

THE WRITTEN WORD
LITERACY IN TRANSITION

Wolfson College Lectures 1985

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WRITING IS A TECHNOLOGY THAT RESTRUCTURES THOUGHT

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I

LITERACY is imperious. It tends to arrogate to itself supreme power by taking itself as normative for human expression and thought. This is particularly true in high-technology cultures, which are built on literacy of necessity and which encourage the impression that literacy is an always to be expected and even natural state of affairs. The term 'illiterate' itself suggests that persons belonging to the class it designates are deviants, defined by something they lack, namely literacy. Moreover, in high-technology cultures—which, more and more, are setting the style for cultures across the world—since literacy is regarded as so unquestionably normative and normal, the deviancy of illiterates tends to be thought of as lack of a simple mechanical skill. Illiterates should learn writing as they learned to tie their shoe-laces or to drive a car. Such views of writing as simply a mechanical skill obligatory for all human beings distort our understanding of what is human if only because they block understanding of what natural human mental processes are before writing takes possession of consciousness. These views also by the same token block understanding of what writing itself really is. For without a deep understanding of the normal oral or oral-aural consciousness and noetic economy of humankind before writing came along, it is impossible to grasp what writing accomplished.

Recent research work, however, in the field and in the library, is offering the opportunity to overcome our chirographic (and typographic) bias. This work has deepened our understanding of what I have styled primary orality, the orality of cultures with no knowledge at all of writing, as contrasted with what I have styled secondary orality, the electronic orality of radio and television, which

Some material in the first part of this article has been adapted from the author's 'Writing and the Evolution of Consciousness', in: Mosaic (University of Manitoba), xviii (1985), 1-10, with the permission of the editor.

grows out of high-literacy cultures, depending for its invention and operation on the widespread cultivation of writing and reading. Classical scholars, from Milman Parry—the prime mover in the orality-literacy universe—through Albert Lord, Eric Havelock, and others, sociologists and linguists such as Jack Goody, Wallace Chafe, and Deborah Tannen, cultural anthropologists such as Jeff Opland, historians such as M. T. Clanchy, and many others from even more diversified fields, including the late Marshall McLuhan, the greatest diversifier of all, have opened vistas into primary orality which enable us better to understand differences between the oral and the literate mind. My own work in opening such vistas, for whatever it is worth, began deep in Renaissance and earlier intellectual history, and has moved into the present, without, I hope, losing live contact with the past. We can now view in better perspective the world of writing in which we live, see better what this world really is, and what functionally literate human beings really are—that is, beings whose thought processes do not grow out of simply natural powers but out of these powers as structured, directly or indirectly, by the technology of writing. Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form.

Functionally literate persons, those who regularly assimilate discourse such as this, are not simply thinking and speaking human beings but chirographically thinking and speaking human beings (latterly conditioned also by print and by electronics). The fact that we do not commonly feel the influence of writing on our thoughts shows that we have interiorized the technology of writing so deeply that without tremendous effort we cannot separate it from ourselves or even recognize its presence and influence. If functionally literate persons are asked to think of the word ‘nevertheless’, they will all have present in imagination the letters of the word—vaguely perhaps, but unavoidably—in handwriting or typescript or print. If they are asked to think of the word ‘nevertheless’ for two minutes, 120 seconds, without ever allowing any letters at all to enter their imaginations, they cannot comply. A person from a completely oral background of course has no such problem. He or she will think only of the real word, a sequence of sounds, ‘ne-ver-the-less’. For the real word ‘nevertheless’, the sounded word, cannot ever be present all at once, as written words deceptively seem to be. Sound

exists only when it is going out of existence. By the time I get to the 'the-less', the 'ne-ver' is gone. To the extent that it makes all of a word appear present at once, writing falsifies. Recalling sounded words is like recalling a bar of music, a melody, a sequence in time. A word is an event, a happening, not a thing, as letters make it appear to be. So is thought: 'This is paper' is an occurrence, an event in time. We grasp truth articulately only in events. Articulated truth has no permanence. Full truth is deeper than articulation. We find it hard to recognize this obvious truth, so deeply has the fixity of the written word taken possession of our consciousness.

The oral world as such distresses literates because sound is evanescent. Typically, literates want words and thoughts pinned down—though it is impossible to 'pin down' an event. The mind trained in an oral culture does not feel the literate's distress: it can operate with exquisite skill in the world of sounds, events, evanescences. How does it manage? Basically, in its noetic operations it uses formulaic structures and procedures that stick in the mind to complement and counteract the evanescent: proverbs and other fixed sayings, epithets, that is, standard, expected qualifiers (the *sturdy* oak, the *brave* warrior, *wise* Nestor, *clever* Odysseus), numerical sets (the three Graces, the seven deadly sins, the five senses, and so on), balance, rhythms of all sorts ('Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven')—anything to make it easy to call back what Homer recognized were 'winged words'. Primary oral culture also keeps its thinking close to the human life world, personalizing things and issues, and storing knowledge in stories. Categories are unstable mnemonically. Stories you can remember. In its typical mindset, the oral sensibility is out to hold things together, to make and retain agglomerates, not to analyse (which means to take things apart)—although, since all thought is to some degree analytic, it does analyse to a degree. Pressed by the need to manage an always fugitive noetic universe, the oral world is basically conservative. Exploratory thinking is not unknown, but it is relatively rare, a luxury orality can little afford, for energies must be husbanded to keep on constant call the evanescent knowledge that the ages have so laboriously accumulated. Everybody, or almost everybody, must repeat and repeat and repeat the truths that have come down from the ancestors. Otherwise these truths will escape, and culture will be back on square one, where it started before the ancestors got the truths from their ancestors.

I have discussed these formulaic and narrative strategies in *Orality and Literacy* (1982). In 1985, John Miles Foley's new *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research* shows, as nothing has ever done before, how universal such strategies are across the globe and across the centuries. Foley provides summaries of over 1,800 books and articles covering 90 different language areas.

Our literate world of visually processed sounds has been totally unfamiliar to most human beings, who always belonged, and often still belong to this oral world. *Homo sapiens* has been around for some 30,000 years, to take a conservative figure. The oldest script, Mesopotamian cuneiform, is less than 6,000 years old (the alphabet less than 4,000). Of all the tens of thousands of languages spoken in the course of human history only a tiny fraction—Edmonson (1971: 323) calculates about 106—have ever been committed to writing to a degree sufficient to have produced a literature, and most have never been written at all. Of the 4,000 or so languages spoken today, only around 78 have a literature (Edmonson 1971: 332). For some of the others linguists have devised more or less adequate ways of writing them, with results that appear in linguistics publications and convention papers that have no noteworthy effect at all on the actual users of the language. Dr C. Andrew Hofling has recently completed a linguistic study of discourse in the Itza Mayan language which transcribes the language in the Roman alphabet. This transcription is essential for linguistic studies, but it is useless, inconsequential, for the Itza Maya themselves. With only some 500 speakers, the language has no effective way of developing a literate culture. Most languages in the world today exist in comparable conditions. Those who think of the text as the paradigm of all discourse need to face the fact that only the tiniest fraction of languages have ever been written or ever will be. Most have disappeared or are fast disappearing, untouched by textuality. Hardcore textualism is snobbery, often hardly disguised.

Only in recent centuries have human beings generally had the idea that a language *could* be written, and even today many peoples do not believe their language can be written. In Dayton, Ohio, on 25 February 1983, I saw a videotape of a Methodist missionary and linguist who had worked out an alphabetization of a previously unwritten language in the South Pacific and witnessed her difficulty in convincing the speakers of the language that she could write down *their* utterances. They believed that only the languages

they knew as written, such as English or French, *could* be written.

All this is not to deny that spoken languages are all amenable to conversion into writing (always with only partial success or accuracy) or that, given the human condition and the advantages conferred by writing, the invention of writing, and even of alphabetic writing, was sure to occur somewhere in the evolution of culture and consciousness. But to say that language *is* writing is, at best, uninformed. It provides egregious evidence of the unreflective chirographic and/or typographic squint that haunts us all.

II

Writing was an intrusion, though an invaluable intrusion, into the early human lifeworld, much as computers are today. It has lately become fashionable in some linguistic circles to refer to Plato's condemnation of writing in the *Phaedrus* and the Seventh Letter. What is seldom if ever noticed, however, is that Plato's objections against writing are essentially the very same objections commonly urged today against computers by those who object to them (Ong 1982: 79-81). Writing, Plato has Socrates say in the *Phaedrus*, is inhuman, pretending to establish outside the mind what in reality can only be in the mind. Writing is simply a thing, something to be manipulated, something inhuman, artificial, a manufactured product. We recognize here the same complaint that is made against computers: they are artificial contrivances, foreign to human life.

Secondly, Plato's Socrates complains, a written text is basically unresponsive. If you ask a person to explain his or her statement, you can get at least an attempt at explanation: if you ask a text, you get nothing except the same, often stupid words which called for your question in the first place. In the modern critique of the computer, the same objection is put, 'Garbage in, garbage out'. So deeply are we into literacy that we fail commonly to recognize that this objection applies every bit as much to books as to computers. If a book states an untruth, ten thousand printed refutations will do nothing to the printed text: the untruth is there for ever. This is why books have been burnt. Texts are essentially contumacious.

Thirdly, Plato's Socrates urges, writing destroys memory. Those who use writing will become forgetful, relying on an external source for what they lack in internal resources. Writing weakens the mind.

Today, some parents and others fear that pocket calculators provide an external resource for what ought to be the internal resource of memorized multiplication tables. Presumably, constant repetition of multiplication tables might produce more and more Albert Einsteins. Calculators weaken the mind, relieve it of the setting-up exercises that keep it strong and make it grow. (Significantly, the fact that the computer manages multiplication and other computation so much more effectively than human beings do, shows how little the multiplication tables have to do with real thinking.)

Fourthly, in keeping with the agonistic mentality of oral cultures, their tendency to view everything in terms of interpersonal struggle, Plato's Socrates also holds it against writing that the written word cannot defend itself as the natural spoken word can: real speech and thought always exist essentially in the context of struggle. Writing is passive, out of it, in an unreal, unnatural world. So, it seems, are computers: if you punch the keys they will not fight back on their own, but only in the way they have been programmed to do.

Those who are disturbed about Plato's misgivings about writing will be even more disturbed to find that print created similar misgivings when it was first introduced. Hieronimo Squarciafico, who in fact promoted the printing of the Latin classics, also argued in 1477 that already 'abundance of books makes men less studious' (Ong 1982: 80). Even more than writing does, print destroys memory and enfeebles the mind by relieving it of too much work (the pocket calculator complaint once more), downgrading the wise man and wise woman in favour of the pocket compendium.

One weakness in Plato's position is that he put these misgivings about writing into writing, just as one weakness in antiprint positions is that their proponents put their objections into print, and one weakness in anti-computer positions is that they are articulated in articles or books printed from tapes composed on computer terminals. The law at work here is: once the word is technologized, there is no really effective way to criticize its condition without the aid of the technology you are criticizing. The complaints about these three inventions are all the same because writing and print and the computer are all ways of technologizing the word.

The new technology of writing, it is now clear, was operating in Plato's lifeworld in ways far too convoluted for even Plato to

understand. The technology of writing was not merely useful to Plato for broadcasting his critique of writing, but it also had been responsible for bringing the critique into existence. Although there was no way for Plato to be explicitly aware of the fact, his philosophically analytic thought, including his analysis of the effects of writing, was possible only because of the effects that writing was having on mental processes. We know that totally oral peoples, intelligent and wise though they often are, are incapable of the protracted, intensive linear analysis that we have from Plato's Socrates. Even when he talks, Plato's Socrates is using thought forms brought into being by writing. In fact, as Eric Havelock has beautifully shown in his *Preface to Plato* (1963), Plato's entire epistemology was unwittingly a programmed rejection of the archaic preliterate world of thought and discourse. This world was oral, mobile, warm, personally interactive (you needed live people to produce spoken words). It was the world represented by the poets, whom Plato would not allow in his Republic, because, although Plato could not formulate it this way, their thought processes and modes of expression were disruptive of the cool, analytic processes generated by writing.

The Platonic ideas are not oral, not sounded, not mobile, not warm, not personally interactive. They are silent, immobile, in themselves devoid of all warmth, impersonal and isolated, not part of the human lifeworld at all but utterly above and beyond it, paradigmatic abstractions. Plato's term *idea*, form, is in fact visually based, coming from the same root as the Latin *videre*, meaning to see, and such English derivatives as *vision*, *visible*, or *video*. In the older Greek form, a digamma had preceded the iota: *videa* or *widea*. Platonic form was form conceived of by analogy precisely with visible form. Despite his touting of *logos* and speech, the Platonic ideas in effect modelled intelligence not so much on hearing as on seeing. The visual model favoured clarity, but also shallowness. 'I see what you say' lacks the depth of 'I hear what you say.' Plato of course was not at all fully aware of the unconscious forces at work in his psyche to produce his literate reaction, or overreaction, to a lingering, and by his time retardant, orality. But he unconsciously adjusted to the threat of shallowness in his 'idea' philosophy by giving his thought what is often called a poetic cast and by avowing that the depths of truth not only escape writing but also even oral articulation.

III

In downgrading writing, Plato was thinking of writing as an external, alien technology, as many people today think of the computer. Because we have by today so deeply interiorized writing, made it so much a part of ourselves, as Plato's age had not yet made it fully a part of itself, we find it difficult to consider writing to be a technology as we commonly assume printing and the computer to be. Yet writing (and especially alphabetic writing) is a technology, calling for the use of tools and other equipment, styli or brushes or pens, carefully prepared surfaces such as paper, animal skins, strips of wood, as well as inks or paints, and much more. Writing technologies have differed in different parts of the world. In their own indigenous technologies of writing, East Asia—China, Korea, and Japan—typically used not pens but brushes, not liquid ink in ink-horns or inkwells, but ink blocks, on which the wet brush was rubbed as in making water-colour paintings, in this sense 'painting' rather than 'writing' (etymologically, 'scratching') their texts.

In *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, M. T. Clanchy (1979) has an entire chapter entitled 'The Technology of Writing'. He explains how in the West through the Middle Ages and earlier almost all those devoted to writing regularly used the services of a scribe because the physical labour writing involved—scraping and polishing the animal skin or parchment, whitening it with chalk, resharpening goose-quill pens with what we still call a pen-knife, mixing ink, and all the rest—interfered with thought and composition. Chaucer's 'Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn' humorously expressed the author's resentment at having to 'rubbe and scrape' to correct his scribe Adam's own carelessness in plying his craft. Today's ballpoint pens, not to mention our typewriters and word processors or the paper we use, are high-technology products, but we seldom advert to the fact because the technology is concentrated in the factories that produce such things, rather than at the point of production of the text itself, where the technology is concentrated in a manuscript culture.

Although we take writing so much for granted as to forget that it is a technology, writing is in a way the most drastic of the three technologies of the word. It initiated what printing and electronics only continued, the physical reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from the living present, where alone real, spoken words exist.

IV

Once reduced to space, words are frozen and in a sense dead. Yet there is a paradox in the fact that the deadness of the written or printed text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a limitless number of living readers. The dead, thing-like text has potentials far outdistancing those of the simply spoken word. The complementary paradox, however, is that the written text, for all its permanence, means nothing, is not even a text, except in relationship to the spoken word. For a text to be intelligible, to deliver its message, it must be reconverted into sound, directly or indirectly, either really in the external world or in the auditory imagination. All verbal expression, whether put into writing, print, or the computer, is ineluctably bound to sound forever.

Nevertheless, by contrast with natural, oral speech, writing is completely artificial. There is no way to write 'naturally'. Oral speech is fully natural to human beings in the sense that every human being in every culture who is not physiologically or psychologically impaired learns to talk. Moreover, while talk implements conscious life, its use wells up naturally into consciousness out of unconscious or subconscious depths, though of course with the conscious as well as unconscious co-operation of society. Despite the fact that they govern articulation and thought processes themselves, grammar rules or structures normally originate, live, and function far below the level at which articulation functions. You can know how to use the grammatical rules or structures and even how to set up new rules or structures that function clearly and effectively without being able to state what they are. Of all the hundreds of thousands of grammar rules or structures that have been at work in all the tens of thousands of languages and dialects of humankind, only the tiniest fraction have ever been articulated at all.

Writing or script differs as such from speech in that it is not inevitably learned by all psychologically or physiologically unimpaired persons, even those living in highly literate cultures. Moreover, the use of writing or script does not inevitably well up out of the unconscious without the aid of stated rules. The process of putting spoken language into writing is governed by consciously contrived, articulated procedures: for example, a certain pictogram

will be consciously determined to stand for a certain specified word or concept, or *a* will be consciously ruled to represent a certain phoneme, *b* another, and so on. (This is not at all to deny that the writer-reader situation created by writing is deeply involved with unconscious processes which are at work in composing written texts once one has learned the explicit, consciously controlled rules for transposing sound into a visual code.)

To say writing is artificial is not to condemn it but to praise it. Like other artificial creations and indeed more than any other, writing is utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials. Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word. Such transformations of consciousness can be uplifting, at the same time that they are in a sense alienating. By distancing thought, alienating it from its original habitat in sounded words, writing raises consciousness. Alienation from a natural milieu can be good for us and indeed is in many ways essential for fuller human life. To live and to understand fully, we need not only proximity but also distance. This writing provides for, thereby accelerating the evolution of consciousness as nothing else before it does.

Technologies are artificial, but—paradox again—artificiality is natural to human beings. Technology, properly interiorized, does not degrade human life but on the contrary enhances it. The modern orchestra, for example, is a result of high technology. A clarinet is an instrument, which is to say a tool. A piano is an intricate, hand-powered machine. An organ is a huge machine, with sources of power—pumps, bellows, electric generators, motors—in motion before the organ is touched by its operator. Antiquity had no orchestras such as ours because it was unable to make any kind of instrument, musical or other, with the precision tooling even of a clarinet. Its maximum experience of precision was at the level of a good pair of scissors. Modern precision tooling has its roots in the late Middle Ages and its first major achievement was printing from movable alphabetic type.

A modern orchestra is the product of precision-tooled technology. Beethoven's scores consist of almost innumerable, precise directions to highly-trained technicians, specifying exactly how they are to use their individual tools. *Legato*: do not take your finger off one piano key until you have hit the next. *Staccato*: hit

the key and take your finger off immediately. And so on for thousands of actions which musicians must practise until mechanically perfect. To be a first-rate musician, a *sine qua non* is to be a superb technician. There is no substitute for mechanical mastery of the tools.

As musicologists well know, it is pointless to object to electronic compositions, as non-musicologists sometimes do, on the grounds that the sounds come out of a mechanical contrivance. What do you think the sounds of a piano come out of, not to mention an organ? Or the sounds of a clarinet or bassoon or even a whistle? These things are all mechanical contrivances. The fact is that by using the mechanical contrivance a clarinettist or pianist or an organist can express something poignantly human that cannot be expressed without the mechanical contrivance. To achieve such expression effectively, of course, the musician has to have interiorized the technology, made the tool or machine a second nature, a psychological part of himself or herself. Art imitates nature. Art follows nature, and joins itself to nature. Art is second nature. But it is not nature. *Natura* in Latin, like *physis* in Greek, means birth. We are not born with art but add it to ourselves. Mastering a musical tool, making it one's own, calls for years of mechanical 'practice', learning how we can make the tool do mechanically all that it can do. Little boys and girls know how boring it can be. Yet such shaping of the tool to one's self, learning a technological skill, is hardly dehumanizing. The use of a technology can enrich the human psyche, enlarge human spirit, set it free, intensify its interior life.

I instance the modern orchestra here to make the point that writing is an even more deeply interiorized technology than the performance of instrumental music is. To understand what writing is, which means to understand it in relation to its past, to orality, one must honestly face the fact that it is a technology.

V

Writing, in the strict sense of the word, as has already been seen, was a very late development in human history. The first script, or true writing, that we know was developed among the Sumerians in Mesopotamia only around the year 3500 BC, less than 6,000 years ago. The alphabet, which was invented only once, so that every