 you have to by "law" it is thought just and the law will
 work if you the parties concerned are equal in power
 and can make the "law" work no there is an oral law
 sometimes called primitive law there are courts among
 people having no writing though you may think "if there is no
 writing theres no reciting" and youre wrong because it is
 where there is no writing there is reciting on the condition that
 some particular articulation in talking was the right articulation
 that one time "do unto others as you would have others
 do unto you" or "those that have shall receive and those
 that have not even the little that they have shall be taken
 away" its not hard to remember that at all give or take a
 little if its memorable youll remember it but it will help
 if its short and peculiar jingling and twisted in some unex-
 pected way its a platitude to say it that you will remember
 what is distinctive and that suggests you shouldnt worry about
 forgetting and there never will be writing because youll
 never need it but you may think something is important and
 it isnt short it is a long train of events and articulations and
 you are worried that you have to remember it just so it has the

nostalgia of *njal* talking about law "with law shall our land be
 built up but with lawlessness laid waste" and we must under-
 stand that *njal* is probably not just saying that hes reciting it
 hopefully a kind of proverb between talking and
 writing we probably have reciting and thats the only way i
 could imagine that the talkings of homer got to be written down
 otherwise it seems too improbable that anyone would
 want to write them down not at a time when all of this talking
 was going on as talking because it would just seem too
 freaky an idea to use a way of mark making that was used for
 labels on a can of peaches or a figure in a bill of lading and hope
 it would hold a way of talking and i dont doubt that homer
 or some other blind man told those "poems" because
 they just arent put together the way somebody would put them
 together if he could lay it out all in front of him and go back
 and forth over all that talk and take out all of his slips and
 file away the little side trips that make the talking seem a funny
 shape kind of uncouth as a "form" but a form only exists
 in space at least it has no objective existence without reference
 to some space in which its all together at once so that you can
 inspect all the parts of it as an overall kind of thing no serial
 art no art that elapses in time can be looked at all at once
 unless it is terribly short because there is memory again you
 cant flip the pages of memory back and forth to find slips of the
 tongue you didnt notice when you made them or forgot
 and an oral poem is clumsier if you like literary poems
 better i mean the saga of *burnt njal* is much more elegant than
 the iliad from a formal point of view and theyre both
 terrific but theyre terrific in different ways if youre a liter-
 ary man homer is something of a slob the whole opening
 of the iliad is something of a mistake the talker gets caught by a
 kind of slip of the tongue and he has no choice but to go right on
 it begins ordinarily enough as i suppose you all know
 he asks the muse to give him enough memory to get his
 talking straight. you know the way it goes

 tell me goddess
 of the destroying rage of achilles peleus son that

loaded all those woes on the achaeans and sent too
early all those brave heros souls down to hell and
left their bodies for the dogs and all the birds and yet
it was the will of zeus and of that first time
when the son of atreus king of men and divine
achilles quarreled and drew apart

which is okay as far as it goes it was the usual thing i suppose
more or less but the turning point the difficult varia-
tion in this opening something like the dragon variation in the
sicilian defense is in the next phrase because up to here
homer could have gotten to the quarrel very easily and worked his
way in from there but the next phrase goes

and which of the gods set them on the two of them
to fight with each other?

which may seem reasonable enough except none of the gods set
them on to fight with each other as homer himself will show in
a very few lines sure he says it was

the son of latona and zeus for he was enraged with
the king and he sent a plague among the army
and the people were dying

which is all very well but thats hardly what set agamemnon
and achilles quarreling it merely created an anterior set of cir-
cumstances that could have caused any number of things the
loss of the war by the greeks their sailing away from troy in
disgust their death by the plague whatever nothing at
all about achilles and agamemnon until the plague gets so bad
that hera zeus wife takes things into her own hands
and in a dream she tells achilles to call a council if there is
no council there will be no quarrel of divine agents hera is as
good a cause as any but even thats not enough its in the
council when achilles asks for a priest or an interpreter of dreams
to explain why the disease that calchas stands up and explains
how agamemnons insult to chryses the priest of apollo
caused it all and how to amend it that the quarrel starts
now you may say thats all right the greeks have a funny
view of causality and i say thats nonsense homer isnt

thinking of causality as a matter of fact he isnt thinking at all
 hes talking trying to make his way to the story which
he intends to tell this time from the point of view of achilles
 quarrel with agamemnon who knows why? and at about
the end of the first request to the muse hes used to asking
about divine agencies hes already named the two main human
actors now its time or seems to be time to bring in the
gods hes already talked about the dying and the dead bodies
 and there is the image of them lying on the beach being fed on
by the dogs and the birds so he may as well or rather he
may whether its well or not talk about the dying and
just before the quarrel broke out there was a disease that ran
through the army and it was on homers mind the dying
men and the carrion birds and the dogs and there was apollo
 prince of disease with his arrows and he was offended
so why not apollo and the story of how he came to be offended
 how agamemnon kidnapped the daughter of apollos priest
chryses and the old priest came to ransom her under the
protection of apollo with the fillet and the ransom in his hands
 and agamemnon drove him away and insulted him as well
 okay you say why not this way the answer is that as
soon as homer says "which god set them on each other" and
names apollo he has to tell the whole story of the old priest
coming down to the ships with his ransom and politely begging and
bribing the greek kidnappers and maybe a little threatening
trouble from apollo as well and homer gives all the speeches
 agamemnons cruel response

 i wont let her go till old age overcomes her in our
house in argos far from her own country
 working the loom and sharing my bed

and "dont let me find you here again down near our ships" its
pretty colorful but the trouble is with the "form" if you
care about things like that because in the council that achilles
calls calchas will have to tell all over again why apollo caused
all that trouble and homers just told that story very well
 and he has to tell it all over again and its not so good this
time whereas if he hadnt slipped into the "which god"

gambit he wouldn't have had to tell the insult to chryses twice
over in the space of a very few lines now you may say
there's nothing wrong with repetition and i would be the last
person to disagree with you but the notion of "formal" elegance
is usually related to reduction of redundancy of pointless
repetition i mean if calchas told the story the second time in
such a way that it added something anything eloquence
more detail or more information of any kind you
could plausibly say it was better written that way but the pas-
sage is nothing of the sort it's a mere statement of the insult to
chryses and to apollo and what happened thereafter
all of which you already know and know better

because there isn't much better in the whole poem than the way
apollo comes down from olympus with his shoulders shaking with
rage rattling the arrows in his quiver calmly seating himself
on the ground and sending his arrows rattling "first into
the mules and then the swift dogs and then on the greeks"

keeping "the funeral fires heaped with the bodies of the dead
constantly burning" this is all very magnificent but it's the
kind of magnificence that a great chess player improvises right
after a structural blunder now in a written work it would
have been very easy to go back erase the false step and put
the whole colorful description of the insult to chryses somewhat
more conveniently in calchas' mouth when he explains the plague
in the council of the greeks but the iliad is not a written work
and there are some things fundamentally different about an

oral poem one thing in particular the technique of erasing
i mean in a literary poem there's a text and a determined reader
can flip the pages back over and over again and there is some-
thing of an illusion of spatial form the idea that you can have
it there all at once lying under your hands leading to
the notion of elegant spatial arrangement and its contraries

clumsy arrangements all based on fantasies of some spatial
existence that is the result of the mind's deceiving itself into forget-
ting that it has itself constructed this "space" and the "form" that
is an imaginary configuration within it by mere flipping of
pages and taking this synthetically derived memory produced by
constant reavailability and confusing it with real memory

it is this "constructed" literal form which requires the mechanical operations of erasure and excision the only way you can get rid of an object is to destroy it but an oral poem has no such problem if you take a wrong turn make a false start you cant "erase" it but you can recover and you can obliterate it from memory you can take advantage of the weakness of human memory by extending through time some kind of diversionary brilliance if your energy isnt impeded and you get where you have to go without looking tired no one will remember that it took you a few extra steps to get there the principle of economy of form in an oral work is measured out in energy not in length how long is a brilliant passage? how short is a boring one? who remembers? after homer told that story twice remember that story? the insult to apollo? with all those fireworks who remembers how apollo got into it at all? as a divine agent what you remember is the insult to chryses apollo's anger flying arrows the mules and the dogs dying and the men and after the poem was "made" i mean after a lot of tellings of the story in many different ways that people "remembered" some tellings and then maybe one telling or one kind of telling seemed very auspicious and the poet the talker or some series of talkers got too fond of their own *bon mots* and those of their masters and there got to be too much art appreciation and not enough art making though still quite a bit so that the poem was strung out with good phrases that by now the overly sensitive younger poets were pretty much stuck with because aside from everything else they were easy to remember and something of a convenience if you had to do it while singing which is a special kind of talking a little bit peculiar like telling a story on a tightrope or while swimming difficult but not impossible especially if you had all those readymade phrases to do it with so you could save a space for the breathing and also have time to improvise in another part of the talking with the arrangement of the story say to improvise at all you need some kind of cliches but anyway with all of this increase in remembering choice bits its easy to see no its not so easy but possible to see how

that making poems talking poems could start dying and
 people could start trying to remember somebodys good talking
 and therefore reciting and from reciting its not too
 far to trying to save it in writing but we know all about that
 about how writing is about anxiety trying to hold some-
 thing still and we can sympathize with it too easily even
 plato who was afraid of writing at least socrates was afraid
 of it and says so in the *phaedrus* how writing will destroy
 human memory that is real memory because people will
 come to rely upon this writing and will not exercise their minds to
 come to the truth and how it writing is like the stupid
 child of indulgent parents that will spout words that you will
 want to question more closely and when you ask it more nar-
 rowly to tell you its meaning it will answer nothing at all and
 have to run back to its parents to find out the answer and yet
 with all this platos own theory of forms is the pathetic child of
 literacy the notion of a fixed paradigm a pattern against
 which all exemplars can be checked or you hope they can
 well maybe it was socrates who saw the trouble coming
 because he committed nothing to writing and plato com-
 mitted everything but we know this story how we got here
 its harder to understand what an oral culture is doing when its
 making art say and easy enough to understand about stories
 and talking but you want to know what about pots?
 because pot making is one of the things they do in oral cultures
 some of them and some people call those pots art if
 this pot making is art its the art of making pots its not the
 pots that are the art pots are the outcome of the art now
 why do i say this because its sometimes easy to forget this
 and start rushing to the pot to find the art if pot making is
 an art lets think about the way people learn to make pots in pot
 making cultures can somebody say "here is the ideal pot in it
 is the very idea of a pot study that pot and copy it" maybe
 they could but they dont not what im calling oral cultures
 anyway if they say anything at all which they may not
 they say something like "this is the way to make this kind of
 pot first you get ready and you sit down sit down
 here no youre not ready go away youre not

ready yet go think about the clay heres some clay take it
go for a walk feel the clay go feel the clay” you know
they may have very elaborate routines which are from their
point of view all part of making the pot and you will find
that in oral societies they frequently have quite elaborate routines
for making all kinds of things or used to have in totem pole
making cultures or boatmaking cultures maybe before you
make the thing that youre going to make you go out into the forest
and find a branch and youre not going to “use it” not in
the sense that it will enter into the boat that youre making or be a
mechanical instrument used in assembling it its part of the “role”
of boatmaking its what “boatmakers do” you go out and
find this branch and youre getting into the spirit say of boatmaking
and youre producing auspicious circumstances the right
mood say the right set for doing this thing and then you sit
down in an appropriate way and set about working at it in
an appropriate way maybe you even talk to appropriate people
in some appropriate way before you work on it and then if
it doesnt come out in some sense we could talk about later

its symptomatic that something was wrong with the way you
made it its not that it was a bad thing it was that you didnt
make it right that is you didnt *do* the right thing the art
of this particular kind of society is a way is a way and it leads
to things but the things it leads to are only places along the
way they may be merely stages of the way so a pot is an
outcome of a way and its not a prototype what you do in a
literal culture is you take a model of a particular pot and this
pot this particular pot exemplifies all pots that you want
as you have someone in a dress factory who works at sewing
the parts of the dresses of which the factory will make very
very many if they are lucky and she sews much better
more carefully and accurately to a pattern that the pat-
ternmaker cuts out of a stiff paper like oaktag and this seam-
stress who is more skilled than the others is the samplemaker
and she makes out of cloth which is not very much like
oaktag pieces and sews them into a dress and if the dress
fits the dummy which is the ideal prototypical shape for
a woman of that size a twelve say then they use the

pattern to trace out other ideal sizes 10 14 16 18
 by a series of ideal amplifications bust so much hips so
 much waist so much for the purpose of which ideal amplifica-
 tions they have an ideal amplifier a man called a grader who
 accomplishes these amplifications and reductions on the same stiff
 paper which he gives to another man called a marker who
 carefully marks these patterns onto a long sheet of paper which
 will be laid over the material that they will use in the dresses by
 another man called a cutter then they will cut up all the cloth
 by following the patterns marked on the marker and the pieces
 of cloth cut up in this way will go to the operators who will
 sew them into the dresses that real women will wear now you
 may object that the different sizes of women are not quantized in
 such a way that they are proportionally grouped in magnitudes
 that are neat multiples of each other or that an individual
 woman may be a perfect 12 at the waist and yet a fourteen at the
 breast which is true but just too bad because it is
 more convenient to make dresses for ideal women than real women
 more convenient for the makers if not for the women and
 all of this is the strategy of a literal culture tracing off a pattern
 and in theory because it is never so in practice a literal cul-
 ture will produce things that look more like the pattern than the
 pattern after a while the notion of replication belongs to that
 culture ideally such a society seeks regularity and uniformity
 and increases convenience for the maker who is funda-
 mentally distinct from the user because his convenience may
 be served otherwise and this convenience may lead to a total
 disjunction between making and using which may reduce to rubble
 the whole apparent purposefulness of the initial prototype now
 an oral society does not gravitate to the notion of replication
 the ideal example because as anyone will easily see
 there is never a situation without some trivial or not so trivial
 accident in making the pot the temperature was perhaps
 too great or there was a piece of sand where there shouldnt
 have been but occasionally is one but if you made it the right
 way you made it the right way everybody knows that if you
 make something the right way its going to be a little different than
 if you make it the right way some other day in fact you dont

even think about it being different from the one you made the right way the other day as far as youre concerned theyre quite the same thing if you take two pots made by two good potmakers who are of the same type belong to the same atelier perhaps one was the teacher of the other and theyre both very good and if its really an oral culture more or less and one pot looks different from the other to you you might have to work fairly hard to get these two potmakers to admit there was really a difference between the two pots or finally to admit that they had noticed it right away but didnt think it meant a great deal because they would think that the difference between the two pots was the difference between any two pots that were made in the right way now of course you could say "look the beak is a little longer here bent a little over here" and you say "and a little wider over there" and "yes yes" they say looking at you like the fool that you are because it has always been evident to them that if you can make it the right way you make it the right way if this is true all other things being equal we should come to see a fundamental difference between what we are calling oral societies and literal societies in an oral society they will keep to the right way and in a literal society they will keep to the right thing and since the right thing is itself a literal exemplar of other right things in such a society you will have an attempt to adhere rigidly to the right thing if you are convinced that you already have the right thing as in certain hierarchic societies and if you are convinced that you do not as yet have the right thing you will try to seek out what that is by inspecting other things which are not quite the right thing and attempting to finish them to the degree of perfection that will make them the right thing but once youre convinced that you have the right thing youll demand absolute adherence to it and if theres any difference of opinion about whether it is the right thing or not youre likely to have something of a conflict between the party that believes they have the right thing and the party that believes they havent the result of this will be that any change in any thing will seem much more important loaded so to speak when a thing is involved with a notion of its rightness so that a literal society will exaggerate any

change at all in a thing it takes seriously and it will seem to this society that any changes at all in its things the things that it notices are terrifically radical and such a society will imagine itself struggling between order and revolution however trivially it may be changing it is therefore a much more rigid and inflexible society than an oral society which we can imagine as continually accumulating small variations somewhat randomly

in the sense that the work under hand is continually varying in the direction of the needs of the moment and habit of the hand of the human being who is making whatever he's making and because there will be no exemplar to hold up the work against or more accurately because no one will feel obligated to hold up the work against any previous work to compare these slight deviations there will be a constant fluidity in the working of this oral society their workmen artists will always be modifying things in an easy going way without really thinking about trying to be different because whatever difference there may be

this workman will be likely to regard it as the same which will lead to the slightly paradoxical conclusion that oral societies are probably always changing and fluid and that their changes may be as great as any changes in any literal society or much greater but they will not flatter themselves or threaten themselves with the notion that these changes are "revolutionary" as long as they are made in the right way because the idea of a revolution is based on the degree of deviation from a prototype

now all this depends to some extent the confidence in any product of the right way depends on some reservoir of memory

and i think it is more useful to think of this memory as a group possession that is i don't think of this memory as being an idiosyncratic individual faculty it involves an individual faculty that is exercised in a social context with other similar faculties memory of most sorts of cultural things is something negotiated by individuals but negotiated with other individuals and "stored" in socially constructed systems like language or socially articulated systems like personality so that there will not really be such extreme idiosyncrasies in judging the right way though there will be considerable biasing in the direction of single personality or situation if the work at hand is not

something that many people must be concerned about in the aspect
 that is undergoing modification something as socially neutral
 as its shape perhaps now you say that may be true all other
 things being equal but since they aren't always equal what then?
 then there will be change of a slightly different sort say
 among yoruba potters the nigerian yoruba society was until
 fairly recently and still is largely an oral society but that isn't
 the way change will occur in yoruba pot making that is
 you can have a family of great potters the grandmother a
 potter her daughter a potter and her daughter a potter and
 they may all three have made pots for the same distinctive social
 purpose a cult purpose say and all three pots may be quite
 distinctively different and these pots may seem quite different
 to the three potters even though they were all made in the right
 way the granddaughter may say seeing a pot of her mothers
 which she may not have seen for years "yes that's a pot of
 my mothers they used to make them like that in those days"
 and she will not say "*we* used to make them that way"
 even though she may have been making pots in those days
 why is that? that's because the yoruba have a "renown"
 system an individual potter can become famous she may
 be publicized by something quite equivalent to an art magazine
 that is by the religious cult of which she is a member
 she may make pots for the members of this cult and it will
 be through the distribution system of the cult that her pots are seen
 since her pots are commodities and are commissioned
 it is advantageous to her to have these pots act as her advertise-
 ment so to speak each pot if it bears the marks of her indi-
 vidual style is an advertisement of her work and it turns
 out that because being a potter is a profession and because this
 profession is rewarded by individual commissions obtained from
 as far as dahomey it is practical for a potter to introduce enough
 distinction in her own wares to be identified by so it will follow
 that every professional potter will look characteristically different
 from every other potter in fact that is probably part of the
 right way but it ought to be a corollary of this that once she
 has achieved a "characteristic style" she may vary casually
 inside of it but it would be unlikely that she would vary to the

point of obscuring the style that is her trademark so a yoruba
 potter will behave something like an american painter of the 1930,
 when painters were creating characteristic commodities and
 this act was called "finding ones style" and it is because of this
 perfectly honorable but commodity distribution system and
 information distribution system which has powerful effects
 upon the work that is done in its context that the right way
 here intersects with the right thing in a special manner and why
 i am talking about a sociology of art rather than a psychology of art
 now it is possible in an oral society to have renown without
 commodity i mean thats what homer was about wasnt it?
 praise poets and epic poets and tellers of tales had no com-
 modity they had a service you can see that very clearly in
 the case of paul radins two winnebago storytellers the ones
 who tell the twin story for him they both have the right to tell
 it which means they have acquired in a legal way the telling
 rights for this story and the story in spite of what radin
 seems to be saying about it is not the same but the blow
 snake brothers appear to be both owners of the same rights
 that is to tell a story about a particular pair of important
 figures in their own way and if winnebago society had been in
 better shape at that time they might have been very well known
 for their abilities to tell these stories as it was they had to be
 well enough known for their ability to tell these stories for radin to
 find this out but we know that language arts dont have a
 commodity in oral societies what there is is more like a franchise
 with rewards for services rendered you could collect gifts or
 whatever and this would probably promote individual differ-
 ences among story tellers which in the nature of things didnt
 need very much promotion but you can also have in an oral
 society a considerable art that has no reward no economic
 reward for art services and little renown take a string-figure
 artist like *narau* the mistress of something over 200 complex and
 distinct string figures made from the manipulation of a 30 inch
 loop of kurrajong bark-fiber cord with her two hands these
 figures made mainly by women themselves or among themselves
 with their own two hands though occasionally they may be
 joined by another woman for a four hand figure now these

figures are final configurations that are the outcome of anything
 from 1 to 30 transformations of the original loop there are
 even two known figures with more than 40 transformations so
 that the string-figure art is a way an elaborate way of
 getting to some recognizable place the figure which usually
 has a name like emu eggs two cunts the morning star
 the menstrual blood of three women a sea eagle catching
 a mullet and so on which figures are landmarks of a story
 so to speak the story of the two sisters who came into this part
 of arnhem land *yirrkalla* invented string figures
 probably string making as well and named everything
 important in sight that is to say the story of the two women
 is like the string-figure making a trip through the countryside
 naming important things but this art what is it? a
 kind of travelling dance conducted on your hands maybe
 invented sometimes or at least adapted to your own hands habits
 in the way a dancer will find a way to adapt a choreography
 to her own body or his own and whether it is a choreography
 with newly invented figures or improvised figures *narau*
 knew more figures than any other person in *yirrkalla* and prob-
 ably 1/5 of all the string figures ever recorded in the world so
 that it is very likely she invented some and modified others
 and if she modified them or the way to get to them
 who would know? at the speed at which she made them
 a transposition of a loop a mirror image reversal of an
 asymmetrical figure will not be so easy to recognize and
 there will be few to recognize these variations anyway since
 this is not an art played out before a vast admiring audience or
 even an intent circle of connoisseurs and if *narau* was a great
 artist she was a great artist without a great audience and like a
 lot of artists *narau* practiced an art with no economic and virtually
 no social stake she worked for a biochemist and did her art on
 the side which from an artists point of view has both advan-
 tages and drawbacks with which we are all familiar but at
 any rate nobody was in a position to examine the amount of change
 she introduced into her art the main pleasure of which must be
 considered the pure pleasure of transformation which would
 lead to change while the secondary pleasure would be the

pleasure of recognition which would restrain this change
 which we would ordinarily be in no good position to estimate
 except for the accident that an anthropologist observed her
 working at a slow motion rate which he had persuaded her to
 undertake so that he could watch her work and he found that
 when he asked her on one occasion to duplicate an already mounted
 figure she made the "wrong figure twice by two different tech-
 niques" on other occasions she proved to be unable to arrive at
 the intended figure at all but sometimes while aiming at
 one figure she arrived at another something like it which is to
 say that sometimes you get there and sometimes you dont
 but sometimes when you dont the place that you get to is right
 enough to call the place which suggests that a constancy of
 naming may disguise considerable change in making because
 "the menstrual blood of three women" is a good name and
 you may like to find different very different figures for
 that naming so that an art of making or working could give
 way or give ground to an art of naming a kind of
 poem - accompanied by a hand dance in a string set

two conch shells
 two cunts
 or one cock and one cunt
 two bottles
 two waterholes
 a man lying down
 a leech in a rakia swamp
 three huts
 frog in a pool
 ripples on a pool
 clouds
 menstrual blood of three women
 three freshwater snakes
 three women sitting down
 fishnet
 two catfish
 human shit
 emu tracks
 fire sticks
 yam
 yam

womans breasts
tree

who knows what possible narratives can be constructed so?
while dancing if you know the story? in hawaii it was
common to recite a fragmentary journey poem or topographical
love poem that is danced on your hands by your fingers with
the string

up rose the sun in its curved path the sun
over the field of aluena set in the calm of kailua
then kona

or to use these figures to "tell stories" or "to act them out"
among the eskimos of alaska and indians of canada

"door boy door boy who stands over there
door boy shut the door why dont you shut the
door?"

"ive got my coat on" (goes away)

between this string dancing and naming there is a lot of play
of room in these hand dramas for variation and change for
continual if unemphasized invention and change it
is even possible under some conditions for making to give place
entirely to naming as among the duchampian *lega* in their *bwami*
ceremonies where if there ever was a strong tradition of making
it is now mostly dead and where a single "sculptured" object
may be given away casually or broken accidentally to be
replaced equally casually by some other object that will be equally
sacred and not even ordinarily distinguished from the object
it has replaced though this new object may be an artifact that
looks nothing like the "original" or it may not even be an arti-
fact at all but a natural object a birdsbeak or shell say
or even a commercially manufactured product a perfume
bottle maybe which will be known as the same thing because
it can be so named because it is capable of the same semantic
function so may be named "the same thing" and no one
displeased or noting the change but you say "what about

form?" and ordinarily i would be prepared to not understand you and answer as easily as you ask that question "what about it?"

i mean im willing to assume that any group of people of any kind whatsoever in some part of their life may want to take advantage of the literalness that is offered by an object to turn a meaning that is only potentially *in* the mind and actually only in the working of the mind in a situation or the working of a hand or a whole body i mean you may want to get out of that shifty ground that we call the memory which isnt a reservoir really but is some action taken in some place and you may want to alienate yourself from this meaning long enough to interrogate it and convert the act of meaning into the object of meaning so you can articulate it at whatever cost that may require and so your working halts temporarily in an object that you can interrogate if only as a station well then this object will be packed it will be something like a condenser filled with energy organized energy that came from some place and can go some other place if you understand its organization if you know what kinds of leads to take it out on i mean what is the "form" of a "sacred bundle"? here is where the notion of "form" begins to break down what about form? form is a notion arrived at by subtraction a residue in the sense that the form of the milk is its bottle which is a notion of form as a shell or a leaving fingernails or hair clippings surely one of the most stupid notions in the history of art is the notion of "form" because in the sense in which it is meaningful it is almost totally obvious and trivial while in the sense that it is meaningless its so eccentric a theory so totally freaky and based on such absurd notions of the human that it is hardly worth considering at all what i mean here is the notion of some kind of specially "significant form" the idea that there is something particularly and universally satisfying about something like certain simple geometric shapes and by the way this is the most modest form of such a claim because earlier in the century more grandiose claims were made for the transcendental value of geometricity but the claim is silly because it is made in a vacuum theres just too much evidence that shows

that what is humanly satisfying or exciting is too contingent
 to be described this way i mean you may find plenty of situa-
 tions where geometrically simple arrangements are significant
 others where it is exciting to find a jumble and others
 where spatial arrangement doesnt seem to matter at all any
 more than olfactory arrangement might matter in a story or
 a system of tactile values in a play at the same time its
 totally obvious that the acoustical signs will be important in a radio
 piece because you wont otherwise hear it and visual signs
 will have to count in a tableau but who would ever disagree
 with that? and why call the visible signs of a tableau its form?
 as opposed to its content i mean all content is content
 you say that something has a shape and its shape is "meaning-
 ful" and you dont exactly know what that meaning is okay
 consider the shape of an arrow the shape of an arrow is
 very meaningful because thats how it enters its object
 when you speak of the form of an arrow what you mean is the
 efficiency with which its designed for penetrating what its supposed
 to penetrate and the difficulty obtaining when you try to
 remove it at least at first thats what you mean and this
 determines the way its made with several qualifications to
 obtain an arrow somebody has to make one right? you
 dont merely snap your fingers and say "arrow!" and have an arrow
 snap into your hand that way you would wind up with a para-
 digm of arrow because whatever design you imagined your
 arrow would entirely manifest your intention it would be
 perfectly designed in terms of your mental definition of "arrow"
 and whatever that might be youll be stuck with it but
 arrows are made out of things and then there are the ways that
 you make them ways you like to work youre a man that
 works you may as well enjoy yourself right? so you realize
 while working that if an arrow has a point it will enter
 easily i mean a point is lets say a generalization a
 refinement of a blade which is merely the principle of the
 wedge or the inclined plane the australians have a spear that
 terminates in a blade and it kills animals too but a point is an
 inclined plane considered from at least one or two additional refer-
 ence planes at right angles to the planes from which the blade

faces are inclined and since inclined planes are simple machines that reduce the amount of force necessary to move a resisting load a point should penetrate more easily than a blade it goes in easier and if it widens enough but not too abruptly to block the entrance of the arrow because the steeper the inclined plane the more force is required to move a load and if it does not widen too slowly to make a large enough wound when thrown with the particular amount of force that it is usually thrown with or shot with and these are conflicting considerations efficiency of entrance which means maximum penetration and maximum wound width which means a larger surface tear and say you add to this a barb a backwards hook that makes it difficult to pull out these are all separate lethal ideas all about killing and maiming penetrating and cutting and tearing the point penetrates and the edge that is the intersection of the inclined planes is a cutting edge theyre all "functional" but not strictly speaking necessary i mean the australian blade-ended spear also kills and nobody knows the relevant kill statistics so while all this is "functional" its not all obligatory and then youve got the stone if you use stone i mean you have to make an arrow out of something and if you hit chip or flake the stone the wrong way it breaks so you dont hit the stone the wrong way that is obligatory if you want an arrow head and the arrow head will have the marks that are characteristic of the right way or the family of right ways for hitting that kind of stone so the marks that you make will have something to do with the kind of stone you use but the stone that you use may have something to do with the stone that happens to be around or even more likely with the kind of stone you happen to like and you may happen to like it because its shiny or hard or because it takes well the kind of marks you happen to like to make because there may be several available stones several adequate ones adequate for their purpose and for the tools you have and for the way you like to work because youre a guy who likes to work arrows and you spend a lot of time working arrows so youre entitled to your preference you find "thats a crummy stone i dont like that stone" and there are stones that "look good" its nice to have slick

snappy arrows if youre an arrow man you have a thing about
 arrows and you like "good arrows" you have a sense too about
 how you might like to make an arrow like when you flake an
 arrow theres a clear mark you can make a simple intelligible
 mark as opposed to a crummy mark and after a while you
 have an idea of the snappy arrow the well made arrow and you
 have an idea of dapper arrows sincere arrows (a sincere arrow
 goes right to the point) clumsy arrows worthy arrows
 that are laborious but efficient maybe the ground point
 lacking the boldness of the flaking style theres no reason
 why you wont play you spend a lot of time making arrows
 now somebody looks at that arrow and he says "whats the
 meaning of that arrow?" and somebody says "death" and
 you say "no its not just 'death' we also shoot at trees
 for fun we have contests in our village there are guys
 who like to shoot arrows for sheer pleasure independent of
 death and we have ceremonial arrow shooting because
 killing our food is the way of our life and we use it in our musi-
 cal performances arrow-target-percussion music and arrow-
 string music and arrow-wind music and there is also just
 a liking to have arrows as liking to have a thing that is a pleas-
 ure to hold" and after a while you say "is that the meaning of
 the arrow?" and you say "well there are a few 'meanings' for
 the arrow there are meanings for the arrow maker its an
 arrow he liked its an appropriate arrow and maybe his distinc-
 tive arrow and belongs to the attitude toward making arrows
 of a whole atelier whose character is defined by an arrow of that
 sort" its based on the notion of the snappy arrow or the
 stylish arrow and theres nothing "formal" about chic this
 is not based on a notion of "pure form" or the universal recognition
 of some particular family of shapes as better or worse style is
 content pure content it is even often polemical con-
 tent and you can hate it or love it not because of what it
 is but because of what it represents this is all about meaning
 perfectly straightforward meaning it has nothing whatever
 to do with pure contemplation or esthetic values whatever they
 may be the notion of pure form and pure esthetic contempla-
 tion is a straightforward argument by example for a particular idea

of the good life which may be manifested in a personal style
 the way people stand say think of the way people stand
 or walk as a stylistically meaningful enterprise in order
 to go from one place to another in a human community
 and for reasons that are not perhaps so functionally clear
 you have to support yourself on your feet walking the
 way people walk surely theres more to walking than getting
 from one place to another because people can get there in a
 lot of ways on their hind legs so you "walk" if you go out
 into the street youre going to see "english walks" "dandy
 walks" "struts" "sexy slinks" "gunfighter walks"
 "a genteel promenade" "a cavaliers *paseo*" "a philoso-
 phers *spazier*" (with his hands behind his back peering occasionally
 at nearby spectacles before returning to an absent forward
 gaze) "a tennis slouch" or a vernacular shambly walk
 just "hulking along" now all of these walks are signifi-
 cant form to the extent that they represent styles loaded with
 content these people walking this way are representing them-
 selves to the world and to themselves with these walks they
 know how it feels and they like it there are people who like
 to shamble they sort of "hulk along" now its not entirely
 a disaster to hulk along because these people who hulk along
 get to places too often they get there on time too some-
 times more often than other people who dont hulk along as
 they stumble in the door theres no way of talking about
 anything meaningful without talking about it as meaning there
 is no special occasion that can be described as an "esthetic occasion"
 but the act of identifying a totally nondescribable experience
 as fundamental and fundamentally nondescribable is a particular
 performance somebody named benedetto croce is performing
 some kind of dance and i dont know whether i like it

"but what about these forms that are persistent and re-
 main virtually unchanged even in oral societies for gene-
 rations like benin bronzes say?"

well im not really convinced that benin bronzes are so unchanged
 and there are probably better examples of relatively stable ways of
 working with apparently very similar products made by different

artists for long periods of time and while i can think of examples
they are i believe the outcome of very special situations i
can think of this in the situation of a sacred art with a sacred tech-
nology and highly valued materials where the initiates the
master makers are both makers and users of the art or where
the audience users are enormously concerned with the precise
outcome of the art making to such an extent that they take
entire control over the processes of making controlling the
materials and the workshops the training of the acolytes
and the quality control over the products of the workshops
like science this is a powerful vested totalitarian art form
what i have in mind is something like the sacred art of radium
poisoning you have here a combination of the necessary elements
radium is a material of very high value and scarcity diffi-
cultly obtained by a severe and refined technology it must
be handled with care in minute doses requiring elegant measuring
devices for weighing and testing and preserving and it is
necessary to use only this means to poison the king in fact it
is only this sacred material that may be allowed to cause the death
of the priest king because it is the only material whose value
is on a level with the sacred person of the ruler the holy king
to be poisoned by the dematerializing force of the holy material
and it is no point to have a ruler who doesnt rule or whose
life is too short for the society to benefit from the experience he
acquires as a ruler and moreover there is available a great exper-
tise in measuring out refined doses of radium in millicuries and
refined magnitudes of damage in becquerels of organic disintegration
and the point of this art form is to sharpen the kings perceptual
field through a domain of gradually concentrating pain which
will come to isolate him from the distracting pleasures of his own
senses and their easy gratification by a sacred and scientific morti-
fication of his royal flesh in this system there is for any ruler
a perfect place for his cessation when this single point of pain
that has been diffused by a kind of leukemia through his body to
his mind renders him incapable of kingship if the art is to be
successful that is the point at which he has fulfilled the most
refined and most perfect conditions for this art work this is
an object for priestly scientific and artistic study it requires

not only schooling but research the young prince must be studied
to determine his psychological and physical capacity to handle pain
the psychological and physical durability of the royal person
it will require decisions about dosing and timing of that dosing
and because this is a grand theatrical art associated with
other arts of performance there will be reasons to decide
how the minute quantities of radioactive material should be admin-
istered to be ingested slowly in his favorite foods and beverages
or to be worked into luminescent jewelry worn close to the
body so that the young ruler may ride glowing into battle
and one would have to combat the unlikely and unworthy
possibility that he might choose to outlive his term and resist the
wise poisoners by contriving to avoid the poisons and
they would be forced to confuse him by poisoning him unawares
in the food he least liked by working the poison into radio-
active jewels or even into perfumes on the person of his favorite
mistress and then yet there is one final requirement
that the perfect success of this art form be ensured by penal-
izing all failure severely by an arrangement whereby if the king
does not die at the appropriate hour or minute or second
since the technology is so refined that the chief poison
artist be killed in the interval and that the assistant poisoners
be killed in succession as required during the interval
within which the audience awaits the luminous death of the king
in such a system if you are not through bad luck forced to
kill off the whole artist population you could expect a very
stable literal art