

Effacing "Mem'ry's Page": the *Agon* between Orality and Literacy in Adam Kidd's *The Huron Chief*

by Kelly McGuire

The historical conflict between North American Natives and European colonists roughly parallels the debate between orality and literacy that has been waged since writing first developed and irrevocably "transformed consciousness" (Ong 78). The Rousseauian view that orality, as the first language evolved by humanity in its yet "unfallen" state, must necessarily reside in the realm of truth and innocence has been shared by many refusing to subscribe to the prejudice endemic in Western thought that equates orality with intellectual inferiority. Literacy, meanwhile, condemned by Plato as dealing in "external characters which are no part of themselves" (*Phaedrus* 563), has often been seen as aligning itself with artifice and deceit, an aggressive rival to its elder counterpart. However, the comparison between this linguistic struggle and that of the Natives and colonists operates on more than an analogical level, and accounts for the profound incompatibility between the peoples themselves. For the colonist, language encompassed both the written and the spoken word, whereas the Native conceived of language as exclusively oral. From these radically opposing views of language stemmed the ideological and cultural differences that the studies of Parry and Lord (as expanded upon by the likes of Havelock and Ong) have shown uniformly to distinguish oral and literate societies.¹ However, even prior to the work of these scholars, others discerned that the language barrier separating the Europeans and the Natives was only partially surmountable. Writing in nineteenth-century Lower Canada, Adam Kidd, an Irish emigrant whose roots perhaps fostered his acute sensitivity towards issues of orality,² launches a polemic against European colonial enterprise, and organizes its resistance along these anciently demarcated lines of orality and literacy. In *The Huron Chief* (1830) the recuperation of orality functions as a central thematic

concern and constitutes a primary means whereby Kidd counters the tendencies of other early Canadian long poems to eulogize European colonialism.

Kidd's ambivalence towards literacy typifies literate culture's affinity for looking back with nostalgic fondness to its oral beginnings. The interest in "primitivism" as revived in eighteenth-century Britain attests to the tenacity of the sway that orality has long held over the imagination, and finds its epitome in the enthusiasm generated by the "discovery" of Ossian, who "corresponded to men's nostalgia for paradisiac spontaneity" (Simonsuuri 115). As his epigrammatic allusion to the fictional bard in *The Huron Chief, and Other Poems* clearly indicates, Adam Kidd inherits this interest in Ossian. Kidd's interest in Ossian translates into a preoccupation with orality attended by the usual suspicion of literacy. Kidd perceives orality as a distinguishing feature of aboriginal culture, and the Preface to *The Huron Chief* expresses Kidd's sense of the imminent extinction of the Natives and concern that they "will scarcely leave a memorial to perpetuate their names, as the once mighty rulers of the vast American regions" (32). His poem, accordingly, supplies the missing memorial in a written form, and attempts to preserve the oral memory of the Hurons by means of a literary tribute to their oral culture. *The Huron Chief* repudiates the widespread anthropological theory of degeneration as promulgated by the "four stages theory of evolution" which holds that the Native peoples, by virtue of their being a nomadic race, must necessarily lack the leisure and sophistication required to develop an authentic strain of culture.³ Penny Petrone writes that during the "nineteenth century, the Indian was seen as the simple silent child of nature just a little above the anthropoids whom the blessing of civilization and Christ could raise to a respectable level" (2). Kidd confronts this thinking directly by illustrating, through the Huron Chief himself, the exceptional rhetorical proficiency of the Natives. Helen Gilbert argues that "orality is a practice and a knowledge, a strategic device potentially present in recuperating indigenous voices, potentially effective in de-scribing empire" (110). Kidd's poem makes use of a similar practice in its protest of colonial projects in North America that have as their end the assimilation or annihilation of the Native peoples. Kidd employs oral-informed strategies that reveal a sensitivity towards ethnopoetics, and a highly developed appreciation of Native conceptions and performance of verbal art. *The Huron Chief* demonstrates both formally and thematically the fallacy inherent in the notion that the essence of an oral culture might be crystallized indefinitely within the confines of a text, and held in stasis long after the culture itself has passed into oblivion. As a result, the poem offers a performative model of the unperformativity of literally inscribed oral

art, as its essentially voiceless speaker and various anomalous references in the text betray a certain anxiety of representation on the part of the author.⁴ The poem is an anticipatory elegy, a proleptic lament for the passing of an age and of a people. Kidd, however, chooses to label it a "dramatic poem," in what may be construed either as a dire misnomer, or a deliberate irony, considering that much of the poem's action asserts itself through modes of narration, and direct action manifests itself only at its conclusion. The main conflict in *The Huron Chief* centres on the dialectical engagement between orality and literacy, which Kidd ultimately resolves by syncretizing the two modes of expression so as to produce a text that preserves, to some degree, the oral flavour of the original, even while it resigns itself to the inevitability of orality's eventual demise.

I

Charles Steele notes the affinity for what he calls "Rousseauistic philosophic primitivism" that impels Kidd to "see true order and liberty contained within the civilization of the North American Indian rather than within that of Britain or Europe" (123). Kidd displays either a direct or indirect familiarity with Rousseau's "Essay on the Origin of Languages," and *The Huron Chief* might be considered a poetic treatment of precisely the same issues with which the French philosopher engages in his work. Song and the primacy of the voice, the impact exerted by environment upon language generally, and the degeneration of art are several of the concerns with which both works grapple; however, just as the media through which each author chooses to address his subject differ radically from each other, so too do the conclusions that they draw prove mutually contradictory. Rousseau avers that the European's language is "better suited to writing than speaking, and there is more pleasure in reading [it] than speaking [it]" (229). In contrast to the Western languages, "Oriental tongues...lose their life and warmth when they are written," and Rousseau claims that "judging the genius of the Oriental from their books is like painting a man's portrait from his corpse" (231). Cultural relativism informs both Rousseau's linguistic theories and *The Huron Chief*; Kidd and Rousseau both explore the implications of the shift from orality to literacy in society, and both concur that the evolution of the literate consciousness corresponds to a diminution of moral judgement. The distinctions that Kidd and Rousseau draw between the oral and the literate mindset are recognized by contemporary theorists on the subject such as Walter Ong, who explored the dramatic renovations wrought in the human psyche and intellect by the advent of writing in *Orality and Literacy*. Ong restricts his focus, however, to the psychological and creative ramifications of

this development, and his study of orality provides an illuminating contrast to Kidd's poetic treatment of the same subject in that it corroborates many of Kidd's basic empirical findings, but throws into sharp relief the moral signification with which Kidd invests his observations.

In *The Huron Chief*, Kidd casts himself in the role of an unanchored wayfarer, whose itinerancy brings him to the seat of a civilization itself erroneously held to be nomadic by popular colonial opinion. Kidd diverges from progenitors of the long poem, not only in asserting a physical presence in his work, but also in displaying a sensitivity towards his position as an interloper rather than as a rightful heir to the territory of the Hurons. *The Huron Chief* also departs from the conventions of topography typically associated with the early Canadian long poem in that the speaker concerns himself more with the sounds around him than with the local flora and fauna.⁵ Kidd establishes the primacy of sound over sight from the first stanza of the poem when he finds himself on Lake Huron's banks where "all things bloomed with beauty gay" (2). The reference to "all things" represents a typically vague and abstract statement in keeping with Kidd's inattentiveness to vivid visual descriptions. In the same stanza, however, Kidd employs a formula to which he has recourse on several other occasions in the poem; he asserts that he "nor heard a sound" (4) and then proceeds to qualify this statement by mentioning sundry sources of sound emanating from the nature around him, including the "wood doves cooing" (4), the "birds that tapped the hollow tree" (5), and "owlets... their playmates wooing" (6). By the stanza's end, the avian chorus generates a "harmony [that] filled the throng" (7) and openly refutes the speaker's claim for the tranquility of the scene just a few lines earlier. Later, Kidd again betrays his auditory unreliability when he notes that "there's scarce a sound or motion here/But wandering breezes now and then/That slowly steal upon the ear" (1435-37), a statement that blatantly contradicts his reference in the last line of the preceding stanza to the "screech-owl's boding song" (1434). The speaker's growing attunement to aural stimuli attests to his preoccupation with matters aural and oral, and one might argue that he indulges in an aesthetics of misdirection in descriptions of sound so as to convey the customary insensitivity of the literate individual to non-visual sensory impressions.⁶

Human song quickly supplants the voice of nature as Kidd penetrates deeper into the Huron paradisiacal sanctuary. If, as D.M.R. Bentley argues, *The Huron Chief* aligns the "Native peoples with the unfallen angels" (*Mimic Fires* 165), it follows that Kidd should also

attribute to the Hurons a like unadulterated language. Kidd overtly draws the parallels between the Huron and their celestial counterparts in his assertion that Skenandow's "accents" fall upon his ear "as if an angel whispered near" (136). Later, he again invokes the figure of the angel, this time casting it in the role of an audience, describing a "melody" as "so soft, so sweet, so purely clear,/An angel might have paused to hear" (407-8). Not only do the Hurons speak with the tongues of angels, but their eloquence also holds the heavenly chorus rapt with wonder. Kidd presents his conception of Adamic language, or a post-lapsarian type of what Walter Benjamin calls the "paradisiac language" (747), as a discourse saturated with the essence of music, in which melody presides as the ruling ideal, and informs its every expression. The lyric insertions that sound at regular intervals throughout the poem might be appreciated for more than their ornamental value in that they attest to Kidd's esteem of the "song culture" of the Natives, and reinforce the central theme of orality in the poem. Petrone asserts that "the oral literature of Canada's Native peoples embraces formal narrative, informal storytelling as well as political discourse, song, and prayer" (3), and indicates that genre distinctions are less prevalent in the realm of "orature" than in literature. Conversational discourse and poetry both partake of the quality of music, and, in this respect, Kidd is perhaps mindful of Rousseau's assertion that the speakers of the "first language" would "sing rather than speak" (248), since speech and song both "sprang from the same source and were initially the same thing" (277). Although Kidd differentiates the speech of Skenandow from the songs of his people, he nonetheless frequently describes the prose of the chief in musical terms. The Huron Chief is said to have "touched the pliant chords/...of conversation" (345-6), and his "language" to steal "o'er [the speaker's] feelings.../Like notes of pleasure on the ear" (161-2). The mellifluous tones of Skenandow's speech contrast sharply with the discord generated by "the jarring creedsmen" against whom Kidd inveighs, and Kidd clearly demonstrates orality's greater proximity to what Duncan Campbell Scott calls the "art of perfection" (20) than that of a literate culture.

Rousseau recounts how "singing gradually became an art entirely separate from speech, from which it originates," and how "the harmonic aspects of sounds caused the inflections of the voice to be forgotten" (293). According to Derrida, Rousseau concludes that "the history of music is parallel to the history of language, its evil is in essence graphic" (Derrida 199). Subscribing generally to the Rousseauian view of the nature of the "first" or ideal language, Kidd agrees also with Rousseau's claim that harmony heralds a necessary degeneration of the art form. Natalie Curtis writes that "harmony is

not found in Indian music; consequently rhythm and melody...are highly developed" (15). Although the first stanza of *The Huron Chief* celebrates the harmony of the "voice of nature," Kidd never applies the term to the music of the Natives, and instead favours the term "melody" as used to describe Alkwanwaugh's "plaintive" song (196), and the "praise poem" of the Huron youth to Skenandow. The Hurons' music achieves perfection without recourse to the artificial device of harmony, and as such closely resembles Rousseau's conception of the "first language." By the criteria of most harmony, an aspect of music that in its complexity relies upon inscription is integral to the production of exceptional music. Rousseau, however, subverts this notion and suggests that music of a superior order might be generated in an oral context, in the absence of harmony, and by association, writing. The prevalence of melodic and non-harmonic song in Kidd's depiction of Huron culture speaks to his larger concern to demonstrate the possibilities of oral art even while downplaying his culture's usual assumption that art of any calibre is contingent upon a prior state of literacy. The Huron's song impinges upon the speaker's literate sensibilities so that he begins to appreciate the oral spirit of music in much the same manner as Walter Pater, who later in the nineteenth century argues, "because of the fact that [music] must reach the understanding through the ear, [it] must be twice created, and the written stuff is dumb until awakened into vibrating life" (20). The Huron song sounds spontaneously and independently of an intermediary medium of writing. Furthermore, the endless variations of unmediated oral song ensure its continued vitality in contrast to the degeneration that Rousseau argues must ever be the fate of a music established upon a foundation of literacy. *The Huron Chief* presents music as an art form that must always subordinate writing to its own essentially oral energies, and one that attests to the primacy of orality in Kidd's aesthetics.

Michele Holmgren affirms that "Kidd's poet-narrator also draws on the oral tradition of the Hurons to create his poem" (70), and Kidd's use of tradition extends to the appropriation of actual oral strategies of verbal art composition. Kidd simulates aspects of oral discourse that are identified by Ong as "heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses" (34). Kidd's appreciation of repetition as a feature of oral composition manifests itself several times in the poem, as when he asserts for the reader's benefit, that "Alkwanwaugh was a Sioux famed—/In many battles honours claimed—/And closely by his mother's side,/To Atsistari was related" (1107-10). Already the poet has established the "Sioux's" lineage, and his reiteration of this information at this juncture suggests the redundancy often detected in oral verse.⁷ Kidd further appropriates oral strategies in his

appreciation of rhythm as an integral component of Native art. Bentley notes that Kidd "includes in the exchange between Skenandow and the narrator several tantalizing indications that...he recognized a connection between new thoughts and new rhythms" (*Huron Chief* xxi). Ong states that "protracted orally based thought, even when not in formal verse, tends to be highly rhythmic, for rhythm aids recall, even physiology" (35). Kidd's sensitivity towards rhythm issues from his concern with simulating the oral speech patterns of his Native subjects as closely as possible. The distinctiveness of each voice and situation necessarily influences the choice of rhythm, as Kidd "reinforces the changes of voice in *The Huron Chief* with corresponding changes in form" (Bentley, *Huron Chief* xviii). Hence, no two songs in the poem share an identical rhythmical structure, but exist rather as distinct units. Both the songs of the Huron Queen and of Alkwanwaugh lament the passing of their loved ones, but each differs drastically from the other in terms of its tempo, tone and rhythm. The Huron Queen's song, despite the length of its hexameter line, moves rapidly, and its rhythms suggest an emotion antithetical to sorrow. Alkwanwaugh's song, by contrast, is marked by a short line length (with varying trimetrical and dimetrical lines) and a choppy, almost staccato rhythm that realistically evokes the anguish of Alkwanwaugh. Kidd's readiness to experiment with and to manipulate diverse rhythms and meters indicates his desire to undermine the rigidly monological foundation of writing that often restricts the author to an unvarying stylistic uniformity.

II

As Bentley points out, *The Huron Chief* relies heavily upon written sources, in accordance with the tradition of Canadian long poems that privilege recorded sources over first-hand personal experience (*Huron Chief* ix). This reliance of Kidd upon literary records is curious considering the apparent emphasis that the poet places upon orality and his stance as the first white to penetrate deeply into the Huron wilderness. But then, the oral culture of the Natives is the feature that seems to distinguish it from Kidd's own Western literate culture, which has come to rely extensively upon the technology of writing, if only, as in the case of Kidd "on the inner rind of birch bark" (Preface 3)⁸. As Bentley notes, Kidd appropriates the ballad stanza first employed by Skenandow within the poem to answer the Chief in a like fashion (*Huron Chief* xxi), an act that suggests at least on a technical level the speaker's recognition of the Native's superior talent resulting, Kidd implies, from his proximity to nature.⁹ The speaker defers to the poetic talent of the Huron by positioning himself physically in the poem as a recorder of their feats and exploits. He

refers to his function as a transmitter of information and he expresses his hope that the tales that are related to him over a month's period in the interval between the reunion of Tapooka and Alkwanwaugh and their marriage, might be "traced on some future poet's page" (1026). Kidd recognizes that, given the possibility for the imminent extinction of the Hurons, their survival in written records is imperative, in that "civilization," along with the numerous disadvantages that it has brought to the white man, has also deprived him of the prodigious mnemonic capacity peculiar to oral cultures. As Patrick Hutton notes, "the modification of mind that leads toward reflective thinking effects a corresponding weakening of the powers of memory" (50). If one regards writing in its primary function as a mnemonic device, then its immateriality to a culture endowed with "the most happy Memory in the world" (Lahontan 43) becomes increasingly apparent. Holmgren notes that "it is through an oral account of their history of oppression at the hands of the Europeans that the narrator comes to a gradual understanding of the Huron culture" (68), and certainly Kidd expresses his recognition of the remarkable capacity of the Natives to retain their culture's history entirely mnemonically when he notes that Alkwanwaugh "well recounted every name/On mem'ry's page—/stamped in succession,/Bright as the beams of lasting fame—/Nor seemed to make one short digression—/ Through every scene of varied strife,/Until this very date of life" (675-80). The phrase "mem'ry's page" draws an explicit contrast between the recording methods of the Native and European cultures, and suggests that the oral technique employed by the Natives in chronicling their people's history is as valid as if not more effective than the literary method adopted by the Westerners. It is worth noting, finally, that the visual trauma that Kidd must wreak upon the word "memory" in order to assimilate it fluidly into the constraints of his meter might obliquely signify the devastating diminution that literacy inflicts upon the memory over time.

Kidd's concern with memory, then, follows as a corollary to his interest in orality. The phrase "mem'ry's page" evokes the central conundrum of the text: how to preserve the oral culture of the Huron through a literary medium? For Kidd and his fellow colonists, memory relies implicitly upon and cannot operate effectively outside script. Memory in Kidd's logocentric culture is reducible to and resides in the written word, whereas the Huron root their history in the collective memory they transmit orally over successive generations. Kidd's poem anticipates the trend in colonial attitudes to regard the Natives as relics of a dying nation, and, subscribing to what Petrone describes as "the doomed culture theory of the nineteenth century" (3), to undertake extensive projects involving the collection of Native oral

legends and lore. However, *The Huron Chief* demonstrates the fallacy of the notion that the Natives might be preserved as relics because, embedded as their culture is in oral tradition, it cannot hope to survive the transfer to written record. The verbal art of Natives has no hope of surviving as one of the "numerous Indian artifacts that Kidd describes during what can easily be envisaged as his archaeological dig into the buried life of North America" (Bentley, *Huron Chief* xviii). The poem may approximate the verbal art of the Hurons mimetically, but, once transcribed, what it offers are mere "traces or indications of conceptional orality; the *disiecta membra* of the language of immediacy" (Osterreicher 199). Wulf Osterreicher insists upon the infeasibility of oral transcription, claiming that "such a mimesis of the language of immediacy can never match authentic immediacy...it is always a matter of simulation" (205). The Huron tradition cannot then survive the demise of the Natives, despite even the most valiant efforts on the part of Kidd and other sympathizers to preserve the traditions in written form.

III

In the latter part of *The Huron Chief*, the speaker reveals that he lingers in the territory of the Chippewa to "gather all/Their deeds of war, and feats of glory,/Till [he] had heard their rise and fall" (1021-3). His use in this context of "rise and fall," a phrase that has become the standard expression in literary histories of major civilizations, serves to underline the validity of the Natives' history and historical recollection. Kidd astutely reasons that the extinction of a people whose history extends further back into the recesses of time than the colonists' own might prove less acceptable to the encroaching nation than that of a people perceived to be cultureless and lacking any palpable history. *The Huron Chief* counters the notion propagated in earlier Canadian long poems which asserts that since "no musty record can the curious trace,/Engross'd by annals of the savage race:/Involv'd in darkness their achievements lay" (*Quebec Hill* 1. 37-9). Furthermore, the expression "mem'ry's page" ironically echoes Oliver Goldsmith's reference, in *The Rising Village*, to "history's page" (529) that clearly presents history as a textual conception, while the same material when orally transmitted falls under the rubric of 'tradition' or 'heritage' and as such, lacks the legitimacy or even veracity of 'recorded' history. As Bentley writes, "since the Indians have no written literature or history...their past is a *tabula rasa*" on which Cornwall Bayley proceeds in *Canada* "to inscribe his own version of events" (*Gay*] *Grey Moose* 149). Kidd, occupying the dual position of historian and translator, finds himself, like Bayley, presented with the opportunity to revise history with impunity.

However, even scholars who consider Kidd's "presentation... sentimental and unrealistic in its detail" nevertheless concede that it "represented a fundamentally correct historical fact" (Steele 124). Kidd's confirmation of the accuracy of oral history proves necessary to the credulous reception of his own work. As Sayre reasons in *Les Sauvages Américains*, "if one cannot trust oral history, how can one believe the bible any more than the Indians' accounts of their origins, wars, and migrations...such skepticism invokes the truth claims of exploration narrative, where the author relates only what he sees along his path through the wilderness, and employs a memory as photographic as the Indians'..." (200). Kidd's own predisposition towards skepticism necessitates that he "make assurance double-sure" and corroborate the fidelity of his own representations to historical fact through the prosaic intercession of his numerous and lengthy footnotes. Elsewhere in the poem, he inveighs against European colonialism as "a foul—unholy crime,/Stamped on the open page of time" (1363-5). Kidd's outraged expression underscores the fact that memory henceforth will exist solely as a faculty of the literate, and that paradoxically, the unrevised literary document will serve only to confirm the treachery of its own culture's history, attesting to the validity of Benjamin's assertion that "there is no cultural document that is not at the same time a record of barbarism" (359).

When Alkwanwaugh recites the speech delivered by John Logan, an Iroquois Chief noted for his eloquence (Bentley, *The Huron Chief* 88), Kidd describes Alkwanwaugh as "recorder of the hero's glory" (694), and the epithet here denotes an oral mode of relation. Etymologically derived from the Latin word for 'heart' (Hoad 393), to "record" means to "think something over," "to be mindful of," and only with the fifteenth century does it acquire the sense of "committing to memory," suggesting the still extant expression "learn by heart." Yet, the original import of the word differs significantly from the associations with literal inscription that contemporary usage brings to it, and it is worth noting that Kidd invests the word with its historical denotation, as if further to underline his concern with orality. Alkwanwaugh, in his recital from memory of Logan's oratory, engages in a performative re-enactment of history, and the speaker's acknowledgement of him as a "recorder" serves to reverse the logocentrism of Kidd's culture by restoring words to their original meanings, and recovering the original oral foundations of his own society.

IV

Kidd repeatedly draws a contrast between literary and oral cultures, aligning the former with entropy and holding up orality as the supreme

embodiment of linguistic vitality. Kidd subscribes to the view, still current amongst theorists of today that "writing...as a function... ossifies, petrifies, and blocks" (Kristeva 58), and he casts literacy as a grim harbinger in *The Huron Chief*, "confronting speech...with its own death" (57). The speaker describes the "unforgettable" lyrics of Tapooka's peripeteiac song as "so sweet, their tones seem breathing yet" (908). Kidd frequently suggests that the dominant value of orality resides in its intimacy with the living voice, and the footnotes similarly attest to his fascination with the oral traditions of the Natives; in reference to a chief from the Indian village of Lorette, Kidd writes "he willingly furnished [him] with an account of the distinguished warriors, and the traditions of different tribes, which are still fresh in his memory, and are handed from father to son" (25). The application of the adjective "fresh" to describe the chief's "memory" of events speaks to the primacy of the oral aesthetic that Kidd cultivates in the poem, in which inscription conjures up musty volumes of forgotten lore, while a memory preserved within the annals of the mind must ever find renewal through the spoken word and the endless variations by which it may be articulated. As Petrone writes, to the oral Native culture, "words did not merely represent meaning. They possessed the power to change reality itself. They were life, substance, reality. The *word* lived before earth, sun, or moon came into existence" (10). When contrasted with the oral vision of a language imbued with such expansive reserves of potency and energy, the written word must appear empty and even moribund, exerting but a tenuous hold on reality, and bearing an even more precarious relation to the truth. Kidd's appreciation of orality's essential dynamism might account for the vigour of the Native voices that resound through the poem, while the voices of the "civilized" literati, by contrast, are rendered mute with the exception of the speaker's sole speech-act, an overture of peace to the Huron Chief at the beginning. Indeed, Kidd, in describing the sullen reticence of the white captives towards the conclusion, notes that they maintained "downcast eyes,/As reading their own obsequies" (1507-8). It is surely no coincidence that Kidd's simile highlights the literacy of the villains, who elsewhere "read their own impending fate" (1362), and suggests a necessary correlation between literacy and moral degeneracy. Earlier, Kidd refers to the treachery of Europeans "who seek the Indian to destroy/And blot away his name and nation" (1493-4), and again employs a verb with unmistakable literary associations to denote the act of annihilation. The pen becomes both symbolically and literally a tool of genocide in the poem, as it signifies the larger enterprise of "education," the "school-taught lore" (455) that Kidd includes amongst the "evils brought" by the Missionaries (1371). Carl Klinck identifies the broader significance of *The Huron Chief* as residing in its "imaginative treatment of the

problem of missionary work among the Indians" (500). History corroborates the deleterious effects of the missionaries' policy of Native education whose aim it was, in the words of Charles Grant, "to protect and cherish this helpless race...[and] raise them on the scale of humanity" (qtd.in Dickason 225). At first appearances, Kidd constructs a binary opposition between conceptions of orality and literacy in *The Huron Chief* that with equal stringency follows racial divisions, but his phonocentrism is tempered by a realistic acceptance of the Huron culture as a lost mentality that depends upon for its preservation, (if only imperfectly) the very literary agents of its destruction.

In reference to oral linguistic practices, Barry Sanders writes that "one cannot dip twice into the same wave, and therefore the lie is a stranger" (113). As self-evident as this might seem, Kidd's poem readily perpetuates the notion that holds orality in an intimate relation to the truth. Tapooka's refusal to break "a vow once made" (281) demonstrates the sanctity of the spoken word to the Hurons, whom he contrasts with the Europeans and their unscrupulous practice of "deceiving with kind words" (1057). Skenandow's condemnation of this vice that Kidd presents as peculiar to the white man comes in a final speech that takes language as its focal point. To Skenandow's censure, Kidd appends the footnote citing Corn Plant's declaration of distrust for the white man's "speech written on the great paper" (55). Kidd yokes the footnote's prose reference to literacy to Skenandow's general denunciation of the colonists' exploitation or misappropriation of language, pointing out that it is the discourse of literacy which Skenandow primarily signifies when referring to the duplicity of the white man's words. Kidd stresses that the Natives have access to a language that bears a one-to-one correlation between signifier and signified. Kidd reveals his eagerness to demonstrate this point in his descriptions of Native discourse, when he mentions, for example, that Skenandow addressed him in "accents clear" (136) and when he insists that he "caught each note that flowed along" (74) in the song of the Huron Queen. These references establish his own reliability as a translator and affirm that the Huron's command of language encompasses both elocution as well as eloquence. With its oral "presence," Huron language is less susceptible to misconstruction, whereas Kidd, deprived of instantaneous reader response, must employ the footnote as a device ensuring the reader does not mistake his meaning. With their direct quotations from sundry celebrated Native chiefs, the footnotes act as a substitute for Kidd's voice, and also for the historical voice of the Native.

V

Through Skenandow's speech, Kidd suggests in a subtle way the

literary capabilities of the Huron that manifest themselves in systems that are not "phonetic...[for] there is no set form for translating them into speech, yet are highly conventionalized and encode complex information" (Sayre 186). Skenandow's final speech begins with the reference to "Wampum" that, in addition to existing as a "current of money amongst the Indians" (54), also serves as a form of language, as the explorer Lahontan noted. The proceeding images that pervade the first stanza of Skenandow's speech similarly suggest alternate forms of "writing." The "tree of peace" to which Skenandow alludes earlier carries unmistakable signification, while the "chain/Of friendship" (1565-66) whose breaking by the white man Kidd cleverly illustrates prosodically through its enjambment over two lines of verse, also carries a denotation much akin to that of writing. Finally, Skenandow's reference to the hatchet, "the purest token/Of Indian faith" (1568), demonstrates the complex multivalency of Native metaphor, in that it serves most obviously as a symbol for war, but placed in a different context stands instead as a metaphor for peace. These objects, just as effectively as the "[Wampum] belts [and]...the calumet or peace pipe" represent a "form of writing for historical and diplomatic purposes, one that guaranteed the truth of what was said or what had happened, and/or the identity and the intentions of he who bore it" (Sayre 185). Skenandow's pointed reference to specific objects constitutes a form of non-verbal communication, and the Natives he addresses would comprehend his meaning without requiring additional clarification. Kidd's intimation of the Hurons' access to metaphorical language falls well within the parameters of Rousseau's assertion that "the depicting of objects is appropriate to a savage people; signs of words and propositions, to a barbaric people, and the alphabet to civilized peoples" (250); however, as Sayre points out, Rousseau's claim constitutes a "retreat from the prohibition against writing by savages but [one that] uses phonocentrism to maintain the primitive status of the *sauvages americains*" (198). Despite the many parallels between his oral aesthetics and those of Rousseau, Kidd upholds the Native Americans' form of writing as one that, as Derrida argues, "preserve[s] better than alphabetic writing some of the ideals of truth, presence, and accuracy for which writing is prized by history" (281). Kidd's possible recognition of the various signifying systems of the Hurons as alternative forms of writing suggests their capacity for literate thought (insofar as literacy is commonly aligned with reflexivity and methodological thinking) which, along with their continued preference for oral modes of expression, indicates their enlightened as opposed to primitive status on the scale of socio-cultural evolution. Kidd's concern to demonstrate this point attests to his lingering preoccupation with validating for the benefit of his European audience the "literariness"

not only of his own work, but of the Huron culture as well, in its demonstrated potential to cultivate the capacity for literate thought.

To the Huron Chief's final speech, Kidd appends an explanatory note confessing that he has been "obliged to sacrifice harmony, in order to preserve, as much as possible, the peculiar, short, pithy phrases generally used by the best Indian orators" (56). He then emphasizes that "it is the *matter*, not the *sound*, that [he] wish[es] to communicate" (56). Considering that Kidd everywhere else in the poem holds up sound as his chief concern, his choice to "sacrifice harmony" in this instance seems eccentric in the extreme. Kidd's decision indicates a departure from verisimilitude and a concession of his sense of the inadequacy of translation. The voice of the Huron Chief loses the sonority of the early parts of the poem and comes to exist only as a mere visual representation of recorded translation. Kidd's footnote admits the violence that his English rendering does to the rhythms of Logan's "reported" speech, as "mem'ry's page" becomes a faded copy of a far more illustrious original forever lost to "civilization." Kidd self-consciously sacrifices linguistic grace and style upon the altar of content, committing the grave folly of presuming that form and content can ever be divorced efficaciously, especially in a poetic context. Concern for historical accuracy takes precedence over aesthetics in this instance; however, it might be argued that Kidd's footnote acknowledges the futility of his endeavour to represent the voice of the Huron with any degree of accuracy.¹⁰

Petrone expresses her skepticism of the translator's ability to "reproduce on the printed page an oral literature that depends so much on performance," for, in "translating a narrative or song...the translator must consider not only linguistic fidelity but also the connotative and denotative meanings of words and the cultural matrix informed by the attitudes, beliefs, and customs of the tribe of which the original is an organic part" (7). Nowhere in the poem does Petrone's indictment of "the well-meaning interpretations of non-Natives [that] led to words and phrases being mistranslated, lost, substituted, or deliberately distorted to fit some preconceived image or the ethos of the times" (6) receive more convincing validation than in Kidd's mistaking of the proper name "Sioui" for the group designation "Sioux." As Bentley points out, "the presence of a Sioux warrior in Southwestern Ontario seems anomalous" (*The Huron Chief* 77), and he submits the possibility that "Kidd was misled by the fact that a common family name at Lorette was (and is) Sioui" (78). An element of irony might be detected in this error in that already a corruption of history has transpired with its entrance into documentation. This "misspeaking" on the part of Kidd marks a strikingly deconstructive moment of authorial frailty, yet at the same time, inadvertently

demonstrates the legitimacy of Kidd's concern for the ravages potentially wrought upon oral tradition by colonizing projects undertaken by the literate. Derrida writes that "the copyist is always tempted to add *supplementary* signs to improve the restitution of the original" (227; Derrida's italics). In terms of *The Huron Chief*, the act of writing itself operates as the *supplement* to the original oral versions of the stories that Kidd conflates in the poem, and his additions and adaptations of these histories further adulterate the purity of the originals. Kidd possibly borrows this idea from Rousseau, whom Derrida criticizes when he claims that writing "is not a supplement to the spoken word, but a quite different performance" (*Of Grammatology* 203). Kidd deliberately emphasizes the distortions in his account, and one might speculate that he introduces the figure of Tecumseh towards the finale to perplex the chronologically vigilant reader. Kidd's historical inexactitude contrasts sharply with the unerring precision of Alkwanwaugh's recounting of "noble deeds in war," that, proceeding in an unerring linear fashion, the speaker describes as "stamped in succession" (676).

VI

In the middle sections of *The Huron Chief*, the speaker's narrative of his wanderings through the Canadian wilderness becomes subsumed into the story of Tapooka and Alkwanwaugh as recounted to him by the Huron Chief and obliquely by the voices of Alkwanwaugh and Tapooka themselves. The term "speaker" might be employed only ironically here, for Kidd performs primarily the function of an audience and he reserves the poem's digressions and footnotes for his own commentary. Nonetheless, Kidd reclaims the role of narrator in its absolutist associations when it becomes convenient for him to do so, and he deliberately withholds information for the purposes of suspense and narrative momentum as an assertion of authorial control. In one footnote Kidd proclaims "the Indian war-dance...one of the grandest displays an European can witness" and expresses his regret "that a work so limited as this, deprives [him] of the pleasure [he] would feel in giving a full description of it to [his] readers" (45). Through the intimation of absences in the text such as this, Kidd conveys to the reader the limitations of the medium in which he works.

In the Preface, Kidd alludes to a projected "more extensive volume" of prose entitled *Tales and Traditions of the Indians*, the publication of which was thwarted by its author's untimely death. Elsewhere in the Preface, Kidd refers to the numerous "difficulties and privations, arising from causes that [he] must, for the present, avoid mentioning" (3). This biographical elusiveness extends into a general theme of deferral in the text of *The Huron Chief* in which Kidd

alludes repeatedly to the *absence* of recorded speech. Neither Alkwanwaugh's recounting "of days, that live but in tradition" (668), nor "all/...[the] deeds of war, and feats of glory" (1021-22) chronicled by the Sachems, find their way onto the "translator's" page in detail. Instead, Kidd leaves the unfolding of their "saddened story" to be "traced on some future poet's page" (1024-26). Kidd's deferral of narratives to which he tantalizingly alludes in the text to future compository efforts suggests the deconstructive notion of *différance*, in terms of the meaning of its verb *différer* as "to defer" (Culler 97). The deferrals illustrate the limitations implicit in the spatial conditions of writing, which circumscribe the creative efforts of an author, and confine his material to a narrow visual field, while the oral narrative, by contrast, takes place outside physical space. Alkwanwaugh's history unfolds *en route*, as he and the speaker wander "along the Lake's smooth, shelving side" (663), and the speaker conveys his appreciation of the skill of his guide's narrative technique in noting that he "nor seemed to make one short digression" (678). Alkwanwaugh's oral account is characterized by mobility and fluidity inasmuch as it issues from the amorphous vessel of his memory and, in turn, lends itself to a peripatetic recital that would prove virtually impossible, or at the very least impractical for a reading of the same material recorded by a literal device. The fact that *The Huron Chief*, a poem composed (Kidd would have us believe) in an ambulatory context, is acknowledged by its own author to be replete with "errors" and "defects" (Preface 3), suggests the practical impediments to the composition of literature which consign it to stationary exertions and sedentary pursuits. Furthermore, Kidd's commendation of Alkwanwaugh's avoidance of digression suggests that he esteems the absence of tangential thinking as a mark of perfection. Considering the digressive tendencies of Kidd's own work which frequently abandons the strain of narrative in order to indulge in sustained fulmination, a certain irony might be detected in Kidd's praise of this alternate prose style.

VII

It almost goes without saying that the colonial take-over of Canada, and colonial enterprise generally, concern themselves primarily with space. Early in the poem, Kidd delineates the territorial divisions between Native and Colonialist peoples when the Huron Chief, mildly accosting the speaker, declares that "this is not the white man's way" (139). Kidd, meanwhile, in a characteristically more vehement fashion deplores the white man's encroachments that set out "to rob the Indian of his home" (1594). Physical space preoccupies both the literary and the oral imagination, and, perhaps because Kidd refrains from indulging in exhaustive topographical description, the

importance of this space impresses itself the more readily upon the reader. All action unfolds *alfresco*, as the wilderness seems to stretch out into infinitude, and the uncontained voices resonate without impediment. Kidd places tremendous emphasis upon the "freedom" of Skenandow's and his people's speech. Kidd also frequently alludes to the echoes which the songs generate, as "echo" after Alkwanwaugh's song brings "the ling'ring tone" (222) that suggests vast expanses over which space and language might radiate outwards indefinitely.

Kidd's emphasis upon the uncircumscribed quality of Huron discourse suggests his appreciation that orality exists outside of space, for it was writing that "reconstituted the originally oral, spoken word in visual space" and print that "embedded the word in space more definitively" (Ong 123). Both colonialism and literacy assert their sway in a spatial context, and resisting their incursions into what Kidd constructs as the oral, amaterial realm of Huron innocence requires confrontation on precisely that plane. Kidd often refuses to isolate tangible sources for the Huron voices, and describes them as emanating from "a close, dark tangled shade" (133) in the case of Skenandow's greeting, from "a grove of pine" (39) and from behind spreading "cedar branches" (896) in the instances of the songs of the Huron Queen and of Tapooka respectively, thereby removing the voice from a spatial location in the text and endowing it with a purely oral status. He also perhaps anticipates Ong's theory that "in oral verbalization, particularly public verbalization, absolute motionlessness is itself a powerful gesture" (68). The statuesque figures of the Natives that populate the forest resemble relics, animated only by their voices, just as action itself is suspended for much of the poem in favour of the verbal act of story-telling. Kidd attempts to realize the uncloistered ideal of language much like Coleridge's "eternal language" that, rather than "pent 'mid cloisters dim" (53), radiates outwards to the greater community, untrammelled by the binding forces of the text.

Bentley observes that "whether Christian, Rousseauian, heterodox, or Arnoldian...early long poems on Canada agree in their moral insistence on the subordination of the individual to the communal" (*Mimic Fires* 315). In *The Huron Chief*, Kidd takes this gregarious impulse a step further and immerses himself altogether in the Huron community, or at least, such is his aim. He finds solitude disagreeable, and yearns from the poem's outset to find "one that [he] could call [his] own" (29). As the poem proceeds, the insistent use of the pronoun "I," especially in the opening five stanzas, gradually shades into its plural form of "we" with the speaker's travels in the company of Alkwanwaugh. The speaker's self-reflexivity ceases altogether at this point in the narrative, and he repeatedly yokes himself

verbally with Alkwanwaugh in statements such as "where'er we looked, where'er we strayed" (846). In his comment "for one short month we loved to trace/And from the Sachems gather all/Their deeds of war, and feats of glory" (1020-22), the speaker's presence and that of Alkwanwaugh become virtually undifferentiated from each other. On a grammatical level, then, the speaker strives to identify himself with the Native community, just as he attempts to demonstrate a political sympathy with the Hurons whose tribulations reflect those of Kidd's own experiences (Holmgren 119). The concluding action, however, brings with it the return of the first person pronoun, when the speaker, distancing himself from the scene, seems to whisper "yes—yes,—I see—I plainly hear..." (1285). Removing himself from the horizontal plane of the action, the speaker ascends almost to a birds-eye perspective on the unfolding scene. This withdrawal from the physical action might betoken the speaker's resumption of literal modes, as if, after a brief sojourn in the now obsolete realm of orality, grim reality restores him to the sphere of the literate to which he cannot deny he belongs.

At the poem's outset, the narrator overhears the song of a bereaved Huron Queen, and after contemplating "suing for invitation" to join her in her bower, ultimately refrains from intruding upon her solitude, in his declared preference "to hear—to see—and not be seen" (87). The speaker occupies what Homi Bhabha refers to as the "migrant position" in that he stands upon the threshold of the action and partakes of the "secret art of invisibleness" that Bhabha claims is the chief characteristic of the migrant (34). In addition to the influence of colonialist psychology, one might attribute the speaker's reticence to tendencies intrinsic to the literate consciousness. As Ong explains, "sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views at a distance, sound pours into the hearer" (72). Governed by a literate mindset, the speaker necessarily occupies a liminal position, fully cognizant of his status as an outsider on the banks of Lake Huron, a "stranger" as his repetition of Skenandow's term of address clearly acknowledges. Apparently not content with his virtual anonymity as a *voyeur/auditeur*, the speaker eventually reduces his role in the action to that of a disembodied voice assuming the authoritative tone of the conventional omniscient narrator. The speaker's recovery of his capacity as a detached narrator compels him to experience what Helen Gilbert characterizes as "a form of disembodiment that separates the speaker from his/her discursive context" and "translates its own absences into a series of visible signs—the script" (105). The speaker literally enacts this disembodiment, for, as what Ong would term a "grapholect," he necessarily lays claim to a voice subordinate to that of the oral culture

and eventually disappears into the text itself, becoming, in the words of Kristeva, "an anonymity, an absence, a blank space" (74). One might speculate further that the speaker's unstable presence signifies a countermovement towards literacy in the poem when Kidd signals the decline of orality by a corresponding waning of the poet's heterodox energies that previously enabled him to present a myriad of voices without asserting the primacy of just one (his own). The poem's calamitous conclusion suggests Kidd's resignation to the inevitability of the demise of what he considers the last bastion of primary orality, and he has recourse to the only means of salvaging some aspect of this unique culture by enshrining it in his verse. The speaker's removal from the physical action of the poem provides a self-reflexive signal to the reader of the work's literariness.

VIII

According to Edward Said, "any simple diametric opposition asserted on the one hand between speech, bound by situation and reference, and on the other hand the text as an interceptor or suspension of speech's worldliness is...misleading and largely simplified" (48). Kidd's poem attests to the validity of Said's assertion, and it is to the poet's credit that he resists constructing a binary opposition between orality and literacy, but rather undertakes a project of syncretizing the two. It would be highly unusual for an author to despise the medium of his art, especially one who, like Kidd, finds himself prevented by circumstances from securing his livelihood by any alternative means. Post-colonialists, however, might disapprove of Kidd's solution, construing it as a form of "hybridity" that, as Kortenaar asserts, "is most often invoked by advocates of pluralism and tolerance, but...can also underwrite imperialism" (404). By assimilating orality into the empire of the literate, Kidd undertakes what one might term a project of linguistic hybridization, one that simultaneously re-inscribes literacy even as it de-scribes it.

The speaker reveals his hybridizing tendencies in his declaration of love for Kemana and for the "Huron Queen," an avowal, that, despite his rhetorical query "who will blame me" (475), is unmistakably calculated to raise the ire of anti-miscegenationists. Kidd's poem returns repeatedly to the theme of desire, and of love more generally. Kidd describes the Hurons as "children of the grove...linked in social, tender love" (431-3), and the Huron Queen's complaint that she "loved with the fervour of Indian feeling" (57), as well as Tapooka's self-sacrificing love for Alkwanwaugh, claim for the Hurons a capacity for passionate intensity superior to the common variety of emotion. Moreover, referring to the lament of the Huron Queen, the speaker confides that as he "caught each mingling breath of song/[His]

heart almost began to feel/A glow—like love's too sure emotion/Directly to its center steal" (470-3). The speaker's confession suggests a correlation between language and desire strongly paralleled by Rousseau's assertion that "the origin of languages is not due to men's first needs but to the passions" (245). The "first language," according to Rousseau, was as supremely passionate as it was oral; "writing, which might be expected to fix [or to stabilize] language, is precisely what alters it; it changes not its words but its genius, it substitutes precision for expressiveness" (253). Writing involves a sacrifice of emotion that Rousseau considers detrimental to language. Literacy inaugurates a degeneration of both desire and language, as "sophistication" dulls the sense, and writing, in its attempt to harness language, only succeeds in crippling it beyond recovery. Kidd's remedy for this linguistic impasse proposes the marriage of the two cultures, in the interests of preserving the one and redeeming the other; however, the implications of this union prove not so salubrious to the prospects of orality as one might expect, given that inevitably the weaker mode will be subsumed into the more potent.

The text's discourse of desire stems not only from a Rousseauian influence, but also from English Romanticism of the sort (Kidd's Preface indicates) espoused particularly by Byron. Emotion generally, in addition to sensual love, claims a close affiliation with language in *The Huron Chief*. Skenadow himself represents the paragon of the linguistically sensitive subject whose speech in turn acts upon the emotions of his audience, as Kidd's confession that Skenadow's "language o'er [his] feelings stole" (161) amply attests. In his invitation, Skenadow mingles "such nobleness of word and thought/So highly every feeling wrought" (369-70), but he also expresses himself through gestural language, as his "withered visage" acts as "herald of his deep sorrowing...the mute interpreter of grief" (309-11). The "oral word," as Ong writes, "never exists in a simply verbal context, as a written word does. Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation which always engages the body" (67). Skenadow imparts his sensitivity both verbally and somatically, in that compassion rather than desire constitutes the driving forces of both oral modes of language. Skenadow's final speech epitomizes this strain of clemency in his language, as his affirmation "but we forgive" (1579) stands in sharp contrast to Kidd's own indictment of the same crimes that he claims "should not be forgiven" (1462). Explicating Rousseau, Derrida writes that "as opposed to writing, which is without pity, the voice is always, in its essence, the passage of virtue and good passion" (173). The Hurons' compassion shows up all the more distinctly the ruthlessness of the "cold—unfeeling—Christian whites" (1492), while Kidd's

hagiographical treatment of Skenandow casts him as a Christ figure in contradistinction to the Europeans to whom Kidd only ironically assigns the epithet "Christian." Kidd's poem implicitly attributes the moral degeneracy of the whites to their literacy (or "art" as he terms it) and in this respect, he once again agrees with Rousseau that "civilization" has "improved the human understanding while depraving the species, and made man wicked while making him sociable" (190). It follows, then, that Kidd equates orality with morality, as writing, represented metonymically through the pen, affords a weapon that, in the hands of "civilized man" may be wielded with brutal impunity. Only the softening influence of orality, Kidd implies, may convert this implement into a instrument of peace, as realized ostensibly by *The Huron Chief* itself.

IX

Representation of the Native as innocent "child of nature," however, is beset with its own ideological problems, in that it potentially belies a condescension stemming from a residual logocentrism that in extolling the ingenuousness of the Native simultaneously denies him the intellect and maturity of his "civilized" counterpart. Kidd's evident predilection for the mythos of the "noble savage" incurs the censure of critics who argue that such a perpetuation of the "stereotype...in its own way, patronizes and simplifies its Indian subjects" (Bentley, *Gay/ Grey Moose* 156). Rousseau's assertion that "one conveys one's sentiments in speaking, and one's ideas in writing" (253) confers upon the oral consciousness a pre-reflexivity and arrogates to the literate mindset an unmistakable intellectual superiority. In his most introspective moments, Kidd betrays a susceptibility to this mode of thinking, as seen in his declaration that "never since [his] boy-hood's days...*ere thought, or reason took command*...have joys so stainless touched [his] heart" (493-500; italics added). In this passage, Kidd likens an infant innocence characterized by irrationality and ignorance to the state of nature exemplified by the Natives. Against this current, however, runs his repeated allusion to the sagacity of the Huron people, which he opposes to the "half-taught Noble, from the Charter-school" (337). Contemporary theorists of orality, even while they acknowledge that literacy cultivates and refines certain analytical and reflective faculties of the mind (Ong 143), condemn the misconception that deems the "oral organization of thought naive" (57). Ong even goes so far as to argue that "writing weakens the mind" (79), insofar as it impairs the mnemonic faculty at the same time as it sharpens analytical skills. Even while subscribing in large measure to Rousseau's language theory, Kidd diverges from the "Essay" when the question of comparative mentality arises. Like Ong,

Kidd views the contrast between the two mentalities as "not a matter of reductionism but of relationism" (Ong 79), and, although his idealization of the Hurons carries overtones of the "noble savage," he nonetheless valorizes the Natives' intellect to the same extent as he exalts their moral rectitude.

Kidd's presentation of the Natives as skilled rhetoricians constitutes one method whereby he dismantles the traditional European skepticism concerning the intelligence of oral cultures. The rhetoric of Skenadow frames the poem, an eloquence that draws upon the resources of poetry and bears an intimate relation to music. Evidently appreciating the Native custom of selecting a chief on the basis of his oratorical skill (Petronie 25), Kidd presents Skenadow as the exemplar of the benevolent ruler whose power resides in his command of language. "The freedom of his gentle speech" (226) attests to Skenadow's aversion to the wanton abuse of this language-invested power, and in their "praise poem" the Hurons hail Skenadow as the "greatest, the bravest the Huron can boast—/Yet mild as the moon-beam now gently thrown' o'er [them]" (410-11). Ong claims that "the fulsome expression of praise is found everywhere in connection with orality" (45), and the Hurons' tribute to Skenadow indicates the extent to which the Natives "invest words with power and reverence" (Petronie 10). Kidd's presentation of the Native as a sociable being differs markedly from the view of Rousseau who claimed the "savage lives in himself" while the "civilized man is capable of living only in the opinions of others" (199). Rousseau argues that the Natives' indifference to the attainment of power proceeds from a self-sufficiency and a natural indolence entirely foreign to the "civilized" man. Kidd, however, offers a species of the "noble savage" that holds both power and community in the utmost esteem, and belongs to a society organized along hierarchical lines.

Kidd's privileging of rhetoric as a superior mode of expression that the Huron has refined to perfection (and that Western culture has so strenuously endeavoured to emulate since its inception) furthers the text's dialectic between orality and literacy. Kidd's addendum to Tecumseh's speech draws a parallel between Roman and Native oratory. Possessing "the very essence of persuasion" (54), the Hurons' true eloquence contrasts sharply with the sophistry of the Europeans. As Ong observes, "the agonistic dynamics of oral thought processes and expression have been central to the development of Western culture, where they were institutionalized by the 'art' of rhetoric, and by the related dialectic of Socrates and Plato" (45). In keeping with his attempts to reconcile the two as equally viable modes of expression, Kidd suggests a continuity between orality and literacy through the genre of rhetoric. Evidently considering rhetoric a hybrid form of

orality and literacy, an exemplary model of a discourse centering on power and desire, and a practical application of oral strategies in a literal context, Kidd demonstrates the possibility for power and language to co-exist in a context of peace that Rousseau considers outside the realm of all logical possibility.

Unlike rhetorical discourse that by its very nature relies upon and supposes an audience, poetry, and more specifically, lyric expression, operates as a chiefly personal mode of expression. In the opinion of John Stuart Mill, "all poetry is of the nature of soliloquy" (172) and Kidd demonstrates an inclination towards this view in *The Huron Chief*. Just as the soliloquy as a form of discourse presents only a facade of privacy, with the speaker invariably possessing an audience (albeit an extra-literary or dramatic audience) so too do the soliloquies occurring as personal lyric within *The Huron Chief* engage unwittingly with an audience. Kidd's presentation of the pivotal songs as directed to no intended listener suggests his appreciation that poetry is by its very nature "overheard" (Mill 175). The speaker himself appears susceptible to these aural tendencies, as he indulges in a supposed interior monologue when contemplating "suing for invitation" into the Huron Queen's bower, yet "ere the words had left [his] tongue" (111), "by impulse" he moves along. The fact that the speaker, rather than silently meditating upon a course of action, instead gives utterance to his thoughts suggests his inclination towards the oral modes of expression which Ong presents as an invariably externally focussed discourse as opposed to the internalized, reflective tendencies attributed to literacy (74). Kidd has in the words of Said "valorized speech, making it the tentacle by which an otherwise silent text ties itself to the world of discourse" (36). Kidd's oral strategy involves the complicity of the reader who essentially "eavesdrops" upon the conversations and songs of the poem, and demands his attunement to audible expression.

X

Another figure that looms largely in *The Huron Chief* alongside the "noble savage" might be identified as the Homeric hero Odysseus. Consonant with Bentley's contention that the Ulyssean figure pervades early Canadian poetry (162) (and despite Kidd's deviation from the national poetic norm in most other respects) Kidd actively and unrepentantly subscribes to the mythos of Odysseus in *The Huron Chief*. In this respect, Kidd once again diverges from Rousseau's "Essay" wherein he describes the *Odyssey* as "but a tissue of stupidities and inanities which one or two letters would have reduced to thin air, whereas the poem becomes reasonable and even rather well plotted on the assumption that its Heroes know nothing of writing" (255).

Rousseau's comment denigrates the capacity of oral art to aspire to the same standards as literature, while Kidd, by contrast, with Ong considers the poem an example of a "creation beyond the reach of literates" (175). Kidd alludes frequently to the *Odyssey* and its characters throughout the poem, and even presents himself, in the form of an itinerant, wandering "undisturbed and free" on the banks of Lake Huron as a type of Odysseus. Kidd's repeated Odyssean allusions suggest a continuity between oral and literary traditions, and presents the *Odyssey* as an instance of the successful transfer of oral material to a literary medium. The *Odyssey* affords a model to Kidd of a syncretic work efficaciously preserving oral art in a literary medium and moreover lending itself to successful translation of the sort to which Kidd aspires in *The Huron Chief*.

Another debt to *The Odyssey* might be discerned in the poem insofar as the "Homeric poems repeatedly depict audiences listening to songs" (Segal 113). Odysseus, as adept an auditor as an orator, finds "sweet pleasure in the tale[s]" (*Od* 7.393) of bards, and acknowledges that "all men owe honor to the poets" (*Od* 7.512). As already observed, the speaker of *The Huron Chief* assumes the role of listener throughout much of the poem, and perhaps furnishes a model of the ideal reader. In presenting a speaker who assumes the physical role of auditor, Kidd displaces the narrator from his central position and subordinates his poetic energies to those of the Native speakers. Although he addresses Skendandow at the beginning of their acquaintance, for the remainder of the action he remains a mute spectator, but more importantly, an auditor to what transpires.

Despite the thematic importance of the *Odyssey*, and its validation of Kidd's authorial enterprise, *The Huron Chief* aligns itself with the genre of the Homeric work only marginally. While *The Huron Chief* partakes of several generic features commonly associated with the epic, it differs in one essential aspect from this genre in that its "organizational principle of epic structure remains monological" with no "dialogue at the level of textual organization" (Kristeva 77). In Kidd's poem, no absolute point of view prevails, and with its dialogical structure, it attempts to undermine the monolithic quality of literary narrative. While the poem might on some level align itself with the epic, in its chief characteristic, the polyvocality of the text, it clearly dissociates itself from the genre.

The Huron Chief conforms more strikingly to the constraints of the pastoral elegy in its presentation of both the mourner and the mourned in the text. Moreover, according to Abrams, the conventional elegist "raises questions about the justice of divine providence and adverts to the corrupt conditions of his own time" (45). *The Huron Chief*, in

addition to engaging in social protest, exemplifies many of the aspects commonly attributed to the elegy, and contains many an elegy in miniature in the form of the lyric insertions. The songs invariably contour themselves around notions of absence, as each lyric constitutes a lament for a lost or a temporarily distant lover. The poem itself ends on a quintessentially elegiac note as it offers the consolation that the fallen Skenandow will be immortalized in verse, for "nor shall his name be e'er forgot—/But future bards in songs of grief,/Will sadly tell of that lone spot/Where rests the noble HURON CHIEF!" (1655-8). But *The Huron Chief* can scarcely be deemed an elegy for Skenandow, as Kidd's concerns gradually assume precedence over his representation of the chief who, for all intents and purposes, actually recedes from the action after his early appearance in the poem, and returns only for the dramatic conclusion. The final stanza ends curiously on a note of triumph. The exclamatory tone suggests not so much indignation as exhilaration at the virtual apotheosis of the Chief through his literary representation in verse. The reference to "that one spot" (1657), significantly differs from the "cedar grove" (582) that Skenandow had claimed for his burial site earlier. The final lines present the essence of the larger concern with which Kidd grapples over the course of the poem, and one might argue that *The Huron Chief* rather constitutes an elegy for orality, as embodied figuratively by the Huron people, and particularly by the hero Skenandow. Kidd's poem allegorically enacts the demise of oral culture in the face of European (literary) encroachment. Kidd deplores the loss of the oral mentality, but his elegy offers the customary consolation of the genre by affirming his subject's immortality, in the Huron Chief's case, through preservation by "future bards" (1656) in (written) verse. Worth noting, however, is the fact that the words "sadly tell in songs of grief" indicate an oral mode of narration, patterned possibly after the "songs of grief" recounted at the outset of the poem, wherein Skenandow's death is foreshadowed in a dirge issued for one of his peers. This doubleness is characteristic of Kidd in that even while invoking a literary expression, he introduces a note of orality, harmonizing (or at least attempting to harmonize) the opposing discourses of orality and literacy.

XI

Kidd's final comment in the Preface notes that "the poem of *The Huron Chief* has made such an impression on the Indian warriors to whom it has been communicated, that it will shortly be translated into their respective tongues, by Sawennowane, and other Chiefs, equally celebrated and intelligent, who speak and write several languages" (4). Kidd's remark illustrates that even before the poem's publication, it

has been disseminated widely amongst the Native peoples. It also suggests that the poem is unique not only in addressing a readership distinct from the Europeans, but also insofar as it privileges this readership by granting it access to the poem before the general non-Native public. Kidd's poem betrays what Bentley terms the "divided mind of someone who is both an Indian sympathizer" and a Christian colonist (Bentley, *Huron Chief* xxi), and nowhere does this condition manifest itself more prominently than in Kidd's ambivalence towards his audience. Kidd's Preface reveals that he addresses two disparate audiences, between whom he must act as the intermediary. The voices of the Natives speak directly to Kidd's European audience, which the Natives hear as a garbled echo of their true modes of speaking. Bentley notes that, "to his enduring credit, Kidd seems to have been aware that his own poem was implicated by its very nature in the linguistic and demographic takeover of Canada" (*Mimic Fires* 125), and Kidd, in entrusting his poem to the Natives, attempts to mitigate the colonialist implications of his text. Translation by a colonialist "partially reinscribes indigenous voices at the same time as it attempts to mobilize the oral text as a mode of decolonization" (Gilbert 98). Kidd, however, endeavours to make his transcription of the Hurons' poetry a less exploitative process by confessing his own inadequacy to the task of capturing the beauty of the Native speech and by repeatedly employing the formulaic expression "words...like these" (39) when transcribing the direct discourse of the Natives. Moreover, by encouraging the translation of his "Native poem" into Native language by Native speakers, Kidd effectively cedes his colonialist position and transfers the "power of the text" to the people best able to wield it, the Natives attuned by Kidd's time to the pleasures of the oral and literate "text."

The poem in addressing a dual readership of the colonist and the colonized further extends Kidd's project of syncretism. *The Huron Chief* becomes the site of a literary meeting between two cultures that Kidd shows to be disparate in the extreme, but not wholly incompatible, as his own direct involvement in the poem's action serves to demonstrate. It would be facile then, to argue that Kidd advocates an abandonment of literacy in favour of a return to the oral modes of the Natives and of Europe's past, particularly so when confronted with the indisputable artifact of the text itself. Kidd attempts instead to dismantle the prejudice in Western society that assigns primacy to the culture of the literate, and relegates orality to a secondary, virtually 'subaltern' status. Kidd's focus is both horizontal and vertical, and he situates his poem at a point of convergence between these two planes as delineated by Kristeva in *Desire and Language*. Kristeva writes that the "word's status is...defined

horizontally [when] the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee" (66). On an oral level, Kidd's voice radiates outwards to the people he considers united with him by virtue of their common humanity, even if a disparity of religion prevents them from communing on the vertical plane, upon which, through a literary means, his text may resonate for a European audience. Kristeva states that a word's status may be defined vertically when "the word in the text is oriented toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus" (66), and Kidd betrays an acute awareness of his place in literary circles and an anxiety about his performance "at a time when Poetry has received the highest polish, from the master hands of a Byron and a Moore" (4). The poem offers an unapologetic celebration of voice, but does not in itself constitute a thorough rejection of writing. Kidd dedicates his poem to the literary poet Thomas Moore, and he concludes the Preface featuring a panegyric on poetry of the "highest polish" with a boasting reference to the impression his poem has made on the "Indian warriors to whom it has been communicated" and who, he takes care to mention, "speak and write several languages" (4). These ancillary remarks attest to Kidd's concern to validate the "literariness" of the same work that ostensibly protests literacy for the colonial and oppressive associations that invariably accompany it. *The Huron Chief* takes on the character of a text turned against itself. Caught between the pressures exerted upon him by the rival oral and literary modes of expressive consciousness, Kidd attempts a compromise confirming Said's paradox that "something as impersonal as a text, or a record, can nevertheless deliver an imprint or a trace of something as lively, immediate and transitory as a voice" (45). Kidd's poem might be described as just such an instance of the ability of a written document to project a voice beyond the boundaries of the page, demonstrating the possibilities of a text modulated to suggest oral reverberations.

XII

Rousseau's essay seems a logical choice as a theoretical source for Kidd in light of his concern with aboriginal orality and its impact upon the culture's politics and morality. Kidd's differences from Rousseau arguably stem from his personal experience amongst the Natives, whereas Rousseau derives his knowledge second-hand from written accounts of Native culture and society. However, like Rousseau (whom Derrida accuses of harbouring a residual logocentrism, despite his valorization of orality), Kidd's ambivalent treatment of literacy suggests perhaps the tenacity of his governing literate mindset even though he unequivocally celebrates orality as the ideal mode of expression. Ong argues that "persons who have interiorized writing not only write but also speak literately, which is to say that they organize,

to varying degrees, even their oral expression in thought patterns and verbal patterns that they would not know of unless they could write" (57). Kidd's literate consciousness produces the seemingly contrapuntal currents apparent in the poem, for even while affirming orality, he nonetheless cleaves to the literacy that, in his vocation as a poet, is his determining characteristic. These observations do not suggest that Kidd might be considered an illuminary precursor to linguists' theories of orality of the kind formulated by Ong, but merely indicate that Kidd, over the course of *The Huron Chief*, displays a marked interest in the oral aspect of the Huron culture which he uses as a springboard to a poetic exploration of culture itself. *The Huron Chief* exists as a document in the true etymological sense of the word, for Kidd presents it as a lesson to the reader, teaching him to recognize the drawbacks of his literacy and to regret the loss to history of a culture and language that must ever remain distinct. Orality for Kidd represents an ideal, but not something which he aspires to realize on a personal level. As Ong affirms, "to approach [orality] positively is not to advocate it as a perfect state for any culture" (175). Kidd, rather, faced with the possible annihilation of the oral culture, seeks to preserve it in the only way available to him, through its assimilation into literate modes of expression.

Notes

1. Milman Parry's Paris doctoral dissertation focussed upon the oral features of Homeric poetry, but as subsequent scholarship has demonstrated, his work has broad implications for the reception and interpretation of oral art, and for examination of oral thought processes generally. [\[back\]](#)
2. Michele Holmgren's dissertation on "Nineteenth-century Irish Canadian Poets" examines the profound extent to which Kidd's biographical influences shape his poetry, and engender his sympathy for the plight of the Natives in North America. [\[back\]](#)
3. cf. Bentley, *The Gay]Grey Moose* (p. 144) for a detailed account of the prevalence of the "Four Stages Theory" of social development in the history of colonial thought and early Canadian literature generally, and Bruce Trigger's *Socio-Cultural Evolution* for a broader historical study of the implications of this same theory in cross-cultural relations. [\[back\]](#)
4. Sandy Petrey defines performativity as a concept that "shifts attention from what language is to what it does and sees a social process where other linguistic philosophies see a formal

structure" (*Speech Acts and Literary Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1994). Kidd's own view of the ideal function of language closely corresponds to that of Petrey in that it looks to the broader social implications of man as "a speaking subject." [\[back\]](#)

5. The major early Canadian long poems are chiefly topographical (cf. Cary's *Abrams Plains*, and MacKay's *Quebec Hill*), and Kidd's departure from this convention is rendered all the more striking in that, as discussed later in the paper, Kidd inserts himself physically in *The Huron Chief* as its speaker, yet seems oblivious to all visual sensory perception in his solitary concentration upon discourse and sound. The Huron sanctuary, described with deliberate vagueness, retains its elusive paradisiacal aspect that defies any precise geographical situating. [\[back\]](#)
6. In his Introduction to *The Huron Chief*, Bentley describes Kidd's practice in the poem as "deconstructive" and conforming to an alternative "field of discourse" (xxv). As a "proto-postmodernist" text, *The Huron Chief* anticipates much of the experimental verse composed in this century, and shakes the reader from the complacent mindset arguably generated by the habits intrinsic to the literate consciousness. Edward Said writes that "the reader is a full participant in the production of meaning, being obliged as a mental thing to act" (41), and Kidd seems to challenge the reader to be receptive to the sound as well as to the sight of the words on the page. [\[back\]](#)
7. At the poem's outset, the Huron Chief describes Alkwanwaugh as one of the "Sioux's noble race" (233), and the reiteration of Alkwanwaugh's lineage at its conclusion takes on the formulaic quality of ornamental epithet. [\[back\]](#)
8. cf. Bentley's chapter on Henry Kelsey's "Now Reader Read" in *Mimic Fires* for a discussion of this curious typographical convention in early Canadian long poetry. [\[back\]](#)
9. George Copway, the first Canadian Native to publish a book in English, speaks at length of the natural quality of Ojibway language arising from the fact that the "pronunciation of the names of animals, birds and trees are the very sounds they produce...our orators have filled the forest with the music of their voices, loud as the roar of a waterfall, yet soft and wooing as the gentle murmur of a mountain stream" (135). [\[back\]](#)
10. After extensively comparing Native and English languages Copway concludes that "after reading the English language, [he has] found words in the Indian combining more expressiveness. There are many Indian words which when translated into English lose their force, and do not convey so much meaning in one

sentence as the original does in one word" (107). [\[back\]](#)

Works Cited

- Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, Juvanouitea, 1993
- Benjamin, Walter. "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man." *Selected Works*. Ed. Peter Demetz. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978.
- Bentley, D.M.R. *Gay]Grey Moose: Essays On the Ecologies and Mythologies of Canadian Poetry 1690-1990*. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1992.
- . Introduction. *The Huron Chief*. By Adam Kidd. London: Canadian Poetry Press, 1987.
- . *Mimic Fires: Accounts of Early Long Poems on Canada*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1994.
- Copway, George. *The Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation*. Toronto: Coles Canadiana, 1972.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982.
- Dickason, Olive. *Canada's First Nations: a History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1992.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- Gilbert, Helen. "De-Scribing Orality." *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*. London: Routledge, 1994. 198-215.
- Goldsmith, Oliver. *The Rising Village. Early Long Poems on Canada*. Ed. D.M.R. Bentley. London: Canadian Poetry Press, 1993. 200-215.

- Holmgren, Michele. "Native Muses and National Poetry: Nineteenth-Century Irish Canadian Poets." Diss. U of Western Ontario, 1997.
- Homer. *Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Hutton, Patrick. *History as an Art of Memory*. Hanover: UP of New England, 1993.
- Kidd, Adam. *The Huron Chief*. Ed. D.M.R. Bentley. London: Canadian Poetry Press, 1987.
- Klinck, Carl. "Adam Kidd: an Early Canadian Poet." *Queen's Quarterly*. 65 (1958): 130-32.
- Kortenaar, N. "Beyond Authenticity and Creolization." *PMLA* 110 (1995): 30-42.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Lahontan, Baron de. *New Voyages to North America*. Ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites. New York: Burt Franklin, 1970.
- Mazoff, C.D. *Anxious Allegiances: Legitimizing Identity in the Early Canadian Long Poem*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1998.
- Mackay, J. *Quebec Hill. Early Long Poems on Canada*. Ed. D.M.R. Bentley. London: Canadian Poetry Press, 1993. 31-57.
- Mill, John Stuart. "What is Poetry?" *Essays on Poetry*. Ed. F. Parvin Sharpless. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1976. 84-67.
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*. New York: Methuen, 1982.
- Osterreicher, Wulf. "Types of Orality in Text." *Written Voices, Spoken Signs: Tradition, Performance and the Epic Text*. Ed. Egbert Bakker. Cambridge: U of Harvard P, 1992.
- Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance*. Cleveland: Meridian, 1961.

- Petrone, Penny. *Native Literature in Canada From the Oral Tradition to the Present*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Plato. *The Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. B. Jowett. London: Oxford UP, 1931.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The First and Second Discourses and Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Trans. Victor Gourevitch. New York: Harper and Row, 1986.
- Sanders, Barry. "Lie as it plays: Oral and Literate Forms of Discourse." *Literacy and Orality*. Ed. David Olson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Said, Edward. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983.
- Sayre, Gordon M. *Les Sauvages Américains: Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997.
- Scott, Duncan Campbell Scott. "Poetry and Progress." *Duncan Campbell Scott: A Book of Criticism*. Ed. S.L. Dragland. Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1974. 7-31.
- Simonsuuri, Kirsti. *Homer's Original Genius: Eighteenth Century Notions of the Early Greek Epic*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979.
- Steele, Charles Reginald. "Canadian Poetry in English: The Beginnings." Diss. U of Western Ontario, 1974.
-