THE CONSEQUENCES OF LITERACY

The accepted tripartite divisions of the formal study both of mankind's past and present are to a considerable extent based on man's development first of language and later of writing. Looked at in the perspective of time, man's biological evolution shades into prehistory when he becomes a language-using animal; add writing, and history proper begins. Looked at in a temporal perspective, man as animal is studied primarily by the zoologist, man as talking animal primarily by the anthropologist, and man as talking and writing animal primarily by the sociologist.

That the differentiation between these categories should be founded on different modes of communication is clearly appropriate; it was language that enabled man to achieve a form of social organisation whose range and complexity was different in kind from that of animals: whereas the social organisation of animals was mainly instinctive and genetically transmitted, that of man was largely learned and transmitted verbally through the cultural heritage. The basis for the last two distinctions, those based on the development of writing, is equally clear: to the extent that a significant quantity of written records are available the pre-historian yields to the historian; and to the extent that alphabetical writing and popular literacy imply new modes of social organisation and transmission, the anthropologist tends to yield to the sociologist.

But why? And how? There is no agreement about this question, nor even about what the actual boundary lines between non-literate and literate cultures are. At what point in the formalisation of pictographs or other graphic signs can we talk of "letters", of literacy? And what proportion of the society has to write and read before the culture as a whole can be described as literate?

These are some of the many reasons why the extent to which there is any distinction between the areas and methods peculiar to anthropology and sociology must be regarded as problematic; and the difficulty affects not only the boundaries of the two disciplines but also the nature of the intrinsic differences in their subject matter.[1] The recent trend has been for anthropologists

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[1] Some writers distinguish the field of Social Anthropology from that of Sociology on the basis of its subject matter (i.e. the study of non-literate or non-European peoples), others on the basis of its techniques (e.g. that of participant observation). For a dis-

to spread their net more widely and engage in the study of industrial societies side by side with their sociological colleagues. We can no longer accept the view that anthropologists have as their objective the study of primitive man, who is characterised by a "primitive mind", while sociologists, on the other hand, concern themselves with civilised man, whose activities are guided by "rational thought" and tested by "logico-empirical procedures". The reaction against such ethnocentric views, however, has now gone to the point of denying that the distinction between non-literate and literate society has any significant validity. This position seems contrary to our personal observaton; and so it has seemed worthwhile to enquire whether there may not be, even from the most empirical and relativist standpoint, genuine illumination to be derived from a further consideration of some of the historical and analytic problems connected with the traditional dichotomy between non-literate and literate societies.

I

THE CULTURAL TRADITION IN NON-LITERATE SOCIETIES

For reasons which will become clear it seems best to begin with a generalised description of the ways in which the cultural heritage is transmitted in non-literate societies, and then to see how these ways are changed by the wide-spread adoption of an easy and effective means of written communication.

When one generation hands on its cultural heritage to the next, three fairly separate items are involved. First, the society passes on its material plant, including the natural resources available to its members. Secondly, it transmits standardised ways of acting. These customary ways of behaving are only partly communicated by verbal means; ways of cooking food, of growing crops, of handling children may be transmitted by direct imitation. But the most significant elements of any human culture are undoubtedly channelled through words, and reside in the particular range of meanings and attitudes which members of any society attach to their verbal symbols. These elements include not only what we habitually think of as customary behavior but also such items as ideas of space and time, generalised goals and aspirations, in short the *weltanschauung* of every social group. In Durkheim's words, these categories of the understanding are "priceless instruments of thought which the human groups have laboriously forged through the centuries and where they have accumulated the best of their intellectual capital".[2] The relative continuity of these categories of understanding from one generation to another

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cussion of these points, see Siegfried F. Nadel, *The Foundations of Social Anthropology* (London, 1951), p. 2.

[2] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life,* trans. Joseph W. Swain (London, 1915), p. 19.

is primarily ensured by language, which is the most direct and comprehensive expression of the social experience of the group.

The transmission of the verbal elements of culture by oral means can be visualised as a long chain of interlocking conversations between members of the group. Thus all beliefs and values, all forms of knowledge, are communicated between individuals in face-to-face contact; and, as distinct from the material content of the cultural tradition, whether it be cave-paintings or hand-axes, they are stored only in human memory.

The intrinsic nature of oral communication has a considerable effect upon both the content and the transmission of the cultural repertoire. In the first place it makes for a directness of relationship between symbol and referent. There can be no reference to "dictionary definitions", nor can words accumulate the successive layers of historically validated meanings which they acquire in a literate culture. Instead the meaning of each word is ratified in a succession of concrete situations, accompanied by vocal inflexions and physical gestures, all of which combine to particularize both its specific denotation and its accepted connotative usages. This process of direct semantic ratification, of course, operates cumulatively; and as a result the totality of symbol-referent relationships is more immediately experienced by the individual in an exclusively oral culture, and is thus more deeply socialised.

One way of illustrating this is to consider how the range of vocabulary in a non-literate society reflects this mode of semantic ratification. It has often been observed how the elaboration of the vocabulary of such a society reflects the particular interests of the people concerned. The inhabitants of the Pacific island of Lesu have not one, but a dozen or so, words for pigs,[3] according to sex, color, and where they come from — a prolixity which mirrors the importance of pigs in a domestic economy that otherwise includes few sources of protein. The corollary of this prolixity is that where common emphases and interests, whether material or otherwise, are not specifically involved, there is little verbal development. Malinowski reported that in the Trobriands the outer world was only named insofar as it yielded useful things, useful, that is, in the very broadest sense;[4] and there is much other testimony to support the view that there is an intimate functional adaptation of language in non-literate societies, which obtains not only for the relatively simple and concrete symbol-referents involved above, but also for the more generalized "categories of understanding" and for the cultural tradition as a whole.

In an essay he wrote in collaboration with Mauss, "De quelques formes

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[3] Hortense Powdermaker, *Life in Lesu* (New York, 1933), p. 292. See also *Language, Thought, and Culture,* ed. Paul Henle (Ann Arbor, 1958), pp. 5-18.
[4] Bronislaw Malinowski, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages", in C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (London, 1936), pp. 296-336, esp. p. 331. But see also the critical comments by Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage* (Paris, 1962), pp. 6, 15-16.

primitives de classification",[5] Durkheim traces the interconnections between the ideas of space and the territorial distribution of the Australian aborigines, the Zuni of the Pueblo area and the Sioux of the Great Plains. This inter-meshing of what he called the collective representations with the social morphology of a particular society is clearly another aspect of the same directness of relationship between symbol and referent. Just as the more concrete part of a vocabulary reflects the dominant interests of the society, so the more abstract categories are often closely linked to the accepted terminology for pragmatic pursuits. Among the LoDagaa of Northern Ghana, days are reckoned according to the incidence of neighboring markets; the very word for day and market is the same, and the "weekly" cycle is a six-day revolution of the most important markets in the vicinity, a cycle which also defines the spatial range of everyday activities.[6]

The way in which these various intitutions in an oral culture are kept in relatively close accommodation one to another surely bears directly on the question of the central difference between literate and non-literate societies. As we have remarked, the whole content of the social tradition, apart from the material inheritances, is held in memory. The social aspects of remembering have been emphasised by sociologists and psychologists, in particular Maurice Halbwachs.[7] What the individual remembers tends to be what is of critical importance in his experience of the main social relationships. In each generation, therefore, the individual memory will mediate the cultural heritage in such a way that its new constituents will adjust to the old by the process of interpretation that Bartlett calls "rationalizing" or the "effort after meaning"; and whatever parts of it have ceased to be of contemporary relevance are likely to be eliminated by the process of forgetting.

The social function of memory — and of forgetting — can thus be seen as the final stage of what may be called the homeostatic organisation of the cultural tradition in non-literate society. The language is developed in intimate association with the experience of the community, and it is learned by the individual in face-to-face contact with the other members. What continues to be social relevance is stored in the memory while the rest is usually

[5] *L'Année sociologique*, 7 (1902-3), pp. 1-72. See also S. Czarnowski, "Le morcellement de l'étendue et sa limitation dans la religion et la magie", *Actes du congrès international d'histoire des religions* (Paris, 1925), I, pp. 339-359.

[6] Jack Goody, unpublished field notes, 1950–52. See also E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford, 1940), chapter 3, "Time and Space", and David Tait, *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana* (London, 1961), pp. 17 ff. For a general treatment of the subject, see A. Irving Hallowell, "Temporal Orientations in Western Civilisation and in a Preliterate Society", *American Anthropologist*, 39 (1937), pp. 647-670.

[7] *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris, 1925); "Mémoire et société", *L'Année sociologique*, 3e série, 1 (1940–8), pp. 11-177; *La Mémoire collective*, Paris, 1950. See also Frederic C. Bartlett on the tendency of oral discourse to become an expression of ideas and attitudes of the group rather than the individual speaker, in *Remembering* (Cambridge, 1932), pp. 265-7, and *Psychology and Primitive Culture* (Cambridge, 1923), pp. 42-3, 62-3, 256.

forgotten: and language — primarily vocabulary — is the effective medium of this crucial process of social digestion and elimination which may be regarded as analogous to the homeostatic organisation of the human body by means of which it attempts to maintain its present condition of life.

In drawing attention to the importance of these assimilating mechanisms in non-literate societies, we are denying neither the occurrence of social change, nor yet the "survivals" which it leaves in its wake. Nor do we overlook the existence of mnemonic devices in oral cultures which offer some resistance to the interpretative process. Formalised patterns of speech, recital under ritual conditions, the use of drums and other musical instruments, the employment of professional remembrancers — all such factors may shield at least part of the content of memory from the transmuting influence of the immediate presures of the present. The Homeric epics, for instance, seem to have been written down during the first century of Greek literature between 750 and 650 B.C., but "they look to a departed era, and their substance is unmistakably old".[8]

With these qualifications, however, it seems correct to characterize the transmission of the cultural tradition in oral societies as homeostatic in view of the way in which its emphasis differs from that in literate societies. The description offered has, of course, been extremely abstract; but a few illustrative examples in one important area — that of how the tribal past is digested into the communal orientation of the present — may serve to make it clearer.

Like the Bedouin Arabs and the Hebrews of the Old Testament, the Tiv people of Nigeria give long genealogies of their forebears which in this case stretch some twelve generations in depth back to an eponymous founding ancestor.[9] Neither these genealogies, nor the Biblical lists of the descendants of Adam, were remembered purely as feats of memory. They served as mnemonics for systems of social relations. When on his deathbed Jacob delivered prophecies about the future of his twelve sons, he spoke of them as the twelve tribes or nations of Israel. It would seem from the account in Genesis that the genealogical tables here refer to contemporary groups rather than to dead individuals;[10] the tables presumably serve to regulate social relations among the twelve tribes of Israel in a manner similar to that which

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[8]   M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (New York, 1954), p. 26.

[9]   Laura Bohannan, "A Genealogical Charter", *Africa,* 22 (1952), pp. 301-15; Emrys Peters, "The Proliferation of Segments in the Lineage of the Bedouin of Cyrenaica", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute,* 90 (1960), pp. 29-53. See also Godfrey and Monica Wilson, *The Analysis of Social Change* (Cambridge, 1945), p. 27.

[10]   Ch. 49; further evidence supporting this assumption is found in the etymology of the Hebrew term *Toledot*, which originally denoted "genealogies", and assumed also the meaning of "stories and accounts" about the origin of a nation. "In this sense the term was also applied to the account of the creation of heaven and earth" [Solomon Gandz, "Oral Tradition in the Bible" in *Jewish Studies in Memory of George A. Kohut,* ed. Salo W. Baron and Alexander Marx (New York, 1935), p. 269].

has been well analysed in Evans-Pritchard's work on the Nuer of the Southern Sudan and in Fortes' account of the Tallensi of Northern Ghana.[11]

Early British administrators among the Tiv of Nigeria were aware of the great importance attached to these genealogies, which were continually discussed in court cases where the rights and duties of one man towards another were in dispute. Consequently they took the trouble to write down the long lists of names and preserve them for posterity, so that future administrators might refer to them in giving judgement. Forty years later, when the Bohannans carried out anthropological field work in the area, their successors were still using the same genealogies.[12] However, these written pedigrees now gave rise to many disagreements; the Tiv maintained that they were incorrect, while the officials regarded them as statements of fact, as records of what had actually happened, and could not agree that the unlettered indigenes could be better informed about the past than their own literate predecessors. What neither party realised was that in any society of this kind changes take place which require a constant readjustment in the genealogies if they are to continue to carry out their function as mnemonics of social relationships.

These changes are of several kinds: those arising from the turnover in personnel, from the process of "birth and copulation and death"; those connected with the rearrangement of the constituent units of the society, with the migration of one group and the fission of another; and lastly those resulting from the effects of changes in the social system itself, whether generated from within or initiated from without. Each of these three processes (which we may refer to for convenience as the processes of generational, organisational and structural change) could lead to alterations of the kind to which the administration objected.

It is obvious that the process of generation leads in itself to a constant lengthening of the genealogy; on the other hand, the population to which it is linked may in fact be growing at quite a different rate, perhaps simply replacing itself. So despite its increasing length the genealogy may have to refer to just as many people at the present time as it did fifty, a hundred, or perhaps two hundred years ago. Consequently the added depth of lineages caused by new births needs to be accompanied by a process of genealogical shrinkage; the occurrence of this telescoping process, a common example of the general social phenomenon which J. A. Barnes has felicitously termed "structural amnesia", has been attested in many societies, including all those mentioned above.[13]

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[11] *The Nuer* (Oxford, 1940); "The Nuer of the Southern Sudan" in *African Political Systems*, ed. Meyer Fortes and Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (London, 1940); Meyer Fortes, *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi* (London, 1945).
[12] "A Genealogical Charter", p. 314.
[13] John A. Barnes, "The Collection of Genealogies", *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal: Human Problems in British Central Africa*, 5 (1947), pp. 48-56, esp. p. 52; Meyer Fortes, "The Significance of Descent in Tale Social Structure", *Africa*, 14 (1944), p. 370;

Organisational changes lead to similar adjustments. The state of Gonja in Northern Ghana is divided into a number of divisional chiefdoms, certain of which are recognised as providing in turn the ruler of the whole nation. When asked to explain their system the Gonja recount how the founder of the state, Ndewura Jakpa, came down from the Niger Bend in search of gold, con-quered the indigenous inhabitants of the area and enthroned himself as chief of the state and his sons as rulers of its territorial divisions. At his death the divisional chiefs succeeded to the paramountcy in turn. When the details of this story were first recorded at the turn of the present century, at the time the British were extending their control over the area, Jakpa was said to have begotten seven sons, this corresponding to the number of divisions whose heads were eligible for the supreme office by virtue of their descent from the founder of the particular chiefdom. But at the same time as the British had arrived, two of the seven divisions disappeared, one being deliberately in-corporated in a neighboring division because its rulers had supported a Man-dingo invader, Samori, and another because of some boundary changes in-troduced by the British administration. Sixty years later, when the myths of state were again recorded, Jakpa was credited with only five sons and no mention was made of the founders of the two divisions which had since dis-appeared from the political map.[14]

These two instances from the Tiv and the Gonja emphasise that genealogies often serve the same function that Malinowski claimed for myth; they act as 'charters' of present social institutions rather than as faithful historical records of times past.[15] They can do this more consistently because they operate within an oral rather than a written tradition and thus tend to be automatic-ally adjusted to existing social relations as they are passed by word of mouth from one member of the society to another. The social element in remember-ing results in the genealogies being transmuted in the course of being trans-mitted; and a similar process takes place with regard to other cultural ele-ments as well, to myths, for example, and to sacred lore in general. Deities and other supernatural agencies which have served their purpose can be quietly dropped from the contemporary pantheon; and as the society changes, myths too are forgotten, attributed to other personages, or transformed in their meaning.

One of the most important results of this homeostatic tendency is that the individual has little perception of the past except in terms of the present;

Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer,* pp. 199-200; Peters, "The Proliferation of Segments", p. 32. See also I. G. Cunnison, *The Luapula Peoples of Northern Rhodesia* (Manchester, 1959), pp. 108-14.

[14] Jack Goody, unpublished field notes, 1956–7; the heads of the divisions who could not succeed to the paramountcy also claimed descent from sons of the founding an-cestor, Jakpa, but this was not an intrinsic part of the myth as usually told, and in any case their number remained constant during the period in question.

[15] *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London, 1926), pp. 23, 43.

whereas the annals of a literate society cannot but enforce a more objective recognition of the distinction between what was and what is. Franz Boas wrote that for the Eskimo the world has always been as it is now:[16] it seems probable, at least, that the form in which nonliterate societies conceive the world of the past is itself influenced by the process of transmission described. The Tiv have their genealogies, others their sacred tales about the origin of the world and the way in which man acquired his culture. But all their conceptualisations of the past cannot help being governed by the concerns of the present, merely because there is no body of chronologically ordered statements to which reference can be made. The Tiv do not recognise any contradiction between what they say now and what they said fifty years ago, since no enduring records exist for them to set beside their present views. Myth and history merge into one: the elements in the cultural heritage which cease to have a contemporary relevance tend to be soon forgotten or transformed; and as the individuals of each generation acquire their vocabulary, their genealogies, and their myths, they are unaware that various words, proper-names and stories have dropped out, or that others have changed their meanings or been replaced.

II

KINDS OF WRITING AND THEIR SOCIAL EFFECTS

The pastness of the past, then, depends upon a historical sensibility which can hardly begin to operate without permanent written records; and writing introduces similar changes in the transmission of other items of the cultural repertoire. But the extent of these changes varies with the nature and social distribution of the writing system; varies, that is, according to the system's intrinsic efficacy as a means of communication, and according to the social constraints placed upon it, that is, the degree to which use of the system is diffused through the society.

Early in prehistory, man began to express himself in graphic form; and his cave paintings, rock engravings and wood carvings are morphologically, and presumably sequentially, the forerunners of writing. By some process of simplification and stylisation they appear to have led to the various kinds of pictographs found in simple societies.[17] While pictographs themselves are almost universal, their development into a self-sufficient system capable of extended discourse occurs only among the Plains Indians.[18]

[16] Franz Boas, "The Folklore of the Eskimo", *Journal of American Folklore*, 64 (1904), p. 2. Lévi-Strauss treats the absence of historical knowledge as one of the distinctive features of *la pensée sauvage* in contrast to *la pensée domestiquée* (*La Pensée sauvage*, p. 349).
[17] Ignace J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago, 1952), pp. 24ff.
[18] C. F. and F. M. Voegelin, "Typological Classification of Systems with Included,

Pictographs have obvious disadvantages as means of communication. For one thing a vast number of signs is needed to represent all the important objects in the culture. For another, since the signs are concrete, the simplest sentence requires an extremely elaborate series of signs: many stylised representations of wigwams, footprints, totemic animals and so on are required just to convey the information that a particular man left there a few days ago. Finally, however elaborately the sytem is developed, only a limited number of things can be said.

The end of the fourth millennium saw the early stages of the development of more complex forms of writing, which seem to be an essential factor in the rise of the urban cultures of the Orient. The majority of signs in these systems were simply pictures of the outside world, standardised representations of the object signified by a particular word; to these were added other devices for creating word signs or logograms, which permitted the expression of wider ranges of meaning. Thus in Egyptian hieroglyphics, the picture of a beetle was a code sign not only for that insect but also for a discontinuous and more abstract referent "became".[19]

The basic invention used to supplement the logograms was the phonetic principle, which for the first time permitted the written expression of all the words of a language. For example, by the device of phonetic transfer the Sumerians could use the sign for *ti,* an arrow, to stand for *ti,* life, a concept not easy to express in pictographic form. In particular, the need to record personal names and foreign words encouraged the development of phonetic elements in writing.

But while these true writing systems all used phonetic devices for the construction of logograms (and have consequently been spoken of as word-syllabic systems of writing), they failed to carry through the application of the phonetic principle exclusively and systematically.[20] The achievement of a system completely based upon the representation of phonemes (the basic units of meaningful sound) was left to the Near Eastern syllabaries, which developed between 1500–1000 B.C., and finally to the introduction of the alphabet proper in Greece. Meanwhile these incompletely phonetic systems were too clumsy and complicated to foster widespread literacy, if only because the number of signs was very large; at least six hundred would have to

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Excluded and Self-sufficient Alphabets", *Anthropological Linguistics,* 3 (1961), pp. 84, 91.

[19] Voegelin, "Typological Classification", pp. 75-76.

[20] C. F. and F. M. Voegelin classify all these systems (Chinese, Egyptian, Hittite, Mayan and Sumerian-Akkadian) as "alphabet included logographic systems": because they make use of phonetic devices, they include, under the heading "self-sufficient alphabets", systems which have signs for consonant-vowel sequences (i.e. syllabaries), for independent consonants (IC), e.g. Phoenician, or for independent consonants plus independent vowels (IC + IV), e.g. Greek. In this paper we employ "alphabet" in the narrower, more usual, sense of a phonemic system with independent signs for consonants and vowels (IC + IV).

be learned even for the simplified cuneiform developed in Assyria, and about the same for Egyptian hieroglyphs.[21] All these ancient civilisations, the Sumerian, Egyptian, Hittite and Chinese, were literate in one sense and their great advances in administration and technology were undoubtedly connected with the invention of a writing system; but when we think of the limitations of their systems of communication as compared with ours, the term "protoliterate", or even "oligoliterate", might be more descriptive in suggesting the restriction of literacy to a relatively small proportion of the total population.[22]

Any system of writing which makes the sign stand directly for the object must be extremely complex. It can extend its vocabulary by generalisation or association of ideas, that is, by making the sign stand either for a more general class of objects, or for other referents connected with the original picture by an association of meanings which may be related to one another either in a continuous or in a discontinuous manner. Either process of semantic extension is to some extent arbitrary or esoteric; and as a result the interpretation of these signs is neither easy nor explicit. One might perhaps guess that the Chinese sign for a man carries the general meaning of maleness; it would be more difficult to see that a conventionalised picture of a man and a broom is the sign for a woman; it's a pleasing fancy, no doubt, but not one which communicates very readily until it has been learned as a new character, as a separate sign for a separate word, as a logogram. In Chinese writing a minimum of 3000 such characters have to be learned before one can be reasonably literate;[23] and with a total repertoire of some 50,000 characters to be mastered, it normally takes about twenty years to reach full literate proficiency. China, therefore, stands as an extreme example of how, when a virtually non-phonetic system of writing becomes sufficiently developed to express a large number of meanings explicitly, only a small and specially trained professional group in the total society can master it, and partake of the literate culture.

Although systems of word signs are certainly easier to learn, many difficulties remain, even when these signs are supplemented by phonemic devices of a syllabic sort. Other features of the social system are no doubt responsible

[21] Gelb, *Study of Writing,* p. 115; David Diringer, *The Alphabet: A Key to the History of Mankind* (New York, 1948), pp. 48, 196.
[22] "Protoliterate" is often employed in a rather different sense, as when S. N. Kramer ["New Light on the Early History of the Ancient Near East", *American Journal of Archaeology,* 52 (1948), p. 161] uses the term to designate the Sumerian phase in Lower Mesopotamia when writing was first invented. There seems to be no generally accepted usage for societies where there is a fully developed but socially restricted phonetic writing system. Sterling Dow ["Minoan Writing", *American Journal of Archaeology,* 58 (1954), pp. 77-129] characterises two stages of Minoan society: one of "stunted literacy", where little use was made of writing at all (Linear A); and one of "special literacy" where writing was used regularly but only for limited purposes (Linear B). Stuart Piggott refers to both these conditions under the name of "conditional literacy" [*Approach to Archaeology* (London, 1959), p. 104].
[23] Alfred C. Moorhouse, *The Triumph of the Alphabet* (New York, 1953), pp. 90, 163.

for the way that the writing systems developed as they did: but it is a striking fact that — for whatever ultimate causes — in Egypt and Mesopotamia, as in China, a literate elite of religious, administrative and commercial experts emerged and maintained itself as a centralised governing bureaucracy on rather similar lines. Their various social and intellectual achievements were, of course, enormous; but as regards the participation of the society as a whole in the written culture, a wide gap existed between the esoteric literate culture and the exoteric oral one, a gap which the literate were interested in maintaining. Among the Sumerians and Akkadians writing was the pursuit of scribes and preserved as a "mystery", a "secret treasure". Royalty were themselves illiterate; Ashurbanipal (668–626 B.C.) records that he was the first Babylonian king to master the "clerkly skill".[24] "Put writing in your heart that you may protect yourself from hard labour of any kind", writes an Egyptian of the New Kingdom: "The scribe is released from manual tasks; it is he who commands".[25] Significantly, the classical age of Babylonian culture, beginning under Hammurabi in the late eighteenth century B.C., appears to have coincided with a period when the reading and writing of Akkadian cuneiform was not confined to a small group, nor to one nation; it was then that nearly all the extant literature was written down, and that the active state of commerce and administration produced a vast quantity of public and private correspondence, of which much has survived.

These imperfectly phonetic methods of writing survived with little change for many centuries;[26] so too did the cultures of which they were part.[27] The existence of an elite group, which followed from the difficulty of the writing system, and whose continued influence depended on the maintenance of the present social order, must have been a powerfully conservative force, especially when it consisted of ritual specialists;[28] and so, it may be surmised, was the nature of the writing system itself. For pictographic and logographic systems are alike in their tendency to reify the objects of the natural and social order; by so doing they register, record, make permanent the existing

[24] G. R. Driver, *Semitic Writing* (London, 1954, rev. ed.), pp. 62, 72.
[25] *cit.* V. Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself* (London, 1941), pp. 187-8; see also *What Happened in History* (London, 1942), pp. 105, 118.
[26] "Egyptian hieroglyphic writing remained fundamentally unchanged for a period of three thousand years", according to David Diringer [*Writing* (London, 1962), p. 48]. He attributes the fact that it never lost its cumbrousness and elaboration to "its unique sacredness" (p. 50).
[27] Many authorities have commented upon the lack of development in Egypt after the initial achievements of the Old Kingdom: for a discussion (and a contrary view), see John A. Wilson in *Before Philosophy*, ed. H. Frankfort and others (London, 1949), pp. 115-16 [pub. in U.S.A. as *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago, 1946)].
[28] "The world view of the Egyptians and Babylonians was conditioned by the teaching of sacred books; it thus constituted an orthodoxy, the maintenance of which was in the charge of colleges of priests" [Benjamin Farrington, *Science in Antiquity* (London, 1936), p. 37]. See also Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History*, p. 121.

social and ideological picture. Such, for example, was the tendency of the most highly developed and longest-lived ancient writing system, that of Egypt, whose society has been described with picturesque exaggeration as "a nation of fellahin ruled with a rod of iron by a Society of Antiquaries".

This conservative or antiquarian bias can perhaps be best appreciated by contrasting it with fully phonetic writing; for phonetic writing, by imitating human discourse, is in fact symbolising, not the objects of the social and natural order, but the very process of human interaction in speech: the verb is as easy to express as the noun; and the written vocabulary can be easily and unambiguously expanded. Phonetic systems are therefore adapted to expressing every nuance of individual thought, to recording personal reactions as well as items of major social importance. Non-phonetic writing, on the other hand, tends rather to record and reify only those items in the cultural repertoire which the literate specialists have selected for written expression; and it tends to express the collective attitude towards them.

The notion of representing a sound by a graphic symbol is itself so stupe-fying a leap of the imagination that what is remarkable is not so much that it happened relatively late in human history, but rather that it ever happened at all. For a long time, however, these phonetic inventions had a limited effect because they were only partially exploited: not only were logograms and pictograms retained, but a variety of phonograms were used to express the same sound. The full explicitness and economy of a phonetic writing system "as easy as A B C" was therefore likely to arise only in less advanced socie-ties on the fringes of Egypt or Mesopotamia, societies which were starting their writing system more or less from scratch, and which took over the idea of phonetic signs from adjoining countries, and used them exclusively to fit their own language.[29] These phonetic signs could, of course, be used to stand for any unit of speech, and thus developed either into syllabaries or into alphabets. In a few cases, such as Japanese, the particular nature of the language made it possible to construct a relatively simple and efficient sylla-bary; but as regards the great majority of languages the alphabet, with its signs for individual consonants and vowels, proved a much more economical and convenient instrument for representing sounds. For the syllabaries, while making writing easier, were still far from simple;[30] they were often combined with logograms and pictographs.[31] And whether by necessity or tradition or

[29]   Gelb, *Study of Writing*, p. 196, maintains that all the main types of syllabary developed in just this way. Driver rejects the possibility that the Phoenician alphabet was invented on Egyptian soil, as it would have been "stifled at birth" by the "dead-weight of Egyptian tradition, already of hoary antiquity and in the hands of a powerful priesthood" (*Semitic Writing*, p. 187).
[30]   "Immensely complicated", Driver calls the pre-alphabetic forms of writing Semitic (*Semitic Writing*, p. 67).
[31]   For Hittite, see O. R. Gurney, *The Hittites* (London, 1952), pp. 120-21. For Mycenean, see John Chadwick, *The Decipherment of Linear B* (Cambridge, 1958).

both, pre-alphabetic writing was still mainly restricted to elite groups. The Mycenean script disappeared completely after the 12th century B.C., a fact which was possible because of the very restricted uses of literacy and the close connection between writing and palace administration.[32] It is doubtful whether any such loss could have occurred in Greece after the introduction of a complete alphabetic script, probably in the eighth century B.C.

The alphabet is almost certainly the supreme example of cultural diffusion [33]: all existing or recorded alphabets derive from Semitic syllabaries developed during the second millennium. Eventually there arose the enormous simplification of the Semitic writing system, with its mere twenty-two letters; and then only one further step remained: the Greek script, which is, of course, much closer than the Semitic to the Roman alphabet, took certain of the Semitic signs for consonants which the Greek language didn't need, and used them for vowels, which the Semitic syllabary did not represent.[34] The directness of our inheritance from these two sources is suggested by the fact that our word "alphabet" is the latinized form of the first two letters of the Greek alphabet, "alpha", derived from the Semitic "aleph", and "beta", from the Semitic "beth".

The reason for the success of the alphabet, which David Diringer calls a "democratic" script as opposed to the "theocratic" scripts of Egypt, is itself based on the fact that, uniquely among writing systems, its graphic signs are representations of the most extreme and most universal example of cultural selection — the basic phonemic system. The number of sounds which the human breath stream can produce is vast; but nearly all languages are based on the formal recognition by the society of only forty or so of these sounds. The success of the alphabet (as well as some of its incidental difficulties) comes from the fact that its system of graphic representation takes advantage of this socially-conventionalized pattern of sound in all language systems; by symbolizing in letters these selected phonemic units the alphabet makes it possible to write easily and read unambiguously about anything which the society can talk about.

The historical picture of the cultural impact of the new alphabetic writing is not altogether clear. As regards the Semitic system, which was widely adopted elsewhere, the evidence suggests that — in part perhaps because of the intrinsic difficulties of the system, but mainly because of the established cultural features of the societies which adopted it — the social diffusion of writing was slow. There was, for one thing, a strong tendency for writing to be used as a help to memory rather than as an autonomous and independent

[32]   Chadwick, *The Decipherment of Linear B*, p. 130; see also "A Prehistoric Bureaucracy", *Diogenes*, 26 (1959), pp. 7-18.
[33]   As is exhaustively documented in David Diringer, *The Alphabet, A Key to the History of Mankind* (New York, 1948).
[34]   *The Alphabet*, pp. 214-218. On the "accidental" nature of this change see C. F. and F. M. Voegelin, "Typological Classification", pp. 63-4.

mode of communication; and under such conditions its influence tended towards the consolidation of the existing cultural tradition. This certainly appears to be true of India and Palestine.[35] Gandz notes, for example, that Hebrew culture continued to be transmitted orally long after the Old Testament had begun to be written down. As he puts it, the introduction of writing:

did not at once change the habits of the people and displace the old method of oral tradition. We must always distinguish between the *first introduction* of writing and its *general diffusion*. It often takes several centuries, and sometimes even a millennium or more, until this invention becomes the common property of the people at large. In the beginning, the written book is not intended for practical use at all. It is a divine instrument, placed in the temple "by the side of the ark of the covenant that it may be there for a witness" (Deuteronomy, xxxi, 26), and remains there as a holy relic. For the people at large, oral instruction still remained the only way of learning, and the memory — the only means of preservation. Writing was practiced, if at all, only as an additional support for the memory . . .

It was not, in fact, until some six centuries after the original Hebrew adoption of the Semitic writing system that, at the time of Ezra (*ca.* 444 B.C.), an official "generally recognized text" of the Torah was published, and the body of the religious tradition ceased to be "practically . . . a sealed book" and became accessible to anyone who chose to study it.[36]

Even so, of course, as the frequent diatribes against the scribes in the Gospels remind us,[37] there remained a considerable gap between the literati and the laymen; the professionals who plied their trade in the market-place belonged to "families of scribes", perhaps organized as guilds, within which the mystery was handed down from father to son.[38]

Anything like popular literacy, or the use of writing as an autonomous mode of communication by the majority of the members of society, is not found in the earliest societies which used the Semitic writing system; it was, rather, in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. in the city states of Greece and Ionia that there first arose a society which as a whole could justly be characterized as literate. Many of the reasons why literacy became widespread in Greece, but not in other societies which had Semitic, or indeed any other, simple and explicit writing systems, necessarily lie outside the scope of this essay; yet considerable importance must surely be attributed to the intrinsic advantages of the Greek adaptation of the Semitic alphabet, an adaptation which made it the first comprehensively and exclusively phonetic system for transcribing

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[35] According to Ralph E. Turner, *The Great Cultural Traditions* (New York, 1941), I, pp. 346, 391, the Hebrews took over the Semitic system in the eleventh century B.C., and the Indians a good deal later, probably in the eighth century B.C.

[36] Gandz, "Oral Tradition in the Bible", pp. 253-4.

[37] e.g. Luke, 20; Matthew, 23; in the 7th century B.C., even kings and prophets employed scribes, Jer. xxxvi, 4, 18.

[38] Driver, *Semitic Writing*, pp. 87-90, where he instances the case of one scribe who having no son "taught his wisdom to his sister's son".

human speech.[39] The system was easy, explicit and unambiguous — more so
than the Semitic where the lack of vowels is responsible for many of the cruxes
in the Bible: for instance, since the consonant in the Hebrew words is the
same, Elijah may have been fed by "Ravens" or "Arabs." [39a] Its great advan-
tage over the syllabaries lay in the reduction of the number of signs and in
the ability to specify consonant and vowel clusters. The system was easy to
learn: Plato sets aside three years for the process in the Laws,[40] about the time
taken in our schools today; and the much greater speed with which alphabetic
writing can be learned is shown, not only by such reports as those of the
International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation in 1934,[41] but also by the
increasing adoption of the Roman script, and even more widely of alphabetic
systems of writing, throughout the world.

The extensive diffusion of the alphabet in Greece was also materially
assisted by various social, economic and technological factors. In the first
place the 8th century saw a great burst of economic activity following the
revival of the eastern trade which had declined after the Mycenean collapse
in the 12th century.[42] Secondly, while the Greek society of the period had,
of course, its various social strata, the political system was not strongly cen-
tralized; especially in the Ionic settlements there appears to have been a good
deal of flexibility and in them we discern the beginnings of the Greek city state.
Thirdly, the increased contact with the East brought material prosperity and
technological advance. The wider use of iron, the advent of the true Iron
Age, was perhaps one of the results.[43] More closely connected with literacy
was the fact that trade with Egypt led to the importation of papyrus; and
this made writing itself easier and less expensive, both for the individual writer
and for the reader who wanted to buy books: papyrus was obviously much
cheaper than parchment made from skins, more permanent than wax tablets,
easier to handle than the stone or clay of Mesopotamia and Mycenae.

The chronology and extent of the diffusion of literacy in Greece remains
a matter of debate. With the Mycenean collapse in the 12th century, writing
disappeared; the earliest Greek inscriptions in the modified Semitic alphabet
occur in the last two decades of the 8th century.[44] Recent authorities suggest

[39] "If the alphabet is defined as a system of signs expressing single sounds of speech,
then the first alphabet which can justifiably be so called is the Greek alphabet". Gelb,
Study of Writing, p. 166.
[39a] I. Kings 17, iv-vi; see A Dictionary of the Bible ... ed. James Hastings (New York,
1898–1904), s.v. "Elijah".
[40] 810 a. From the ages 10 to 13.
[41] L'Adoption universelle des caractères latins (Paris, 1934); for more recent develop-
ments and documentation, see William S. Gray, The Teaching of Reading and Writing:
An International Survey, Unesco Monographs on Fundamental Education X (Paris,
1956), especially pp. 31-60.
[42] Chester G. Starr, The Origins of Greek Civilization (New York, 1961), pp. 189-190,
349 ff.
[43] Starr, The Origins of Greek Civilization, pp. 87-88, 357.
[44] Starr, The Origins of Greek Civilization, p. 169.

the new script was adopted and transformed about the middle of the 8th century in Northern Syria.[45] The extensive use of writing probably came only slowly in the 7th century, but when it eventually came it seems to have been used in a very wide range of activities, intellectual as well as economic, and by a wide range of people.[46]

It must be remembered, of course, that Greek writing throughout the classical period was still relatively difficult to decipher, as words were not regularly separated;[47] that the copying of manuscripts was a long and laborious process; and that silent reading as we know it was very rare until the advent of printing — in the ancient world books were used mainly for reading aloud, often by a slave. Nevertheless, from the sixth century onwards literacy seems to be increasingly presumed in the public life of Greece and Ionia. In Athens, for example, the first laws for the general public to read were set up by Solon in 593-4 B.C.; the institution of ostracism early in the fifth century assumes a literate citizen body — 6,000 citizens had to write the name of the person on their potsherds before he could be banished;[48] there is abundant evidence in the fifth century of a system of schools teaching reading and writing[49] and of a book-reading public — satirized already by Aristophanes in *The Frogs*;[50] while the final form of the Greek alphabet, which was established fairly late in the fifth century, was finally adopted for use in the official records of Athens by decree of the Archon Eucleides in 403 B.C.

III

ALPHABETIC CULTURE AND GREEK THOUGHT

The rise of Greek civilization, then, is the prime historical example of the transition to a really literate society. In all subsequent cases where a widespread introduction of an alphabetic script occurred, as in Rome, for example, other cultural features were inevitably imported from the loan country along with the writing system; Greece thus offers not only the first

[45] L. H. Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece* (Oxford, 1961), p. 21; R. M. Cook and A. G. Woodhead, "The Diffusion of the Greek Alphabet", *American Journal of Archaeology*, 63 (1959), pp. 175-78. For North Syria, see Sir Leonard Woolley, *A Forgotten Kingdom* (London, 1953).
[46] Chester Starr speaks of its use by "a relatively large aristocratic class" (p. 171) and Miss Jeffery notes that "writing was never regarded as an esoteric craft in early Greece. Ordinary people could and did learn to write, for many of the earliest inscriptions which we possess are casual graffiti" (p. 63).
[47] Frederic G. Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1951), p. 67.
[48] Jérôme Carcopino, *L'Ostracisme athénien* (Paris, 1935), pp. 72-110.
[49] *Protagoras*, 325 d.
[50] 1. 1114; in 414 B.C. See also Plato, *Apology*, 26 d, and the general survey of Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome*.

example of this change, but also the essential one for any attempt to isolate the cultural consequences of alphabetic literacy.

The fragmentary and ambiguous nature of our direct evidence about this historical transformation in Greek civilization means that any generalizations must be extremely tentative and hypothetical; but the fact that the essential basis both of the writing systems and of many characteristic cultural institutions of the Western tradition as a whole are derived from Greece, and that they both arose there simultaneously, would seem to justify the present attempt to outline the possible relationships between the writing system and those cultural innovations of early Greece which are common to all alphabetically-literate societies.

The early development of the distinctive features of Western thought is usually traced back to the radical innovations of the pre-Socratic philosophers of the sixth century B.C. The essence of their intellectual revolution is seen as a change from mythical to logico-empirical modes of thought. Such, broadly speaking, is Werner Jaeger's view; and Ernst Cassirer writes that "the history of philosophy as a scientific discipline may be regarded as a single continuous struggle to effect a separation and liberation from myth".[51]

To this general picture there are two kinds of theoretical objection. First, that the crucial intellectual innovations — in Cassirer as in Werner Jaeger — are in the last analysis attributed to the special mental endowments of the Greek people; and insofar as such terms as "the Greek Mind" or "genius" are not simply descriptive, they are logically dependent upon extremely questionable theories of man's nature and culture. Secondly, such a version of the transformation from "unphilosophical" to "philosophical" thought assumes an absolute — and untenable — dichotomy between the "mythical" thought of primitives and the "logico-empirical" thought of civilized man.

The dichotomy, of course, is itself very similar to Lévy-Bruhl's earlier theory of the "prelogical" mentality of primitive peoples, which has been widely criticised. Malinowski and many others have demonstrated the empirical elements in non-literate cultures,[52] and Evans-Pritchard has carefully analyzed the "logical" nature of the belief systems of the Azande of the Sudan;[53] while on the other hand the illogical and mythical nature of much

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[51] *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New Haven, 1955), II, p. xiii; and *An Essay on Man* (New York, 1953), especially pp. 106-130, 281-3. For Werner Jaeger, see especially *The Theology of The Early Greek Philosophers* (Oxford, 1947).
[52] "Magic, Science and Religion" in *Science, Religion and Reality*, ed. Joseph Needham (New York, 1925), reprinted *Magic, Science and Religion* (New York, 1954), p. 27. For an appreciation of Lévy-Bruhl's positive achievement, see Evans-Pritchard, "Lévy-Bruhl's Theory of Primitive Mentality", *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts, University of Egypt*, 2 (1934), pp. 1-36. In his later work, Lévy-Bruhl modified the rigidity of his earlier dichotomy.
[53] *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937). See also Max Gluckman's essay, "Social Beliefs and Individual Thinking in Primitive Society",

Western thought and behavior is evident to anyone contemplating either our past or our present.

Nevertheless, although we must reject any dichotomy based upon the assumption of radical differences between the mental attributes of literate and non-literate peoples, and accept the view that previous formulations of the distinction were based on faulty premises and inadequate evidence, there may still exist general differences between literate and non-literate societies somewhat along the lines suggested by Lévy-Bruhl. One reason for their existence, for instance, may be what has been described above: the fact that writing establishes a different kind of relationship between the word and its referent, a relationship that is more general and more abstract, and less closely connected with the particularities of person, place and time, than obtains in oral communication. There is certainly a good deal to substantiate this distinction in what we know of early Greek thought. To take, for instance, the categories of Cassirer and Werner Jaeger, it is surely significant that it was only in the days of the first widespread alphabetic culture that the idea of "logic" — of an immutable and impersonal mode of discourse — appears to have arisen; and it was also only then that the sense of the human past as an objective reality was formally developed, a process in which the distinction between "myth" and "history" took on decisive importance.

a. *Myth and History*

Non-literate peoples, of course, often make a distinction between the lighter folk-tale, the graver myth, and the quasi-historical legend.[54] But not so insistently, and for an obvious reason. As long as the legendary and doctrinal aspects of the cultural tradition are mediated orally, they are kept in relative harmony with each other and with the present needs of society in two ways; through the unconscious operations of memory, and through the adjustment of the reciter's terms and attitudes to those of the audience before him. There is evidence, for example, that such adaptations and omissions occurred in the oral transmission of the Greek cultural tradition. But once the poems of Homer and Hesiod, which contained much of the earlier history, religion and cosmology of the Greeks, had been written down, succeeding generations were faced with old distinctions in sharply aggravated form: how far was the

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Memoirs and Proceedings of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, 91 (1949–50), pp. 73-98. From a rather different standpoint, Lévi-Strauss has analysed "the logic of totemic classifications" (*La Pensée sauvage,* p. 48 ff.) and speaks of two distinct modes of scientific thought; the first (or "primitive") variety consists in "the science of the concrete", the practical knowledge of the handy man (*bricoleur*), which is the technical counterpart of mythical thought (p. 26).
[54] e.g. the Trobriands (Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology,* pp. 33ff).

information about their Gods and heroes literally true? how could its patent inconsistencies be explained? and how could the beliefs and attitudes implied be brought into lines with those of the present?

The disappearance of so many early Greek writings, and the difficulties of dating and composition in many that survive, make anything like a clear reconstruction impossible. Greek had of course been written, in a very limited way, during Mycenean times. At about 1200 writing disappeared and the alphabet was not developed until some four hundred years later. Most scholars agree that in the middle or late eighth century the Greeks adapted the purely consonantal system of Phoenicia, possibly at the trading port of al Mina (Poseidon?). Much of the early writing consisted of "explanatory inscriptions on existing objects — dedications on offerings, personal names on property, epitaphs on tombs, names of figures in drawings".[55] The Homeric poems were written down between 750 and 650 B.C., and the seventh century saw first the recording of lyric verse and then (at the end) the emergence of the great Ionian school of scientist philosophers.[56] Thus within a century or two of the writing down of the Homeric poems, many groups of writers and teachers appeared, first in Ionia and later in Greece, who took as their point of departure the belief that much of what Homer had apparently said was inconsistent and unsatisfactory in many respects. The logographers, who set themselves to record the genealogies, chronologies and cosmologies which had been handed down orally from the past, soon found that the task led them to use their critical and rational powers to create a new individual synthesis. In non-literate society, of course, there are usually some individuals whose interests lead them to collect, analyse and interpret the cultural tradition in a personal way; and the written records suggest that this process went considerably further among the literate elites of Egypt, Babylon and China, for example. But perhaps because in Greece reading and writing were less restricted to any particular priestly or administrative groups, there seems to have been a more thorough-going individual challenge to the orthodox cultural tradition in sixth-century Greece than occurred elsewhere. Hecataeus, for example, proclaimed at about the turn of the century, "What I write is the account I believe to be true. For the stories the Greeks tell are many and in my opinion ridiculous",[57] and offered his own rationalizations of the data on family traditions and lineages which he had collected. Already the mytho-

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[55] Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece,* p. 46.
[56] "It was in Ionia that the first completely rationalistic attempts to describe the nature of the world took place" [G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 73]. The work of the Milesian philosophers, Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, is described by the authors as "clearly a development of the genetic or genealogical approach to nature exemplified by the Hesiodic *Theogony*" (p. 73).
[57] F. Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker,* Vol. I, *Genealogie und Mythographie* (Berlin, 1923), fr. 1.a.

logical mode of using the past, the mode which, in Sorel's words, makes it "a means of acting on the present",[58] has begun to disappear.

That this trend of thought had much larger implications can be seen from the fact that the beginnings of religious and natural philosophy are connected with similar critical departures from the inherited traditions of the past; as W.B. Yeats wrote, with another tradition in mind, "Science is the critique of myths, there would be no Darwin had there been no *Book* of Genesis".[59] Among the early pre-Socratics there is much evidence of the close connection between new ideas and the criticism of the old. Thus Xenophanes of Colophon (*fl. ca.* 540 B.C.) rejected the "fables of men of old", and replaced the anthropomorphic gods of Homer and Hesiod who did "everything that is disgraceful and blameworthy among men." with a supreme god, "not at all like mortals in body and mind";[60] while Heraclitus of Ephesus (*fl. ca.* 500 B.C.), the first great philosopher of the problems of knowledge, whose system is based on the unity of opposites expressed in the *Logos* or structural plan of things, also ridiculed the anthropomorphism and idolatry of the Olympian religion.[61]

The critical and sceptical process continued, and according to Cornford, "a great part of the supreme god's biography had to be frankly rejected as false, or reinterpreted as allegory, or contemplated with reserve as mysterious myth too dark for human understanding." [62] On the one hand the poets continued to use the traditional legends for their poems and plays; on the other the prose writers attempted to wrestle with the problems with which the changes in the cultural tradition had faced them. Even the poets, however, had a different attitude to their material. Pindar, for example, used *mythos* in the sense of traditional stories, with the implication that they were not literally true; but claimed that his own poems had nothing in common with the fables of the past.[63] As for the prose writers, and indeed some of the poets, they had set out to replace myth with something else more consistent, with their sense of the *logos,* of the common and all-encompassing truth which reconciles apparent contradictions.

From the point of view of the transmission of the cultural tradition, the categories of understanding connected with the dimensions of time and space

[58] *Reflections on Violence,* trans. T. E. Hulme (New York, 1941), p. 136; *cit.* Robert Redfield, *The Primitive World and its Transformations* (Ithaca, New York, 1953), p. 125.
[59] *cit.* Joseph Hone, *W. B. Yeats* (London, 1942), p. 405 (our italics).
[60] Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin, 1951), fr. 11, 23; see also John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (2nd ed. London, 1908), pp. 131, 140-141, and Werner Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers* (Oxford, 1947), pp. 42-7; Kirk and Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers,* pp. 163 ff.
[61] Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker,* fr. 40, 42, 56, 57, 106; see also Francis M. Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae: The Origins of Greek Philosophical Thought* (Cambridge, 1952), pp. 112 ff.; Kirk and Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers,* pp. 182 ff.
[62] Francis M. Cornford, *Greek Religious Thought from Homer to the Age of Alexander* (London, 1923), xv-xvi. See also Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy,* p. 1.
[63] 1st Olympian Ode.

have a particular importance. As regards an objective description of space, Anaximander (b. 610 B.C.) and Hecataeus (*fl. ca.* 510–490), making use of Babylonian and Egyptian techniques, drew the first maps of the world.[64] Then their crude beginnings were subject to a long process of criticism and correction — by Herodotus [65] and others; and from this emerged the more scientific cartography of Aristotle, Eratosthenes and their successors.[66]

The development of history appears to have followed a rather similar course, although the actual details of the process are subject to much controversy. The traditional view gave priority to local histories which were followed by the more universal accounts of Herodotus and Thucydides. Dionysius of Halicarnasus writes of the predecessors of these historians who "instead of co-ordinating their accounts with each other . . . treated of individual peoples and cities separately . . . They all had the one same object, to bring to the general knowledge of the public the written records that they found preserved in temples or in secular buildings in the form in which they found them, neither adding nor taking away anything; among these records were to be found legends hallowed by the passage of time . . ." [67]

Jacoby however has insisted "the whole idea is wrong that Greek historiography began with local history." [68] As far as Athens is concerned, history begins with the foreigner Herodotus who, not long after the middle of the fifth century, incorporated parts of the story of the town in his work because he wanted to explain the role it played in the great conflict between East and West, between Europe and Asia. The aim of Herodotus' *History* was to discover what the Greeks and Persians "fought each other for";[69] and his method was *historia* — personal inquiry or research into the most probable versions of events as they were to be found in various sources. His work rested on oral tradition and consequently his writings retained many mythological elements. So too did the work of the logographer, Hellanicus of Lesbos, who at the end of the fifth century wrote the first history of Attica from 683 to the end of the Peloponnesian war in 404. Hellanicus also tried to reconstruct the genealogies of the Homeric heroes, both backwards to the Gods and forwards to the Greece of his own time; and this inevitably involved chronology, the objective measurement of time. All he could do, however, was to rationalize and systematize largely legendary materials.[70] The development of history as a documented and analytic account of the past and present of the society in permanent written form took an important step forward with Thucydides,

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[64]   See Eric H. Warmington, *Greek Geography* (London, 1934), pp. xiv, xxxviii.
[65]   *History*, 4, 36-40.
[66]   Warmington, *Greek Geography,* pp. xvii-xviii, xli ff.
[67]   *Cit.* Lionel Pearson, *Early Ionian Historians* (Oxford, 1939), p. 3.
[68]   Felix Jacoby, *Atthis* (Oxford, 1949), p. 354.
[69]   *History*, I, 1. See also Moses I. Finley (ed.), *The Greek Historians* (New York, 1959), pp. 4 ff.
[70]   See Pearson, *Early Ionian Historians,* pp. 152-233, especially pp. 193, 232-33.

who made a decisive distinction between myth and history, a distinction to which little attention is paid in non-literate society.[71] Thucydides wanted to give a wholly reliable account of the wars between Athens and Sparta; and this meant that unverified assumptions about the past had to be excluded. So Thucydides rejected, for example, the chronology that Hellanicus had worked out for the prehistory of Athens, and confined himself very largely to his own notes of the events and speeches he related, or to the information he sought out from eye-witnesses and other reliable sources.[72]

And so, not long after the widespread diffusion of writing throughout the Greek world, and the recording of the previously oral cultural tradition, there arose an attitude to the past very different from that common in non-literate societies. Instead of the unobtrusive adaptation of past tradition to present needs, a great many individuals found in the written records, where much of their traditional cultural repertoire had been given permanent form, so many inconsistencies in the beliefs and categories of understanding handed down to them that they were impelled to a much more conscious, comparative and critical, attitude to the accepted world picture, and notably to the notions of God, the universe and the past. Many individual solutions to these problems were themselves written down, and these versions formed the basis for further investigations.[73]

In non-literate society, it was suggested, the cultural tradition functions as a series of interlocking face-to-face conversations in which the very conditions of transmission operate to favor consistency between past and present, and to make criticism — the articulation of inconsistency — less likely to occur; and if it does, the inconsistency makes a less permanent impact, and is more easily adjusted or forgotten. While scepticism may be present in such societies, it takes a personal, non-cumulative form; it does not lead to a deliberate rejection and reinterpretation of social dogma so much as to a semi-automatic readjustment of belief.[74]

[71]   See, for instance, Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London, 1922), pp. 290-333.
[72]   Thucydides, *History,* I, 20-22, 97. For a picture of note-taking (*hypomnemata*) among Athenians, see *Theaetetus*, 142 c-143 c.
[73]   Felix Jacoby notes that "fixation in writing, once achieved, primarily had a preserving effect upon the oral tradition, because it put an end to the involuntary shiftings of the *mnemai* (remembrances), and drew limits to the arbitrary creation of new *logoi* (stories)" (*Atthis,* 1949, p. 217). He points out that this created difficulties for the early literate recorders of the past which the previous oral *mnemones* or professional "remembrancers" did not have to face: whatever his own personal view of the matter, "no true Atthidographer could remove Kekrops from his position as the first Attic king ... Nobody could take away from Solon the legislation which founded *in nuce* the first Attic constitution of historical times." Such things could no longer be silently forgotten, as in an oral tradition.
   The general conclusion of Jacoby's polemic against Wilamowitz's hypothesis of a "pre-literary chronicle" is that "historical consciousness ... is not older than historical literature" (p. 201).
[74]   As writers on the indigenous political systems of Africa have insisted, changes

In literate society, these interlocking conversations go on; but they are no longer man's only dialogue; and insofar as writing provides an alternative source for the transmission of cultural orientations it favors awareness of inconsistency. One aspect of this is a sense of change and of cultural lag; another is the notion that the cultural inheritance as a whole is composed of two very different kinds of material; fiction, error and superstition on the one hand; and on the other, elements of truth which can provide the basis for some more reliable and coherent explanation of the gods, the human past and the physical world.

b.   Plato and the Effects of Literacy

One area of this process can be described as the replacement of myth by history; but of course *historia* in the Greek sense, meaning "inquiry", can be viewed much more broadly as an attempt to determine reality in every area of human concern; and in many of these areas it was the Greeks who provided us with the bases of our present categories of understanding.

The actual role of writing in the development of this conceptual framework is more largely a matter of inference than in the particular case of history proper; but when we turn from the processes of collective development and transmission in their chronological perspective to the particular process of transmission from one individual to another, we can find something a little more definite than inference to go on; for in the writings of the Greek who shows most consciousness of the difference between oral and literate thought-ways, Plato, the greater completeness and intensity of oral transmission is discussed and emphasized.

Plato was born about 427 B.C., long after the widespread diffusion of the alphabet in the Greek world. Many of the characteristic institutions of literate culture had already appeared: there were schools for children from the age of six and upwards; [75] and professional scholars and philosophers, such as the Sophists, had replaced the traditional expounders of the lore of the past, such as the *Eupatridai,* noble families in whom had earlier been vested the right to interpret the laws. Both the schools and the Sophists are discussed in an early Platonic dialogue, the *Protagoras,* where Socrates is shown to be suspicious of the new professional teachers and authors who have turned wisdom into a market-place commodity, a commodity which is dangerous

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generally take the form of rebellion rather than revolution; subjects reject the King, but not the kingship. See Evans-Pritchard, *The Divine Kingship of the Shilluk of the Nilotic Sudan* (The Frazer lecture, Cambridge, 1948), pp. 35ff; Max Gluckman, *Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa* (The Frazer lecture, 1952), Manchester, 1954.
[75]   See Henri-Irénée Marrou, *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité* (Paris, 1948), pp. 76-7, 84-6, 94,, 139-142, 150-2.

unless the buyer already has "understanding of what is good and evil".[76] But it is in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter* that we find the most explicit criticism of writing as a means of conveying thoughts and values.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates takes up the "nature of good and bad speaking and writing" and tells how the Egyptian king Thamus rebuked the God Theuth for claiming that his invention of writing would provide "a recipe for memory and wisdom": ". . . If men learn this," Thamus concludes, "it will implant forgetfulness in their souls: they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks; what you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance; for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing; and as men filled, not with wisdom, but the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows." [77]

The emphasis on memory,[78] the repository of the cultural tradition in oral society, is significant; and it is appropriate that Socrates should deliver his attack on writing in the form of a fable or myth, in a distinctively oral and non-logical mode of discourse. The ensuing discussion, and several other discussions, of which the most important occurs in the *Seventh Letter*, make clear that the objections to writing are twofold: it is inherently shallow in its effects; and the essential principles of truth can only be arrived at dialectically.

Writing is shallow in its effects because reading books may give a specious sense of knowledge, which in reality can only be attained by oral question and answer; and such knowledge in any case only goes deep when it "is written in the soul of the learner." [79] The reasons which Plato, or his spokesman Socrates, gives for holding dialectic to be the true method of pursuing essential knowledge are very close to the picture given above of the transmission of the cultural tradition in oral society. For the dialectic method is, after all, an essential social process, in which the initiates pass on their knowledge directly to the young; a process, indeed, in which only a long personal relationship can transcend the inherent incapacity of mere words to convey ultimate truths — the forms or ideas which alone can give unity and coherence to human knowledge. As Plato puts it in the *Seventh Letter*, such knowledge can be passed on only when "after personal assistance in these studies from a guide, after living for some time with that guide, suddenly a flash of understanding, as it were, is kindled by a spark that leaps across,

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[76] *Protagoras,* 313 e.
[77] 259 e; 274-275. From Reginald Hackforth's translation in his *Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge, 1952).
[78] A great deal of relevant information, and a wealth of further references, are given in the valuable article by James A. Notopoulos, "Mnemosyne in Oral Literature," *Transactions of the American Philological Association,* 69 (1938), pp. 465-93.
[79] *Phaedrus,* 276 a.

and once it has come into being within the soul it proceeds to nourish itself." [80]

What is at issue here is not only the intimate understanding which comes from long personal contact, but also the inherent advantages which living speech is given over the written word by virtue of its more immediate connection with the act of communication itself. The first advantage is that possible confusions or misunderstandings can always be cleared up by question and answer; whereas "written words," as Socrates tells Phaedrus, "seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing for ever." The second intrinsic advantage is that the speaker can vary his "type of speech" so that it is "appropriate to each nature . . . addressing a variegated soul in a variegated style . . . and a simple soul in a simple style." And so, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates concludes that "anyone who leaves behind him a written manual, and likewise anyone who takes it over from him, on the supposition that such writing will provide something reliable and permanent, must be exceedingly simple-minded." [81]

To some extent Plato's arguments against writing are specific reflections of the incapacity of words alone to convey the Ideas, and of the initiate's usual reluctance to share his esoteric lore except on his own terms; [82] while in the perspective of the later history of epistemology, Plato's position must be seen as an indication of his prescient awareness of the danger of using abstract words about whose referents no common agreement or identity of understanding has been established. Plato's reservations about writing must also be seen in relation to the preference which Greek culture shares with Roman for the more living quality of the spoken as opposed to the written word [83] — the general argument at this particular point in the *Phaedrus* is concerned with the advantages of extempore as compared with written speeches.

Nevertheless the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter* seem to provide good evidence that Plato considered the transmission of the cultural tradition was more effective and permanent under oral conditions, at least as regards the individual's initiation into the world of essential values. The endless ferment of new ideas at the end of the fifth century in Athens, and the growing scepticism about religion and ethics, bore eloquent witness to how writing down the accumulated lore of the past had fostered a critical attitude; but whatever the dismay of Plato at some features of the process, he himself could not escape it. Plato, of course, was largely critical in his thought. The majority of his dialogues are arguments against the views of other philosophers; and even his most practical and constructive writings, such as *The*

[80]   341 c-d. [trans. R.S. Bluck, *Plato's Life and Thought* (London, 1949)].
[81]   *Phaedrus*, 275 d; 277 c; 275 c.
[82]   For a modern example, see Alexandra David-Neel and Lama Yongden, *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects* (Calcutta, 1959).
[83]   See especially William Chase Greene, "The Spoken and the Written Word", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 60 (1951), pp. 23-59.

Republic and *The Laws*, are in large part continuations of the debates which had begun with the pre-Socratic criticisms and rationalizations of the anthropomorphism of the body of traditional myths; myths which were sanctified by the preeminent authority of Homer, from whom, as Plato wrote in *The Republic* "all men have learned from the beginning".[84]

It would be wrong, therefore, to represent Plato as a whole-hearted protagonist of the oral tradition. Neither he nor Socrates were intransigent enemies of literate culture; Socrates did not write books himself, but Xenophon tells us that he would "turn over and peruse in company with his friends . . . the treasures of the wise men of old, which they have left written in books"; [85] while the scale, the complexity of organization, and the high literary finish of *The Republic,* led Wilamowitz-Moellendorff to hail Plato as the first true author.[86] One must assume, therefore, a much more complex attitude to the new problems of the literate culture: the increase both in the number of books and readers, and consequently in the public awareness of historical change which books fostered, had made the problems inescapable by the end of the fifth century in Athens; and Plato was torn between his interest and understanding of the prosaic, analytic and critical procedures of the new literate thoughtways on the one hand, and his occasional nostalgias for the "unwritten customs and laws of our ancestors," [87] along with the poetic myths in which they were enshrined.

c. *Logic and the Categories of Understanding*

The importance of Plato in the later history of philosophy, of course, lies primarily in that aspect of his work which looks forward, and which did much to define the methods of Western thought; the present argument therefore requires a brief consideration of how far these are intrinsically connected with writing. Obviously the great majority of Greek ideas have their roots in their specific historical and social circumstances, for many of which one can find earlier sources and analogues in the great civilizations of the Near East and elsewhere. Yet it does not seem to be merely a matter of ethnocentric prejudice to say that in two areas at least the Greeks developed intellectual techniques that were historically unique, and that possessed intrinsic empirical advantages which led to their widespread adoption by most subsequent literate

[84]   606 e [Jaeger, *Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers*, pp. 42, 211]. See also Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae,* pp. 154-5.
[85]   *Memorabilia,* i, 6, 16. See also *Phaedo,* 98-99; *Phaedrus,* 230 d-e.
[86]   *Platon* (Berlin, 1919), I, 389.
[87]   See especially Plato's *Laws* 793 a-c. Plato is shown to represent both the old veneration and the new distrust of Homer in H. V. Apfel's "Homeric Criticism in the Fourth Century B.C.", *Transactions of the American Philological Association,* 69 (1938), p. 247.

cultures: the first area is epistemological, where the Greeks developed a new kind of logical method; and the second area is that of taxonomy, where the Greeks established our accepted categories in the fields of knowledge — theology, physics, biology and so forth.

In the former, Plato is essentially an heir of the long Greek enterprise of trying to sort out truth, *episteme*, from current opinion, *doxa*. This epistemological awareness seems to coincide with the widespread adoption of writing, probably because the written word suggests an ideal of definable truths which have an inherent autonomy and permanence quite different from the phenomena of the temporal flux and of contradictory verbal usages. In oral cultures, words — and especially words like "God," "Justice," "Soul," "Good" — may hardly be conceived of as separate entities, divorced both from the rest of the sentence and its social context. But once given the physical reality of writing, they take on a life of their own; and much Greek thought was concerned with attempting to explain their meanings satisfactorily, and to relate these meanings to some ultimate principle of rational order in the universe, to the *logos*.

It was, of course, Plato and Aristotle who conceived that there might be a special intellectual procedure for this process; who imagined the possibility of a system of rules for thinking itself, rules which were quite distinct from the particular problem being thought about and which offered a more reliable access to truth than current opinion. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, Socrates is made to speak of the proper method for arriving at the truth in general; and this method consists in disregarding the body of popular assumptions, and instead, analysing each idea by an initial definition of terms, followed by the development of a unified argument with "a middle and extremities so composed as to suit each other and the whole work." This is to be achieved by "divisions and collections," by analysis of a problem into its constituent elements, and by subsequent rational synthesis.[88]

This logical procedure seems essentially literate. On general grounds, because, as Oswald Spengler put it, "writing . . . implies a complete change in the relations of man's waking-consciousness, in that it *liberates it from the tyranny of the present* . . . the activity of writing and reading is infinitely more abstract than that of speaking and hearing." [89] On more practical grounds too, because it is difficult to believe that such a large and complex series of arguments as are presented in *The Republic*, for instance, or in Aristotle's *Analytics*, could possibly be created, or delivered, much less completely understood, in oral form.

There is also some fairly convincing evidence to suggest a more directly causal connection between writing and logic. The Greek word for an "element" was the same word as for a "letter of the alphabet"; and in *The States-*

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[88]   264 c; 265 d-266 b; 277 b-c.
[89]   *The Decline of the West,* trans. C. F. Atkinson (New York, 1934), II, p. 149.

man Plato compares the first basic principles of his philosophy with the child's first contact with the alphabet,[90] on the grounds that each principle or letter is the key to an infinitely greater number of words or ideas than the particular ones through which it is learned. Plato develops this idea in the *Theaetetus* when Socrates compares the process of reasoning to the combination of irreducible elements or letters of the alphabet into syllables which, unlike their constituent letters, have meaning: "the elements or letters are only objects of perception, and cannot be defined or known; but the syllables or combinations of them are known and . . . apprehended".[90a] From this it is not far to the way the letters of the alphabet are used to symbolise the manipulation of general terms in Aristotelian logic; the set sequence of the premises, arguments and conclusions of a syllogism have been represented by letters of the alphabet ever since Aristotle so used them in the *Analytics*. It is further significant that Aristotle felt that he had made his greatest philosophical contribution in the field of logic; for, as he says in *De Sophisticis Elenchis*, "on the subject of reasoning we had nothing else of an earlier date to speak of at all." [91]

The same process of dissection into abstract categories, when applied not to a particular argument but to the ordering of all the elements of experience into separate areas of intellectual activity, leads to the Greek division of knowledge into autonomous cognitive disciplines which has since become universal in Western culture and which is of cardinal importance in differentiating literate and non-literate cultures. Plato made one important step in this direction, for he developed both the word and the notion of theology to designate a separate field of knowledge.[92] This kind of strict separation of divine attributes from the natural world, and from human life, is virtually unknown among non-literate peoples.[93] Neglect of this fact has led to much misunderstanding of the non-empirical and magico-religious aspects of their culture: but the neglect is itself a tribute to the depth of the literate tradition's acceptance of the categories of understanding which it has inherited from Greece.

Plato, however, was too much the disciple of Socrates to take the compartmentalization of knowledge very far. This was left to his pupil, Aristotle, and to his school;[94] by the time of the death of Aristotle in 322 B.C. most of the categories in the field of philosophy, natural science, language and

[90]   *Statesman,* 278. See also *Cratylus,* 424 b-428 c.
[90a]   *Theaetetus,* 201-202. The analogy is continued to the end of the dialogue.
[91]   184 b. There were, of course, many precursors, not only Plato and his laws of the dialectic but the Sophists and grammarians with their semantic interests (see John Edwin Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship* (Cambridge, 1921), I, pp. 27, 88 ff).
[92]   Jaeger, *Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers,* pp. 4-5.
[93]   This question is discussed in greater detail by Jack Goody in "Religion and Ritual: the Definitional Problem", *British Journal of Sociology,* 12 (1961), pp. 142-164.
[94]   See, for example, Alfred E. Taylor, *Aristotle* (London, 1943), pp. 24-39.

literature, had been delineated, and the systematic collection and classification of data in all of them had begun.

With Aristotle the key methods and distinctions in the world of knowledge were fully, and for the most part permanently, established; and so, of course, were its institutions. It was Aristotle, according to Strabo,[95] who was the first man to collect books, and who taught the kings of Egypt to set up libraries; and although there had actually been earlier private collectors of books, Aristotle's library is the first of which much is known; it is from his collections that our word "museum" derives; and if "academy" commemorates the school of Plato, *lycée* carries us back to Aristotle's *Lyceum*.

IV

LITERATE CULTURE: SOME GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is hardly possible, in this brief survey, to determine what importance must be attributed to the alphabet as the cause or as the necessary condition of the seminal intellectual innovations that occurred in the Greek world during the centuries that followed the diffusion of writing; nor, indeed, does the nature of the evidence give much ground for believing that the problem can ever be fully resolved. The present argument must, therefore, confine itself to suggesting that some crucial features of Western culture came into being in Greece soon after the existence, for the first time, of a rich urban society in which a substantial portion of the population was able to read and write; and that, consequently, the overwhelming debt of the whole of contemporary civilization to classical Greece must be regarded as in some measure the result, not so much of the Greek genius, as of the intrinsic differences between non-literate (or proto-literate) and literate societies; the latter being mainly represented by those societies using the Greek alphabet and its derivatives. If this is so, it may help us to take our contrast between the transmission of the cultural heritage in non-literate and alphabetically-literate societies a little further.

To begin with, the case of alphabetic reading and writing was probably an important consideration in the development of political democracy in Greece: in the fifth century a majority of the free citizens could apparently read the laws, and take an active part in elections and legislation. Democracy as we know it, then, is from the beginning associated with widespread literacy; and so to a large extent is the notion of the world of knowledge as transcending political units: in the Hellenic world diverse people and countries were given a common administrative system and a unifying cultural heritage through the

[95] *Geography*, 608-9, cit. Sandys, *History of Classical Scholarship*, I, p. 86. See also *ibid.*, pp. 76-114 and James Westfall Thompson, *Ancient Libraries* (Berkeley, 1940), pp. 18-21.

written word. Greece is therefore considerably closer to being a model for the world-wide intellectual tradition of the contemporary literate world than those earlier civilizations of the Orient which each had its own localised traditions of knowledge: as Oswald Spengler put it, *"Writing is the grand symbol of the Far"*.[96]

Yet although the idea of intellectual, and to some extent political, universalism is historically and substantively linked with literate culture, we too easily forget that this brings with it other features which have quite different implications, and which go some way to explain why the long-cherished and theoretically feasible dream of an "educated democracy" and a truly egalitarian society has never been realized in practice. One of the basic premises of liberal reform over the last century and a half has been that of James Mill, as it is described in the *Autobiography* of his son, John Stuart Mill:

So complete was my father's reliance on the influence of reason over the minds of mankind, whenever it is allowed to reach them, that he felt as if all would be gained if the whole population were taught to read, if all sorts of opinions were allowed to be addressed to them by word and in writing, and if, by means of the suffrage they could nominate a legislature to give effect to the opinions they adopted.[97]

All these things have been accomplished since the days of the Mills, but nevertheless "all" has not been "gained"; and some of the causes of this may be found in the intrinsic effects of literacy on the transmission of the cultural heritage, effects which can be seen most clearly by contrasting them with their analogues in non-literate society.

The writing down of some of the main elements in the cultural tradition in Greece, we say, brought about an awareness of two things: of the past as different from the present; and of the inherent inconsistencies in the picture of life as it was inherited by the individual from the cultural tradition in its recorded form. These two effects of widespread alphabetic writing, it may be surmised, have continued and multiplied themselves ever since, and at an increasing pace since the development of printing. "The printers," Jefferson remarked, "can never leave us in a state of perfect rest and union of opinion,"[98] and as book follows book and newspaper newspaper, the notion of

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[96] *Decline of the West,* II, 150.
[97] *Autobiography of John Stuart Mill,* ed. John J. Coss (New York, 1924), p. 74.
[98] *Cit.* Harold A. Innis, "Minerva's Owl", *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto, 1951), p. 24. Harold Innis was much occupied with the larger effects of modes of communication, as appears also in his *Empire and Communications* (Oxford, 1950). This direction of investigation has been taken up by the University of Toronto review *Explorations;* and the present authors are also indebted to the as yet unpublished work of Professor E. A. Havelock on the alphabetic revolution in Greece. Among the many previous writers who have been concerned with the Greek aspect of the problem, Nietzsche [*Beyond Good and Evil* (Edinburgh, 1909), p. 247], and José Ortega y Gasset ["The Difficulty of Reading", *Diogenes*, 28 (1959), pp. 1-17] may be mentioned. Among those who have treated the differences between oral and literate modes of

rational agreement and democratic coherence among men has receded further and further away, while Plato's attacks on the venal purveyors of knowledge in the market place have gained increased relevance.

But the inconsistency of the totality of written expression is perhaps less striking than its enormous bulk and its vast historical depth. Both of these have always seemed insuperable obstacles to those seeking to reconstruct society on a more unified and disciplined model: we find the objection in the book-burners of all periods; and it appears in many more respectable thinkers. In Jonathan Swift, for example, whose perfectly rational Houyhnhnms "have no letters", and whose knowledge, "consequently . . . is all traditional".[99] These oral traditions were of a scale, Swift tells us, that enabled "the historical part" to be "easily preserved without burthening their memories." Not so with the literate tradition, for, lacking the resources of unconscious adaptation and omission which exist in the oral transmission, the cultural repertoire can only grow; there are more words than anybody knows the meaning of — some 142,000 vocabulary entries in a college dictionary like the *Webster's New World*. This unlimited proliferation also characterises the written tradition in general: the mere size of the literate repertoire means that the proportion of the whole which any one individual knows must be infinitesimal in comparison with what obtains in oral culture. Literate society, merely by having no system of elimination, no "structural amnesia", prevents the individual from participating fully in the total cultural tradition to anything like the extent possible in non-literate society.

One way of looking at this lack of any literate equivalent to the homeostatic organization of the cultural tradition in non-literate society is to see literate society as inevitably committed to an ever-increasing series of culture lags. The content of the cultural tradition grows continually, and in so far as it affects any particular individual he becomes a palimpsest composed of layers of beliefs and attitudes belonging to different stages in historical time. So too, eventually, does society at large, since there is a tendency for each social group to be particularly influenced by systems of ideas belonging to different periods in the nation's development; both to the individual, and to the groups constituting society, the past may mean very different things.

From the standpoint of the individual intellectual, of the literate specialist, the vista of endless choices and discoveries offered by so extensive a past can be a source of great stimulation and interest; but when we consider the social effects of such an orientation, it becomes apparent that the situation fosters

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communication in general, David Reisman ["The Oral and Written Traditions", *Explorations*, 6 (1956), pp. 22-28, and *The Oral Tradition, the Written Word and the Screen Image* (Yellow Springs, Ohio, 1956)] and Robert Park ["Reflections on Communication and Culture", *American J. of Sociology*, 44 (1938), pp. 187-205] are especially relevant here.

[99] *Gulliver's Travels,* Part IV, ch. 9, ed. Arthur E. Case (New York, 1938), p. 296.

the alienation that has characterized so many writers and philosophers of the West since the last century. It was surely, for example, this lack of social amnesia in alphabetic cultures which led Nietzsche to describe "we moderns" as "wandering encyclopaedias", unable to live and act in the present and obsessed by a "'historical sense', that injures and finally destroys the living thing, be it a man or a people or a system of culture." [100] Even if we dismiss Nietzsche's views as extreme, it is still evident that the literate individual has in practice so large a field of personal selection from the total cultural repertoire that the odds are strongly against his experiencing the cultural tradition as any sort of patterned whole.

From the point of view of society at large, the enormous complexity and variety of the cultural repertoire obviously creates problems of an unprecedented order of magnitude. It means, for example, that since Western literate societies are characterized by these always increasing layers of cultural tradition, they are incessantly exposed to a more complex version of the kind of culture-conflict that has been held to produce *anomie* in oral societies when they come into contact with European civilization, changes which, for example, have been illustrated with a wealth of absorbing detail by Robert Redfield in his studies of Central America.[101]

Another important consequence of alphabetic culture relates to social stratification. In the proto-literate cultures with their relatively difficult non-alphabetic systems of writing, there existed a strong barrier between the writers and the non-writers; but although the "democratic" scripts made it possible to break down this particular barrier, they led eventually to a vast proliferation of more or less tangible distinctions based on what people had read. Achievement in handling the tools of reading and writing is obviously one of the most important axes of social differentiation in modern societies; and this differentiation extends on to more minute differences between professional specializations so that even members of the same socio-economic groups of literate specialists may hold little intellectual ground in common.

Nor, of course, are these variations in the degree of participation in the literate tradition, together with their effects on social structure, the only causes of tension. For, even within a literate culture, the oral tradition — the transmission of values and attitudes in face-to-face contact — nevertheless remains the primary mode of cultural orientation, and, to varying degrees, it is out of step with the various literate traditions. In some respects, perhaps,

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[100] "The Use and Abuse of History", *Thoughts out of Season,* trans. Adrian Collins (Edinburgh, 1909), pp. 33, 9.
[101] *Chan Kom, a Maya Village* (Washington, D.C., 1934); *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (Chicago, 1941); *A Village that Chose Progress: Chan Kom Revised* (Chicago, 1950); and for a more general treatment, *The Primitive World and its Transformations* (Ithaca, New York, 1953), pp. 73, 108. See also Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (London, 1957). For the concept of *anomie,* see Émile Durkheim, *Le Suicide* (Paris, 1897), Book II, Ch. V.

this is fortunate. The tendency of the modern mass-communications indus-
tries, for example, to promote ideals of conspicuous consumption which cannot
be realized by more than a limited proportion of society, might well have
much more radical consequences but for the fact that each individual exposed
to such pressures is also a member of one or more primary groups whose
oral converse is probably much more realistic and conservative in its ideolog-
ical tendency; the mass media are not the only, and they are probably not
even the main, social influences on the contemporary cultural tradition as
a whole.

Primary group values are probably even further removed from those of
the "high" literate culture, except in the case of the literate specialists. This
introduces another kind of culture conflict, and one which is of cardinal
significance for Western civilization. If, for example, we return to the reasons
for the relative failure of universal compulsory education to bring about the
intellectual, social and political results that James Mill expected, we may well
lay a major part of the blame on the gap between the public literate tradition
of the school, and the very different and indeed often directly contradictory
private oral traditions of the pupil's family and peer group. The high degree
of differentiation in exposure to the literate tradition sets up a basic division
which cannot exist in non-literate society: the division between the various
shades of literacy and illiteracy. This conflict, of course, is most dramatically
focussed in the school, the key institution of society. As Margaret Mead has
pointed out:

Primitive education was a process by which continuity was maintained between
parents and children ... Modern education includes a heavy emphasis upon the
function of education to create discontinuities — to turn the child ... of the
illiterate into the literate.[102]

A similar and probably even more acute stress develops in many cases be-
tween the school and the peer group; and quite apart from the difficulties
arising from the substantive differences between the two orientations, there
seem to be factors in the very nature of literate methods which make them
ill-suited to bridge the gap between the street-corner society and the black-
board jungle.

First, because although the alphabet, printing, and universal free education
have combined to make the literate culture freely available to all on a scale
never previously approached, the literate mode of communication is such
that it does not impose itself as forcefully or as uniformly as is the case with
the oral transmission of the cultural tradition. In non-literate society every
social situation cannot but bring the individual into contact with the group's
patterns of thought, feeling and action: the choice is between the cultural tra-
dition — or solitude. In a literate society, however, and quite apart from the

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[102] "Our Educational Emphases in Primitive Perspective", *American Journal of Soci-
ology*, 48 (1943), p. 637.

difficulties arising from the scale and complexity of the "high" literate tra-
dition, the mere fact that reading and writing are normally solitary activities
means that insofar as the dominant cultural tradition is a literate one, it is
very easy to avoid; as Bertha Phillpotts wrote in her study of Icelandic
literature:

Printing so obviously makes knowledge accessible to all that we are inclined to
forget that it also makes knowledge very easy to avoid ... A shepherd in an Ice-
landic homestead, on the other hand, could not avoid spending his evenings in
listening to the kind of literature which interested the farmer. The result was a
degree of really national culture such as no nation of today has been able to
achieve.[103]

The literate culture, then, is much more easily avoided than the oral one; and
even when it is not avoided its actual effects may be relatively shallow. Not
only because, as Plato argued, the effects of reading are intrinsically less deep
and permanent than those of oral converse; but also because the abstractness
of the syllogism and of the Aristotelian categorizations of knowledge do not
correspond very directly with common experience. The abstractness of the
syllogism, for example, of its very nature disregards the individual's social
experience and immediate personal context; and the compartmentalization of
knowledge similarly restricts the kind of connections which the individual can
establish and ratify with the natural and social world. The essential way of
thinking of the specialist in literate culture is fundamentally at odds with that
of daily life and common experience; and the conflict is embodied in the
long tradition of jokes about absent-minded professors.

It is, of course, true that contemporary education does not present pro-
blems exactly in the forms of Aristotelian logic and taxonomy; but all our
literate modes of thought have been profoundly influenced by them. In this,
perhaps, we can see a major difference, not only with the transmission of the
cultural heritage of oral societies, but with those of proto-literate ones. Thus
Marcel Granet relates the nature of the Chinese writing system to the "con-
creteness" of Chinese thought, and his picture of its primary concentration
on social action and traditional norms suggests that the cultural effect of the
writing system was in the direction of intensifying the sort of homeostatic
conservation found in non-literate cultures; it was indeed conceptualised in
the Confucian tao-'tung, or "orthodox transmission of the way." In this
connection it may be noted that the Chinese attitude to formal logic, and to
the categorization of knowledge in general, is an articulate expression of
what happens in an oral culture.[104] Mencius, for example, speaks for the
non-literate approach in general when he comments: "Why I dislike holding

[103] Edda and Saga (London, 1931), pp. 162-3.
[104] Marcel Granet, La Pensée chinoise (Paris, 1934), especially pp. vii-xi, 8-55; see
also Hu Shih, The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China (Shanghai,
1922).

to one point is that it injures the *tao*. It takes up one point and disregards a hundred others." [105]

The social tension between the oral and literate orientations in Western society is, of course, complemented by an intellectual one. In recent times the Enlightenment's attack on myth as irrational superstition has often been replaced by a regressive yearning for some modern equivalent of the unifying function of myth: "have not," W. B. Yeats asked, "all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?" [106]

In his nostalgia for the world of myths Plato has had a long line of successors. The Rousseauist cult of the Noble Savage, for instance, paid unwitting tribute to the strength of the homogeneity of oral culture, to the yearning admiration of the educated for the peasant's simple but cohesive view of life, the timelessness of his living in the present, the unanalytic spontaneity that comes with an attitude to the world that is one of absorbed and uncritical participation, a participation in which the contradictions between history and legend, for example, or between experience and imagination, are not felt as problems. Such, for example, is the literary tradition of the European peasant from Cervantes' Sancho Panza to Tolstoy's Platon Karataev. Both are illiterate; both are rich in proverbial lore; both are untroubled by intellectual consistency; and both represent many of the values which, it was suggested above, are characteristic of oral culture. In these two works, *Don Quixote* and *War and Peace,* which might well be considered two of the supreme achievements of modern Western literature, an explicit contrast is made between the oral and literate elements of the cultural tradition. Don Quixote himself goes mad by reading books; while, opposed to the peasant Karataev, stands the figure of Pierre, an urban cosmopolitan, and a great reader. Tolstoy writes of Karataev that—in this like Mencius or like Malinowski's Trobrianders — he:

did not, and could not, understand the meaning of words apart from their context. Every word and every action of his was the manifestation of an activity unknown to him, which was his life. But his life, as he regarded it, had no meaning as a separate thing. It had a meaning only as part of a whole of which he was always conscious.[107]

Tolstoy, of course, idealizes; but conversely, even in his idealization he suggests one major emphasis of literate culture and one which we immediately associate with the Greeks — the stress upon the individual; Karataev does not regard "his life . . . as a separate thing". There are, of course, marked differences in the life-histories of individual members of non-literate societies:

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[105] *Cit.* I. A. Richards, *Mencius on the Mind* (London, 1932), p. 35.
[106] *Autobiographies* (London, 1955), p. 194.
[107] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace,* trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (New York, 1942), pp. 1078-9.

the story of Crashing Thunder differs from that of other Winnebago,[108] that of Baba of Karo from other Hausa women;[109] and these differences are often given public recognition by ascribing to individuals a personal tutelary or guardian spirit. But on the whole there is less individualization of personal experience in oral cultures, which tend, in Durkheim's phrase, to be characterized by "mechanical solidarity" [110] — by the ties between like persons, rather than by a more complicated set of complementary relationships between individuals in a variety of roles. Like Durkheim, many sociologists would relate this greater individualization of personal experience in literate societies to the effects of a more extensive division of labor. There is no single explanation; but the techniques of reading and writing are undoubtedly of very great importance. There is, first of all, the formal distinction which alphabetic culture has emphasised between the divine, the natural, and the human orders; secondly, there is the social differentiation to which the institutions of literate culture give rise; third, there is the effect of professional intellectual specialization on an unprecedented scale; lastly, there is the immense variety of choice offered by the whole corpus of recorded literature; and from these four factors there ensues, in any individual case, the highly complex totality deriving from the selection of these literate orientations and from the series of primary groups in which the individual has also been involved.

As for personal awareness of this individualization, other factors doubtless contributed, but writing itself (especially in its simpler, more cursive forms) was of great importance. For writing, by objectifying words, and by making them and their meaning available for much more prolonged and intensive scrutiny than is possible orally, encourages private thought; the diary or the confession enables the individual to objectify his own experience, and gives him some check upon the transmutations of memory under the influences of subsequent events. And then, if the diary is later published, a wider audience can have concrete experience of the differences that exist in the histories of their fellow men from a record of a life which has been partially insulated from the assimilative process of oral transmission.

The diary is, of course, an extreme case; but Plato's dialogues themselves are evidence of the general tendency of writing to increase the awareness of individual differences in behavior, and in the personality which lies behind them;[111] while the novel, which participates in the autobiographical and con-

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[108] Paul Radin, *Crashing Thunder: the Autobiography of an American Indian* (New York, 1926), and *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (New York, 1927).
[109] Mary F. Smith, *Baba of Karo, a Woman of the Muslim Hausa* (London, 1954).
[110] Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. G. Simpson (New York, 1933), p. 130.
[111] In the *Theaetetus,* for example, emphasis is placed on the inner dialogue of the soul in which it perceives ethical ideas "by comparing within herself things past and present with the future" (186 b).

fessional direction of such writers as St. Augustus, Pepys and Rousseau, and purports to portray the inner as well as the outer life of individuals in the real world, has replaced the collective representations of myth and epic.

From the point of view of the general contrast between oral and alphabetically literate culture, then, there is a certain identity between the spirit of the Platonic dialogues and of the novel [112]: both kinds of writing express what is a characteristic intellectual effort of literate culture, and present the process whereby the individual makes his own more or less conscious, more or less personal selection, rejection and accommodation, among the conflicting ideas and attitudes in his culture. This general kinship between Plato and the characteristic art form of literate culture, the novel, suggests a further contrast between oral and literate societies: in contrast to the homeostatic transmission of the cultural tradition among non-literate peoples, literate society leaves more to its members; less homogeneous in its cultural tradition, it gives more free play to the individual, and particularly to the intellectual, the literate specialist himself; it does so by sacrificing a single, ready-made orientation to life. And, insofar as an individual participates in the literate, as distinct from the oral, culture, such coherence as a person achieves is very largely the result of his personal selection, adjustment and elimination of items from a highly differentiated cultural repertoire; he is, of course, influenced by all the various social pressures, but they are so numerous that the pattern finally comes out as an individual one.

Much could be added by way of development and qualification on this point, as on much else that has been said above. The contrast could be extended, for example, by bringing it up to date and considering later developments in communication, from the invention of printing and of the power press, to that of radio, cinema and television. All these latter, it may be surmised, derive much of their effectiveness as agencies of social orientation from the fact that their media do not have the abstract and solitary quality of reading and writing, but on the contrary share something of the nature and impact of the direct personal interaction which obtains in oral cultures. It may even be that these new modes of communicating sight and sound without any limit of time or place will lead to a new kind of culture: less inward and individualistic than literate culture, probably, and sharing some of the relative homogeneity, though not the mutuality, of oral society.

To speculate further on such lines would be to go far beyond the purposes of this essay; and it only remains to consider briefly the consequences of the general course of the argument for the problem as it was posed at the outset in terms of the distinction between the disciplines primarily (though not ex-

[112] Jaeger, *Paideia* (Oxford, 1944), II, 18, speaks of the dialogues and the memoirs by many members of the circle of Socrates as "new literary forms invented by the Socratic circle ... to re-create the incomparable personality of the master."

clusively) concerned in the analysis of non-literate and literate societies, that is, anthropology and sociology.

One aspect of the contrast drawn between non-literate and alphabetic culture would seem to help explain one of the main modern trends in the development of anthropology: for part of the progress which anthropology has made beyond the ethnocentrism of the 19th century surely derives from a growing awareness of the implications of one of the matters discussed above: an awareness, that is, of the extent to which, in the culture of oral societies, non-Aristotelian models [113] are implicit in the language, the reasoning, and the kinds of connection established between the various spheres of knowledge. The problem has been approached in many ways; particularly illuminating, perhaps, in Dorothy D. Lee's contrast between the 'lineal' codifications of reality in Western culture, and the 'non-lineal' codifications of the Trobriand Islanders; and there, incidentally, although Aristotle is not mentioned, his characteristically analytic, teleological and relational thinking is recognizable in the governing attitudes that Dorothy Lee presents as the typical literate mode of thought in contrast to that of the Trobrianders.[114] Benjamin Lee Whorf makes a similar point in his contrast of Hopi with SAE (standard average European). He sees the "mechanistic way of thinking" of Europeans as closely related to the syntax of the languages they speak, "rigidified and intensified by Aristotle and the latter's medieval and modern followers".[115] The segmentation of nature is functionally related to grammar; Newtonian space, time and matter, for example, are directly derived from SAE culture and language.[116] He goes on to argue that "our objectified view of time is . . . favorable to historicity and to everything connected with the keeping of records, while the Hopi view is unfavorable thereto." And to this fact he links the presence of:

"1. Records, diaries, bookkeeping, accounting, mathematics stimulated by accounting.

2. Interest in exact sequences, dating, calendars, chronology, clocks, time wages, time graphs, time as used in physics.

3. Annals, histories, the historical attitude, interest in the past, archaeology, attitudes of introjection towards past periods, e.g. classicism, romanticism."[117]

[113] Just as it has been argued that a proper understanding of Homer depends upon a "non-Aristotelian literary criticism" which is appropriate to oral literature: James A. Notopoulos, "Parataxis in Homer: a New Approach to Homeric Literary Criticism", *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 80 (1949), pp. 1, 6.

[114] "Codifications of Reality: Lineal and Nonlineal", in *Freedom and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1959), pp. 105-120; see also her "Conceptual Implications of an Indian Language", *Philosophy of Science*, 5 (1938), pp. 89-102.

[115] "Languages and Logic", *Technological Review*, 43 (1941), reprinted in *Language, Thought, and Reality, Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (New York, 1956), p. 238.

[116] "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language", *Language, Culture, and Personality, Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir*, ed. by Leslie Spier (Menasha, Wis., 1941), reprinted in *Language, Thought, and Reality*, p. 153.

[117] *op. cit.* p. 153.

Many of these features are precisely those which we have mentioned as characteristic of societies with easy and widespread systems of writing. But while Whorf and other anthropological linguists have noted these differences between European institutions and categories on the one hand and those of societies like the Trobriands and the Hopi on the other, they have tended to relate these variations to the languages themselves, giving little weight to the influence of the mode of communication as such, to the intrinsic social consequences of literacy.[118]

On the other hand, what has been said about literacy and the consequent developments of Greek thought leading to the logical methods and to the categories of Aristotle may seem to attribute to one individual, and to the civilization to which he belonged, a kind of absolute claim to intellectual validity to which neither the philosopher, the anthropologist, nor the historian of ancient civilization, is likely to assent. The currency of such diffuse assumptions in general long ago moved John Locke to an unwonted burst of wintry humour: "God has not been so sparing to men to make them barely two-legged creatures, and left it to Aristotle to make them rational".[119] Nevertheless Locke's own treatment of the "forms of argumentation" and of "the division of the sciences" is itself recognisably within the tradition that derives from Aristotle and his time; and so, in some important ways, is the literate culture, not only of the West, but of the civilized world today. There is obviously some more or less absolute efficacy in the organization of human knowledge which appears in the thoughtways of the first substantially literate culture, although its definition (which could hardly be more difficult) is well beyond the scope of this paper. Max Weber saw as the essential differentiating factor of Western civilization the "formal rationality" of its institutions; and this, in turn, he regarded as a more fully developed and more exclusively practise, version of the ordinary human tendency to act reasonably—to behave with "substantive rationality". For Weber "formal rationality" was merely an institutionalised form of this general tendency working through "rationally established norms, by enactment, decrees, and regulations" [120]

[118] For example in his paper "A linguistic consideration of thinking in primitive communities" (*Language, Thought and Reality*, pp. 65-86), Whorf discusses Lévy-Bruhl's account of the thinking of primitive man as characterized by *participation mystique,* and suggests that the differences are related to the structure of language. No mention is made of the role of writing and he seems to see language itself as the independent variable, although in his later paper on "Habitual thought", he does make a passing reference to writing, as well as to the *interdependence* of language and culture (p. 153). Lévi-Strauss, who is much concerned with the linguistic aspects of the problem, makes no mention of the role of literacy in his analysis of the differences between *la pensée sauvage* and *la pensée domestiquée,* but again the actual process of domestication is peripheral to his study (1962).

[119] *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* Book IV, ch. 17, 84.

[120] *From Max Weber; Essays in Sociology,* trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York, 1946), pp. 298-9. See also *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation,* trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York, 1947), pp. 184-6.

rather than through personal, religious, traditional or charismatic allegiances. Weber's differentiation in some respects parallels the differentiation made above between oral and alphabetic culture and in various places he antici- pates part of the argument advanced in this paper.[121]

The present study then, is an attempt to approach a very general problem from one particular point of view. In that perspective it suggests one reason for what has been widely remarked upon in the comparison between anthro- pology and sociology: the relative incompleteness of sociological analyses as compared with those of anthropology, and the tendency for anthropologists studying European societies to limit their observations to village communities or family groups. For, quite apart from differences of scale and complexity of social structure, there are two other dimensions of analysis which can in practice be largely disregarded by the anthropologist but not by the student of literate societies.

First the reifying of the past in written record means that sociology must inevitably be the more deeply concerned with history. The kinds of practi- cal and theoretical issues involved here are numerous, for the great impor- tance of the historical dimension, and its very different kind of impact on various social groups, obviously poses acute methodological problems. At the most general level, the analytic model of the sociologist must take into account the fact that from one point of view his data include materials ac- cumulated from earlier cultures and periods, and that the existence of these records greatly increases the possible alternative ways of thinking and be- having for the members of the society he is studying, as well as influencing their action in other ways. This added complexity means that certain aspects of the past continue to be relevant (or at least potentially so) for the contem- porary scene; and it also means that when functional theoretical models are used, the interconnections can hardly be as direct or immediate as those the anthropologist might expect in non-literate societies.

Secondly, the sociologist must in any case recognize that since in alphabetic society much of the homeostatic function of the oral tradition works at the inward and individual rather than at the overt and public level, sociological descriptions, which inevitably deal primarily with collective life, are con- siderably less complete than those of anthropology, and consequently provide a less certain guide to understanding the behavior of the particular individuals of whom the society is composed.

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[121] Especially in the "Author's Introduction" to *The Protestant Ethic,* trans. Talcott Parsons (London, 1930), pp. 13-31, where Weber gives a rapid but comprehensive survey of the problem of "what combination of circumstances" made some aspects of Western civilization "lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value". See also his lecture "Science as a Vocation" (*From Max Weber,* especially pp. 138-143).

SUMMARY

Recent anthropology has rightly rejected the categorical distinctions between the thinking of "primitive" and "civilized" peoples, between "mythopoeic" and "logico-empirical" modes of thought. But the reaction has been pushed too far: diffuse relativism and sentimental egalitarianism combine to turn a blind eye on some of the most basic problems of human history. Where the intellectual differences in the cultural traditions of complex and simple societies are given adequate recognition, the explanations offered are unsatisfactory. In the case of Western civilization, for example, the origins are sought in the nature of the Greek genius, in the grammatical structure of the Indo-European languages, or, somewhat more plausibly, in the technological advances of the Bronze Age and the associated developments in the division of labor.

In our view, however, insufficient attention has been paid to the fact that the urban revolution of the Ancient Near East produced one invention, the invention of writing, which changed the whole structure of the cultural tradition. Potentially, human intercourse was now no longer restricted to the impermanency of oral converse. But since the first methods of writing employed were difficult to master, their effects were relatively limited, and it was only when the simplicity and flexibility of later alphabetic writing made widespread literacy possible that for the first time there began to take concrete shape in the Greek world of the 7th century B.C. a society that was essentially literate and that soon established many of the institutions that became characteristic of all later literate societies.

The development of an easy system of writing (easy both in terms of the materials employed and the signs used) was more than a mere pre-condition of the Greek achievement; it influenced its whole nature and development in fundamental ways. In oral societies the cultural tradition is transmitted almost entirely by face-to-face communication; and changes in its content are accompanied by the homeostatic process of forgetting or transforming those parts of the tradition that cease to be either necessary or relevant. Literate societies, on the other hand, cannot discard, absorb, or transmute the past in the same way. Instead, their members are faced with permanently recorded versions of the past and its beliefs; and because the past is thus set apart from the present, historical enquiry becomes possible. This in turn encourages scepticism; and scepticism, not only about the legendary past, but about received ideas about the universe as a whole. From here the next step is to see how to build up and to test alternative explanations: and out of this there arose the kind of logical, specialized, and cumulative intellectual tradition of sixth-century Ionia. The kinds of analysis involved in the syllogism, and in

the other forms of logical procedure, are clearly dependent upon writing, indeed upon a form of writing sufficiently simple and cursive to make possible widespread and habitual recourse both to the recording of verbal statements and then to the dissecting of them. It is probable that it is only the analytic process that writing itself entails, the written formalization of sounds and syntax, which make possible the habitual separating out into formally distinct units of the various cultural elements whose indivisible wholeness is the essential basis of the "mystical participation" which Lévy-Bruhl regards as characteristic of the thinking of non-literate peoples.

One of the problems which neither Lévy-Bruhl nor any other advocate of a radical dichotomy between "primitive" and "civilized" thought has been able to resolve is the persistence of "non-logical thinking" in modern literate societies. But, of course, we must reckon with the fact that in our civilization, writing is clearly an addition, not an alternative, to oral transmission. Even in our *buch und lesen* culture, childrearing and a multitude of other forms of activity both within and outside the family depend upon speech: and the relationship between the written and the oral traditions must be regarded as a major problem in Western cultures.

A consideration of the consequences of literacy in these terms, then, throws some light not only upon the nature of the Greek achievement but also upon the intellectual differences between simple and complex societies. There are, of course, many other consequences we have not discussed — for instance, the role of writing in the running of centralized states and other bureaucratic organizations; our aim has only been to discuss in very general terms some of the more significant historical and functional consequences of literacy.[122]

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