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The Special Theory of Greek Literacy

How the human mind really works, how what we call "thoughts" are formed, is a mystery not easily penetrated. Philosophers of many persuasions would prefer to separate mind from our senses and treat it as an autonomous self-regulating "entity," to be understood and investigated as such. This involves the paradox that the mind would undertake to understand itself. Is this a logical impossibility, or a metaphysical absurdity? It seems to have been an objective proposed by Socrates of Athens as early as 430 B.C.

A special theory of Greek literacy involves the proposition that the way we use our senses and the way we think are connected, and that in the transition from Greek orality to Greek literacy the terms of this connection were altered, with the result that thought patterns were altered also, and have remained altered, as compared with the mentality of oralism, ever since.

One begins with the Darwinian maxim, that our human capabilities have been produced by the pressures of natural selection exercised over perhaps a million years. The major specific differentiation that has occurred lies in our capacity for linguistic communication, which in turn brings into existence that kind of society enjoyed specifically by man. With society comes culture in all its manifestations. Though many of these are material (art and architecture, for example) the act of com-

munication which they indirectly express depends in turn upon the activity of linguistic communication. Human language is the foundation; the material achievement is the superstructure.

"Spoken or written" is a phrase which, when one thinks about it, calls up a problem in elementary psychology. The acoustic form of communication to which orality is confined employs ear and mouth, and only these two organs, and depends on them for its coherence. Written communication adds the vision of the eye. Is this a simple sum in addition or conversely a simple sum in substitution, one factor in the equation being simply replaced by another?

If the laws of evolution are taken seriously, neither can be wholly true. The acquisition of that means of communication which is specific to man was accomplished by "an increase of brain size during the mid-Pleistocene at an unprecedented rate. Average cranial capacity rose from a thousand to 1,400 cubic centimeters in less than one million years" (Mayr 1963, p. 634).

In parallel, selective pressures altered the shape and use of the face. Before man, the mouth in living organisms had developed as a means of mastication and as a weapon to grasp or kill the food required as well as defend it. Some secondary specialization occurred which allowed very elementary acoustic communication—the bark, the growl, the warble, and the like. The adaptations required for human language included "the low position of the larynx, the oval shape of the teeth row, the absence of diastemas between the teeth, the separation of the hyoid from the cartilage of the larynx, the general mobility of the tongue and the vaulting of the palate" (ibid., p. 635).

To be sure, human communication relies also on vision to the degree that bodily signals and responses are perceived by the eye. That could never of itself create human society, nor our essential humanity. It is a fact of our biological inheritance that these emerged through the use of our ears and mouths. To

suppose that after a million years, vision employed on a physical artifact—a piece of writing—could suddenly replace the biologically programmed habit of responding to acoustic messages, that is, that reading could replace hearing, automatically and easily, without profound and artificial adjustments of the human organism, is to fly in the face of the evolutionary lesson.

As the change toward literacy has occurred, it has produced changes in the configuration of human society. These, particularly as they have arisen after the invention of print, have attracted notice from recent scholars and historians (see above, chapter 6). But the main shift began to occur with the invention of writing itself, and it came to a crisis point with the introduction of the Greek alphabet. An act of vision was offered in place of an act of hearing as the means of communication, and as the means of storing communication. The adjustment that it caused was in part social, but the major effect was felt in the mind and the way the mind thinks as it speaks.

The crisis became Greek, rather than Hebrew or Babylonian or Egyptian, because of the alphabet's superior efficiency. Fluency had always characterized orally formed communication. To achieve a complete transfer to a system of visual recognition required a comparable visual fluency. This the pre-Greek systems could not provide, and so they could not compete adequately with the oralism which they partially recorded but which continued to flourish as the habit of a majority. Even today this seems to hold true in societies that are not officially alphabetized (see above, chapter 6).

Granted that primary orality had subsisted as a biologically determined condition for an undetermined period of evolutionary time, and that its social effectiveness depended upon a tradition acoustically memorized, the dramatic and traumatic effect of substituting a written artifact for this purpose becomes obvious. Aside from adding the vision of the reader as a third sensory means, it wiped out, at least theoretically, the prime

function of the acoustically trained memory, and therefore the pressure to have storage language in a memorizable form. As the memory function subsided, psychic energies hitherto channeled for this purpose were released for other purposes.

The initial effect of the invention had been to record orality itself on a scale never before attained. The special theory of Greek literacy describes a situation of unique complexity. The powers of "written orality" (if the paradox be allowed) were strong enough in Greece to enforce a partnership with the newly discoverable powers of the alphabet. What precisely these latter were is the subject of this chapter, but to isolate them as a "revolution" (as in Havelock 1982), while theoretically convenient, does injustice to the unique genius of classic Greek literature. The masterpieces we now read as texts are an interwoven texture of oral and written. Their composition was conducted in a dialectical process in which what we are used to think of as "literary value" achieved by the architectural eye crept into a style which had originally formed itself out of acoustic echoes.

The removal of pressure to memorize, registering slightly at first and very gradually increasing its force, had as its first effect some removal of the corresponding pressure to narrativize all preservable statement. This had freed the composer to choose subjects for a discourse which were not necessarily agents, that is, persons.

They could in time turn themselves into names of impersonals, of ideas or abstractions or "entities" (as we sometimes call them). Their prototypes had occurred in oralism, but only incidentally, never as the subject of the kind of extended language allotted to persons.

Hesiod affords an initial example of a process which was to gather momentum later, when he chose the term *dike* (usually translated "justice") as the formal subject of a "discourse." The term occurs incidentally and not infrequently in orally preserved speech (as in Homer) but never as the topic of a formal

discussion. The narrative laws of oral memorization would discourage such a choice.

Having made his choice, Hesiod cannot conjure the required discourse out of thin air. We could easily manage it today, because we inherit two thousand years of literate habit. He, on the contrary, must resort to the oral word as already known—the only preserved word that is known. He must build his own semi-connected discourse out of disconnected bits and pieces contained in oral discourse, either some pieces in which the term *dike* happened for whatever reason to occur, or others in which incidents occurred that he felt were appropriate to connect with the word. His decision is compositional (rather than ideological), or perhaps we should say re-compositional.

If he must do this, he will be forced to continue to utilize the narrative forms which control what he is borrowing from. He still will not be able to tell us what justice is, but only what it does or suffers. He has taken one decisive step toward the formation of a new mentality by inventing the topic to take the place of the person. But he cannot take the second step of giving his topic a syntax of descriptive definition. It will still behave rather than be. So in seventy-three lines of hexameter we are treated to a panorama of dynamic situations in which justice singular or plural features as a subject performing or an object being performed on: a voice speaking, a runner in a race, a woman abused, a present you give someone, a thing you walk away from, a pronouncement of Zeus, a crooked weapon to inflict injury, a ward protected by guardians, a virgin goddess who sings her proclamations, a prisoner confined, a piece of property, a present given by Zeus to men, a cripple. The heterogeneity of the images may seem to be a symptom of confusion, but in fact it is the product of new invention, unavoidable at the first stage of a pioneering journey of language and of the mind (Havelock 1978a, chapters 11 and 12).

The psychological push needed to bring this about must

have been the use of vision as supplement to hearing. An architectural—not acoustic or at least only partially acoustic—rearrangement has been performed on language as previously used. The various "justices" which perform one after the other in Hesiod's account echo each other acoustically to some extent, but they are also all "look-alikes." The reading eye has been able to perceive them as located in an oralistic flow that has now been written down in the alphabet, which can be looked at, read, and "backward-scanned." Hesiod could have so composed only if he was able to "read" oral texts of Homer (and perhaps others), though not necessarily the complete Homer of today.

The first beginnings of the alphabetic revolution have occurred, in the creation of a *topic* as a subject of a "discourse" made possible by the conversion of acoustically preserved memorized speech into materially preserved visible artifacts that are capable of rearrangement. But the topic must continue to behave as a person or as something managed by persons. Partnership between oral and written, acoustic and visual, ear and eye, still remains intimate, with the eye as yet a junior partner. As the partnership develops and the ratio of control slowly alters, topicalization slowly increases its presence in classic Greek. The effect can be dramatized by a particularly famous illustration—the chorus on the genius of man, composed to form the first stasimon of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Here is a topic presented formally at the beginning (333). It is named *anthrōpos*, also styled later as *anēr* (348).

This general kind of "person" can crop up briefly in oralist language—Homer for example—by being included in a maxim: "As (is) the generation of leaves, such also of men. . . ." The maxim indeed comes nearer to the nature of an abstract statement than anything else in oralism. But its determinate characteristic is its brevity. The mental operation involved in thinking it up means breaking away briefly from the flow of the narrative panorama in order to fix it in some

permanent posture, and the effort could last only a brief time, before relapsing into the familiar habit of memorizable narrative.

Here, however, in Sophocles' verse—and in highly memorizable cadences—is an extended topic. This creature is a phenomenon (333). His thirteen achievements, or hallmarks, are itemized not necessarily in logical order: first, navigation, followed by agriculture, bird watching, hunting, fishing, domestication of animals (the sustenance group); then language, thought, social instincts, architecture, medicine, law, the state (*polis*).

Clearly, in this example, echoes of an anthropological discourse have intruded into the play's text. They even include a reference to the achievement of technical skills (365–66). However, though a topic "man" is proposed and described, we are never told what it (or he) "is," only what this named "person" *anthropos* "does." A series of man's properties as a species is spelled out in short narratives of things we do. Even man's *noema* (thought) is "wind-swift." These are not definitions, not conceptualized abstractly. But they approach the language of definition, so far as they are cast in the present tense; these are things man *always* does. But expression of the definitive word "always" is absent.

The same generic present of the activist verb partly prevails in Hesiod's previous topicalization. There is a difference between this generalized usage and the same tense as it occurs in narrative to index action going on *now* before one's eye—not necessarily "going on always." Once the use of "topics" for discourse became an accepted habit, pressure mounted for predicates which after first supplying an "always action" could convert this into an "always condition," that is, relationship. Static "facts of the case" began to replace dynamic "goings on." In the language of philosophy, "being" (as a form of syntax) began to replace "becoming."

The change is one that still grows out of the ability to read

language visually in its alphabetized form instead of hearing it pronounced acoustically. The contrast can be illustrated by quotation from the opening pages of Aristotle's *Politics,* in which we hear a later echo of the same anthropology and which may indeed carry a reminiscence of the Sophoclean chorus, but with a big difference:

> From these [considerations] it is evident that the city is [one] of the things-by-nature, and that man [*anthropos*] by nature [is] a city-animal, and that the non-city man [*apolis,* as in *Antig.* 360] due to nature not some vicissitude is surely either a worthless [person] or a superman—like the one reviled by Homer: "clanless, lawless, hearthless" [*anestios:* cf. *mete emoi parestios* in *Antig.* 372]. . . . Man alone of animals possesses discourse. . . . As man is best of the animals [*beltison zōion*], so also sundered from law and justice he [is] worst of all.
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> [Cf. *Antigone* 332–33: *polla ta deina kai ouden anthropou deinoteron.*]

A sentiment shared by both contexts, one of the mid-fifth century, the other of the late fourth, is nevertheless expressed in two quite different modes of syntax. Both share "man" as a general name, not that of a specific person like an "Achilles" or an "Odysseus" which had been the typical idiom of memorized orality. But by the time the Aristotelean passage was written, it had become possible to describe this "man" not by narrating what he does, but by linking "him" as a "subject" to a series of predicates connoting something fixed, something that is an object of thought: the predicate describes a class, or a property, not an action. In the idiom suitable for this purpose the verb "to be" is used to signify not a "presence" or a "forceful existence" (its common use in oralism) but a mere linkage required by a conceptual operation. The narrativized usage has turned into a logical one. This conceptual idiom also requires that

Greek predicates become generalized, using the generic neuter (that is, the non-gender, the non-personal), as in "the [things] by nature ... best of animals ... worst of animals" (not "best animal ... worst animal"). This use of the generic neuter occurs in a few Homeric maxims but (so far as I know) is confined to them. In oralism it does not become an idiom of discursive speech. Sophocles uses it to introduce the *Antigone* chorus ("the formidable [things] are many, and no [thing] more formidable"), but he then drops it. It is comparatively rare in tragedy, as in Homer. In philosophy, on the other hand, conceptual force was being assisted by this usage, especially as applied to the Greek definite article (Snell 1924).

It is not artificial to charge these conceptual advances in idiom to the account of the written alphabet. The standard explanation of such a difference between two "authors" resorts to the truism that the two were of different professions, one a poet, the other a philosopher, and that their vocabulary differs accordingly. This presumes that the two professions with their corresponding idioms were both available to Greeks of the fifth century and that a Sophocles was an author who happened to choose one rather than the other, in the manner of his modern counterparts. The testimony of the vocabulary contained in the texts we have, from Homer to Euripides, tells against this conclusion. The alternative explanation is that the idiom represents something that had slowly become possible only as the pressure to compose discourse for oral memorization had been lifted by the introduction of an alternative means. The composer, seeking survival for what he was composing, found that the artifact he was creating could do this for him by simply existing as an artifact.

The substitution of the "timeless present," turning into the "logical present," in place of the "immediate present" or the past or future, became a preoccupation of the pre-Platonic philosophers, particularly Parmenides. His verse indeed vividly illustrates the dynamics of the partnership between oral and

written idiom as they existed in his day. This is no place to examine his system, except to note his dramatization of the verb "to be" in its present tense *esti* and its neuter generic present participle *eon* as embodying a linguistic usage which, as he saw it, must replace the Homeric language of action and event—of "becoming" and "perishing." Discussion of the logical and epistemological and ontological dimensions of this verb has become a commonplace among historians of Greek thought, especially as such concerns come to the fore in Plato's dialogues, which, it must always be remembered, were written documents, the fruit of a writer's lifetime preoccupation. Sufficient here to say that the genesis of this Greek problem becomes uncovered once it is placed in the context supplied by the special theory of Greek literacy.

Could the Muse learn, if not to sing, at least to write, in the verb "to be" rather than in the verb "to do"? One genre of composition shared by the muse of Homer and the muse of Alexandria was the "hymn" celebrating the status and functions of a given deity. The Homeric "author" of a hymn to Aphrodite proceeds to indicate her unusual parentage and then some specifics of her character by a narrative short story. She is mistress of Cyprus

> whither the humid force of blowing zephyr carried her over the wave of the foam-roaring sea within mollient foam. And her the seasons received welcoming and put ambrosial garments around her and on her immortal head they set a well-fashioned crown [both] beautiful [and] golden . . . and when they had put the adornment entire upon her [body's] flesh, they brought her into [the company of] the immortals.
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> [*Homeric Hymn* VI, ll. 3–15]

The passage, like the rest of the hymn that follows it, illustrates standard oralist technique for "drawing a portrait" as we would say. Only, this is not a still-life portrait, but a piece of

cinema: a beautiful woman emerging from sea foam is wafted ashore and is then dressed in her boudoir by her attendants before being introduced to the waiting company in a formal reception. The language evokes tactile mobility—the softness of the foam-bed, the warm wetness of the wind, the caressed surface of a woman's body.

Similarly, Callimachus celebrates Zeus by first addressing the circumstance of parentage:

> In Parrhasia it was that Rhea bare you, where was a hill sheltered with thickest brush. Thence is the place holy. . . . There when your mother had laid you down from her mighty lap, straightway she sought a stream of water, wherewith she might purge her of the soilure of birth and wash your body therein. But mighty Ladon flowed not yet, nor Erymanthus clearest of rivers; waterless was all Arcadia, yet was it anon to be called well-watered. For at that time when Rhea loosed her girdle, full many a hollow oak did watery Ladon bear aloft, and many a wain did Melas carry and many a serpent above Carnion, wet though it now be, cast its lair. . . ."
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> [Callimachus, *Hymn to Zeus*, ll. 10–25; Loeb translation]

In this poetry written for literate readers the narrative syntax of oralism still survives: "When your mother laid you down . . . she sought a stream. . . ." (Even so, oralism would more likely have avoided the subordinate clause, saying instead, paratactically, "she laid you down and sought a stream.") But clearly the overall syntax is quite different. Explanation of the contrast between the two styles normally attaches itself to what is obvious—the increased weight of learned allusion, which burdens the verse in accordance with the conventions of scholarly poetry. But the difference goes deeper: the narrative syntax of memorizable oralism has been invaded by the static syntax of literate description: "where *was* a hill . . . thence *is* the place holy . . . Ladon flowed not yet . . . waterless *was* all Arcadia

. . . yet *was it* [the verb *mellein* used of historical fact] anon to be called well-watered . . . wet though it *now be*. . . ."

Though past tenses intermingle with present, they are not the past of actions performed in memorized narrative, but the past of historic fact, which now exists fixed in the mind of the present. The verb "to be," linking a subject and its property in a timeless connection, intrudes as it never could in oralist language. This is not cinema, but still life, a writer's portraiture. But yet, is it not poetry? The Muse has learnt to put her song into writing and in doing so tries to sing in the language of Aristotle.

Has Greek discourse—the contrived and cunning word—as it passes out of orality into literacy, started to devalue itself? Here are competing versions of the human experience, of what is perceived as a human reality. The one narrates an occasion which is dramatized, the other places the same kind of occasion in a historical context. Leaving aside the personalities involved (since the charms of Venus, which give her an advantage over Jove, are only contingent to the main issue), to which of these two idioms of discourse is instinctive preference likely to be given?

Yet there is another side to the coin. Alphabetized speech offered its own forms of freedom, even of excitement. Oralism had favored the traditional and the familiar, both in content and style. The need to conserve in memory required that the content of memory be economical. You added to it only cautiously, slowly, and often with the loss of previous material to make room for addition in what was a drastically limited capacity. Oral information was packaged tightly (to use an anachronistic metaphor).

The resources of documentation were by contrast wide open, at least in theory, disclosing two related possibilities. The warehouse of storage, no longer acoustic but visibly material, was extendible, and also the documented contents need no longer relate only what was already familiar and so easy of rec-

ollection. Alphabetized speech, given its ready fluency of recognition, now allowed of novel language and of novel statement (should individual minds be tempted to indulge in such) which a reader scanning as he read could recognize at leisure and "take in" and "think over." Under acoustic conditions, this was not a possible operation. He could also respond with a commentary of his own which might be novel.

The loss of constraint previously imposed by rhythm greatly assisted this process. Prose became the vehicle of a whole new universe of fact and of theory. This was a release of mind as well as of language, and it showed up first, where we would expect it, in the creation of "history" as essentially a prosaic enterprise. If the genius of preserved orality had always been narrative, the inclination of the first writers, as they were able to turn preserved speech into prose, would be to choose the familiar narrative mode for this purpose. They boldly set out to describe anything that had "happened" within their own field of attention, concentrating on war in particular, because deeds of war had already been exploited by the bards of orality as the readiest means of attracting and holding audiences. Yet it is significant that they also gave much attention to the *mores*—the *ethos* and *nomos*—of societies both Greek and foreign as though they instinctively recognized the didactic role of preserved speech acting as the instrument of cultural tradition. The Ionians Hecataeus and Herodotus were the pioneers, followed by Thucydides, the first Attic historian.

Gradually, if sparingly, the verb "to be" appears as the copula required for a stated historical "fact" replacing the powerful and mobile "presence" assigned to the personalities of oral narrative. The phrase *potamos megas*—"river big"—expresses an oral vision (and incidentally constitutes a fragment of a hexameter). But *Olenos potamos megas esti*—"Olenos is a big river" (Herodotus)—converts the vision into the likeness of an objective statement (though the preferred predicate is still a symbol of status).

The same opening toward the novel and the nontraditional, as it provoked history, also created philosophy and science. The new language of fact was accompanied by a new language of theory, which relied even more on the resources of the verb "to be."

Aristotle, writing as a philosopher, and asking the question, How did philosophy start, proposed an answer that was in part psychological, resting on the human tendency to pause in wonder at some striking spectacle, and in part sociological, relying on that "surplus value" (to adopt the Marxist formula) accumulated in society which becomes sufficient to support a class of leisured persons, able to pursue speculation "beyond need." The explanation can be interpreted as in part an apology for his own Lyceum, considered as a club of leisured persons who needed the support of their contemporaries to function. The pioneers of the past whom he names in this category lived within a century (or a little more) of the alphabet's invention.

The words he chooses to describe their intellectual enterprise are *theōria* and its verb *theōrein,* both referring to the act of looking at something. The choice may be a better pointer toward the real truth of what had happened. Why choose vision as the metaphor for an intellectual operation, unless guided by the subconscious recognition that the operation had arisen out of viewing the written word rather than just hearing it spoken?

The continuing partnership between orality and literacy, ear and eye, required Plato, writing in the crucial moment of transition from one to the other, to reassert the primacy of speaking and hearing in personal oral response, even as he wrote. The apparently spoken format of his dialogues testifies to the partnership. In one of them—the *Phaedrus*—he even strives to give the oral message priority over the written, though with ambiguous result. But it was the written which had made his own profession possible, and his literary output—the first extensive and coherent body of written speculative thought in

the history of mankind—testifies as much. Nevertheless, after the Greeks, the possibilities of novel statement remained partly dormant.

The conversion of an acoustic medium for communication into a visible object used for the same purpose had wide effects which at the time they occurred were accepted unconsciously (with some exceptions); and by and large they have been so accepted ever since. As a result of technological efficiency, the conversion could become total—the only instance of this kind in human history. All language could now be thought of as written language. The text as read came to be regarded as the equivalent of the word as spoken. Since scholars and specialists deal almost exclusively with texts, the assumption has grown up that writing is identical with language—in fact, that writing *is* language, rather than merely a visual artifact designed to trigger the memory of a series of linguistic noises by symbolic association. Non-alphabetic scripts, such as those of China and Japan, are commonly confused with the foreign tongues they are used for, as though the two were inseparable. It is a misconception which tends to block any proposal to alphabetize spoken tongues. The science of linguistics itself commonly treats textualized language as though it were the whole of language.

The confusion is understandable, because it is only as language is written down that it becomes possible to think about it. The acoustic medium, being incapable of visualization, did not achieve recognition as a phenomenon wholly separable from the person who used it. But in the alphabetized document the medium became objectified. There it was, reproduced perfectly in the alphabet, not a partial image but the whole of it, no longer just a function of "me" the speaker but a document with an independent existence.

This existence, as it began to attract attention, invited examination of itself. So emerged, in the speculations of the sophists and Plato, as they wrote about what they were writing, conceptions of how this written thing behaved, of its "parts of speech," its "grammar" (itself a word which defines language as it is written). The term *logos,* richly ambivalent, referring to discourse both as spoken and as written (argument versus treatise) and also to the mental operation (the reasoning power) required to produce it, came into its own, symbolizing the new prosaic and literate discourse (albeit still enjoying a necessary partnership with spoken dialectic). A distinction slowly formed which identified the uttered *epos* of orally preserved speech as something different from *logos* and (to the philosophers) inferior to it. Concomitantly, the feeling for spoken tongue as a stream flowing (as in Hesiod) was replaced by a vision of a fixed row of letters, and the single word as written, separated from the flow of the utterance that contained it, gained recognition as a separate "thing."

There is probably no attestable instance in Greek of the term *logos* as denoting a single "word," though it is often translated as though it did. The first "word for a word" in the early philosophers seems to have been *onoma*—a "name" (Havelock 1982a, p. 289*n*64). They recognized that in the orally preserved speech which they had to use (while striving to correct it) the subjects of significant statements were always persons, with "names," not things or ideas.

As language became separated visually from the person who uttered it, so also the person, the source of the language, came into sharper focus and the concept of selfhood was born. The history of Greek literature is often written as though the concept was already available to Homer and as though it should be taken for granted as a condition of all sophisticated discourse. The early lyric poets of Greece have been interpreted as the voice of an individualism asserting the identities of individual selves, to form a necessary condition of Greek classic culture (Snell 1953, chapter 3; Havelock 1963, p. 211*n*6). This in any strict sense only became true in the time of Plato. Achilles may have had a "self" in our sense of the word, but he

was not aware of it, and if he had been, he would not have behaved as a hero of the oralist vocabulary, a speaker of utterances and a doer of deeds.

The "self" was a Socratic discovery or, perhaps we should say, an invention of the Socratic vocabulary (Havelock 1972, pp. 1–18; Claus 1981). The linguistic method used to identify it and examine it was originally oral, so far as Socrates was concerned. Later it was "textualized" as we say by Plato. But though oral, the Socratic dialectic depended upon the previous isolation of language in its written form as something separate from the person who uttered it. The person who used the language but was now separated from it became the "personality" who could now discover its existence. The language so discovered became that level of theoretic discourse denoted by *logos* (Havelock 1984).

Within the logos resided knowledge of what was known, now separated from the personal knower—who could, however, train himself to use it. Simultaneously, a separate cleavage opened up, between this theoretic discourse and the rhythmic narrative of oralism: the philosopher entered the lists against the poets. Both these breaks with tradition were recognized and dramatized in Socrates' own lifetime, when he was nearly fifty and Plato was a child. Neither would have been rendered possible without growing visualization of the tradition, as this had occurred when language was alphabetized.

Aside from the reflexive pronouns (my-self, your-self, himself) the chosen symbol of selfhood became *psyche,* often erroneously rendered as "the soul." The choice betrays an instinctive fidelity, on the part of those who exploited the word, to the continuing partnership between orality and literacy. For here was the symbol of the speechless thoughtless "ghost" of oral epic, able in Greek orality to discourse (and so "think") only after being revived by the warm blood of temporary human life, but now given a new dimension in the guise of the "ghost in me" which as it speaks also thinks and, through the new life of the intellect, achieves the only complete life of man.

Once the reader found himself set free to compose a language of theory, with its abstract subjects and conceptualized predicates, he also realized that he was employing new mental energies of a different quality from those exercised in oralism. Pressure accordingly arose to give this mental operation a separate identity. One can say that the entire Athenian "enlightenment," assigned by historians to the last half of the fifth century B.C., revolved around the discovery of intellectualism, and of the intellect as representing a new level of the human consciousness. The linguistic symptoms of this radical shift away from oralism, which has ever since underlain all European consciousness, occurred in a proliferation of terms, for notions and thoughts and thinking, for knowledge and knowing, for understanding, investigating, research, inquiry. The task set himself by Socrates was to bring this new kind of terminology into close connection with the self and with *psyche* (Havelock 1984, pp. 88–91). For him, the terminology symbolized the level of psychic energy required to realize thought of what was permanently "true," as opposed to what fleetingly happened in the vivid oral panorama.

The linguistic formula in which such intellection expressed itself was par excellence the "is" statement, in preference to the "doing" statement, the one literate, the other oralist, with a corresponding contrast between a "true" mental act of knowing and an oral act of feeling and responding. A static relationship between the "true" statement and its "knower" took the place of a mobile relationship between linguistic sound and its recipient.

Yet always, the later mode, the literate, was realized only as it came out of the earlier, the oral, and as it still remained partner with the oral, at least for the time being. Very few terms of the growing intellectualist vocabulary were coined out of thin air (some that were can be credited to Democritus); Homeric heroes could sense and be aware and reflect and seek. The difference was that such thoughtful activities were directed toward choices of specific actions, or else expressed sen-

sibilities of specific happenings. The same nouns and verbs in the intellectualist vocabulary first were converted into symbols of isolated mental operations and then were placed in contexts where the objects of such verbs and the predicates of such nouns became abstract.

The close partnership was recognized with a degree of poignancy, in a symbolic incident narrated in the most famous of Plato's dialogues, the *Phaedo.* Purporting to relate the master's death, the text in its conclusion is used to dramatize the survival and hence the existence of the master's real "self," the *psyche.* In the prelude, waiting in prison for death, he reports that in the last few days he had turned for recreation to the task of versifying some of Aesop's fables. Up to this point, he remarks, "I had thought that the supreme form of the Muses' art was really philosophy." But as he turns back to versifying, preparing for the end of life, he reverts also to those ways of orality with which he had grown up. His own previous career had exemplified as dramatically as was possible the closeness of the partnership between traditional orality and incipient literacy. His own dialectic depended upon a growing literate vocabulary. Yet he had never written a word himself. Plato's incomparable insight captures a last sense of the partnership precisely at the moment when it was to be dissolved. The orality to which Socrates briefly turned back was to fade away before the presence of its junior but now more powerful partner, just as Socrates must fade away too. By the time it was Plato's turn to leave, in the middle of the fourth century, the Greek Muse had left the whole world of oral discourse and oral "knowing" behind her. She had truly learnt to write, and to write in prose—and even to write in philosophical prose.

11

The Special Theories on Trial

Was there a time when an oral state of mind, as described, of great significance and specifically different from ours, actually existed? Was it one which continued to exist as a pervasive presence in the early masterpieces of Greek literature? Did the mere act of learning to read and write produce the consequences that have been described? We are not aware of them today. Why is it necessary to suppose that they once did occur in Greece?

Antiquity can be viewed only through the lens of modernity. The image which passes through the lens in order to reach our own sensibilities is one that has been manipulated by our choice of focus and lighting. The thesis presented in the previous chapter is revisionist, in the sense that it asks us to adjust a previously held system of ideas which have been used to interpret the Greek cultural achievement.

It addresses itself in particular to a re-reading of the Greek classics, with attention to overtones concealed in their texts. These have continually received scholarly scrutiny, ranging from later antiquity to the present day and, most conspicuously, in the last two hundred years dating from the inception of classical philology as a discipline of the university. Is it likely, one hears the skeptic say, that anything really "new" that can be said about them is either available or discoverable?

Classical scholarship is an art, not a science, and its objec-