

Eric A. Havelock
and
the Origins of Philosophy

by

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To My Family

and
Phil & Ray

"...THERE IS HARDLY ANYTHING that can make one happier than to feel that one counts for something with other people. What matters here is not numbers, but intensity. In the long run, human relationships are the most important thing in life; the modern 'efficient' man can do nothing to change this, nor can the demigods and lunatics who know nothing about human relationships. God uses us in his dealings with others."

--Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Key to Eric A. Havelock References

I have gleaned Havelock's observations from his major works dealing exclusively with the oral/literate question. The following works are listed by publication date but are not exhaustive: *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963, hereafter referred to as *Preface*; "Preliteracy and the Presocratics." In *Institute of Classical Studies Bulletin* No. 13: 44-67. University of London, 1966, hereafter referred to as "Preliteracy"; "Prologue to Greek Literacy." In *University of Cincinnati Classical Studies* II, pp. 331-91. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973, hereafter referred to as "Prologue"; *Origins of Western Literacy*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1976, hereafter referred to as *Origins*; "The Alphabetization of Homer." In *Communication Arts in the Ancient World*, ed. Havelock and Hershbell, pp. 3-21. New York: Hastings House, 1978; *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982, hereafter referred to as *Revolution*; "The Socratic Problem: Some Second Thoughts." In *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. Anton and Preus, 2: 147-73. Albany: State University of New York, 1983, hereafter referred to as "Problem"; "The Linguistic Task of the Presocratics." In *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. Kevin Robb, pp. 7-82. La Salle, Illinois: Monist Library of Philosophy, 1983, hereafter referred to as "Task"; "The Orality of Socrates and the Literacy of Plato." In *New Essays on Socrates*, ed. Eugene Kelly, pp. 67-93. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1984, hereafter referred to as "Orality"; and *The Muse*

Learns to Write. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, hereafter referred to as *Muse*. "The Oral/Literate Equation." In *Literacy, Language and Learning: The Nature and Consequences of Reading and Writing*, eds. Olson, David and Torrance, Nancy. London: Cambridge University Press, 1991, hereafter referred to as *Equation*.¹

¹ This paper originally was given to me by David Olson at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education as an unpublished script, July 1990.

Introduction

This paper, broadly speaking, is a study on the birth of philosophy in Ancient Greece. In order to keep this paper manageable, I have chosen to concentrate on a particular figure, Eric A. Havelock, and his contribution to the field of research that has investigated the question of the birth of philosophy in the Western tradition. The objective of this paper, then, is to investigate this problem of philosophy's birth in light of Havelock's assessment that this birth can be construed only in light of the progress of western thought from a state of orality to literacy.

Havelock says that Greek culture from the eighth century, B.C., to the latter third of the fifth century, B.C., was predominately oral and that all communication was performed by the medium of oral discourse and a receptive ear. Communication was essentially an act of speaking and hearing. Therefore, the medium of communication in this epoch in Greece was seen as a dynamic exchange between word of mouth and ear, which was mutable and able to adapt to different occasions and events as they happened.

With the advent of widespread literacy, which Havelock sets in the latter third of the fifth century, B.C., the medium of communication began to see a change from mouth and ear to eye or from an 'acoustic' to a 'visual' medium. Communication became more visually oriented to 'written' texts that were beginning to replace the traditional oral discourse of the previous age. Therefore, a shift in the medium of communication accompanied or effected a shift in

worldview. Havelock calls this gradual shift as one from an oral to a literate state of mind.

The question of the birth of philosophy, for Havelock, is concentrated particularly on the intimate relationship between primary orality, the oral culture uncontaminated by literacy, and literacy as it became fixed in the 'texts' of a literate society. The key to this tensive relationship and the glue that holds them together was the technological advances of the Greek alphabet. For Havelock's argument is that the alphabet served as a catalyst in the cultural transformation of the Greek mind around the fifth century, B.C., when literacy became widespread in the cultural, political, economical, and especially, the educational institutions. These broad and sweeping effects of alphabetical literacy, according to Havelock, also established a polarity between two cultural institutions: the traditional Homeric poetry and epic vs. the 'new' Platonism of abstract, 'objectified,' dialectic. This polarity Havelock construes, also, as the tension between an oral and a literate state of mind. For Havelock this tension is representative of the gradual shift from the traditional oral worldview of a non-literate Greece, one exemplified by Homer, to a Platonic literate state. But this break was not a single and sudden shift, but one of many that took place only gradually over a period of many years.

Our agenda in this paper is to evaluate Havelock's program along the lines of a contrast between oral and literate modes of thought. Our underlying thesis is that Havelock is operating from a starting point that understands Greek thought before Plato as a structural-system battling between two life-views: Orality (the

dynamic) vs literacy (the static). This polarity in cultural thought patterns or life-views is not to be seen as mutually exclusive but as involved in a tensive relationship that culminates in Plato's Great Synthesis, which both incorporates the oral and literate (the dynamic and the static) into one grand structural system ruled by a single ground motive. The impetus behind this Great Synthesis is, for Havelock, the Greek alphabet without which the Great Synthesis (which, for Havelock, is the birth of philosophy) could not have emerged. Thus, the thesis of Havelock that we will ultimately address in this paper is: "that the gradual promulgation of literacy at the expense of orality was the decisive causal factor in the development of Greek culture in general and philosophy in particular."¹ But Havelock is not arguing that the transformation from oral to literate modes of communication was one from a 'primitive' to a sophisticated, complex society, but rather one of inventing new forms of thought or expression to deal with the new technology of the Greek alphabet.

Our goal in this paper is to criticize Havelock's estimation of philosophy and its intricate relation to literacy. Did philosophy ultimately depend on the full-flowering of literacy that was effected by the unique invention of the alphabet, as Havelock would understand it? Or could philosophy have occurred apart from the effects of alphabetic literacy? Our answer is that philosophy should not be understood as growing out of this causal relationship with alphabetic literacy.

¹ *Preface*, 194.

We should bear in mind that Havelock's program is primarily concerned with communication theory, that is, how different forms of communication played a role in the growth of the mind in ancient Greece. As we will see, the two primary forms of communication were represented by oral and written modes. Havelock, and other scholars in such varied fields as communication theory, linguistics, and classics, rightly insisted on the importance of language and how it influenced the life and 'thinking' of ancient Greece and her surrounding neighbors. They by no means disregarded the importance of political, cultural, and economic influences, but by and large, insisted on the primacy of language as the driving force behind the Greek culture and intellect. In other words, it was the nature of language that paved the way for the major changes that occurred in the political, cultural, and economic sectors of society. It is this 'primacy of language' that we wish to contend in this paper.

This paper will be divided into two chapters: the first chapter will present Havelock's assessment of the orality/literacy question and its implications for the birth of philosophy. We will first examine his analysis of the Greek alphabet and its role in the promulgation of literacy; secondly we will develop Havelock's Homeric/Platonic antithesis; followed lastly by an assesement of his placement of the Presocratic philosophers and Socrates in his oral/literate scheme. The second and final chapter serves as a critique of Havelock's conclusions.

Prefatory remarks that follow will investigate the background to Havelock's theses by exploring, in summary fashion, the role that oral communication played on the Greek mind prior to and during

the rise of alphabetic literacy. We will now look at some of the concerns that surround the questions of orality and its importance to the rise of philosophy in relation to Havelock's theory.

Havelock's underlying assumptions concerning the oral/literate question rest on his attempt to paint a more positive picture of orality. For the most part, scholars in the field have underestimated the role of orality in the development and functioning of preliterate as well as literate society. This 'bias' toward literacy, what David Olson has called the 'myth of literacy,'¹ is based on the assumption that any culture that is nonliterate must be 'primitive,' unsophisticated, and 'impoverished.' These same scholars have taken their colored glasses and projected today's literacy upon a situation that was not literate. According to Havelock, Greek literacy had first to emerge from Greek orality, an orality that was determined by human biology. This means that human beings are initially programmed to speak. Writing figures in only secondarily. Writes Havelock: ..."oral linguistic habits form part of our biological inheritance, which can be supplemented through literacy but never wholly superseded..."² In other words, the advent of literacy is a question of a "cultural development superimposed upon the biological man,"³ which depends, still, on "the accumulation of information and its storage for reuse in human language."⁴ Oral communication, then, according to Havelock, "is fundamental to our

¹ David Olson. "Literate Thought." In *Understanding Literacy and Cognition* (New York: Plenum Press, 1989), 3.

² *Equation*, 20.

³ *ibid*, 19.

⁴ *Muse*, 55.

species, whereas reading and writing wear the appearance of a recent accident."¹ It is a mistake, then, to think that non-literate Greece was inferior and unsophisticated.

The 'bias' toward literacy led to the conclusion that the Greek alphabet was invented around the tenth century, B.C., if not earlier, based in part on the conclusion that Homer's poetry had first to be written down in prose. This again is a modern prejudice. Today we often think of poetry as refined prose. A poetry superimposes its art form upon the prose giving the poetry sophistication and refinement. Poetry, then, is seen as an addition to prose.

Havelock reverses this bias stating that prose came from poetry. Poetry is not seen as modern poetry, but as a way of life, a 'massive repository of cultural information.' Havelock draws primarily from two sources, who helped shape a new view of the early Greek world. Milman Parry (whom we will look at further below) in his analysis of the metrical and verbal structure of the Homeric poems, drew the conclusion "that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were examples of a strictly oral composition which employed a formulaic and highly traditional language."² Homer was cast into new light. He was seen as a nonliterate bard who composed from memory for audiences who could only listen and not read.³

¹ *Origins*, 6.

² *Prologue*, 333.

³ See the "Collected Papers of Milman Parry." edited by Adam Parry in the *Making of Homeric Verse* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1971). Hereafter referred to as *Papers*.

This conclusion is further strengthened by Rhys Carpenter's published demonstrations that the Greek alphabet was invented around the last half of the eighth century, B.C., and not earlier.¹

The recognition that the creative process of Homeric epic ended shortly before the invention of the Greek alphabet also points to the fact that Greek culture before the end of the eighth century, B.C., was primarily oral. Any notion that oral civilization is primitive and incapable of sophisticated art is misdirected.²

Let us turn to the debate over orality as it was constructed by Havelock's primary predecessor, Milman Parry, and other connected authorities in the field of orality, namely Alfred Lord and G.S. Kirk, who made fruitful contributions to Havelock's program. This historical backdrop is helpful in better understanding the context in which Havelock was to formulate his thesis concerning the impact of the Greek alphabet on ancient Greek society and thought.

What Milman Parry did was to focus not on orality alone but to find a way to contrast it with literacy. What this meant for Parry and Havelock later was that at only one time in an historical context --viz., ancient Greece-- did a profound change in communication life emerge. That change occurred when non-literate culture, based solely in orality, encountered a radically new form of communication: the written word. This is clearly something that can never happen again. Parry's study could only be completed if it held that both orality and literacy were in a dynamic tension, on the one hand, and

¹ Rhys Carpenter. "The Antiquity of the Greek Alphabet," *AJA* 37 (1933), 8-29; and "The Greek Alphabet Again," *AJA* 42 (1938), 58-69.

² *Prologue*, 335.

on the other hand entered into this tension in a specific historical setting, namely, ancient Greece.

Parry argued that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were the work of one traditional poet, whose diction was not his own creation but the product of generations of bards (*aoidoi*) before him. The poet did not search his mind for *le mot juste* but inherited a ready-made phraseology that conformed to the metrical needs of composing hexameter verse. Parry demonstrated clearly that the noun-epithet combination in the Homeric poems, such as "swift-footed Achilles" or "grey-eyed Athena," were not randomly or consciously chosen juxtapositions but rather examples of a phraseological pattern he called the *formula* and defined as a group of words which is regularly employed "under the same metrical conditions, to express a given essential idea."¹ The poetic tradition, as Parry described it, consisted wholly of such substitutable phrases or formulas, some changeable and some constant, which were woven together into the fabric of the poem by the individual poet at the moment of composition.

Only in the very act of oral performance, Parry contended, could the formulaic idiom of the Greek poetic tradition have been developed and cultivated. This seems remarkable when one considers that the 29,000 lines of Homeric epic are to be explained as an artistic creation without the aid of writing. Havelock, unlike Parry, believes Homeric epic had access to some rudimentary writing that helped facilitate the memory but that Homeric epic was first and

¹ *Papers*, 13.

foremost governed acoustically and therefore set within a thoroughly oral context of rhythm and story.

Parry's concentration on the standardized epithets attached to proper names led him to conclude that these epithets and other formulas aided the improvisation of the tale as it unfolded. These formulae were placed in the bards' memory, and kept at his disposal for (re)use at a specific time and place. They helped both with improvisation and with filling in the metrical gaps in order that the singer might maintain a continuous and even flow.¹ This breakthrough proved instrumental for Havelock's discovery of 'rhythm' and its role in the preservation of oral language in the social memory.

Parry and his assistant, Albert Lord, were the first to provide compelling evidence that the Homeric tradition was an exclusively oral tradition "and thus to show that a complex social organization and a sophisticated literature could be built up in a society completely lacking a technology of writing."² (Havelock incidentally contends that there was some influence of writing involved here but that its sole purpose was to help with memorization and that even then the writing came from a statement already orally framed. We can observe in Havelock, more so than in Parry, an insistence on a tension between writing and speech; see below). Even more importantly, Parry's findings in this area of sociological orality introduced the concept of "storage of material in the oral memory,"³

¹ *Equation*, 17.

² Olson, 2.

³ *Equation*, 17.

something that Havelock furthered in his research, as we shall also see below.

Lord's advances, after Parry's untimely death, materialized in his single most important book, *The Singer of Tales*,¹ which introduced two important concepts: those of the theme and what was later termed the "story pattern." Lords' themes are not unlike formulas at the level of narrative scenes, that is, "groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song"²; they are not static units but rather flexible multiforms (i.e. formulations that can adapt to multiple situations or stylistic usages) which are adapted to a specific use in a given song and which take on a single, fossilized character only in the individual occurrence. The story pattern is the formulaic narrative skeleton at the level of the whole song, such as the pattern of the "Return of Heroes," which characterizes the *Odyssey* and hundreds of epics in the Parry collection. The "story pattern," in addition to rhythm, is another important factor, for Havelock, in aiding the preservation of oral statement in the memory of an oral culture. As we shall see below, rhythm and story, for Havelock, play a pivotal role in orally framed statement and thus in the preservation of an oral culture's memory.

Other important books which appropriated Parry's 1928 theses, were Cedric Whitman's *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (1958);³

¹ Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

² *ibid.*, 68.

³ Cedric Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958). This book treats the question of unity of poems, the relationship among image, symbol, and formula. Whitman understands the *Iliad* to be structured like a formulaic epic which repeated at an episode's end, elements from the beginning. Another find is his analogy between paratactic

Denys Page's *History and the Homeric Iliad* ;¹ Nilsson's *Homer and Mycenae* (1933)² and Carpenter's *Folk Tale, Fiction, and Saga in the Homeric Epics* (1946).³ Then in 1962, G.S. Kirk published *The Songs of Homer*,⁴ which included an account of oral poetry, especially the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in which he tried to develop a unified view of their nature, of their relation to the heroic poetry of the so-called 'Dark Age' and beyond, and of their creation in the eighth century, B.C. In Kirk's view there were four stages in the life-cycle of any oral tradition: originative, creative, reproductive, and degenerate. The originative stage, according to Kirk, came long before Homer and the eighth century, B.C., because by this time the Homeric formular had already been fully developed. This originative stage consists of short, simple, and technically naive songs which find their manifestation in the creative stage.

Kirk placed Homer in the second category (creative stage), describing him as a poet who molded his inherited tradition in individual and original ways.⁵ That is, while there are many recurrences and reshapings, there are also many passages without

"ring composition" typical of Homer and the contemporaneous designs on Proto-Geometric and Geometric pottery. What this means is that "the secret of Homeric structure...lies...in the adjustment of oral technique to the psychology underlying the Geometric symmetry of the late eighth century B.C. Its units are the typological scenes and motifs which are the stock and trade of oral poets..." (10).

¹ Denys Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1959). Page employs Parry's theories on traditional diction and then presents evidence for 15th century B.C. Mycenaean phraseology.

² Martin Nilsson, *Homer and Mycenae* (London: Methuen, 1933). Reprinted, New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1968.

³ Rhys Carpenter, *Folk Tale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1956).

⁴ G.S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge: the University Press, 1962).

⁵ *ibid.*, 96 (cf. Havelock's agreement on p. 12 above).

echo or precedent -- as we might infer from the fact that many Homeric words occur once and only once. Writes Kirk: "In such periods singers learn an initial repertoire from older men, but in the course of time they considerably extend this repertoire by their own inventions and improvisations. These may be applied to making radical developments of existing songs or to creating entirely new ones--always, of course, with the aid of standardized language and certain well-established heroic themes."¹

Kirk also drew a sharp line between the Parry/Lord analogy of Greek and Yugoslavian orality by calling the latter "reproductive."² This latter third stage simply reproduces what was created in the second stage. That is, little or no composition of new songs or verse are made. "If you ask these singers where a song comes from," writes Kirk, "they answer that they learned it from someone else."³ It can be conjectured then that it was by means of this stage that the Homeric poems were able to survive, and to be passed along without being mutilated from the time of its oral composition to their recording in writing. The fully reproductive stage, according to Kirk's analysis, cannot last for an extended period of time. He attributes to this degenerative stage a change in social conditions, citing that the spread of literacy in seventh century, B.C., Greece, along with its establishment, was an especially formidable factor in the decline of not only the reproductive stage but of orality as a medium for fictive or imaginative art works (fictive creations) in general.⁴

¹ Kirk, 96.

² *ibid.*, 96-7.

³ *ibid.*, 97.

⁴ *ibid.*, 97-8.

Along with Kirk's breakthrough, another one of great magnitude happened in just the span of 12 months from 1962-63. At this period the academic community saw an intellectual outpouring of literature related to this problem of orality and its relation to literacy, with direct and indirect ramifications for the origins of scientific or philosophic thinking. The five publications that made a tremendous impact were: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*¹ by M. McLuhan (1962), *La Pensée Sauvage*² by Lévi-Strauss (1962), a paper by Jack Goody and Ian Watt entitled "*The Consequences of Literacy*"³ (1963), Ernst Mayr's book, *Animal Species and Evolution*⁴ (1963), and lastly *Preface to Plato*⁵ by Eric Havelock (1963).

The major figure in our investigation, Eric Havelock, has gone significantly further than the others in this list in exploring the larger implications both for orality *and* literacy in the ancient world, particularly concerning the growth of the philosophic mind. Havelock explained the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as encyclopedic storehouses of exemplary attitudes, ethics, politics, the kind of information that a written culture can keep in a set of reference books but which an oral culture must maintain mnemonically and

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1962).

² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

³ Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Contemporary Studies in Society and History*, 5, (1963, 304-45); Republished in J. Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1968).

⁴ Ernst Mayr, *Animal Species and Evolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

⁵ Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

mimetically through continual recreation of the poems in which this educative material is encoded.

Still Havelock argues that "even though both orality and literacy are sharpened and focused on each other, they can be seen as still interwoven in society."¹ For Havelock it would be a mistake to polarize these as mutually exclusive. Their relationship is one of mutual tension, a creative tension -- one which has an historical dimension -- as literate societies have emerged out of oralist ones.

Havelock, therefore furthering the Parry/Lord 'Orality theory,' showed how the classical Greek tradition (of literacy) grew out of the Homeric oral one. Moreover, he argued that "the transformation was not one of a movement from a 'primitive' to a complex society² but rather one of inventing new forms of thought and expression to deal with a new technology of communication, namely, the invention of alphabetic literacy."³

In the following chapter we will examine Havelock's presentation of his views in light of his oral/literate scheme. We will first develop his thesis regarding the unique characteristics of the Greek alphabet, followed by the radical cultural and intellectual

¹ *Equation*, 1.

² Cf., Claude Lévi-Strauss, who demonstrates how each culture has its own system of concepts and categories derived from experience and imposed by the surrounding natural world. He also shows how so-called 'primitive' societies, by ordering the naming of plants and animals, as well as notions of space, time, myth and ritual, also engage in a high level of abstract reasoning different from but not necessarily inferior to that involved in cultivated 'systematic thought.' " Havelock would argue, however, that the use of concepts and categories is anachronistic in that they did not become a part of the Greek vocabulary until after full literacy was achieved and even then involved a process of philosophic discourse.

³ Olson, 2. We will examine the topic of the alphabet invention in section one of chapter one.

effects caused by it. Secondly we will explore the two cultural institutions in ancient Greek life, the one characterized by Homeric orality, and the other represented by the literacy of Plato. Thirdly, we will see where and in what way the Presocratic thinkers as well as the figure of Socrates, fit within this oral/literate structure.

Chapter One

This chapter will investigate Havelock's assessment of the oral/literate question and what it means for the origins of philosophy. Our thesis here is that Havelock's program involves an antithesis of sorts that is represented in his oral/literate equation.¹ This antithesis is between the dynamic worldview represented in the state of orality and the static, permanent worldview represented by the state of literacy. We find Havelock's representatives of this antithesis in Homer and Plato, respectively. Furthermore, this antithesis is overcome in Plato, for whom both orality and literacy come together in a great cultural synthesis. The driving force behind this Synthesis is the Greek alphabet, the tool which defines and directs the movement toward the Platonic Synthesis.

But how does Plato represent both the antithesis of Homer and a Synthesis with him? Havelock claims² that orality is 'fundamental to the human species,' whereas literacy is a 'recent accident' caused by the invention of the Greek alphabet. Furthermore, Havelock claims that the orality of Homer and the literacy of Plato remained in a tension much like its modern partner, that is, between radio/television vs. newsprint. The fundamental difference, however, is that the birth of literacy could only happen once in history and it did so in ancient Greece.

¹ Havelock uses the term equation to mean, on the one hand, a factor that affects a process, and on the other hand, a state of being equal (i.e., enjoying a sense of reciprocity). In other words, the oral/literate equation is one that involves an intricate relationship.

² See the Introduction pp. 5-6.

The reason for the tension between orality and literacy harks back to the first proposition that orality is 'fundamental to the human species,' whereas literacy is not. Even though literacy in the late fourth century, B.C. would usurp orality's role as the chief means of passing cultural information, orality would still underlie the cultural fabric of the Greek *paideia*, precisely because human beings, according to Havelock, are biologically conditioned to communicate orally.

Following the validity of these claims, we can construe that Plato represents both the antipode of Homer, in which Plato is the primary example of the cultural state of literacy, and at the same time a synthesis with Homer, in which the oral element underlies Plato's literary genius, for example, in his dialogues.

The first section will explore the cultural and theoretical consequences of the Greek alphabetic invention. We will see how and in what way the alphabet served as the catalyst in the emergence of a new state of mind for the Greek, that is, in the institution of literacy. The reason for investigating the alphabetic invention is that this technology had, for Havelock, revolutionary intellectual and social consequences. If we grasp the impact and influence of the Greek invention, then we will be at a better position to understand how the alphabet effected the Greek cultural antithesis of 'Homer' and 'Plato,' and furthermore, the Homeric/Platonic Synthesis established in Platonism.

The second section in this chapter serves as an exposition of Havelock's position by setting up Havelock's primary antithesis--viz., that between the 'Homeric state of mind' of primary orality, that oral

culture uncontaminated by literacy and the 'Platonic state of mind,' considered fully literate and free from the strictures of an orally governed society. Section A, then, will examine the state of mind of an oral culture, exemplified by Homer. We will see how, why, and in what manner, this oral medium of communication served the needs and cultural formation of the early orality of the Greeks. Section B will present Homer's antithesis, Plato, and illustrate in what manner Plato proceeded to undermine the 'Homeric state of mind' and thus fashion a new way of 'thinking' that, in Havelock's view, culminated in philosophy.

The third section will see to the problem that the Presocratics (section 3A) and Socrates (section 3B) posed to Havelock's program. Where do these personalities figure into Havelock's scheme? Can they not be called philosophers? The figure of Socrates poses an even more fundamental problem. What is the relationship between Plato and Socrates? Was Socrates non-literate¹ and if so, can he then be properly called a philosopher? These are some of the questions that we will address in order to criticize Havelock's thesis concerning philosophy and its birth.

Section A

In this section we will scrutinize and develop Havelock's reassessment of the Greek alphabet and the role that it played in the establishment of a new cultural 'mentality' that culminated in the

¹ See the Introduction pp. 4ff and section 3B in this chapter.

full-flowering of literacy and philosophy. After this examination we will better understand how and in what way the alphabet contributed to the evolution of the Greek mind from the orality of Homer to the literacy of Plato.

The view of the Greek alphabet as a momentous and profound invention in the history of ancient Greece, if not the whole of western civilization, is no doubt shared by most people. There is little quarrel that the Greek alphabet afforded new possibilities for civilization to grow and prosper in ways that it could not have if this new language system had not been invented and established in the mainstream of Greek culture. It is, however, the alphabet's 'use' or 'function' that has led to considerable debate among scholars. I mean by 'use' the functional character that scholars such as Havelock have understood the alphabetic effect to have had on Greek society in general, and on philosophy in particular.

Havelock has dated the inception of the Greek alphabet at around the last half of the eighth century, B.C.¹ Havelock argues that the alphabet could not have come into existence prior to this date because archaeological evidence points to five artifacts with alphabetic notation which have been dated to the late eighth century, B.C. These include: a pot, sherds of two other pots, a clay plaque fragment, and a bronze statuette as well as the famous Dipylon vase.² No other artifacts, prior to these five, contain alphabetic inscription.

¹ Havelock's dating of the alphabet follows the advances of Rhys Carpenter in his work above and that of Ignace Gelb, *A Study of Writing: The Foundations of Grammatology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

² Supporting evidence is found in: J.M. Cook, *A Painter and His Age*. Melanges offerts a Andre Varagnac (Paris, 1971); L.A. Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1961); Sarah Morris, *The Black*

The invention of the Greek alphabet at such a late date in the history of civilization did not mean the Greeks had lacked a writing system or that other writing systems were nonexistent. In fact, the period of the great Mycenaean palace-centered kingdom furnished a script called Linear B.¹ However this cursive form was available only to special scribes who, at the beck and call of the king (*wanax*),² made use of this syllabic system³ by recording data on materials such as wood, leather, and papyrus as well as clay. For the most part the general populace was nonliterate and depended on oral communication to store and pass information. Writing, therefore, was a privileged tool of a special group of scribes. This kind of society continued with little change until the late fourth century, B.C.

With the collapse of the Mycenaean kingdom during the 15th century, B.C., the form of writing represented by Linear B was lost to the Greek world. But what happened after was significant for Greek

and White Style: Athens and Aigina in the Orientalizing Period (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

¹ Also belonging to the Croetons. There is also a Linear A script that has so far defied interpretation. It is suggested too that Linear A is a later script than Linear B. See John Fine, *The Ancient Greeks: a critical history* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 3ff.

² During the period of the Mycenaean dynasty, all control was regulated by a private ruler (*wanax*) who oversaw all sectors of society: economic and political. After the collapse of the Mycenaean kingdom, the *wanax* was replaced by a *basileus* meaning a common, multiple kingship. This term had a strictly local meaning and the office it designates was stripped of all its private control that the earlier *wanax* had regulated. See Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982). Originally published in France as *Les Origines de la pensee greque*, Presses Universitaires de France (1962).

³ The syllabic system is a form of writing in which each individual syllable in the spoken language is phonetically coded with its own unique sign. The syllabaries lie between the pictographic (logographic) and the alphabetic. The logographic system is represented by a spoken word and its own unique visual sign, that is, the spoken word is symbolically or pictorially denoted or depicted by each sign. Alphabets code each individual phoneme so that each letter represents the basic sounds or phonemes of a spoken language.

culture. No longer was power regulated by one ruler who controlled all sectors of society, including writing. The breakdown of the palace-centered fortress opened up new possibilities for the Greeks such as the establishment of city-states or kingships where each city (*pólis*) had its own king and power was equally distributed among the populace. When the alphabet was finally invented after the 'Dark Ages,' an age that knew no writing, it had an entirely different script from that of Linear B.

Havelock's primary motive in establishing the alphabet's superiority to other scripts or sign systems was to show how with only the alphabet a fully literate and democratized society could emerge in which the majority of citizens could read and write. This event had special implications for philosophy because citizens could now not only read and write but 'think' abstractly,¹ that is, free from the dynamic panorama of lived experience.

This alphabetic achievement has a complex history whose profundity, in Havelock's estimation, could not be equalled by any other writing system. The point here is that the alphabet achieved what no sign system was able to do and that was

to analyze human sounds into their two theoretic components, not only symbolizing vocalization but also isolating the non-sound and giving it conceptual identity as a consonant. The alphabet can plausibly be compared to Greek atomism: whereas the Phoenician and other syllabaries were content to reproduce the actual sounds made by the mouth, the Greek system was atomic,

¹ We will investigate the use of the term below.

breaking units into at least two abstract components.¹

What this means is that the mind free from the pressure to memorize, made use of the alphabetic elements -- the vowel and the consonant -- in order to perceive some objective significance apart from the experiential meaning (i.e. pre-alphabetic scripts) tied to it. That is, the elements of the Greek alphabet do have objective significance which means they mean something independent of experience. But the alphabetic elements did not lack any connection with the real world, that is, experience. In fact, Havelock says that the alphabet was able, just because it was abstract, to fully represent the Greek speech. In this way the alphabet was even closer to experience than the other sign systems which relied upon objects from experience. The alphabet, in Havelock's view, can be clearly linked with Plato's *Forms* such as Beauty itself or Justice itself which refer to the visible world.² Therefore the Greek alphabetic elements became theoretical components to be 'thought.' Even more striking was the ability to isolate the consonant, a non-sound, and give it conceptual identity.

Thus, whereas in the pre-alphabetic systems, consonants had not been identified as such and hence depended on an intimate connection to a vowel that could be represented by a sound formed by the mouth, the consonant in the Greek alphabet could stand on its own and combine with vowels in different ways. In short, the

¹ Matthew Santirocco. "Literacy, Orality, and Thought," *Ancient Philosophy* 6 (1986), 154; also see Eric Havelock. *Origins*, 43.

² See pp. 37ff below.

consonant became an isolated entity which could be thought. Such was the extent of the alphabet's technology.

However, there is a much more profound and complex issue at hand here, namely the alphabet's capacity to serve as the primary tool in the creation of a fully literate society. And with a fully literate society, this meant a radically different way of thinking. Thus the historical/cultural ramifications of literacy depends on the technology of the Greek alphabet.

Yet how was the alphabet able to help pave the way to literacy and philosophy? According to Havelock, literacy depends ultimately on the technological efficiency of the script chosen. What does this mean? Havelock lists three ideal requirements that are needed for a script to be 'efficient:' first, the script must provide exhaustive coverage of all of a language's phonemes; second, it must be unambiguous, with one shape (like A or B) or combination (like EI) triggering the memory of only one phoneme; and third, it should limit the number of shapes (letters, if we mean the Greek shapes) to between twenty and thirty so as to facilitate their automatic recognition and use.¹ Only in the alphabet were these three conditions simultaneously met.

Previous scripts, such as the Phoenician from which the Greek letters derived, could not meet all three of these conditions. If they satisfied one condition, they would sacrifice another condition. Ideograms or hieroglyphic scripts of the pre-Semitic syllabaries, were uneconomical because they required too many symbols for

¹ *Origins*, 22-24.

memorization. As a result, the pressure to memorize all the different types of signs became too burdensome to allow for efficiency in reading. Unvocalized syllabaries (like the Phoenician) created a high degree of ambiguity. Although the number of shapes was reduced to twenty-two, much guesswork was involved to decide where the proper linguistic sounds were to be found. Therefore responsibility for the correct choice fell upon the reader or the tradition.¹

The mnemonic necessities and ambiguities that are part and parcel of the syllabaries and the oral tradition, imposed strict limitations on what could be said and done. Statements made by such systems were governed by a 'factor of familiarity.'² This means that all statements had to have some archetypal condition that goes back to some authorized version, that is, the reader must have some 'knowledge' or expectation of what the statement is going to say; he must be 'familiar' with the statement's content --i.e., an 'oral' tradition must accompany each text. These traditions were still regulated by an elitist state of 'craft-literate' scribes who remained the authority on all 'textual' interpretations.

The Greek alphabet, on the other hand, made possible the transcription of unique statements that led to the kind of thinking appropriate to philosophy and science. The alphabet did not remain subject to an 'authority' and to memorization but was able to free the

¹ An example of a tradition being responsible for the correct choice of interpretation would be the Masora (translated means: tradition). Hence the Masoretic text of the Hebrew bible.

² *Origins*, 32.

subjects' mental energies previously directed to memorization.¹ What ensued from this was the breakdown of craft-literacy and the full democratization of literacy. This latter development, however, would happen only gradually over several centuries and depended for its success upon a fourth and final condition once the first three conditions had been completely satisfied.

The fourth condition was a new feature of social organization that started with training in letters at the pre-puberty level to insure that reading and writing would become automatic skills.² These two skills must meld together at a time when the pubescent's "mental resources are still in a plastic condition...so that the act of reading is converted into an unconscious reflex."³ So not only did the alphabet exhaustively cover all of its phonemes, it was unequivocal, having one shape or combination for each, and finally limited its letter shapes to under thirty allowing for immediate recognition. It was the result of these three elements simultaneously meeting in the Greek alphabet, with the addition of its pedagogical function, that caused the literacy breakthrough and also created the clash between the 'Homeric' and 'Platonic' states of mind.

But clearly such schooling requires the existence of a sufficient number of texts for writing and reading. Havelock maintains, though, that there is little evidence for such texts and schools before the end of the fifth century.⁴ Therefore Havelock says that the alphabet's

¹ By implication, this also freed 'reading' from traditions of interpretation, something important for its implications for an autonomous style of philosophizing.

² *Origins*, 24.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *Revolution*, 27.

revolutionary implications were met only gradually. Its first use was to 'write' down what had already been preserved in oral form --viz., the Homeric epics. A significant prose literature did not emerge until the fourth century when Athens was fully literate. All literature that intervenes in between these two extreme periods, represents a body of transitional texts, which include the Presocratic writings.

In the next section we will explore the oral/literate antithesis in Homer and Plato, respectively.

Section B

a) Homer and Orality

What Havelock calls an "oral state of mind"¹ results from the influence of preserved communication over the kind of thoughts which can be preserved. Oral communication was designed to enable the hearer and reciter to relive sympathetically from moment to moment the actions and passions of the characters reported, identifying themselves with them to a degree that was almost pathological. The syntax used in this traditional poetic enterprise was only of one kind, a syntax of events which was strongly visualized in the imagination, and was debarred from any possibility of one's standing apart from it in order to be a critic.

Prior to alphabetization, Greek institutions and practices depended on the memorization of the heritage embodied in poetry. "The only possible verbal technology available to guarantee the preservation and fixity of transmission was that of the rhythmic

¹ *Preface*, 41.

word organised cunningly in verbal and metrical patterns which were unique enough to retain their shape."¹ Poetry, because of its structure, could be remembered and carried on in an individuals' memory. To retain the tradition, however, the participation of all Greeks in the poetic performance was required. Havelock describes this participation as "a state of total personal involvement and therefore of emotional identification with the substance of the poetised statement that you are required to retain."² A total involvement was necessary for the memorization of such enormous quantities of oral memory. One had to identify one's entire being with what was being portrayed. "You threw yourself into the situation of Achilles, you identified with his grief or his anger. You yourself became Achilles and so did the reciter to whom you listened."³ This total identification was the spell of poetry. These "enormous powers of poetic memorisation could be purchased only at the cost of total loss of objectivity."⁴ It is this loss of objectivity which we will discuss below and which becomes Plato's enemy in the *Republic*. Plato attacks poetry on epistemological grounds. With such total involvement there is no possibility to move from mere knowledge of things to knowledge of the true Forms or Ideas. Thus, there is no room to theorize, to 'think' an object itself or '*per se*' (*to auto...*). The audience in such a mind-set is at the mercy of living experience.

¹ *Preface*, 42-3

² *ibid.*, 44

³ *ibid.*, 45

⁴ *ibid.*

We find that the function of the poet, a Homer, was encyclopedic, reporting and maintaining, in the oral language dependent upon meter and rhythm, the cultural norms and moral apparatus of his society. The poet therefore did not invent everything *ex nihilo* but rearranged or colored what was already there in the tradition that was handed him. However that may be, the poet did, though only because of his cultural status as the moral and cultural leader, create new forms of 'thinking' or approaching relative conditions that were new and original to the society.¹

The Poet, and epic poetry in general, derived his power from his function; one that did not carry him upward above the spirits of humanity but horizontally outward embracing the *nomos* and *ethos* of the field of society which he either eulogized or derided. One might say that the Poet was an immanent Benefactor who by being involved in the everyday processess of life: the joys, sorrows, frustrations, and triumphs, could be called upon, seen, and felt. Writes Havelock: "He [the epic poet] profoundly accepts his society, not by personal choice but because of his functional role as its recorder and perserver. He is therefore dispassionate, he can have no personal axe to grind, no vision wholly private to himself."²

The task of the Poet is not only to report and recall but to frame his discourse in a repetitive manner. Repetition becomes a useful and a necessary tool for pedagogical purposes, something that

¹ Cf. **Introduction** p.10f for G.S. Kirk's analysis of the life-cycle of an oral tradition. G.S. Kirk. *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge: the University Press, 1962).

² *Preface*, 89.

was lost with the advent of literacy.¹ We see the use of repetition in the mechanisms of poetic performance which require a self-identification of audience in the performer. That is, in a poetic performance the entire being of the audience is required, all the senses are brought into play, and the individual's unconscious resources are fully tapped. Repetition was used to help facilitate a sort of hypnotism.² Words repeated would restrict the movement of the lungs, teeth, larynx.³ A poet would use a string instrument to thump a rhythm.⁴ The reflexes of the body, such as the moving of the legs, would also come into the performance.⁵ The entire nervous system was geared towards the task of memorization.⁶ And thus the poetic performance became a sensual experience to which the Greeks were addicted. The poet "gave them not only pleasure but a specific kind of pleasure on which they came to depend, for it meant relief from anxiety and assuagement of grief."⁷

The Poet, as the moral and cultural leader, had an encompassing function and role in society. He was primarily the communicator, scholar, and jurist who represented all the sectors of the cultural life, including, especially, the mores of the non-literate society. Only in a secondary sense was he an artist and in a tertiary

¹ Milman Parry calls this use of repetition by the term "variation of the Same," 92. Havelock refers to this use of repetition as the "echo principle" which exhibits clear patterns of arrangement. See "The Alphabetization of Homer." *Communication Arts in the Ancient World*, ed. E.A. Havelock and J.P. Hershbell (New York: Hastings House, 1978), 3-21 [reprinted in *Revolution*].

² *Preface*, 147.

³ *ibid.*, 149.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*, 150.

⁶ *ibid.*, 151.

⁷ *ibid.*, 153.

sense, a showman.¹ The non-literate Greek, the person of a Homeric worldview, depended on this functional role of poetry as a magesterial and encyclopedic warehouse.

Writes Havelock:

It was the essence of Homeric poetry that it represented in its epoch the sole vehicle of important and significant communication. The Homeric poet therefore was called upon to memorialise and preserve the social apparatus, the governing mechanism, and the education for leadership and social management.²

The poem or the epic, as was mentioned, was not simply a form of entertainment. More crucial was the poem as a massive repository of cultural information, which included custom, law, and social propriety. The Epic was an oral "documentation" of a way of life, a "Tribal Encyclopedia." The role of entertainment, although not the whole of the oral-literate question, did provide a clue for the difference between oral forms of thought and literate modes of thinking. That is, epic must involve actors who are persons in action --i.e., doing and suffering without the use of abstract statement. "One can reflect," writes Havelock, "but always as a human being, never as a philosopher, an intellectual, a theorist."³ To reflect means to bend in continuous harmony, to see the world unitarily, which is something completely different from and prior to the abstract, separating off rendered by philosophy. The former, epic act was the

¹ *Preface*, 94.

² *ibid.*, 93-4.

³ *Equation*, 20.

original meaning of *theoria*¹ which Herodotus had defined as the act of "looking at," "viewing," "beholding." Sophocles and even Plato of the middle dialogues, related the word to "being a spectator at the theatre or the public games." Plato, however, was the first to explain *theoria* (contemplation or speculation; Lat. derivation) with the suggestion that to achieve a vision of reality by means of contemplation means for the first time to see it in full actuality.² Aristotle later borrowed *theoria* as a metaphor for an intellectual operation and to defend his desire for a leisured society in which an 'enlightened' few might pursue speculation --i.e., philosophy.³

b) Plato and Literacy

We now come to the antithesis of the Homeric, Platonism. It is here in Platonism that, with the aid of a fully literate society, philosophy could properly be called philosophy. What we must examine now are the conclusions reached by Havelock concerning the gradual succession of a literate frame of mind over an oral one, the literate state represented by Plato.

¹ See Liddell and Scott's, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 364.

² See Plato's *Republic* 475e4, 500c3, 532c6 and the parable of the sun in 507c6-509b10. The translation is from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1961); future references to Plato will be taken from this translation and will be cited by the particular dialogue (e.g., *Protagoras*, 24d).

³ See Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea* Bk.10.7 & 8 (1177b3-1178a9 & 1178b-1179a32). This translation is from *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, translated by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941); future references to Aristotle will be taken from this translation and will be cited by the particular Aristotelian work (e.g., *Metaphysics*, 987a1).

Together with Parry's thesis of storage material in oral memory Havelock concluded that down to the 5th century in Greece, "oralist rules of composition were still required in expounding even serious philosophical thought."¹ Platonic prose marked a decisive turn away from the method of oral verse, although clearly other mnemonic devices are in use in Plato --e.g., the dramatic situation; The important factor is that: "It (Plato's discourse) was the first body of prose of an extended character written out in any culture known to us."²

With the advent of Plato on the scene, a great divide in Greek *Paideia* occurred. This demarcation was between oral society which relied upon rhythmic metre and recited literature for its cultural knowledge, and even more significantly, its preservation vs. a literate society which was grounded in prose as a vehicle for rigorous scientific analysis, i.e. philosophy. The latter forced the former into a subordinate role by which the oral element no longer had decisive power, and so was no longer required for preserving cultural mores.

Plato's desire to break away from the relativism of experience found in the poetic tradition and from its equivocal world of hypnotic opinion, became paramount and so overwhelming, that the tension between orality and literacy already underway soon would give rise to a new 'thinking.' Plato is the first to give some concrete direction to this muddled history, bringing order to the chaos and reformulating it in a new language that for his predecessors was not yet fully conceptual but aiming toward it. Plato is the watershed

¹ *Equation*, 18.

² *ibid.*

from which Philosophy was to proclaim itself; he is the 'Muse of Athens.'

By the time Plato steps into the *ágora* (the public domain) he is still battling with the forces of traditionalism. The bitter war between speech and text is between Homer, the bastion of conservative Athens, and Plato, the formidable and dangerous revolutionary who threatens a culture already uprooted and agitated because of war and political corruption. The *pólis* and the *ágora* was Athens. The *pólis* made its participants citizens and to the Athenian this meant it made them human.¹ Because the figure in Plato's dialogues, Socrates, instigated 'revolution,' and proclaimed the sensory world only an imitation of the true Forms unseen and unattached, he was chided and cast out.

What was the language, the *methódos* (discipline of the abstract), that Plato was using and which in turn soured his relationship with the Athenians?

When Plato insists that his contemporaries must turn away from the panorama of sensual experience, and focus instead upon the abstracted object *per se* which is the only possible object of thought, he sometimes identifies this object as a Form and also speaks of the Forms (in the plural) as furnishing a methodology or intellectual discipline which is familiar to his readers.²

¹ This point is made effectively by Aristotle in his *Politics* 1.1252aff.

² *Preface*, 254. see *Republic* 475e6ff; 504e7-8; 505a2-3; 507a8; 596a5-7. Also compare the *Phaedo* 65ff and 109b to the *Republic's* analogy of the cave in Book 5.

What Havelock here suggests is that Plato was writing for a group familiar with this kind of talk. Thus when Plato wrote he was not necessarily writing for the general public's understanding, which rests on the mental state of *dóxa* or opinion. Rather it suggests that Plato already had around him a group --i.e., a sort of intelligensia, familiar with a new kind of syntax and use of vocabulary that had been brewing for a few generations before him in the likes of Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles, and Socrates.

Plato's use of language was not only meant to put forward a kind of metaphysical theory, but to find a way of expressing the need to discover principles, formulae and general concepts which are timeless universals and exist apart from sensual experience. That is why Plato insists that the Forms are unseen and torn out from all context (i.e., they are *koristá*— i.e., "separated things"). But above all else, Plato describes these 'forms' as self-identical and unchanging which counters the becoming of events in time. The syntax for Plato excludes any notion of past and future tenses (in reference to the Ideas) and he does this by developing a use of the word 'to be' or 'itself per se' (*auto to...*).¹ Writes Havelock:

The direct evidence of these necessities is furnished not in the Forms but in his reiterated use of the 'itself per se' which is 'one,' and which 'is,' and which is 'unseen.' This is Plato's fundamental language, for by its own syntax it also betrays the syntax of that which he is breaking away from, that from which he

¹ Cf. Parmenides' use of the copula *einai* below.

is emancipating himself and from which
he has to emancipate us.¹

But how did Plato come to this 'new' syntax and vocabulary. What was it precisely that allowed for this expression in language that had not happened before in Greece or in any other culture prior to the Athens of the fifth century, B.C.? Havelock contends that it lies in the superior technology of the Greek alphabet, which gained ascendancy in the educational curriculum of fifth century Athens, when full literacy had become a part of the Greek life.² Writes Robert Logan:

Statements in the oral tradition must be made in the context of events in real space and real time. It is only with alphabetic literacy that timeless analytic statements emerge that can express universal truths independent of the context in which they occur.³

Here we see the shackles of oral tradition subverted by means of the alphabet's technology, a method of dialectic, which called for a new way of framing language in a nonpoetical, nonrhythmical fashion. "Dialectic," writes Havelock, "...was a weapon for arousing the consciousness from its dream language and stimulating it to think abstractly. As it did this, the conception of 'my thinking about Achilles' rather than 'my identifying with Achilles' was born."⁴ The

¹ *Preface*; 256; Havelock illustrates on 272 n.6 that aside from the *Republic* (Book 2, 5 476a-Book 6 485a, and the entire Book 7) other uses of *auto to* are used: *Phaedo* (65bff., 78dff., 100bff); Cf. the *Theaetetus* where it is not used -- see 272 n.3 (above).

² *Origins*, 44ff.

³ Robert Logan, *The Alphabetic Effect* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 105.

⁴ *Preface* , 209.

autonomous psyche is now confronted not with particular acts and events but with abstract laws and principles which require a new vocabulary and a new mental effort.¹ The concrete language of oral memory must be replaced by an abstract language of descriptive science.²

Gradually, then, the Homeric state of mind gave way to the Platonic. The Greek ego frees itself from the spatial-temporal tradition and begins to think independently of it.³ Writes Havelock:

This amounts to accepting the premise that there is a 'me,' a 'self,' a 'soul,' a consciousness which is self-governing and which discovers the reason for action in itself rather than in imitation of the poetic experience. The doctrine of the autonomous psyche is the counterpart of the rejection of the oral culture.⁴

Along with this new discovery of the soul or *psyche* in the last quarter of the fifth century, B.C., one also finds the rise of intellection or the activity of thinking, which we will encounter below in the pre-Platonics. "It now became possible," writes Havelock, "to identify the 'subject' in relation to that 'object' which the 'subject' knows."⁵ Plato identifies the autonomous personality with the process of reflection

¹ *ibid.*, 223.

² *ibid.*, 236.

³ *ibid.*, 200.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*, 201. Havelock clearly states that he is employing a modern term when he refers to 'subject' in this quote.

and cogitation and he is now ready to reject the mimetic process and suggest that the mind is in need of a new method of education.¹

According to Havelock, Plato, together with Aristotle, can rightfully be considered the creator of "knowledge" as the knowledge of an object and as the chief purpose and the proper content of all educational systems.²

Havelock suggests, then, that philosophy as a genuine discipline did not emerge until Plato began to write. How do we then answer the traditional placement of the pre-Platonic thinkers as philosophers? It is this question that we will deal with in the following section.

Section C

a) The Presocratic Philosophers

In this section we will examine Havelock's position in regard to the Presocratic thinkers. Is Havelock's estimation of them as proto-philosophers, correct and justifiably founded? Does Havelock properly categorize them as poised between literacy and orality? Can we properly call the Presocratics, philosophers? Havelock's conclusions regarding the position of the Presocratics is an important topic to consider for it bears on the problem of philosophical origins.³

The difficulty that Havelock had to contend with was why the Presocratic philosophers, while engaged in serious speculation, still

¹ *Preface*, 206; cf. *Republic* 10.595a7.

² *ibid.*, 305.

³ I have gleaned Havelock's consideration of the Presocratic polemic primarily from "Task."

chose to compose in verse, i.e., Homeric verse. And alternatively, why did Heraclitus choose to publish his thoughts in self-contained aphorisms --i.e., oral sayings.¹ Havelock contends that the Presocratic philosophers were poised between literacy and non-literacy, that is between two media of communication: orality and literacy. Writes Havelock: "Their style of composition is a form of mediation between ear and eye. They expect an audience of listeners, yet look forward to a reception at the hands of readers."²

The Presocratic thinkers were more aware of the relationship between themselves and the public than was the previous tradition. The evidence for this is suggested by the Presocratics' constant admonition to the unphilosophical ways of *hoi polloi*. However, the forms that this had to take were for the most part those of an oral author.

"Truly one can say of the Presocratics," writes Havelock, "that their whole linguistic enterprise stands poised between the word acoustically delivered and the word articulated, written, and visible. Competition between *mythos* and *logos* has begun."³

If the Presocratic style of composition was primarily acoustic what then was the content of their thought? What were they saying to their society? To themselves? What does the substance of their doctrines hold? Are these thinkers, like their style, poised between a situation of non-literacy and literacy? Between *mythos* and *logos*?

¹ See Charles Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1979).

² "Task," 9.

³ "Task," 12.

Havelock maintains that the Presocratics' aim was only to instruct. This is a different goal from that of most poets who also incorporated a desire to please or entertain, even if it was on a secondary level.

If the Presocratics' orientation was that of instruction, it seems that it concentrated on those objects of everyday human perception and experience: the sky, sun, moon, clouds, hills, seas, day, night, rain, eclipses, and drought. All these experiential phenomena were limited to, or for that matter contained within, the parameters of the ordinary field of vision.

This desire to appraise coherently and systematically the complex arena of human experience and sense perception was not new; it had a predecessor in Hesiod. Hesiod begins his *Theogony*¹ by explaining how Chaos opened up spewing forth a succession of numerous gods and demi-gods to give order and structure to the world.

The filiation that Havelock understands between Hesiod and the Presocratics is not a new theory. Some² have found them remarkably akin and have often favored the notion that the Presocratics (particularly the Milesian school) took Hesiod's Cosmogony and clothed it with their own linguistic color in order to separate themselves from the language of gods and religion.

The Presocratics are at the threshold of a new era in which they see themselves breaking away from the older tradition of battle-worn

¹ Hesiod, *Theogony/Works and Days*. Translated by Dorothea Wender (Hammondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973).

² Cf. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Origins of Greek Thought*, 119f; also G.S. Kirk. *The Nature of Greek Myths* (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 276f.

epics and adventuresome gods and heroes all set within the syntax of doing and acting. It was after all an oral tradition that, in order to remain true to its heritage and form, had to retain the vocabulary suitable for oral memory. Any notion of abstraction and conceptual speech as placed over and against acts of persons and happenings of events was unfriendly and unwelcome.

Havelock argues that students of the history of philosophy have presupposed that earlier Presocratic thinkers had such a conceptual vocabulary, when in fact they did not. What they had to do was to initiate the invention of it.¹ What allowed or caused them to do this? Why did the Presocratics undertake this linguistic task? Havelock contends that this 'curiosity' was prompted at the particular time by the change initiated by the advent of writing per se. And further this changing technology also facilitated the urgent need to tie down a unified structure and to constitute a system out of the loose series of events issuing from the muse or poet. Documented description seems to imply talk about an object, on the one hand, and talk that is made into an object, on the other. What we have, then, is the beginning of a separation between describer and what is described, a separation that we can trace back to Hesiod's time. The full separation would not take place, though, according to Havelock, until the time of the Platonic writings.

Writes Havelock:

In short, while the environment had from our point of view always existed for the oral mind, this mind had not conceptualized and

¹ "Task," 14.

objectified it as an environment. The Presocratics not only had to invent a terminology suitable to describe an external world; they had initially to realize that such a 'world' or a cosmos existed to be described.¹

Havelock is skeptical² about the level of conceptual abstraction in the Presocratics, especially since they were extremely near in time and place to the oral culture of Homer and Hesiod. Because these thinkers up to but not necessarily including Anaxagoras and the Atomists were so close to the predominant oral culture, they really could not properly separate themselves, primarily for the reason that there was no where else to go. That is, there is only somewhere to go if someone effects a separation between oral discourse and some other kind of discourse. The Presocratics had not effected a total separation.

The objections by the Presocratics against the traditional language of the oral culture is proof enough for Havelock to suggest that these early thinkers were in search of a new vocabulary and a new method to communicate their theories.

It is important to note that there are differences inherent in each of these thinker's method of investigation. However, a common bond ties them together that Havelock maintains are the attacks directed toward a mode of communication that is unsuitable for philosophy. The resources for oral poetry and performance do not fit the proper bill for philosophic study.

The problem as Havelock sees it is the growing need for a new conceptual language aided by the advanced technology of the Greek

¹ "Task," 15.

² *ibid.*, 14.

alphabet that will eventually open and reform language from its origins in the mythic and oral tradition.

The Presocratics are united in their use of language condemning the old syntax exemplified in Homer and Hesiod. However, it is important to note that the Presocratics could not have made such an attack if they were not prepared with a new alternative, the alphabet.

What the Presocratics had done through the advanced technology of the alphabet was to pave the way by documenting their sayings, releasing the acoustically trained individual from the pressure to memorize. That individual could always refer back to what was written at any time. It might be construed that the written text had no particular historical situation in itself and only took on a 'history' as a person 'read' the text -- thus the text became timeless.

Yet, the Presocratics did not just document what was orally stated. Rather, in their discourses they replaced personal agents by impersonal forces and instead of setting up a statement where agents performed acts upon other agents, they framed statements of relationships between impersonal entities. Again, when these words appeared in documents, they became objects separated out from the consciousness of lived, common experience (which might be construed as mythic), and thus became objects assessable only to theory or abstracting contemplation.

We should understand the Presocratic polemic against mythic, oral language, reflected in the fragments as an attempt to bring our common worldview into a single, unified whole, a single comprehensive account that we might properly call a *Logos*, away from the panorama of multiple events which constitutes the state of

mythos. This is the 'act of integration' that forms the common bond among the Presocratics in their insatiable desire to bring structure and order to the cosmos and to human experience.

Moreover, on a deeper level, the 'act of integration' is a phrase used by Havelock to mean the mental act of isolating and abstracting.¹ For instance, a Homeric epic will contain a thousand words to describe the acts and wills of a moral person. These many acts and events, however, are now to be dissolved into a single identity in the abstracting and integrating language of the Presocratics. The word which was scattered and torn out of context from the syntax of orally composed speech to describe a multiplicity of acts and happenings is now a 'thing apart' and in isolation. As a result, its language is analytical expressed in terms and propositions which are timeless. Once this happens, epic poetry is destroyed. For the poem is nurtured by a syntax of time-event series based in verbs of action occurring in all tenses --past, present, and future.

Furthermore, the abstracted object does not need to be visualized; in fact it cannot be. In order to talk about the colors or shapes of things, we have to see them. As a result they become pluralized in our own experience. But when we reflect and write about an experience involved in sensual observation, the sensual becomes an idea. Thus, as a result of losing its plurality of action in time and all the attributes of experience, Ideas become 'unseen.'

For all practical purposes, then, the Presocratics can be called monists and the new verb called upon to replace the action verbs of

¹ *Preface* , 218.

the oral situation and to instill permanence, unity, and constancy was the verb *einai*-- to be.

Contemporary scholars have isolated at least three related uses of the verb *einai*:¹ copulative, existential, and veridical. The copulative brings together the subject and predicate as in: the chalk *is* white or *x is y*; the existential and locative *is* is understood in the context of existence -- Does there exist a Socrates?: Therefore it would be stated something like this: Socrates *is* alive or Socrates *is not* alive; yet more simply Socrates *is*. Kahn doubts the use of the existential 'be' among the early Greeks. Rather he prefers understanding *einai* as locative, a claim of his that is still somewhat controversial. The third use, the veridical, is in general use by scholars. Although it is difficult to see the veridical sense in English it would mean something like: *Tauta Esti* (these things *are* [true].) It simply *is*. For the Greek mind, however, there really wasn't a strong difference between these uses of the verb *to be*. It carried unconsciously all the subtleties of our modern use: copulative, existential, and veridical. The verb forms such as *esti(n)* (3rd person singular) and *einai* (the infinitive) became the primary verbs to replace the verbs of action and happening.

In Heraclitus and Parmenides we see an attempt to avoid and hence replace all other verbs and its uses in the Homeric context by applying the "is" syntax, the only one appropriate to the task of theory. Havelock argues that for Parmenides' syntax there can be no subject applied to the 'is.' Rather the "is" is suspended in mid-air

¹ Charles Kahn, "The Greek Verb 'To Be' and the Concept of Being," in *Foundations of Language* 2 (1966) 245-265.

with no 'referential function.'¹ However, Havelock notes that Parmenides no less has initiated the step toward making 'being' something we could talk about.²

You will not cut off that-which-is (*to eon*) from adhering to that-which-is (*tou eontos*), neither scattering in all manner of ways and means throughout [the] order, nor combining (B4).³

Neither ever was (*eon*) nor shall be (*estai*), since indeed it is (*estin*) [exists] now together, as an all, a one, a continuum (B8.5-6).

All is (*estin*) filled up with what is (*eontos*) therefore [it] is (*estin*) all continuous. For what-is (*eon*) closes with what-is (*eonti*) (B8.24-25).

Fix your gaze on [things] absent yet also present to the sense [*nous*] steadily (B4).

The Presocratics are seeking a terminology by which to identify a certain new kind of consciousness, such as the type exemplified in Parmenides' fragment B4 above. Writes Havelock: "They [the Presocratics] are seeking to isolate what we might describe as an act of cognition or intellection, directed toward grasping conceptual abstractions rather than narrating and describing events."⁴

¹ "Task," 26.

² *ibid.*

³ The translation of this fragment of Parmenides and the three following are Havelock's. For the original testimony (in Greek) consult Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 249ff. Hereafter referred to as KRS.

⁴ "Task," 27.

The Homeric tradition, according to Havelock, had used a variety of terms to describe the situation of human experience and the cosmos. The Homeric bards, however, did not so much direct this awareness to special and separate categories such as the Presocratics had done. So whereas Homer could talk about the particular 'bigness' (the adjective is *mégethos*) of Zeus, he could also refer to the particular 'big' cedar tree near the 'big' river.¹ The Presocratics, although using the same adjective (*mégethos*) for instance, used the word for universal application in one instance, such as the spatially (big) encompassing dimension of the One God, in Xenophanes.² Zeno takes the adjective to mean the dimension of the "is" (B1)³, following Parmenides; Melissus, still using *mégethos*, 'stretches' it to mean "the unbounded is" (B3).⁴ Havelock calls the Presocratic method here one of 'stretching' a word out of its Homeric particularity into the name of an abstraction, one in this case that approximates to the term 'space.'

To this extent, Havelock argues that the terms as such took years before they became fully conceptualized in Plato and Aristotle. These terms themselves, prior to Plato, were not properly philosophical.⁵ The Presocratics were still using the vocabulary of the older tradition but were anticipating and as a result introducing some conceptual order into the panorama of narrativized actions and events. Writes Havelock: "It is tempting to see this kind of

¹ Homer, *Iliad*. Translated by A.T. Murray. The Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1925) See the references in *Iliad* 2.142ff and *Iliad* 15.187-92. Also see "Task," 29.

² KRS, 169; fragments 23, 26 & 25, and 24.

³ *ibid.*, 266-67.

⁴ *ibid.*, 393.

⁵ "Task," 33.

arrangement as a visual one prompted by the conversion of spoken speech to alphabetic shape. It may at the same time respond to the previous oral and acoustic habit of narrating events in patterns of echo."¹

For Havelock these statements continue to "embody and manipulate"² oral speech by 'stretching' and 'extending' the Homeric vocabulary. Orality is still involved in this tensive relationship with the written word. In fact, as Havelock would have it, orality is the underlying substructure to literacy and that not until Plato did literacy finally divorce itself from orality. Yet, and this should be remembered, literacy would still be paying alimony to orality for a long time to come.

In view of all this, Havelock hesitates to qualify the Presocratics as the tradition that gave birth to philosophy. The Presocratics can only be the initiators of a philosophy that was yet to come. They were stepping-stones in the dynamic process of the transition from orality to literacy. Philosophy for Havelock could not emerge until full-literacy had made its debut with Plato. Then, and only then, when the Athenian society was fully literate, totally capable and cognizant of reading and writing, when these latter two tools became an integrated part of the educational system, could philosophy exist in a recognized social space. Furthermore the philosophical vocabulary was familiar to a larger number of readers who were readily available to make philosophy more capable of dissemination.

¹ "Task," 34.

² *ibid.*, 35.

Yet, this does not mean that the Presocratics¹ were not already involved in a similar struggle like Plato, one that involved a new syntax and vocabulary and the nascent recognition of a need to separate the knower from the known (the object) and the positing of a *psyche* as a 'rational' entity taking a form different from anything material or corporeal.² But this was not accomplished by them. The Presocratics were, indeed, pioneers. They too attacked the same target that they found hostile to thinking --the state of mind labelled *dóxa*--as Plato did; they too were caught up in a cultural revolution, one between the extremes of a dying (Homeric) and a living (Platonic) *paideia*; and they too were seeking a different path, a new inquiry, in language and as a result, a new mind. But, in Havelock's view, can they be called Philosophers?

The real barrier, as Havelock's recognizes it, is what the word philosopher signifies. The noun itself did not become a common label until early in the fourth century, B.C. Before then it scarcely occurs in written documents. Heraclitus uses the accusative *philósophous* from the noun 'lover of wisdom'(B35)³ to refer to those men (*ándras*) who love wisdom. Herodotus uses the participle *philosophéon* to refer, in line with Heraclitus, to those men who are wise at making good

¹ Along with the Presocratics, we might include the historians, medical writers, and sophists as a group struggling against the old Homeric tradition.

² For the early Presocratics *psyche* was closer to the oral vocabulary of the Homeric tradition, thereby expressing something like breath-soul or wind; it was a soul that spirited itself in the universe. Plato takes the word, according to Havelock's argument, and totally radicalizes it to mean a 'thinking', abstract entity. The *psyche* in its original sense has been 'torn out' of context and given a new and powerful conceptual meaning. But unlike Cartesian dualism, the early Greeks still understood the soul to be involved with the body in a much closer way than Descartes.

³ Charles Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 33.

inquiry, excellent reports or accounts (*historie*).¹ Other similar citings can be found in Thucydides² and in Plato's reference to the cosmologists in his *Apology* 23d.

However that may be, Havelock argues that the Presocratics were proto-thinkers on the grounds 1) that they were too close in time and circumstance to the oral tradition, wavering between a situation of craft-literacy (i.e., a scribal type of privileged community) and semi-literacy; 2) that as a result of their own idiom they could not be as technologically advanced as Plato; and 3) that they were preoccupied with totality views without paying sufficient attention to questions of method. "They had to discover conceptual thinking itself as idea and as method," writes Havelock, "before the products of thought, that is systems, could emerge fluently."³ In other words, they were too busy paving and initiating reformation. It was left up to Plato to break the bottle on the vessel and set sail on his theory of Forms.

b) The Socratic Problem

In this section we will examine the 'Socratic Problem' in light of Havelock's oral/literate question. Our basic questions are: what is the Socratic personality? How does he figure into Havelock's program? What is the relationship between Plato and Socrates?

¹ Herodotus, *Histories* Bks 1-2. Translated by A.D. Godley. The Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1920), Bk.1.30.

² Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Charles F. Smith. The Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1921), 2.40.

³ *Preface*, 302.

Because Socrates left no writings of his own, there is today some disagreement over what philosophical ideas can be properly attributed to him. Our most extensive account of Socrates' thought and activity is found in the dialogues of Plato, in which he is the leading character. The persistent question that follows is whether 1) Plato is reporting what Socrates taught or 2) expressing his own thoughts through the figure of Socrates.

If we follow those who say that the Socrates found in the Platonic dialogues is the historically correct Socrates, then it would follow from 1) that Socrates must get all the credit for the novel philosophical activity the dialogues contain, and that Plato is to be credited with its literary form and placement into writing.

Aristotle distinguished between the philosophical activities of Socrates and Plato. To Socrates Aristotle attributed inductive argument and universal definition in ethical matters. To Plato, on the other hand, Aristotle ascribed the development of the theory of Forms, the notion that universal Ideas or Forms, exist independently of the particular things that embody them.¹

What modern interpreters of Plato have done, following Aristotle's lead, is to divide Plato's writings into three periods of development. The first period is clearly the closest and most accurate of Socratic representation, as in the *Apology* and the *Euthyphro*.²

¹ *Metaphysics Alpha* 987b1-23.

² Although there is still considerable debate concerning the place of the dialogues in Plato's three periods, scholars generally agree to this grouping: The early writings, usually called the Socratic dialogues because of their preoccupation with ethics, consist of the *Apology*, *Crito*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Euthyphro*, *Euthydemus*, *Cratylus*, *Protagoras*, and *Gorgias*. The second, or middle dialogues, in which the theory of Forms and metaphysical doctrines are expounded, include the *Meno*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*.

Therefore the plausible solution rests on accepting that the earlier dialogues are portrayals of Socrates' philosophic activity, whereas the later dialogues, such as *Sophist* and *Parmenides*, represent Plato's own philosophic development, including his metaphysical theory of the Forms. This has been the traditional way of perceiving the Socratic problem.

Havelock argues that any attempt to understand the Socratic problem by the use of 'early' or 'late' Plato is futile. "All of Plato," writes Havelock, "is essentially Plato; the name Socrates in his writings is a mask for his own thinking, as applied to the task at hand."¹ Plato in the dialogues is taking advantage of a unique skill by incorporating his task as a thinker as well as a literary genius, an artist. He employs Socrates as a literary device in order to employ a powerful dramatic construction. Havelock, however, is not denying the historical figure of Socrates and his importance to the thought of ancient Greece. To be sure, Plato knew the man Socrates and obviously felt very close to him. Havelock simply maintains that Plato, in order to produce a *dramatis persona*, employs a historical figure, Socrates, for this purpose. Furthermore, there are important contributions made by Socrates that serve well for Plato to employ this particular 'Socratic mask.' Writes Havelock:

It is sometimes necessary to restate the obvious, in the face of much popular writing that beguiles the reader into thinking he has been allowed to listen to a historical Socrates

Plato's third period, the later dialogues, more technical and dealing with the structure of nature, especially with philosophy of religion include, *Theaetetus*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, and *Law's*.

¹ "Problem," 162.

speaking. The corpus *is* Plato. He would not exist in the history of philosophy, except as a shadowed mentality, if the corpus did not exist. The mask as borrowed converts a historical figure into a hero placed in heroic situations, for reasons closely connected with what was current literary convention. In doing so, it is inherently likely that by accident or design the corpus includes reminiscences of the historical figure, particularly because in this case the writer had known him personally. Since the writer is a philosopher, his interest in the historical figure is likely to be philosophical. But since everything he writes is his own, addressed to his own philosophical purposes, such reminiscences as there are will not be amenable to mechanical segregation, as though every now and then he took time off from his own enterprise in order to indulge in biography. If there is a mind of Socrates discoverable in the writings of Plato, it is intermingled with them chemically and is as likely or unlikely to appear in one place as in another, in early or a later dialogue, in the *Republic*, or *Theaetetus*, just as much or as little as in the *Apology* or *Crito*.¹

Havelock reframes the 'Socratic Problem' in the context of the oral/literate question. Havelock sees a powerful new partnership between Socrates and Plato. Socrates is seen as an oralist steeped in the non-literate tradition. He is a speaker who hears language as it is spoken. Plato is now conceived as a textualist, a writer who sees language, writes it, and reads it as an artifact.² Havelock reverses the traditional assumption shared by scholars of the Socratic Problem--viz., that in Socrates' day, to write was normal, to teach was abnormal.

¹ "Problem," 162-63.

² "Orality," 69.

Therefore, if we construe this Socratic Problem within the rubric of Havelock's oral/literate question, the Socratic Problem takes on a whole different meaning. Now both oral and literate communication is normal. Also implied is that what Socrates does to the speech of others by way of critique through his own speech, Plato does to this entire oral exchange, including the speeches of Socrates, by his own writing.¹ Socrates, in the context of orality and literacy, becomes a special character, if not entirely unique and ambiguous. He is seen in partnership with the Pre-platonic thinkers too, in their common goal to fashion a new vocabulary and syntax. The shared task in general is to generate a new language and way of thinking for conceptual discourse. But Socrates is treated as a very unusual partner, Socratic oralism in partnership with literacy. But how so? Clearly Socrates' abstention from writing, or for that matter, the written word,² was a function of his nonliteracy.³ How, then, can Socrates be a partner with literacy? Havelock construes that Socrates was an 'oralist' but that much of his teaching was conducted in the context of a literate revolution that came to be consummated not by him but by his pupils. The contemporary thinkers with whom Socrates was supposed to

¹ Cf., Plato's *Phaedrus*.

² We must bear in mind that the scene in the *Phaedo* 98b where Socrates reads Anaxagoras' *biblion* is really Plato. Socrates is being used as a "mask." See above.

³ Socrates was non-literate simply because Athens at that time was still a non-literate society. Athens' educational program was still essentially oral and governed by laws of orality. It was not until after Socrates' primary education, forty years later, that Athens became for the most part a literate society. Furthermore, we must quickly kill any notion that Socrates was illiterate. Illiteracy is a term used to denote those persons who, within a literate culture, cannot read or write. During Socrates' first forty years, Athens was still a non-literate culture. Any notion then that Socrates was illiterate is a modern prejudice. Socrates' nonliteracy also explains why he abstained from the written word (both as a consumer and as a producer of texts).

have associated were writers but they were not Athenians. Havelock contends that "they (the older thinkers from overseas) had a headstart. They had all been schooled in letters at the elementary level before puberty. When it came Plato's turn, Athens was equipped to teach him on the same lines, but that was forty years later, and Plato records the experience in a dialogue written perhaps eighty years later."¹ This means that the effects of the alphabet were first established overseas in Ionia before it made its debut in Athens. But what could Socrates' oralism contribute when placed in partnership with literacy?

Havelock supplies the answer by what he calls the 'interrupting question,' or the "'disruptive question requiring a repetition and rewording of what has just been said.'"² This technique, unique to Socrates, entails the ability to take abstract nouns, forming the subjects of conceptual statements, out of their roles in orally preserved communication. These abstract nouns were intended to be non-agents, non-persons, but still behaved in the syntax of orality, that is, as agents or persons being acted upon. This method of dialectic was special to Socrates, but still lacked the technology needed to break away from the sensual world of the human subject to a realm completely outside of human experience--viz., Plato's Forms.

It was left up to Plato to make this complete and final separation and he did so by way of his metaphysical doctrine of the

¹ "Problem," 167. See Plato's *Protagoras* 325d-e and the *Laches*, especially at 200e.

² *ibid.*

Forms. Finally, instead of talking about subjects such as "me," or "you," which was the seat of Socratic individual moralism, it became possible to refer to objects such as "it," "ideas." The old term justice became a moral principle that took on a new definition that had universal meaning, independent of all the various things that are called just at various times and places. Writes F.M. Cornford: "This absolute meaning can be defined and known. It is what Plato called a 'Form' or 'ideal,' fixed in the nature of things, unchangeable, beyond the reach of the arbitrary enactments of any group or individual."¹

The Socratic Problem becomes one rooted in the oral/literate question. Obviously Socrates' abstention from writing was a result of his nonliteracy. As a result he could go only so far with his abstract ability. He did not have the proper tools of literacy required to do what philosophy ultimately calls for, that is, to think an object *per se*, nor was he ingrained in a culture that was fully literate. Socrates remains as ambiguous as ever. He was at once a non-literate, an oralist, but one capable of serious reflection. Socrates is a paradox, one who found himself mid-way between orality and literacy.

Nevertheless, Havelock's account seems plausible and insightful. The only problem that remains is his intimate connection of literacy and philosophy in his interpretation of Plato. As a result, Socrates because he is non-literate, cannot be a genuine philosopher. Only Plato who wrote, who was grounded in letters at an early age, and was a pioneer of sorts in a society fully literate, could become the true philosopher.

¹ F.M. Cornford, *Before and After Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931 [revised 1990]), 60-61.

One final point: Havelock writes:

...writers in order to fulfil the full potentiality of their writing require readers, just as minstrels require an audience. And these became available in quantity only as the social apparatus was organized behind the effort to create them...the degree to which he feels able to exploit it will depend upon the degree of 'readership' in his linguistic group.¹

The cultural situation during Plato's *flourit* was one that recognized something was new in the air. For fourth century Athens, the degree of 'readership' was massive, the majority of the population was literate. The Athenians recognized the drive toward the abstract; they were historically cognizant of this new language that had intruded into their experience, and more importantly began to call it 'philosophy.' Philosophy became a democratized term, one that was fully available to the culture. But it could not have come about, in Havelock's view, if it were not for the technological superiority of the alphabet that served as the ultimate catalyst for a writing that would become fully available to the *pólis*. Once this was achieved philosophy had something to write and someone to write for. Philosophy as a discipline of the abstract had found its genius in Plato and as a consequence philosophy was born.

In the next chapter we will criticize Havelock's theory of the alphabet and its function as a technology that created the only possible means for the birth of philosophy. We will determine that Havelock's assessment of the alphabet's contribution to the birth of

¹ *Preface*, 262.

philosophy is a specious line of reasoning, misdirected and incoherent for a proper definition of philosophy, for it wrongly connects full literacy to the birth of philosophy and as a result devalues the true philosophical worth of Socrates and the Presocratics. Secondly, we will show how Havelock, too, is working from an underlying preconception, that is from a worldview set up by two primary theses: the dynamic (orality) and the static (literacy), and how these are brought together in Plato's cultural synthesis.

Chapter two

In the previous chapter we presented Havelock's theory of the unique characteristic of the Greek alphabet and the latter's revolutionary consequences for Greek culture in general, and for philosophy in particular. Our thesis there was that Havelock set up a general structural system, whether he was cognizant of the matter or not, that could be understood in terms of a dynamic vs static opposition. We saw how language played its antithetical roles in Homer and Plato and how it brought about its transitional effects in the Presocratics and Socrates. Moreover we observed how language, particularly the Greek alphabet, served as the key to Havelock's whole system.

The alphabet, in Havelock's view, on account of its ingenuity freed Greek culture from the limitations imposed upon it by the oral mnemonic techniques and the attendant ambiguities of what could be thought and said. The alphabet in all its uniqueness totally radicalized Greek culture and paved the way for revolutionary social and intellectual consequences. Because the alphabet broke the chains of mental dependence on oral memorization based in story and rhythm, Greek culture could move on to the privileged speculative heights found in science and philosophy. But Greek society could enjoy full democratization because the alphabet allowed for the removal of craft-literacy and semi-literate communities who held elitist status in society as scribes.

Yet, as we know, this latter development occurred because the technological efficiency of the alphabet and the sociological

institution of pre-puberty education insured that reading and writing would become automatic skills and thereby establish the reign of literacy in the culture. However, such a system of instruction presupposes the existence of a sufficient number of texts in order to motivate learning and to practice reading and writing. Since Havelock argues that there is minute evidence for such texts and schools before the end of the fifth century, B.C., he says that the alphabet, for all its revolutionary implications, had but a gradual technological influence on Greek culture that began with the transcription of oral Homeric verse and was then applied to a variety of texts over time; thus the technological use of alphabetic inscription went through transitional stages. For Havelock, a significant prose literature did not emerge until the fourth century, B.C., when literacy had fully blossomed. It is here that philosophy could make its rightful and official debut.

Our thesis here is that Havelock has concentrated too narrowly on the use of language in the development of Greek thought and culture from mythos to logos. We can observe this in his claims stated on behalf of the oral/literate equation. Furthermore, Havelock has reduced the whole phenomenon of the transmission from myth to philosophy to one aspect of cultural meaning, namely, language. We will scrutinize Havelock's thesis that philosophy depended on the full-flowering of literacy, that is, that philosophy in order to exist had to have a sufficient number of readers. Through this examination we will see that Havelock's thesis depends on the qualitative efficiency afforded by the alphabet and the quantitative amount of readers. Our conclusion is that the rise of Philosophy did not have to depend

on this link with literacy and that such a thesis misrepresents philosophy's proper and rightful place in culture.

A critic of Havelock's dating of literacy is Alfred Burns¹ who argues against Havelock's thesis that places widespread literacy in the latter half of the fifth century, B.C., if not even later. He rightly argues that Havelock's doubts about Athenian literacy in the fifth century, B.C., is based both on quantitative prevalence and on data of a qualitative sort. Burns presents epigraphical, archaeological, and literary evidence that literacy was prevalent in Hellas by the end of the sixth century, B.C., when the vast majority of Athenians were literate. Furthermore, literacy, while not universal, played an important role in the growth and development of the Greek intellect and culture by affecting thought processes in a particular way --viz., toward abstract conceptualization.

Havelock's definition of literacy "as that state of proficiency in which reading learned in childhood through practice and habit has become an automatic activity requiring almost no conscious effort,"² underestimates, according to Burns, the extent of fifth century literacy and overstates the extent of the literacy definition. Havelock, then, clearly presupposes the implementation of schooling and the abundant availability of books which he insists could not have occurred before the fourth century, B.C. The fifth century, B.C., for Havelock was one of 'craft-literacy' -- which included poets, dramatists, and other related professions.³ Hence Havelock considers

¹ Alfred Burns. "Athenian Literacy in the Fifth Century B.C." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42 (July-Sept., 1981) 371-387.

² *ibid.*, 373; *Preface* 39-40, 12-13; "Pre-literacy," 45-55.

³ See *Preface*, 39 and "Pre-literacy," 51.

the literacy of the remaining population as either rudimentary or non-existent.¹ Therefore, any 'philosophizing' was looked upon indifferently for two reasons: first, the non-literate society was unknowledgeable about the content, and to a larger degree, the extent, of the 'new' and growing philosophical movement; and secondly, the non-literate culture felt very little pressure from this philosophical group to reform their cultural worldview. There did not seem to be the need to take on a new cultural directive, that is, to change from a society so dependent on story and rhythm for the transmission of tradition to one that became independent through the written word. In short, even though the transition was underway from an oral society to a literate society, the antagonism represented by Homer and Plato had not yet made its formidable debut.

At any rate, Burns' major claim against Havelock's dating of Athenian literacy, is that "Athenian society in the fifth century B.C. functioned by and large as a literate society"² and that even if there was not large-scale book production or a standardized spelling, "its pervasive spread had a profound impact on the intellectual life of Athens and on the development of abstract thought."³

Even if Athenian literacy may have fallen short quantitatively of general literacy and qualitatively of full literacy as defined by the standard of a universal and effortless reading habit, it nevertheless seems to have been a crucial moving force in the cultural achievement of the fifth century.⁴

¹ *Preface*, 54 n.10 and 12.

² Burns, 387.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, 385.

Burns' most heavily documented evidence supporting widespread literacy at the end of the sixth century, B.C., points to the existence of schools where reading and writing were an integral part of music instruction, which in the wider sense of *mousike* included all forms of music and poetry.

Aristophanes¹ confirms this in his *Knights* in which the sausage-seller says: "I don't even know music except my letters."² Writes Burns: "Even if in the early fifth century specialization had not yet reached the point at which writing became the separate subject of the *grammatistes*, it was part of the music curriculum."³

Havelock's rapid dismissal of the evidence for a fully literate Athens in the fifth century, B.C., is erroneous. According to Burns there was a wealth of inscriptions, especially from literary references that point to schools in the early fifth century, B.C., that reading and writing were a part of the general curriculum. For instance, public decrees were inscribed and put up in the fifth century. Old comedy⁴ does refer to the use of documents, according to Burns. The conversion of the Attic alphabet to the Ionic model presupposes widespread documentation. Furthermore, Plato's *Protagoras* attests to the teaching of letters in schools:

¹ L. Woodbury. "Aristophanes 'Frogs' and Athenian Literacy" *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 106 (1976) 349-57. This essay presents a thorough study of the references in Aristophanes.

² Aristophanes. *Knights* 188-89. Translated by Benjamin Rogers. The Loeb Classical Library. (London: William Heinemann, 1941), 140-41.

³ Burns, 382.

⁴ Old Comedy is the comedy produced in Athens during the fifth century, B.C. Aristophanes best represents that period which, for the most part, satirized the political and cultural life of Greece. See *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. eds. N.G.L Hammond & H.H. Sculard (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1970), 269ff.

Later on when they send the children to school, their instructions to the masters lay much more emphasis on good behavior than on letters or music. The teachers take good care of this, and when boys have learned their letters and are ready to understand the written word as formerly the spoken, they set the works of good poets before them on their desks to read and make them learn them by heart...¹

More evidence points to the existence of a large library owned by Euripides. According to a passage in Plato's *Apology*² the writings of Anaxagoras could be purchased at the *agora* for a drachma at most. In other words, contemporary manuscripts were available to the general public in the marketplace at inexpensive prices. Besides the literary evidence, Burns cites the documentation of instruction in reading and writing found on vase paintings. He also shows evidence for instruction in reading and writing in drama, prose literature, and political institutions and procedures.³

Havelock would no doubt count all this as a testimony of craft-literacy. Regarding Anaxagoras' book, it was merely a single papyrus piece.⁴ Nevertheless, Havelock seems to be begging the question here, especially that Anaxagoras' *biblion* was representative of the majority of *biblia*.⁵

¹ *Protagoras*, 325d5-e.

² *Apology*, 26d.

³ Burns, 376; The evidence for Athenian literacy in the early fifth century, B.C., is presented by such figures as: T.Birt. *Die Buchrolle in der Kunst* (Leipzig, 1907); H.R. Immerwahr. "Book Rolls on Attic Vases" *Classical and Renaissance Studies in Honor of B.L. Ullman* (Rome, 1964); F.A.G. Beck. *Album of Greek Education* (Sidney, 1975); and T.B.L. Webster. *Potter and Patron in Classical Athens* (London, 1972).

⁴ *Preface*, 55.

⁵ Cf. *Phaedo* 98b-c which gives to Socrates detailed knowledge of Anaxagoras' doctrine.

Burns' argument is illuminating in particular by pointing to evidence that literacy was already widespread much earlier than Havelock's dating. If we accept Burns' theory that full literacy was established in the early fifth century, doesn't that force Havelock to concede that Heraclitus, Xenophanes, Parmenides, as well as the remaining Presocratic thinkers, were or might have been genuine philosophers? This pushes philosophy's origins back further than Havelock would admit. Yet Burns' analysis still fails to distinguish between philosophy and literacy and thus, does not properly save philosophy from the causal link to literacy that Havelock imposes upon philosophy.

Havelock views Greek culture as technically more sophisticated than non-Greek societies because of the scientific and philosophical breakthroughs caused by the revolutionary innovation of the alphabet. Yet why is a culture more sophisticated because of language efficiency? Havelock surely has a restrictive understanding of language, one that obfuscates the necessary interconnections that language has with other aspects which have influenced the cultural development of Greece, such as economics, politics, and aesthetics. And why rest philosophy on the basis of a quantitative distribution of literacy? Is philosophy philosophy only if and because the majority of the population can read and write? This certainly lends itself to a 'cultural chauvinism' on the part of Havelock for it discredits the momentous breakthroughs of non-alphabetic cultures such as the Hebrews, Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Chinese, all who came up

with equal yet different forms of abstraction.¹ Furthermore, it lessens the philosophical contribution of the Presocratics who made great advancements in philosophical thinking. In fact, Athens enters the picture only late in the game. What became of Miletus, Ephesus or Elea?

Havelock seems to overstate his case to reduce the phenomenon of the birth of philosophy to a functionalistic, technological affair founded on the sophistication of the alphabet. Civilization, viewed under this aspect of Havelock's theory, is seen as something merely technical in the sense that civilization is determined by its language and goes through various stages when a society moves from one linguistic technique to another. It is in this sense that civilization becomes technically more skilled. We have then for Havelock the following stages of cultural formation: 1) unconscious/ conversational orality; 2) pre-literacy (craft-literacy) where only a handful of scribes have access to reading and writing (but it is potentially democratic in the case of the Greeks because of the transcriptional accuracy of the alphabet); 3) dawning or semi-literacy in which a mixing of eye and ear --i.e., visual and acoustic methods of communication -- takes place, although the latter is still the prevalent medium; and 4) full literacy.

Even though this assessment of the changes in communication technique is plausible, Havelock's conclusions that Greek culture in general excelled and philosophy in particular could be birthed because of the superior technological advances in communication is

¹ We will examine this term further below.

biased and wrong. In fact, to link philosophy in this one-way causal relationship to culture tends toward a type of cultural relativism that in the long run endangers philosophy *qua* philosophy. To make philosophy dependent on culture and contiguous historical developments closes and shuts out philosophy's ability to engage in fruitful openness above and beyond the cultural bias. Nihilism sets in when philosophy can only be thought of as a cultural-historical phenomenon that is governed solely by what seems to be appropriate to the times and what the people want it to say. Seen in this light, philosophy would have nothing ultimate to say, no real truth to unfold; it becomes dead to culture.

Furthermore, Havelock's view that genuine philosophy could not have emerged without the cultural implementation of democracy subjects philosophy to the same one-way cultural bias. That is, Havelock doesn't differentiate between democracy as an arena for free dialogue and philosophy which is at once private and public.¹ If philosophy is understood, with Nietzsche, as a reciprocal partner with culture and as rooted deep in a culture's own history, a positive outcome can be achieved.

Nietzsche proclaims that this reciprocity exists only in 'a healthy culture.' He calls the Pre-platonic philosophers the first and the last of the true philosophical prophets who were the "highest authority for what we may term cultural health."² It was in this luxuriant world that they could, without hindrance, utter their cries

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*. Translated by Marianne Cowan (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1962).

² *ibid.*, 28.

for a new way of thinking--one that was their own yet one that most would not understand. Philosophy sat far above the fallaciousness of the cultural phenomenon and yet in the same measure, culture and philosophy were one 'being' together and in harmony. The Greek *paideia* was a homogenous, unified affair. Philosophy was in a way perfect, having a divine prestige, yet in another way a tragedy waiting to happen that projected itself upon the historical Socrates--the last philosopher. According to Nietzsche, the Greek world before Plato affirmed philosophers. They held them in high esteem. Yet with Plato, culture became sick; it turned against philosophy, banishing or executing the philosophers. This the decay of culture meant not only the decline of philosophy but of humanity as well.

As we said earlier, Havelock's conclusion regarding the birth of philosophy and its restrictive link with language has led philosophy onto a precarious path. Nietzsche rightly points to these problems that arise through a causal understanding of the relationship between philosophy and literacy.

Charles Kahn¹ reaffirms Nietzsche's insights concerning the causal linking of philosophy and literacy and, like Burns, claims that Athenian literacy did not necessarily entail mass 'book production' or 'standardized spelling.' Kahn goes further, and rightly so, by citing the use of prose in Greek thinking. Kahn claims, in part, that the function of prose complements philosophy.

¹ Charles Kahn. "Philosophy and the Written Word: Some Thoughts on Heraclitus and the Early Greek Uses of Prose" in *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy* (La Salle, Illinois: Monist Library of Philosophy, 1983), 110-125.

The philosophic author does not transport his audience into another realm with its own standard of verisimilitude. Even more than the historian..., the philosopher must reveal to his readers a world with which they are in some sense familiar, for it is his aim to tell the truth about the world in which they live. In this sense his discourse too is supposed to be transparent; the audience is invited to look *through* his words in order to recognize the reality which he describes. That is, perhaps, one of the deeper reasons for the philosophic preference for prose.¹

Prose thus gives a clearer and less opaque picture of the way language ought to function. Unlike epic poetry which creates an artificial screen of heroes and gods, prose opens the real world of day-to-day reality. Writes Kahn: "We look through the written word in order to see the world described or direct the action as enjoined."²

This 'transparency' of the written word refers to 'something else beyond.' Homeric epic, especially, does not mirror the world of nature and action as does prose. On the contrary, epic transmutes nature and action "into a new realm of brighter and darker colors, sharper relief, and more dramatic moments of emotion and decision, a fictive realm which is essentially opaque in that there is nothing behind it, no more basic 'reality' to which it can be referred."³

In short, the mimetic function of prose tells it as it is, the creative role of poetry conjures up fiction. But Kahn warns us that prose has its opacities as well and he cites Heraclitus as one of the first enigmatic prose writers. Kahn finds this use of prose especially

¹ Kahn, 120.

² *ibid.*, 119.

³ *ibid.*, 119

in Heraclitus, the first philosopher for whom the 'written word' was the "essential mode of communication."¹ Moreover, Kahn considers Heraclitus to have had a readership, not necessarily as widespread as in Plato's *flourit* but enough so that a few would recognize the meaning and extent of the Heraclitean corpus.²

Kahn's analysis of prose reaches as far back as Hesiod's *Erga* giving a more definite date for the birth of philosophy. The two, philosophy and prose, are essentially complementary, if we understand prose to be a recording of observation and planning. If we take this line of reasoning, then Kahn's claims also support the definite claims presented by Burns and Rohde's (below), that philosophy has a long tradition beginning about the time of Homer, if not earlier. The archaic language and traditional formulae employed by Homeric hexameter helped "create a fictive world, and the powerful rhythms and unusual vocabulary of lyric poetry" contributed "to an expressive reshaping of visual celebration of experience."³ "Prose," on the other hand, "represents language in its most natural state, as a vehicle for information and command."⁴

Kahn insists that philosophy depends on prose so that it can better transport philosophical meaning. Even though Kahn claims that prose can be found in Hesiod's *Erga* thus giving a more tangible date for the inception of philosophy, Kahn, in the end, doesn't give enough credit to the oral tradition. Kahn shows his preference for prose by juxtaposing orality and literacy in relation to philosophical

¹ Kahn, 118.

² idem., *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 3ff.

³ Kahn, 119.

⁴ ibid.

prose. The question we can now ask is: Why can't we talk philosophically without literacy? We can better solve this by examining the definition of abstraction.

Havelock identifies an antagonism between the conceptual (abstract) requirements of philosophy and the interests of a fully oral society. Writes Havelock:

The syntax of memorized rhythmic speech is...not friendly to that type of statement which says 'the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles' or 'courage consists in a rational understanding of what is to be feared or not feared.' It is not friendly precisely to that statement which the Socratic dialectic was later to demand. A statement which prefers its subject to be a concept rather than a person, and its verb to be an 'is' verb rather than a 'doing' verb. Neither principles nor laws nor formulas are amenable to a syntax which is orally memorizable.¹

We can see here the division that takes place between epic narrative, poetry, drama and Plato's dialogues, Aristotle's treatises, Herodotus' *Histories* and with some reservations the Presocratics (as Havelock would have it). These are the principle lines of contrast. The contrast represents an apparent cultural antithesis formed, in Havelock's view, by the technology of alphabetization.

As we said above, Havelock propounds a technological theory based on his conception of the achievement of civilization rooted in the superiority of the alphabet. Havelock holds that for pre-literate civilization devices such as rhythm and story were necessary to sustain not only the powers of memory but the very fabric of society.

¹ "Prologue," 51.

The achievement of philosophy within a civilization still grounded in the oral act was made possible by the facilities of the Greek alphabetic script. The alphabetic script (i.e., the vowel and the consonant) allowed for the development of conceptual abilities which gradually eclipsed the epic and the conversational idiom from which it came, so that a genuinely philosophical one grounded in conceptual abstraction could emerge.

Margolis¹ insists that we can resist Havelock's special explanation of the conceptual powers of philosophy. Margolis believes that magisterial doctrines such as Parmenides' must have had a history of development that may conceivably, following Rohdes and Burns, have begun in the Homeric poems. Rohdes holds fast to the compatibility of philosophy and the strongest features of the oral tradition and the writing down of the oral tradition. He thereby holds to the theory that there is a continuity between the two traditions.²

If we do accept Rohde's thesis --viz., that this continuity requires linking Parmenides with the Ionians -- this will extend the philosophical tradition back to the sixth century, B.C. In that case, we recover the whole, conventional picture of the history of Greek philosophy. The issue at stake, though, is not the mere dating of the philosophical tradition but the dating of the philosophical tradition in relation to the dating of the literacy tradition which allegedly arose due to the influence of the alphabetic invention. Writes Margolis:

¹ Joseph Margolis. "The Emergence of Philosophy" in *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy* (La Salle, Illinois: Monist Library of Philosophy, 1983), 228-243.

² Erwin Rohde. *Psyche...* Translated by W.B. Hillis (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1925) 372.

For, if the philosophical tradition is actually older than the invention of the alphabet or at least older than the development of widespread literacy in Greece, then it is both the case that Havelock's linkage of the philosophical with the literate is mistaken and that the conceptual character of philosophy and the oral tradition cannot be as inimical or as opposed to one another as he [Havelock] holds.¹

To be sure, Margolis favors Havelock's conclusions concerning the role of the alphabet and democratized literacy but disagrees with him concerning the conceptual capacity of the oral tradition and its relationship to a fully literate tradition. He feels that Havelock has misunderstood the several relative but different conceptual powers that distinguish the oral from the literate tradition, that is, the oral tradition had a restricted conceptual capacity, according to Havelock, which precluded abstractions, such as philosophy, science, or history.

Margolis also argues that those notational systems --i.e., the vowelless syllabic or the ideographic -- ones that preceded the Greeks' unique invention -- either fostered a philosophical or proto-philosophical tradition or else was entirely hospitable to it.

Furthermore, Margolis disputes Havelock's conclusions that "Greek literature presented the full-flowering of a literate culture which had already been incubating for some centuries."² Havelock's analysis "does not yet entail anything about the strength of the claim that the Greek literature of the last half of the eighth century, B.C. -- and of even more recent times -- must, in being oral in nature, have precluded the philosophical."³

¹ Margolis, 232.

² *ibid.*, 232.

³ *ibid.*, 233.

Margolis also disputes Havelock's view that the special advent of literacy involved the simultaneous democratization of reading and writing which contributed to its full flowering and thus, to the rise of philosophy and science. Havelock parallels pre-Greek systems of writing to the special scribal classes capable of interpreting texts and regularizing and systematizing conceptual distinctions that had been acoustically given. Margolis writes:

It seems very reasonable to suppose that, here, rather than in the democratized possibilities of the Greek alphabet, the prospect of, and interest in, developing and controlling a ramified abstractive idiom was already in place. Why not? What Havelock shows is that the peculiarly democratic flowering of Greek civilization could not have occurred if syllabic notation had not been replaced by the genuinely alphabetic; but he does not show that what was conceptually distinctive of the Greek --in the direction of philosophy, science, mathematics --depended on what facilitated the *democratic* pattern."¹

The key here for Margolis is that it would be misdirected to think of the Greeks as the only culture to achieve a genuine abstract science because of the alphabetic technology. Other cultures such as that of the Hebrews and Mesopotamians -- though geared toward different matters such as supernatural monotheism in the case of the Hebrews, and the computation of physical bodies like the stars and tides in the case of the Mesopotamians -- displayed an equally abstractive function. Margolis' single point is that "an oral tradition lacking an alphabet is bound to produce either a philosophical

¹ Margolis, 233.

practice or an alternative but equally abstractive practice"¹ Havelock overstates his case and as a result precludes other non-Hellenic cultures, thus his peculiar ethnocentrism. To be sure, the alphabet did make an impact on the early flowering of Greek philosophy and science, but to state that it was the only means by which philosophy could have come about is to deflate the contribution and conceptual integrity of the oral tradition. In the final analysis Havelock's position becomes a cultural chauvinism.

Margolis wishes to abide by Rhode's historical linking of the philosophical tradition to the Homeric/Hesiodic tradition. In doing so, Margolis would undoubtedly plead for an oral philosophy. Evidence for this can be seen in the figure of Socrates who never wrote a word. Simply, for Margolis, philosophy does not depend on a linkage to democratic literacy.

If we think of the philosophical tradition going back to Homeric and Hesiodic orality, we can see that these figures had the benefit of alphabetic notation, an advantage the Presocratics further exploited. "Even with regard to whatever conceptual orientation the alphabet might have facilitated, there is no reason to suppose that the philosophical impulse had to wait well into the six century."² If that is the case then the non-literacy of the general populace would be irrelevant for the question of the rise of philosophy. To be sure, Heraclitus, Xenophanes and Parmenides wrote during a time of semi-literacy (following Havelock's stages of literacy). To call them proto-

¹ Margolis, 234.

² *ibid.*, 236.

philosophers because the populace was for the most non-literate is to evoke the wrong criterion. Writes Margolis:

But Havelock sometimes argues that the memory of oral cultures lacking alphabetic notation could not support the democratized processing of complex philosophical abstractions; and sometimes he argues that the conceptual powers of essentially oral cultures even possessing scribal or privileged notation could not produce and sustain philosophical abstractions. Both are technological claims, and both may well be false; but, at the very least, the truth of the first entails nothing about the second. The most Havelock has shown is that the orientation and interest of an oral culture would probably favor mythos over logos -- unless, of course, there were in place actual societies or special infrasocietal arrangements that encouraged the reverse pattern."¹

The crux of Margolis' critique of Havelock rests on the latter's definition of abstraction. Margolis gives three constructions of the term 'conceptual abstraction': 1) that which makes no reference to the physical; 2) that which arranges the physical in a single system; and 3) that which theorises on a second order--i.e., theorises about theories. Margolis takes these multiple meanings of 'conceptual abstraction' and shows that they do not imply a sharp delimitation between imagistic and abstract thinking, but in fact are consistent with a "seamless continuum of reflection from bare assertion (oral or written) to grammar, science, and philosophy."²

¹ Margolis, 237.

² *ibid.*, 239.

Arthur Adkins¹ follows Margolis by arguing against Havelock's claim that the existence of written words alone renders abstraction possible. Adkins claims that there is no necessary link between literary and abstract thought. In fact, Adkins, like Margolis, argues that oral cultures, such as Homer's, were capable of abstract thought and that they were very much capable of systematization. Adkins emphatically states that the problem of abstraction is not an issue of linguistics but of genre --a class or category of artistic endeavor having a particular form or technique. Adkins uses an example from the *Iliad*: The narrative starts out on the battlefield of Troy. Poseidon, in defiance of Zeus' commands, has made his way down to the battle field. When Zeus demands his departure, Poseidon refuses, saying to Zeus' messenger:

For we are three brothers...Zeus and I and Hades...All things are divided into three, and each has a share of possessions and status. When the lots were cast, I drew the lot to dwell always in the grey sea, and Hades drew the dark gloom, while Zeus drew the broad heaven among the aether and the clouds. The earth [is] still common to all, as is mighty Olympus.²

Adkins points to a 'systematic apportionment,' in this passage, of the different parts of the cosmos (order). Even though this apportionment began with the actions of the deities, it is now conceived as a 'permanent state of affairs' existing over those same

¹ Arthur Adkins. "Orality and Philosophy" in *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy* (La Salle, Illinois: The Monist Library of Philosophy, 1983), 207-227.

² *ibid.*, 214.

deities. Adkins also points to the use of the perfect tense of the Greek verb, the primary function of which is to express "states of affairs as states of affairs."¹ Furthermore this perfect aspect is a phenomenon of non-literate Greek. The Greeks had therefore expressed 'state of affairs as states of affairs' over and against momentary or continuous actions despite the absence of literacy in their culture.

Adkins rightly construes that this verb-form represents a viable system as long as its purpose is to express states of affairs *qua* states of affairs. He cites documentation of the perfect aspect *teuko* meaning to make, build, work, in *Iliad* 14.246, where the "god Oceanos *tetuktai* [is] the origin of all things."² Adkins also shows that the use of the perfect passive of *teukein*, 'to make,' is a virtual synonym for 'is,' and can stand apart from an action or agent of action. Writes Adkins:

Havelock presumably must concede that it is a long-standing usage of oral speech since it is frequent in the Homeric poems; so that not merely is the perfect aspect available to express states of affairs--the function which it indeed was developed to perform--but it is already used to express states of affairs without reference to any agent or action which brought the states into being. Even without the copulative *einai*, and without the verbless usage, Homeric man possesses the linguistic resources to express a system as an abiding state of affairs.³

¹ Adkins, 214.

² Homer. *Iliad* VII. Translated by A.T. Murray. The Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1925).

³ Adkins, 214-15.

Adkins and Margolis have rightly criticized Havelock's use of the idea of abstraction. Adkins even claims that pre-literate Greeks could indeed have a system and he points to linguistic evidence. He argues that Havelock paints too simple a picture of the gulf that separates the "image-thinking of poetry and the abstract thinking of philosophy"¹ to borrow a phrase from *Preface to Plato*. In sum, they, along with Kahn, see the need to recognize the connections between these two traditions, the oral and the literate, and thus restore the continuity of the unfolding drama in Greek thought.

Havelock's problem in presenting a viable and workable theory for the birth of philosophy rests precisely on his view of abstraction. Again we find that the deciding factor in Havelock's assessment of the orality/literacy equation, and in particular the mythos/logos question, is his understanding that the gradual promulgation of literacy led to the usurpation of orality as a sociological institution. This in turn led to the development of a new Greek culture and the birth of a new mental state represented by philosophy. The key to all of this was the technological advances caused by the superiority of the Greek alphabet.

It is apparent that Havelock has painted too simple a picture of philosophy's birth by viewing the whole transition from mythos to logos as a phenomenon concentrated solely in the use of language. The view of language represented in his oral/literate equation, can also be understood as a kind of *lebensphilosophie*, a worldview that privileged the dynamic over the static. This is made clear in

¹ *Preface*, 266.

Havelock's antithesis between Homer and Plato, who as representatives of two primary sociological institutions form the basic categories of the dynamic and the static, respectively. This fundamental opposition between the static and the dynamic is Havelock's underlying paradigm that characterizes his whole program. The context for this opposition in ancient Greece is linguistic and its appearance in antiquity is grounded in the technology of the Greek alphabet.

Havelock's conclusions about communication technology, and its influence on Greek culture in general and philosophy in particular, are remarkable. But the causal linkage of literacy and philosophy is clearly a mistake. He has overstated and overstressed the positive contribution of orality and literacy to the development of the Greek mind and culture. By taking such an extreme position with orality and literacy and their cultural impact on Ancient Greece, he has restricted the birth of philosophy to one driving motive, communication technology, which is grounded in the Greek alphabet. As a result, he has failed to take into account the importance of other fundamental forces that have helped shape the Greek mind and culture independently of and together with the alphabet. In the end, Havelock's thesis becomes just another reductionalistic attempt to find the origins of philosophy.

By reducing philosophy to language, particularly to an artifact produced by alphabetic technology, Havelock has misunderstood philosophy's proper task and place in culture. Philosophy is irreducible to the oral/literate issue, that is, it cannot be pictured

merely as the outcome of a simple structural contrast represented by his oral/literate equation.

To be sure, literacy grounded in the technology of the alphabet had a profound impact upon Ancient Greek society. But it is one thing to say that philosophy was at a certain point in time or even primarily governed by its linguistic aspect; it is quite another to say that philosophy is essentially linguistic. Grounding philosophy's birth on a technological discovery, that is, the Greek alphabet, is to call philosophy a mere accident of human history. In other words, it is not part of our humanity to philosophize.

As K.J. Popma writes: "To philosophize is to discern the structure of creation and to describe systematically, i.e. in logical order, what is subject to that structure.¹" That is, philosophy opens up reality in a way that takes account of human experience by analyzing the structure of our humanity, and it does this in a way that Havelock seemingly fails to see. Havelock makes philosophy a technology (*techne*) based on alphabetic literacy and precludes the view that philosophy also grows out of naive human experience. In other words, Havelock has abstracted the governing aspect of philosophy, which is linguistic, from the totality structure of human experience and has placed philosophy in a one-sided causal linkage to the cultural institution of literacy. As a result philosophy cannot take on a totality relationship with creation. On the contrary, philosophy is restricted to one manifestation of creation, that is, cultural literacy.

¹ K.J. Popma. *Inleiding in de wijsbegeerte* (Kampen, 1956). Cited by L. Kalsbeek. *Contours of a Christian Philosophy* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1975), 35.

This view is blatantly prejudiced, not only to non-alphabetic cultures such as the Chinese, but also to individuals, like Heraclitus, who could philosophize despite widespread non-literacy.

If the early Greeks without the use of alphabetic technology could think systematically and abstractly as we argued earlier, then they could also think philosophically. Philosophizing is no doubt part of the human experience of creation and not subject to some accidental technological affair that was invented sometime after the Dark Ages in Greece. Therefore, philosophy can take on a totality vision that is comprehensive and foundational, comprehensive in that it opens up theoretically all of the aspects of creation.

Seen in this light, philosophy does not have to depend on the amount of literacy in a given society. The advent of literacy and the appearance of philosophy are two very different concerns. To be sure, literacy can help facilitate philosophy, but literacy should never determine whether there can be philosophy or not.

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