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Text and Ideology in Hellenism

The last line of an early schedule of papers for this conference read: "We expect to publish the proceedings in the spring of 1992." The expectation will reassure many, not least me. I, for one, hardly ever remember anything I hear in lectures, and have trouble enough remembering what I read. The assurance that the conference proceedings will be published allows all of us to let our thoughts wander as we sit here. Listening, we can meditate, can mentally argue, or rephrase our own contributions. On publication, the convenient format of our publications allows us to look over the conference volume briefly, then put the book on our shelves, or in the bathroom, to be read or cited when the need arises.

We write—and think—for publication. We can phrase our conceptions as abstrusely as those of Claude Levy-Strauss because we know our audience can sit and puzzle over what we mean; if we are as noted as Levy-Strauss, we can be confident that they will take the time to do so. If we are me, we try to be a little clearer and tax the patience of our readers less. But as I write—note that I say write—the introduction to this lecture, I use language appropriate for publication and develop and present my concepts in a way that will be clear on the page: the fact that my ideas are presented orally is revealed only in a relative informality of the first paragraph or so, and the orality of the message emerges not in the words or sentence structure but in the actual performance and delivery of the text.

Text and orality, as I use the words here, are near-exclusive concepts. Where there is text, it eventually supplants orality, and with orality, no text exists. I will be discussing today the manner in which the emergence of text influenced and even framed the ideology of Hellenism, and also how the physical nature of text also contributed to that mentality we call Greek. (I do not use ideology and mentality as synonyms, but as complementary concepts.) It is banal to stress the difference between oral and written culture, but perhaps a little less so to stress the difference, within text societies, of the manner in which text is created, presented and preserved.

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For a long time, Hellenic traditions and memories about the Homeric epics and the manner in which they were sung by bards depended on notions of memory. The concept of "oral poetry" with which we are familiar today is a relatively new, twentieth-century idea which owes its inception to Milman Parry, and even today is based on his insights into formulaic diction and constantly living and changing narrative verse. Fundamental to Parry's notion of the kind of poetry which could give rise to such monumental epics as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* was the idea that the tradition limited content by form: one could only "sing" about events, concepts, people when the corpus of formulae or the formulaic diction could apply or be adapted to them. Parry's concept could be described by McLuhan's "The medium is the message," in a way.

Consider, for a moment, the Homeric *Iliad*, and match it to Vergil's *Aeneid*. The *Iliad* claims to be about "The wrath of Achilles ——" while the *Aeneid* is about "Arms and the man ——" The Greek epic uses a narrative technique to focus on a short period of time—a few days or weeks at most—and one place, and makes a psychological and cosmological investigation of the human condition, while the Latin poem is itself primarily a narrative using epic conventions, a history, covering a very broad scope of time and distance and comprehending a large number of political, moral, cultural and ideological conceptions. The first could work in a written culture, but the second could not in an oral one. (I cannot prove the second part of the preceding sentence, but the existence of the *Iliad* today is ample proof of the first part.)

Very early in the history of the development of Hellenism, the *Iliad* was written down. Tradition tells us that this peculiar act took place during the time that Pisistratus was tyrant in Athens—the mid sixth century. The transmission of the *Iliad* into written form established a text for the Greeks, and that text froze the potential of impact which the work in oral form could make ideologically. Whether or not some segments of the epic were originally interpolations, as some critics argue, they were undoubtedly in the Pisistratid text, and they stood as part of this fundamental expression of Greek thought. The Achilles-figure, the human who sought repeatedly to find a successful rationale for decision and human existence, became a paradigm for the human condition, great not because he succeeded in his confrontation with a

hostile or uncaring cosmos, but rather, because in the face of repeated failure, he still insisted on asserting his will, human will. It helped to make Hellenism's glorification of the self the diametrical opposite of the eastern goal of elimination of the self.

The writing down of the *Iliad* was a step toward the establishment of Athenian society as a writing culture. It was a long time, however, before the essential orality of that culture gave way completely before writing. I agree with Eric Havelock that it was not until the end of the fifth century B.C. that writing dominated in the transmission and framing of culture in Athens. Most of the implications of this have not been noted, however, and in discussing the transition from orality to text and its effects on mentality and ideology I hope also *pari passu* to lend some confirmation to Havelock's thesis.

It is not an unimportant fact that almost every important Greek author whose works we have intact—or nearly so, falls into the period 450–350 B.C. We have all of the *Histories* of Herodotus, all of the account of the Peloponnesian War that Thucydides wrote, albeit incomplete as he left it. We have all of Xenophon's varied works, plus some others attributed, and we have the entire Platonic corpus—plus letters which are arguably spurious. All these are prose writers. From the same period, (or before, in the case of the first tragedian) we have about ten per cent of the works of Aeschylus intact, about seven per cent of the plays of Sophocles, while we do a little better for Euripides—about a fifth extant. The attrition is savage, and yet, less severe than the losses which resulted in the near destruction of the entire body of lyric poetry and complete absence of works of other tragedians. Furthermore, while we have the intact works of the dramatists I have named, we have practically nothing of any of their prose-writing predecessors or contemporaries apart from those I have named, and of the noted philosopher who followed Plato, his pupil Aristotle, we have again only a small part of the works attributed to him, and of third-century philosophers, we have only fragments of an extremely voluminous outpouring.

The unusual aspect of this data is in the collocation of extant writers, particularly when we take into consideration the relative insignificance of these writers in the body of Greek literary papyri, now known in significant enough numbers to give some indication of the relative frequency of texts in the collections of Greek readers in

Egypt. There the dominance of Homer iis obvious, with about half of all literary papyri representing epic texts. Euripides' works appear frequently, as do those of Demosthenes, while of our "complete" authors, only a small, scattering of papyrus fragments remains. So the preservation of complete texts of Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato and Xenophon cannot be demonstrated to be due to exceptionally large numbers of texts available in antiquity, unless we hypothesize that the traceable patterns of the East differed greatly from other parts of the ancent world.

Is it, then, literary taste? Or philosophical inclinations? We do know that Plato was a figure of dominant importance in Roman times. Is it to the same philosphical orientation that we owe one apparently complete recension of Plotinus that we must credit the survival of all of Plato? To literary taste we can certainly attribute the greater survival of Euripidean tragedy over the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles, for we have independent evidence of Euripides' preferment, even in his own time, but why Herodotus and Thucydides and Xenophon over the popular Euripides?

I could meander through this material, setting up straw men and knocking them down, but instead I will get right to the point. In my view, the concentration of "complete" authors at the end of the fifth and beginning of the fourth centuries is related to the transition from oral to written culture, and, furthermore, the use of writing by historians and philosophers to a large extent controlled the nature and development of Hellenism—and in turn, western civilization.

Before I explore this further, I will deal with the issue of the extant texts of drama, since the argument might be made that the existence of our dramatic texts pushes the shift earlier, and calls for an acknowledgement that the ideas of drama represent written, rather than oral culture. In the first place, the existence of texts of drama is no more evidence for the written-culture mentality of dramatic expression than the texts of Homeric epic would argue for an essentially written culture as the background of epic. The majority of expression in the fifth century could easily have been oral, while the developing importance of writing could have motivated the writing down of play scripts in much the way the interest in history motivated the writing down of the traditional (oral) Athenian archon list and list of Olympian victors.

Second, and more important, drama is *per se* oral. What is said by the characters and playwright comes out in the "winged words" of epic. Enunciated, they fly away, and if the force of their impact is not great, the impact itself will be slight, and listeners will either forget what was said or will miss its significance. The difference between the needs of oral communication and written communication is so great as to determine the nature of what can itself be communicated, and drama, as oral in its entirety, can only deal with matters communicable in an oral culture.

In mid-fifth century Athens, drama dealt with the same issues as those treated by epic. Presented in the religious context of the festival of Dionysus, plays explored the natures and actions of the gods, the human condition, morality and ethics in private and public life, the interaction between the cosmos and the human domain. Narration was secondary, particularly in the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles, reasoned argument not only scanty but hardly necessary, the speeches and choruses instead aiming at producing emotional perception of the outcome of the actions of the characters. What happens when people do *that*? is a question that drama can ask, and the answers provide the nature of what drama can teach.

This kind of composition can present human problems, can demonstrate their effects and the actions they stimulate. It can present situations, and offer emotional and spiritual interpretations. It can probe deeply into religious and philosophical problems, and present them with stunning clarity and emotional force. It can even present solutions by way of examples and the simulation of action. What it cannot do, however, is present sequential argument, moving from starting point through a series of ideas and steps to reach a conclusion which depends for its acceptance on the success of conviction carried by both the parts and the coherence of series of statements. It conveys its truth through the directness of perception, rather than through the construction of its logic.

Logic belongs to the world of writing, rather than speech. It calls for a great deal more than just the hesitation of cogitation, reflection, revision, as Plato described Lysias developing a speech he was to deliver, writing "at his leisure, and over a long period of time" (*Phaedrus*, 228). It calls for the reader to have leisure and time to read, reread, think and evaluate. And argumentative writing, itself,

ultimately calls for some form of logic, some set of rules which a reader will accept as validating the steps of argument, and which can be used as the reader checks back over what has been read, rereading and rethinking to assert agreement or denial.

So writing both permits and calls for logical sequential developent in argumentation. It also permits lengthy, complex and variegated narrative. It can accept a bewildering array of people, places, events, can reach over a long period of time and can even allow for frequent forays back and forth in time. When the writing is presented on the pages of books, in the manner of modern texts, rather than in the rolls of early and middle antiquity, pages over which the reader can turn back and forth to be reminded of ideas and names, the complexity, subtlety and content can be almost limitless. Today, for example, historians can dump all sorts of obscurities into their texts, in the confidence that a reader who has got lost can be reoriented by using the index.

By now, say 15 minutes into my discussion, you listeners need some direction signals to explain where this argument is going, so that you can follow it. Readers, on the other hand, can forge ahead without them, looking back if they forget any of the points I have made so far. The listeners, then, I will remind of a few points: I accept the notion that the extensive use of writing began in Athens in the late fifth century B.C.; I noted that the preservation of the complete work of a few major prose writers of that period or shortly after is peculiar to that period; I alleged that writing permits of a kind of argumentation and complex narrative in history and philosophy which is not possible in oral composition and that the existence of written composition may even call for modes of thought unknown to oral composition. I am now going to argue two propositions: First, that the reason for the preservation of the work of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon and Plato is the maintainence, in their texts, of some of the ideology of earlier Hellenism along with the creation of the new ideology which in later Hellenism coexisted with the earlier. Secondly, I am going to claim that Hellenism has at least two conflicting mentalities or ideologies. One of these, characteristic of the earlier Homeric, dramatic and oral way of thinking, sees human beings developing understanding and experience through direct perception: with the inevitably fragmentary and personal nature of

perception, this mentality sees the human condition as fundamentally limited, buffeted and at the mercy of a cosmos which is poorly understood or known not at all and which itself is inaccessible to and uncaring of humanity. The other ideology, which I may call the mentality of writing, is based on faith in human reason and on the view that human beings using their minds are capable of reaching accurate conceptions of the nature of the cosmos.

It is clear that the work of the extant prose writers does not show a deliberate rejection of an earlier attitude about humanity and the cosmos. There is neither that, nor a calculated endorsement of a new and different idea, or even an explicit endorsement of the value of writing itself. These are, after all, transitional figures, with attitudes reflective of the past and involved in activity leading to the future. Plato, for one, in the very act of writing denigrated its value and its relation to truth, holding out written books as mere reminders of the valuable, discussable and refutable ideas and words of spoken discourse. And these wrters were not the first, by any means, to compose in writing or in prose. What is new about their age and their work is the growing importance of writing as the mode of communication, so that by the time of Plato's death in the mid-fourth century, the written work was the norm. And what is new about all these writers is their acceptance of the basic assumption of the validity of human reason and knowledge. Herodotus asserted a cyclical nature for human history, citing evidence by which one can deduce its truth, and his account of the vast panorama of Persian and Greek history and the Persian Wars is a validation of the possibility that humans can know their limits. The Lydian history of the dynasty of Croesus is so precise a prelude in microcosm of the great story to come that we must see his using the potential of writing to focus the attention of readers on his main points.

Thucydides, with his seemingly modern choice of a narrower focus to probe in depth, has a similar faith in the value of history. Who can read his pages without an awareness of his aim of moral education? To know the events of this "greatest disturbance of the Greeks" is to learn a great deal about right and wrong in statecraft and human behavior. And in Plato's case, learning is what all the discourse is about—probing the potential of human reason to recognize true reality and abandon the deceptions of the world of seeming

and becoming to which the senses respond. Even Xenophon, seen by many to have been of a lesser intellectual ability than the others, wrote with the same confidence in the capability of politicians and philosophers to make decisions on the basis of knowledge which could be called accurate.

Yet, with all this "new," the heart of traditional Hellenism has not been expunged from the world view of these figures. The human being operates in a cosmos over which humanity has very little control. The king of Herodotus' cycle is as powerless to affect the broad sweep of events as is any figure of epic or tragedy. Thucydides' narrative takes place entirely on the human level and the author passes by all the questions of cosmic and human interaction, and for the most part, the same is true of Xenophon. Plato's work is concerned with knowing reality, not altering or affecting it. The difference between Achilles and Oedipus on the one hand and the historian or philosopher of Herodotus and Plato is knowledge, but it is *only* knowledge. Achilles at the end of the *Iliad*, like Ajax, Philoctetes, Prometheus, is unbowed but uncomprehending. Plato and Herodotus would lead us to comprehension and perhaps acquiescence, but they would not assert the modern confidence in the possibility of human control of the environment.

Knowledge itself would someday be praised as power, and the human confidence in the power of knowledge traces itself back to that point in Hellenism when some Greeks developed a confidence in the very possibility of knowledge, so that in the next generation, Aristotle could assert that the human being by nature desires to know. From the fourth century on, many Greek writers based their whole approach to understanding on the tacit assumption that accurate, or true knowledge was not only abstractly possible but in some instances at least had actually been achieved. By the end of the fourth century we could have Epicurus assert the complete divorce between humanity and the cosmos: "If the gods exist, they don't care." Zeno, his contemporary and rival, as we understand the two schools of thought, began a tradition which in essence equated the divine force with that of reason.

This is a long way from the cry of one of Euripides' characters, "If you are a god you must be crazy," but the Euripidean vision of the cosmos as a moral shambles, at least from the human point of view,

persisted in Hellenism for a long time. This is the view of life which the epic accepts, which fits the events of the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, which Aeschylus explores in some plays and rejects in the *Oresteia*, that remarkable account of transition from divine to human justice, from cosmic conflict tormenting humanity to the settlement of scores both divine and human. The view of humanity floundering in a cosmos neither understood nor manageable in any way never died out of Hellenism, but the manner in which it would be discussed changed radically. No longer an *Oresteia* on the stage, but dialectic and argument, recorded for reminding and discussion, as Plato would put it, carried the burden of human cosmological, ethical and moral investigation for Hellenism. The atrophy of the tragic drama came quickly after the birth of written philosophy, and within a decade or two the stage was occupied by comic writers and melodrama like that of Menander. The genre in which thought was carried on altered irreversibly. While enquiry into the human condition might in the future be carried on in a "literary mode," that was a long time in the future and would await an idealization of Hellenism many centuries in the future. Meanwhile, for the rest of antiquity, poetry and the drama would be devoted, for the most part, to entertainment and the expression of personal feelings—or at the most impersonal, ideas and ideals about society and human affairs or metrical renditions of philosophical tracts.

It is the philosophical tracts that would carry on the exploration which characterized the religious drama of fifth century Athens. The first creator of these, Plato, was himself suspicious of the very medium of writing which he was using, and tried to preserve the impact of orality and metaphor which he knew from his youth. He certainly did not move very far along the road of logic and controlled argument which writing allowed. This emerged in the corpus of texts attributed to Plato's student Aristotle, a corpus which in its bare existence presents us with a large number of problems: questions related to the extent to which each text was authored specifically by Aristotle or might have been a recording of his teaching; problems related to the apparent neglect of many of the works and the later creation of a collection or an "edition;" the effect of the assembly of works into a text which seems to have obliterated chronology and development in the writing; curiosities like the emergence of an Aristotelian

Constitution of Athens as late as the end of the nineteenth century and a concomitant debate over authorship and attribution.

However one may react to these problems, the philosophical tracts which make up the Aristotelian corpus show a remarkable difference from Plato's in their confidence in writing and in their use of tools which writing makes possible. As history, once fixed as a genre by Herodotus and Thucydides, comprehended an assembly of information, opinion, values and experience of an extremely wide range of people, places and times, and could even spill over into poetry as in the *Aeneid*, philosophy could, now in an organized way, approach subjects like physics and metaphysics (whatever we take that designation of Aristotle's work to mean), astronomy, ethics, logic, rhetoric, politics and natural science. And all these are based not only on Aristotle's assumption of the essentially human nature of the taste for knowledge, but on a confidence in the ability of the human to achieve something significant in a quest for it. And it is a buildable, developable kind of knowledge. At the end of the Antigone, the chorus tells us, "The basis of happiness is wisdom." But what is the wisdom we learn from the misfortunes of Antigone, Haemon and Creon, in terms of knowledge we can use and expand for the future? Very different is the knowledge we gain from Aristotle, and his exposition of the route to human happiness in the *Nichomachean Ethics* and *Politics*.

Both Sophocles and Aristotle contributed to the medley which made up the music of Hellenism, and their very different harmonics continued to influence the manner in which the music was composed and heard. In Hellenism and in our culture the confidence in human potential for knowing has run in a straight line from Plato to Popper, (an odd collocation I have deliberately chosen) coexisting with a sense of *nausée* which has made it possible for Nietzsche to argue for Homeric values in the century of Marx.

As I considered the impact of writing on the ideology of Hellenism, I had also in mind the question of the effect of the nature in which the writing and text was recorded and preserved: I mean the roll, rather than the codex. Plato in the *Phaedrus* was concerned that writing would erase memory, but the difficulty of using the roll to refer back to specific passages or even, to find specific information in it seems to have made that threat a little remote. Certain the

inaccuracy and approximation by which earlier writers were cited by later among the Greeks suggests that memory was often used in preference to arduous precision. Just as Christian use of the codex and Jewish insistence on maintaining the roll may account at least in part for the difference in attitude toward scripture and basic text found in the two theological traditions, so the dependence on the roll through most of antiquity may have had its effects in preserving the earlier aspect of Hellenic mentality, and. perhaps, even playing a part in the predilection for Platonic over Aristotelian approaches on the part of most Greek philosophy of later times. When you reach the end of a set of rolls containing the *Republic*, it is difficult to go back to the points at which your faith in Socrates' assertions might have wavered. The metaphoric and mythic characteristics of Plato's writing continue the orality of earlier composition. Furthermore, the reading of the roll, listening to writing, so to speak, as many ancient readers did, also continues orality to some extent, and the combination of the transmission of text in this manner may well encourage styles and thought less Aristotelian, that is, less oriented to data and precision. Indeed, since we know from administrative practice in Egypt that the roll was even used for filing, that is, disparate documents were pasted together to form rolls which made individual texts virtually unfindable, the mentality of using writing for reference and consultation was a long time coming. The convenient codex, with pages that can be turned quickly, back and forth, more accommodating to scholarship and science, was a very late arrival on the scene in the ancient world. The earliest Christian codex is dated by its editor to 100, and only that editor was convinced that it was that early. Ultimately, after antiquity and its orientation had been swept away by the disruption of Mediterranean life after the fifth century of our era, and Greek texts returned in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, they came back in codex form, and then it was Aristotle who held the intellectuals' attention.

In antiquity, once writing prevailed it established the mentality of logic and progressive argument, but the enduring roll did not encourage the kind of investigation for which a book is better suited—based on data collection, comparison and cross reference. Anyone who is familiar with the most extensive ancient astronomical work, Claudius Ptolemy's *Almagest*, will be aware how difficult that work, or at least

its predecessors, would have been to use in roll form, and some of the peculiarities of reference and content in the *Almagest* may have been due to the existence of Ptolemy's source-information only in roll form. A modern comparison may be the difference between a hand-written notebook and computer memory for data retrieval and analysis—and it is worth noting that many in humanities, at least, have not had their mentality changed yet to go beyond notebook questions in using the computer memory. Among the limits on Greek science and technology may have been those imposed by the nature of the vehicle for communicating and recording information, and it would come as no surprise to find "roll attitudes" hanging on for a long time after the beginning of the use of the codex.

I am able to be only tentative in these suggestions about the ideological implications of using rolls instead of codices, and I do not want to press my ideas any further than I have suggested. With regard to the implications of writing on the mentality of Hellenism, however, I have more confidence. I can see a collocation of changes in the types of genre used to carry cultural concerns with the dominance of the new medium of communication, and I can see indicators like the odd contemporaneity of the group of authors whose works are completely preserved. I think that along with these phenomena and the change in the manner of text-creation came an ideological shift which produced a confidence in the capability of the human being to comprehend the earthly and cosmic environment, both in physical and moral terms. Where Hellenism earlier had evolved a mentality in which the all-important human developed a tolerance and insoucience of the neglectful or hostile cosmos, now it carried its emphasis on the human to a much higher level—the human could know, as well as suffer, and so had a new role to play. We can trace the development of the ideas, we can follow the emergence of the written text, we can see a shift in the vehicles of thought; I suggest that all are interrelated.

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