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The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind

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I. Words and History

History becomes possible only when the Word turns into words. Only verbatim traditions enable the historian to reconstruct the past. Only where words that were lost can be found again does the historiographer replace the storyteller. The historian's home is on the island of writing. He furnishes its inhabitants with subject matter about the past. The past that can be seized is related to writing.

Beyond the island's shores, memories do not become words. Where no words are left behind, the historian finds no foundations for his reconstructions. In the absence of words, artifacts are silent. We have often felt frustrated, but we accept that prehistory cannot be read. No bridge can be constructed to span this chasm.

ISTORY REMAINS a strict discipline only when it stops short, in its description, of the nonverbal past. The critical historian, reading Herodotus or Homer, observes and admires the very creation of Greek words, for the word is a creature of the alphabet and has not always existed. If the historian tries to describe wordless societies, he soon becomes a natural historian, an anthropologist like Aristotle, whose *anthropogein* can only be translated as "idle talk" or "rattle tales."

Anthro
Gossip →

Herodotus knew how far the writ of the historiographer ran. A thousand years after the death of Polycrates, he wrote that the tyrant of Samos "was the first to set out to control

the sea, apart from Minos of Knossos and possibly others who may have done so as well. Certainly Polycrates was the first of those whom we call the human race." Herodotus did not deny the existence of Minos, but for him Minos was not a human being in the literal sense. He let the architect of the labyrinth live on as the father-in-law of the Minotaur. He believed in gods and myths, but he excluded them from the domain of events that could be described historically. His ability cheerfully to place historical truth alongside the qualitatively different truth of myth stemmed from his having set limits on historiography. He did not see it as his job to decipher a core of describable truths in myth, to explain the sacrifice of Athenian boys to Minos as a tribute to please some lecherous Oriental potentate, as later Greek and Roman historians did. Like Plato, he retained the ability to see the myths as stories that spoke to the illiterate, to children, poets, and old women.

Prior to history, Plato says, there is a narrative that unfolds, not in accordance with the rules of art and knowledge, but out of divine enthusiasm and deep emotion. Corresponding to this prior time is a different truth—namely, myth. In this truly oral culture, before phonetic writing, there can be no words and therefore no text, no original, to which tradition can refer, no subject matter that can be passed on. A new rendering is never just a new version, but always a new song. Thinking it self takes wing; inseparable from speech, it is never there but always gone, like a bird in flight. The storyteller spins his threads, on and on, never repeating himself word for word. No variants can ever be established. This is often overlooked by those who engage in the "reading" of the prehistorical mind, whether their reading is literary, structuralist, or psy-

choanalytic. They turn Minos into a person, the Minotaur into a dream, and the Labyrinth into a symbol.

Memories of this prehistory become a historical source, a verbatim tradition, only through historiography. Only the historian, writing it down, freezes the source material for his descendants, as Flavius Josephus stresses in his *Jewish War*: "My task is to write down what I have been told, not to believe everything; and what I am saying here applies to my entire work." Only the original text gives simultaneous rise to source and history.

Every original text is the record of something heard. Some scribe of genius listened to Homer and the result was the one *Iliad*. Bernardo de Sahagun, the sixteenth-century Franciscan missionary in Mexico, and a pupil of Erasmus, took down hundreds of Aztec songs. He tried to apply the rules of textual criticism to several songs on the same theme all attributed to Prince Netzalhuacoyotl, but failed to reconstruct an original. In their deceptive similarity, each song, when written down, was not a variant but an original. Anthropologists become hunters chasing unwritten materials; tape recorders in hand, they descend on blacks, women, peasants—anyone on whose lips they sense prehistory. Folklorists sieve sagas and legends for fragments of oral phraseology. It is the task of the historian to develop the tools for recognizing which of these records are original sources, that is to say, texts that are not based on other texts, but represent the first fixing of speech. For those records are the flotsam from the oral realm that have washed up on the historiographer's shore, dicta for the first time broken down into words, sung rhythms strung in verses.

Writing is not the only technique we know of for making the flow of speech coagulate and for carrying clots of language

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along intact for tens or even hundreds of years. When melody, meter, and rhythm combine with a proverb, the result is often an indestructible nugget of language. The drummers of the Lokele who live in the jungle of Zaire, not far from the former Congo River, still know the sayings that fit their tom-tom rhythms. In fact they need the sayings in order to drum the rhythms. But no one now remembers what they mean—or whether they ever “said” anything.

In certain rituals practiced in the Isthmus of Panama, sequences of sounds are used, in which rhythm, melody, and articulation form a three-dimensional counterpoint. The counterpoint effectively prevents any change from creeping in, the chants acting as mummified dicta from a forgotten, prehistoric age. Legal maxims, oaths, spells, benedictions and curses, elements of genealogy, the stock epithets attaching to the name of a god, a hero, or a place, are all very often secured against corruption in this way. The utterance can also be tied to a thing. The tally stick that the Maori orator holds in front of him and to which he hitches his solemn oration, the quipu, or knotted bundle of threads that enables the Incan runner to reel off his news like a rosary, the sequence of pictures drawn on a wall, can support the unchanged repetition of sounds that might make no sense to the speaker. The caste organization of preliterate India can be understood as the social organization of a mnemonic device that enables the Brahmins to preserve the Vedas unchanged. Gestures that coalesce with the liturgical murmurs in a sacrificial ceremony fix language to body movements. Through all these techniques, nuggets of frozen speech can be carried along in an oral culture.

But it would be a grave mistake to view the alphabet pri-

marily as an immense improvement over these mnemonic devices. Only the alphabet has the power to create “language” and “words,” for the word does not emerge until it is written down. Neither the songs of the poets, nor the invocations of the priests, nor the dictates of rulers from prehistoric times are sequences of word. Their immense yet evanescent power eludes description, and those who uttered them were unable, for all their oral skill, to see their own speech as a string on which words are the beads. Prehistory knows nothing of these mono- or polysyllabic atoms of language whose semantic fields we plot with our dictionaries. What prehistory perceives as units can have only quaint contours. The sequences of sounds between pauses that characterize speech are not words but syllables, phrases, tropes. It is to these measures of speech alone that the original word or Logos relates. This meaning has become secondary today, although we invoke it when we “give” or “go back on” our word, or when we “have a word” with someone. For us the “real” meaning of word is *grammatical building block*, before and after which our pen breaks contact with the paper. Plato’s slayers, barbarians, and children still live in a prelogical, that is, a “word-less” society.

The historian misreads prehistory when he assumes that “language” can be spoken in that word-less world. In the oral beyond, there is no “content” distinct from the winged word that always rushes by before it has been fully grasped, no “subject matter” that can be conceived of, entrusted to teachers, and acquired by pupils (hence no “education,” “learning,” and “school”). For it is the record in phonetic writing that first carries what is heard across a chasm separating two heterogenous eras of speech. The alphabetic scribe carries

“educ”

what is spoken from the ever-passing moment and sets down what he has heard in the permanent space of language. Only * with this act can knowledge, separate from speech, be born.

As literates, we think of speech as the use of language, and we think of this language as outliving speech, as leaving traces—if not on paper, then in our selves. Before the concept of recording sounds through the alphabet had come into being, speech could not be imagined to leave such a trail. Without a listener (who might be an angel or God), speech could not be perceived as anything but madness, because speech courts attention. And before this sound-recording through the alphabet, a listener could not be perceived as a recorder. The nod indicated that the other person had understood, not that he had recorded the message, accepted the information.

Kelly T. [How different speech is from language is made clear by the fact that language is always neuter, while speech is always gendered. With every utterance, the speaker refers back to himself and his gender. It is always the total quality of speech that refers the listener to the speaker's gender, not the grammatical gender of the pronoun "I." (Nowhere, with the possible exception of the oasis of Hadramut, does the personal pronoun have grammatical gender.) In a culture, what sounds feminine and what sounds masculine is determined by convention, and not by the biological nature of the vocal cords. The way men and women speak contrasts in many ways: linguists, anthropologists, and sociologists recognize about two dozen criteria describing these contrasts. In no two places is their configuration the same. The gender contrast in speech is just as fundamental as the contrast in phonemes, but it has barely been remarked. At the very best, recently, linguists

have examined the discrimination against women in the so-called "use" of language, which is genderless.

This gender contrast in speech is lost when it congeals as language on the page. It does not survive the jump from pure time of speech into the permanent, spatial dimension of script. To return to Herodotus: The historian's task starts "with those whom we call the human race" that script has brought into being; with men and women when they begin to speak the same language. (We have been tempted to speculate that the story of the Tower of Babel tells of this event.)

If alphabetic writing can be spoken of as bringing the human race into existence, it is only because this kind of writing is unique, as a study of the history and phenomenology of phonetic writing will reveal. Pure, mature phonetic writing, which was discovered only once, albeit in stages, is an oddity among writing systems in the same way that the loudspeaker is an oddity among trumpets. The alphabet records only sounds, and it is only through sounds that it provides meaning. The alphabet does exactly the opposite of what most hieroglyphics and ideograms and, most importantly, what Semitic letters were created to do.

In writing systems using hieroglyphics and ideograms, the reader is expected to speak; the ideogram itself is silent. The statement "1 x 1" says "once one," or "one times one," or even "multiplication table." But it can equally be read "jedan put jedan." In all these scripts the reader must find the spoken expression from recollecting what has been said before: Mayan hieroglyphics, for example, provide the clues so that the reader may speak aloud from memory. Through landmarks that are more than just pictograms, they help him find

his way orally along an often-traveled path. Ideograms, too, originally point toward utterance. They presuppose that the reader is familiar with the content of ideas whose individual elements are strung in a row before him to be named. Reading thus means retelling the familiar content depicted in accordance with more or less precise rules. Even when—as in the third millennium B.C.—the individual Egyptian hieroglyph or Mesopotamian ideograph become logograms, so that from that point on they had to be named with one and only one word, the word presents itself to the reader without any indication about its sound; the ending and inflection that make it audible must be supplied by the reader.

The early part of the second millennium B.C. saw a series of faltering attempts here and there in the Middle East to bind speech more closely to writing. Convention came to dictate that a particular pictogram or ideogram, which had become a logogram, could be used as a syllable sign. The reader put aside any recognizable meaning of the word and read it into the text for its sound only. As a syllable sign it came to be placed beside the thing sign, making it easier to decipher. Reading became somewhat like solving a rebus. Nowhere, however, did a true syllabary evolve out of this custom—the Indian syllabic alphabet is of considerably more recent origin than the Greek. It is an admirable system of phonetic notation that grew out of the Greek invention.

Quite suddenly, around 1400 B.C., an entirely new kind of script made its appearance on the border between the Egyptian hieroglyphic tradition and the cuneiform of Mesopotamia. This North Semitic alphabet was the first to have signs for sounds only, and only one sign for each group of sounds. Some archaeologists have speculated on a single inventor for

this alphabet, so completely does it accomplish both requirements for script from the first moment of its appearance: the universe of heard sounds—an almost infinite variety of sounds in every language, with men and women, children and dotards, singers and ragmen all sounding different—is reduced to a limited number, each of which is then labeled.

However, this Byblos alphabet whose letters stand only for sounds does not have any letters for vowels. The freely voiced qualities of breathing are not indicated, only the consonants, the harsh or soft obstacles the breath encounters. Its script does not yet transform the page into a mirror of speech, but is rather a burial ground for the skeleton of language. Being a purely phonetic notation, it differs radically from all previous scripts, but it can still be read only by someone trained for a special kind of analysis. Only a person who has developed the ability to recognize within the uninterrupted string of consonants groups of two to five elements that act as “roots” can breathe those roots into life. The roots grow into words only when the reader makes them resound according to the semantic function they ought to play in the environment in which they stand.

In a prophetic vision, Ezekiel describes the process: “The hand of the Lord carried me out . . . in the midst of a valley which was full of bones that, lo, were very dry . . . and I prophesied as I was commanded, and the bones came together: bone to bone . . . but there was as yet no breath in them . . . and the Lord said, ‘Breathe upon the slain [literally: Give thy soul, *nefesh*, to them] that they may live’ . . . and as I did, they stood upon their feet” (Ezek. 37:1-10). It is astounding with what audacity a clutch of pastoral tribes in Canaan claimed the invention as their own. As Exodus relates, Israel overcame

"Egypt" intellectually and emotionally with the invention of phonetic writing. The mummies in their tombs are supplanted by roots. No longer is it only priests who can promise the continuation of life after death by deciphering the hieroglyphs. The invention of the Semitic script makes possible a new relationship to the life and death of Osiris.

From now on the written character rescues a sequence of sounds from ephemerality; and living speech is dismembered by the scribe, who as he listens to dictation ponders the speech, examines it for its inaudible roots, determines the (usually) three consonants that compose it, and engraves these into a clay tablet. The letters he has buried tell what roots have been read into the recorded utterance, and these letters can be resurrected at any time alphabetically by the reader.

Greek merchants acquired the string of Semitic consonants from Syrian traders on the coast of Asia Minor. They left the sequence of letters undisturbed, with their shapes recognizable and their names unchanged, but they perverted the use of these letters. While for the Semite *beth* had a semantic association, because for him it means "house," for the Greek it is merely the name of a letter that stands for a sound. Four of the Semitic letters were not needed by the Greeks: To the Greek ear they stood for barbaric noises. The Greeks of the eighth century used them to indicate vowels. The consonants are now placed between vocals, the entire word now lies on the page. No more does the reader have to recognize naked bones that must be properly assembled by the eye and then fleshed out only by breathing life into them. The page has become a record of sounds.

Phonetic script could now do the opposite of what the

string of consonants had so far done. While the consonants had been used to record units of meaning that the scribe had picked from the flow of speech, the Greeks froze the flow of speech itself onto the page. The scroll had been sounded thus far through an act of interpretation of the letters; alphabetic recording that fixed sound on the page brings an utterance from the past into the present, to which the reader can listen, interpreting what he hears. The Jew searches with his eyes for inaudible roots in order to flesh them out with his breath. The Greek picks the sound from the page and searches for the invisible ideas in the sounds the letters command him to make.

The transformations brought about by Greek literacy are well symbolized by the appearance of Sybil, who replaces her older sister, the Pythia, as the model of the prophetess. Her story is told by Heraclitus, a Pythagorean who, through Cratylus, could claim Plato as a pupil. He was the first to distinguish the consonants (which he divided into the unvoiced *aphthonga* and the sonant *aphona*) from the vowels. Plutarch has conserved the passage from Heraclitus in which the Sybil makes her first appearance. In the image of the alphabet, she wrests utterance from its temporal context and turns prophecy into a literary genre: "Sybil, in her mania, makes the oracle of the god ring out a whole millennium, joyless, odorless, and unadorned. . . ." She spells out the future. For the Sybil first writes her oracle on leaves, then later on tablets. She brings stone slabs to King Tarquinas, who reigned over the Campagne, south of Rome—over Etruscan towns through which the Romans got their alphabet. No one need strain anymore to hear the ominous murmurings of the Delphic Pythia. The menacing future can now be read.

II. Memory

At the time when heaven still embraced the earth, when Uranus still lay with full-hipped Gaia, an aeon before the Olympian gods, the Titans were born and with them, memory, or Mnemosyne. In the Hymns to Hermes, she is called the Mother of the Muses. She is the earliest of the goddesses, preceding even Apollo with his lyre. Hesiod mentions her as the goddess of the first hour of the world and describes her flowing hair as she stretches out beside Zeus on his couch, there to beget the rest of her nine daughters, the Muses. It is she who adopts the son of Maya, the "shamefaced" or "awful" nymph, and thus makes him the son of two mothers. She provides Hermes with two unique gifts: a lyre and a "soul." When the god Hermes plays to the song of the Muses, its sound leads both poets and gods to Mnemosyne's wellspring of remembrance. In her clear waters float the remains of past lives, the memories that Lethe has washed from the feet of the departed, turning dead men into mere shadows. A mortal who has been blessed by the gods can approach Mnemosyne and listen to the Muses sing in their several voices what is, what was, and what will be. Under the protection of Mnemosyne, he may recollect the residues that have sunk into her bosom by drinking from her waters. When he returns from his visit to the spring—from his dream or vision—he can tell what he has drawn from this source. Philo says that by taking the place of a shadow the poet recollects the deeds that a dead man has forgotten. In this way, the world of the living constantly makes contact with the world of the dead.

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THE MODERN memory does not derive from the older Mnemosyne, but from another, later Latin word, *memoria*. Like words and text, memory is a child of the alphabet. Only after it had become possible to fix the flow of speech in phonetic transcription did the idea emerge that knowledge—information—could be held in the mind as in a store. Today, we take this idea so completely for granted that it is hard for us to reconstruct an age when recollection was not conceived as a trip into the cellar to pick up stores, or a look into a ledger to verify an entry. Since the fourth century B.C., memory has been conceived as such a deposit that can be opened, searched, and used. Philosophers have disputed where this deposit is located—in the heart, the brain, the community, or perhaps in God, but in all these discussions memory has remained a bin, a wax tablet, or a book.

For turning this idea topsy-turvy, Milman Parry ranks close to Einstein, although it took much longer before the implications of Parry's achievement were grasped, since humanists, as a rule, are much more conservative than physicists. Thanks to research done in the 1930s by this young Harvard classicist and his assistant Albert Lord, it is now clear that a ~~purely oral tradition knows no division between recollecting and doing.~~ The pre-alphabetic bard does not, like his medieval counterpart, draw on a storehouse of memories in order to compose a poem. Rather, he dips into a grab bag of phrases and adjectives and, driven by the rhythms of the lyre, spins the yarn of a tale.

Parry's thesis, submitted to the Sorbonne in 1928, argued that the *Iliad* could only have come into being through oral recitation and in the rhythm of spoken hexameters. According to Parry's hypothesis, there are two heterogenous pro-

life, knowl.

cesses by which social continuity is preserved: the flow of prehistoric epic tales that are never repeated word for word; and history that is built on the bedrock of words. In a purely oral tradition, songs, epics, and sayings do not hover above life. That life is a delicate, complex tissue steeped in epic recollections. As soon as the stream of recollections becomes even potentially visible as a narrative, this stream clots and turns into an authority, a point of reference, a socially disembedded rule, the excrement of lived wisdom that a new kind of wise man, called the scribe, can shape.

This epistemological heterogeneity between history and prehistory only gradually gained acceptance. It contradicts the assumption made by the sciences that categories exist to describe human experience *tout court*. Parry's hypothesis stood up only because the question whether a particular text represents the direct, firsthand transcription of a preliterate tradition can be answered according to strict rules.

The new field of research Parry marked out makes it possible today to determine with certainty whether a particular text is, in the strict sense, prehistoric—whether it is the faithful record of a preliterate improvisation, or the line of a speaker who uses language or memory to compose a text. During the last fifty years Parry's pupils have applied phonologically governed linguistics to the criticism of literary works and the study of oral tradition. In the course of their research, they observed that surviving elements of oral tradition often complemented the detailed study of the linguistic peculiarities of certain major Greek texts and subsequently of epics in other languages as well. They have developed, tested, and refined a number of criteria that make it possible to distinguish oral poetry from every kind of written com-

position with impressive consistency. Their criteria are the best way we know to evoke the elusive activity of preliterate recollecting in the time before *scripta* of information, originals, or copies emerged.

To begin with Parry's thesis about the *Iliad*: *The Iliad* reveals a mastery in self-limitation within given patterns that cannot be imitated self-conscious literacy. What Eric Havelock calls the "variation within the same" has never been approximated by any poet. Only texts that exhibit five forms of self-limitation simultaneously may be regarded as genuine, firsthand written records of oral improvisation: First, in Greek epics, the hexameters are composed of standard word groups. Second, those word groups are mutually attracted to one another during oral recitation. Purely statistically, there is an increasing probability of finding the same formulae in the same section of the epic. Third, the line usually coincides with a syntactic unit: Many lines could be ended with a full stop or a comma because at least the meaning comes to an end there. Fourth, a uniform—though complicated—pattern occurs at the level of the phoneme; combinations of sounds that fall outside the pattern inevitably point to written composition rather than oral improvisation. Finally, this quantitatively verifiable self-limitation relates even to the pattern of the story as a whole: The return of the hero, for example, is always, in oral improvisation, told in the same phrases within the same culture.

According to Parry, the question of the origin of Homeric epics had remained unsolved for so long because it had been wrongly framed. Even today much Homeric research is directed toward looking for an author. Who was the parent of those twenty-seven thousand hexameters? Was he an editor

of songs that he had collected from people who knew them by heart? Was he a she? Or was he a godlike poet who composed them himself? Did he write them down, or did he get someone else to do it? Or did others learn them from him, memorizing them, so that much later, after the invention of the alphabet, like a Greek Samizdat, they could be written down?

For Parry, both hypotheses—that of the editor and that of the poet—were equally untenable. Neither learning by heart nor composing were possible in prehistoric times. Before writing, there was no text that could have been internalized and later reproduced like a film script or a part in a play. ~~Not until there was a text could there be a recitation.~~ In Plato's day, there were already people who knew the Homeric epic by heart—in the *Ion*, Plato describes Socrates' dialogue with such a mnemonist. Xenophon also tells of such a rhapsode who knew all of Homer's work by heart and was admired for it. But that very admiration is already Classical, providing proof that the rhapsode's act of memory was regarded as an extraordinary achievement. ~~No oral society supplies accounts of an epic poet being admired for feats of recollection. They were neither prodigies nor super-Brahmanic mnemonists.~~

But neither was Homer a man of letters—for the simple reason that there were no letters. The lines of the *Iliad* do not consist of a series of words. Those who sang it were driven by the rhythm of the lyre. In the twenty-seven thousand hexameters, we can find twenty-nine thousand repetitions of phrases with two or more words. Homer sang as a prehistoric rhapsode—the Greek *rhapsodein* meaning to stitch together, a linguistic connection that is shared with the *Sutras*, stitched

(sutured) together. Homer's art consisted of stitching together a series of stock words and phrases.

We are so used to drawing a distinction between speaking (and the language that we speak) and thinking (and the language in which it is clothed) that we are no longer capable of composing aloud by improvisation. This difficulty did not exist for the bard: He was composing and reciting simultaneously. As easily as he handles the Greek verb in the rhythm of speech, he finds the first stock word in the poetic vocabulary that leads him on to the next one that will fit in the hexameter. Choosing the one correct verbal inflection from the limited group of forms is as easy for him as selecting the phonetically and syntactically right formula from the vast, but after all finite, group of such formulae in the poetic vocabulary of *his* time.

In making his choice, the rhapsode was not so much concerned with the actual meaning of the particular adjective selected. It is therefore a mistake to judge these epics according to the aesthetic canon of the Classical Age. ~~Homer, in contrast with Virgil, was not only word-less, but also language-less.~~ The singer of the *Iliad*, carried along by the beat of the hexameters, was able to locate and use the wonderfully precise nuances of the Greek verb forms and to choose from the enormous store of "winged words." No object remains from this performance. The art of Homer consisted of fluent improvisation within strictly limited means: the art of Classicism gives poetic originality free rein. That originality consists of the deliberate recasting of a given text; that is to say it was based on improving imitation—the mimesis praised by Aristotle. For Virgil, the *Aeneid* was a work of art: It was an

object that he continued improving by changing a word here and there—until, on his deathbed, he wanted to burn it in frustration. The *Aeneid* allows itself to be paraphrased. In contrast, Homer can only be rendered—the word cannot be pried from the meaning.

Parry's theory remained mere speculation until he managed to observe the singing of living traditional rhapsodes. In the 1930s, he and his pupil Albert Lord traveled to Serbia, where they made the acquaintance of a number of folksingers who still had their roots in the epic traditions of the Balkans. In Turkish coffeehouses and at peasant weddings they sang all night, telling stories to the rhythms of the *gusla*. Using the complicated equipment of pre-war days, Parry recorded their epics on metal discs in order to check his theory by observation.

No *guslar* ever repeated the same epic word for word. Every performance was, as Parry expected, a fresh attiring of the old story. For many years after Parry's death, Lord continued the research. He was able to observe the process whereby a youngster became a *guslar*. First, the young man spent years listening to the master singing. While tending his herds, he practiced using the stock formulae and so gradually became familiar with the poetic vocabulary. With growing assurance he was able, accompanied by the strum of the *gusla*, to fall back more and more upon those set pieces; but only a small number of skilled bards could draw, even in their maturity, upon the full repertoire of rhythmic fragments. The deeper his active mastery of the wealth of formulae, the clearer his understanding of the content of the songs he heard. Once this faculty was fully developed, he needed only one night's lis-

tening to a song he did not know in order to be able to reproduce that song himself a week later. No one could do it on the same day: The *guslari* say that a story needs time to ferment in the bard—at least a day and a night.

Parry's theory enables us to understand that so complex a structure as the *Iliad* was sung in a single draft—without the aid of written notes, plans, or drafts. According to Lord's observations in Serbia, it is entirely possible that a single bard assembled from formulae and sang tens of thousands of verses in one outpouring. The riddle of how such work is written down is also solved, according to Lord. In Serbia, he attempted, without tape recorders, to get an accurate written record of long epics. It emerged that collaboration between a clever town clerk and a mature *guslar* produced surprisingly good results.

At the start, the bard felt annoyed and uneasy about having to pause repeatedly in his singing and rely on plucking his *gusla* to keep him in time. Soon, however, the *guslar* began to enjoy this leisure and to use the additional time to utter the proper formula. And in the clerk he found a listener who allowed him to spin out his material at his own discretion until it was exhausted. The writing down of the *Iliad* could have taken place under similar circumstances, and Homer probably had the same attitude toward the text as the *guslari*: not one of them was the least bit interested in having so much as a line of the written record read back to him for checking.

The knowledge gained from this comparison of the Serbian *guslar* and Homer has proved helpful over the past fifty years in the study of cultures that have persisted beyond the reach of records. It has come to form one of the foundations

of scholarly discussion of the epic in the Anglo-Saxon world and has led to entirely new insights in the study of the medieval epic.

Oral transmission of epics ceases with writing, and with it, at the dawn of history, fades the idea of memory as the goddess of immortal recollection. For the Classical poet of Greece no longer has need of recollections from a "beyond." No longer is each utterance like a piece of driftwood the speaker fished from a streamful of treasures, something cast off in the beyond that had just then washed up onto the beaches of the mind. No longer are thought and memory intertwined in every statement with no distinction between thought and speech.

When epic tradition becomes a recorded one and custom is transmogrified into written law, the poet's sources are frozen into the texts. He can follow the lines of a written text; the river that feeds its own source is remembered no more. Not one Greek city has preserved an altar dedicated to Mnemosyne. ~~Her name became a technical term for "memory" now imagined as a page: the water of memory turns into the fluency of a writer and a reader.~~ Fixed words on clay tablets acquire authority over the re-evocation of fluid speech.

~~Plato, in the early fourth century B.C., stands on the threshold between the oral and written cultures of Greece.~~ The earliest epigraphic and iconographic indications of young boys being taught to write date from Plato's childhood. In his day, people had already been reciting Homer from the text for centuries, but the art of writing was still primarily a handicraft. From the seventh until well into the sixth century B.C., reading and writing were confined, in Greece, to very narrow circles. In the fifth century B.C., craftsmen began to acquire the art of carving or engraving letters of the alphabet. But writing

was still not a part of recognized instruction: The most a person was expected to be able to write and spell was his own name. The taking of dictation and the fluent reading of written materials were not yet part of knowledge used for control and education. Until the fifth century B.C., schooling in Athens was purely oral, musical, and gymnastic. *Mousike* stood at the core of the Greek curriculum: Poems were recited and improvised, rhythmic rhetoric was practiced, pupils learned stringed and wind instruments, singing and dancing. The few pictures in which a teacher is represented with a stylus in his hand show that the alphabet now made it possible for the teacher to read out to the pupils the poems to be learned. Thus a full century before the stylus was imposed on pupils, they were able to learn the texts by heart. That is to say, they gained an understanding of a fixed text that could be listened to, and a respect for the sound of its words, long before they were required to write or read fluently.

Plato's was the time of great change from instruction in elevated, rhythmic public speech to the predominance of prose speech. What formerly could only be recited or sung, can now be pinned down, penned down. The script can be copied, one copy serving as the source for another. The scroll can freeze "materials" for a teacher. It is not the speech but the language of the past that can be made present. Plato heard the Pythagoreans and Socrates. He does not claim to have dictation from them, but he does boast about his faculty of recollection. He is not a traitor like Hippias, who disclosed the orally transmitted secret teachings of Pythagoras. He is already a writer—however anachronistic that may sound. His dialogues are literary prose. He created the model—never surpassed—of the written dialogue that imitates speech. His

educ.

literary ~~records~~ forms a counterpart to the record of Homeric song from prehistoric times.

Plato was not Greece's first author. But he was the first uneasy man of letters. He was the first to write with the conviction of the superiority of thought unrelated to writing. He was anguished by the effect the alphabet was exerting on his pupils. Their reliance on silent, passive texts could not but narrow the stream of their remembrance, making it shallow and dull. Earlier, this mistrust of the alphabet had been reflected in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*: Zeus punished Prometheus for bringing the alphabet—"the combining of letters, creative mother of the Muses' art, wherewith to hold all things in memory"—to mankind. Zeus had engendered his daughters in the pond of Mnemosyne so that they might bubble and flow, not be locked up in script.

Plato, who saw writing as a threat to the meditative search, kept coming back to the question of Mnemosyne: memory/recollection. How do we bring the past into the present? He answers the question through Diotima in the *Symposium*, after he has been extolling Eros: "To what does the word *meditation* refer if not to knowledge that is past? When we forget, knowledge escapes us. Meditation then brings us to new knowledge and gives it the appearance of still being the same."

Diotima describes the search for truth in terms that very closely parallel the process by which the Serbian *guslar* repeatedly retrieves the same material from oblivion and spins it into a new song. Plato's intellectual path, his access to truth and ideas, is an epic one. This becomes clearer when we read further in Diotima's speech: It forms part of her answer to Socrates, who wants her to teach him about the secrets of

Eros. For Diotima, "meditating" is an expression or form of creative love, which in its search for the immortal is always giving itself anew and always withdrawing. Eros longs for what is permanent, and it takes shape when we meditate on the immortal truth, on *eidos*. Only this kind of loving meditation can lead to wisdom. Plato sees this search for the springs of truth as being threatened by a polymathy based on writing.

To give form to that threat, Plato "fabricates," as Phaidros puts it, the story of Theuth, the inventor of letters. Theuth seeks to "sell" the letters to King Thamus of Thebes as a *pharmakon*, a medicine to strengthen the power of recollection and intellect of his subjects. The word *pharmakon* carries a suggestion of magic and the vegetable kingdom. It can be translated as "drug"—either a healing potion or a poison, depending on how it is used. Which of the two was meant was decided by the epithet: In some sayings *pharmakon* means "boon," in others "mischief." Theuth not only presents himself as the inventor of a new means, he also presents a new kind of end.

Thamus thanks him, but he refuses. "O skillful Theuth," he says, "being the inventor of an art is different from being the person who has to decide what advantages and disadvantages that art will bring to those who employ it. You stand before me as the father of letters. With a father's favor, you attribute to letters a fortune that they cannot possess. This facility will make souls forgetful because they will no longer school themselves to meditate. They will rely on letters. Things will be recollected from outside by means of alien symbols; they will not remember on their own. What you are offering me is a drug for recollection, not for memory. . . .

meditation
'(17vni)

Your instruction will give them only a semblance of truth, not the truth itself. You will train ignorant know-alls, nose-know-nothings, boring wisecracs."

Thus in the Classical period memory became divided into two sorts: The natural—that which was born simultaneously with thought—and the artificial—that which could be improved, through precise techniques, or devices, and exercises. The Classical teacher of rhetoric still viewed recollection as the result of a journey, but not to the shore of a river to pick up a piece of driftwood that Plato called "similar" to another piece that had been lost beyond recall. The trip now led to a storage room, as Aristotle says, "to recover knowledge through previous sensations held in one's memory."

Each of the three primary works of rhetoric (the anonymous *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* [82–81 B.C.], on which later Western traditions of memory training were based and which was attributed to Tullius; Cicero's *De Oratore* [55 B.C.]; and Quintilian's *Instituto oratoria* [first century A.D.]) describes essentially the same mnemonic technique. A person tries to imprint on his memory the interior of a building, preferably a spacious one, visualizing each location—stores, attics, stairs, fore- and antechambers—complete with accessories, such as furniture, paintings, and sculpture. The person then equates the ideas to be remembered with certain images (*imagines agentes*); Quintilian uses the example of an anchor and weapon, perhaps to signify ships and war. These *imagines agentes* are mentally placed into various *loci* within the building. When the person wishes to "recollect" certain facts, he merely revisits these pre-designated places in the building, and gathers them up once again.

The construction of a memory palace met the needs of the

rhetorical arts. To deliver a convincing speech, the speaker must remember it in a planned order; and to prepare for arguments, he must remember points that he has previously connected. (The idea of a planned order would have been, of course, alien to the epic poet, the story unfolding as inevitably as each note followed the next on his musical instrument.) The "palace" of memories provides not only the recollected facts, but also the shape, essential to a well-constructed rhetorical argument.

These architectonic images are suited to the shift from the aural to the visual emphasis that a script culture, like Greece by the end of the fifth century B.C., demands. In fact, Plutarch mentions that Simonides of Ceos, who was believed to have invented the "artificial" mnemonic devices, called painting "silent poetry," equating the visual aspect of the two arts that Horace summarizes as *ut pictura poesis*. For the writers of the three Latin memory texts, memory is a signet ring leaving its impression on wax. Aristotle, in his *De Memoria et Reminiscencia*, puts down the old waters of Mnemosyne using virtually the same image: "Some men in the presence of considerable stimulus cannot remember owing to disease or age, just as if a stylus or a seal were impressed on flowing water."

Martianus Capella, a contemporary of Augustine, goes even further. It is Capella who once and for all replaces the cut stone of a sealing ring with the stylus, the image impressed on the wax of memory by letters traced on an invisible tablet. The three-dimensional pictogram of Classical memory thus appears as the arrangement of logograms on the slate of the mind. Capella's *Marriage of Philology to Mercury* was read in the Middle Ages; the monastic curriculum built around the seven liberal arts has been shaped in part by Capella's fanciful

summary of antique learning. He served as one of the bridges between Cicero and Alcuin, to Aquinas, over which the conception of memory as a store has reached us.

And while in antiquity this image of memory as an archive referred primarily to a device used by the rhetor, scholasticism made of memory a faculty of every soul, like will and intelligence. Thus, each soul was also burdened with a conscience—a record of its own doings that could be read and examined by clergy and laity, literate and illiterate alike. The rhetorical device provided the foundation for a new activity, confession, the verbal manifestation of a secret kept in one's own heart. And not only deeds left traces that could be admitted; past words and even past thoughts that inspired the deeds could soon be read in an examination of conscience.

conscience
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confession

III. Text

The Lindisfarne Gospel, painted and lettered around 697 A.D., brings into sight the watershed that separates the oral from the descriptive mind. Opposite the beginning of each Gospel in the Lindisfarne Book stands a wordless ornamental page, decorated in the style of Irish and Saxon sword handles, silver cups, and fibulae, that balances the lettered page to the right. The initial letter of the text appears on the ornamental page, but it also both frames and penetrates the strings of uncial letters on the lettered page. It looks as if the calligraphic outpourings of one capital had the task of weaving the texture that supports the sentences. Occasionally the interwoven colored lines take the appearance of elongated dogs or birds, only to dissolve again into infinitely prolonged tongues, tails, and ears. Only the portraits of the four Evangelists rise from this painted warp and written woof: not symbols but strong individuals shown in the style of late antique coins rendered in sharp, northern lines.

In the Book of Kells, written one hundred years later, it is easier to speak separately of its lettering and drawings. The form of the letters reveals its date: no longer roman capitals and not yet medieval minuscules. Historians are still in disagreement about the place at which it was written and the origin of the stylistic elements it combines. Around 1185, Geraldus Cambrensis was still impressed by its beauty: The designs are "so deliberate and subtle, so exact and compact, so full of knots and links, with colors so fresh and vivid,

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that you might say that all this was the work of an angel and not of a man."

Art historians have talked about barbaric instincts surfacing on these "Baroque" pages, which react against the reforms attempted by Charlemagne. We should say: The book talks as if literacy had not yet settled in. It talks through the style of its meandering threads. They challenge the reader to weave the one story of Christ's life out of four tales, thereby fleshing out the "Word of God," the Gospel Truth. Seen in this way, the Book of Kells is a kind of "Homeric page" in which, at an early date in England, oral storytelling has been for a moment visibly frozen in the cadence of knot and link that punctuates the series of letters—just as the strum of the lyre punctuates the utterance of the singer. The Good News becomes visible. Like a stream of fibers that is drawn from the distaff, twisted between the fingers and turned into a yarn, so the Good News is embodied in the spinning out of a yarn, knitting up of a tale, weaving the tales into a story. The metaphors of narration are taken from yarn and spindle and loom, used by oral societies to embody and share their unspeakable perception. Even today the Navajos and Aymara women weave each tribe's cosmography into one reality with its social geography. Both in the mesas and in the Andes the seeds must be brought to the field in kerchiefs that tell the unspoken story of the spot at which they will grow. During the final years of intense oral tradition in the north of the British Islands, the pages of the Book of Kells make a wordless tale of this kind visible, even to the unlettered. But for the reader, what is on the page is not the same as what is in the book. The letters and the lines tell the same story in dissymmetric, mutually untranslatable ways. The knotted lines that occasionally spawn figures are not yet illustrations to the text, for the texture of the lettered rows has not yet arranged itself to be perceived by the eyes as a visible "text."

THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE MIND

The idea of the "text" that is in the book could not come about without major changes in the elements that are visible on the page. By pointing to the arrangement of lines and colors on the page, the emergence of a "text" can be followed, even by a modern illiterate—one who cannot decipher the insular majuscule in which the Book of Kells is written, or who cannot understand a single sentence in Latin. The transformation of the manuscript page during the eight hundred years that precede Gutenberg illustrates the steps through which the mind of the West has come into being.

page
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mind



IT WAS NOT until the Middle Ages that letters ushered in a new type of society. The role played by letters in the birth of this new kind of society can be studied on two levels. On one level, new ways of doing business, nourishing prayer life, and administering justice all became feasible through the written preservation of words. In the twelfth century neither the heresies nor the new orders, neither the new towns nor their universities could be understood without the new and broad spread of the word that was now not only said but read.

The second way letters changed a society—by their own symbolism getting under a culture's skin and changing social perception in terms of the written word—has been much less studied and is much more difficult to talk about. The reason for this research lacuna is probably that all the categories by which we talk about past societies have been acquired by reading. By their very nature they serve to describe. They are directly suited to saying things about a society in which social relations are governed by a reliance on written language. Even as poets, we are men of letters. What we call science originates from description. Absurdly, we speak of the surviving

body of oral traditions as "oral literature," which literally means "oral writing." Consequently, it is very difficult to convey how society was turned inside out by the spread of writing in the Middle Ages.

In the part of Europe lying north of the Alps, between the middle of the twelfth century and the end of the thirteenth, an unprecedented change occurred in the nature of social relations: Trust, power, possession, and everyday status were henceforth functions of the alphabet. The use of documents, together with a new way of shaping the written page, turned writing, which in the Early and High Middle Ages had been extolled and honored as a mysterious embodiment of the Word of God, into a constituent element in the mediation of mundane relations.

So long as literacy was confined to minorities, as was the case until the High Middle Ages, power was exercised in the form of foreign rule. Relying on his *Calendarium*, in 1186—scarcely four years after his election—Abbot Samson, a foreigner, knew every bushel owed on every hide of St. Edmund's land. Even though the tenant knew no letters—the Abbot's means of recollection was as foreign to him as the book of the Day of Judgement—writing had left an impression on his soul as if it were a whip. He was now under the coercion of writing to pay those debts that he did not care to remember.

As literacy became more general and, by the end of the medieval period, embraced large sections of society, changes began to seep into everyone's everyday life. Without obliterating social relations based on orality in a uniform way, it engendered a growing tension between custom and legality.

In the committing of oaths to writing, we can trace the shift of trust from the validly given word to a document exerting

legal force. An oath is a ceremonial giving of one's word, a spoken promise. This kind of emphatic utterance seems to occur among all peoples. An oath swears to a given word. The truth or intention of the thing sworn to is reinforced by a ritual association between word and gesture, both traditional in form. The latter invests the former with a peculiar power. Oaths are among the forms of utterance most carefully guarded against change. Their formulation in terms of rhythm, alliteration, and repetition keeps them from falling into oblivion, like unforgettable fragments of a forgotten past. Often the form of the oath was recited to the person making it—in the Germanic world with the oath stick held out. While taking the oath, the swearer laid his hand on the temple stele, on a clod of earth, or on his sword, or he raised his weapon skyward and placed a foot on a stone. "By the ship's side and the shield's rim, by the sword's edge and the horse's thigh" was how the Danes swore fealty. The swearing of an oath took place in the open air—in eighteenth-century Polish courtrooms, oaths were still sworn by an open window—in order to make the oath manifest to the gods, the spirits, or the dead. While swearing to fulfill his oath, the swearer raised his sword or raised three fingers or laid them against his beard or testicles, and in many places he sullied himself with the blood of a sacrificed animal. Women swore with different gestures than men, laying a hand on their breast or braids or belly.

A man who makes an oath pronounces a conditional curse against himself; he asks to be maimed, withered, or blinded, if he is pronouncing a falsehood or should ever break his word. He swears his own body, his limbs, his eyes, his honor, even his descendents, by putting them up as a pledge. Through the

medium of co-jurors, he physically makes his whole tribe a party to his oath, involving them all in his pledge. May lightning strike them, may the devil take them, may his wife bear him a crippled child if he is lying.

For the onlookers, the unity of word and gesture has something of the effect of a sacrament. The swearing of an oath makes the word visible—not on paper, but in the living body of the person concerned. It incarnates the veracity of what he is saying. ~~In the context of the oath, truth is inseparable from veracity. The oath reveals an epiphany of this unity of form and content that captures the essence of the oral mentality.~~

The oath survived tenaciously in written law despite being in fundamental contradiction to the nature of the letter. Written law seeks to legitimize itself by controlling the oath, which it does by monopolizing it. When strict laws were passed against oath taking and cursing outside the courts, the oath's function was reversed, as can be seen in medieval records.

When the splendidly bound Book of the Gospels replaced the oath-taker's own beard, the rim of his shield, or the pomel of his sword in solemnifying the oath, a new relationship began between the oath and writing: The book as object was incorporated into the gestures accompanying the self-curse, while its contents, oddly enough, remained outside the wording of the oath. What makes this even more peculiar is the fact that Matthew 5:33-36 contains an unqualified prohibition of oaths of any kind: "You have learned that they were told, 'Do not break your oath,' and 'Oaths sworn to the Lord must be kept.' But what I tell you is this: You are not to swear at all—not by heaven, for it is God's throne, nor by earth, for it is His footstool, nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the

great King, nor by your own head. . . ." In spite of this unambiguous passage in the Sermon on the Mount, Emperor Justinian's legal reforms require those taking oaths to place a hand on the Gospels.

This innovation is all the more instructive for the fact that the reform by the Christian Byzantine Emperor, in 528 A.D., first elevated the oath in Roman law to the status of a general obligation in legal proceedings. Missionaries then introduced the oath with the Gospels to traditional courts north of the Alps. Litigants in these courts were no longer to swear on a ring that had been dipped in the blood of a sacrificial animal, but on the cross, on relics, on the altar—and on the Gospels. This was required by the Lex Ribuaria in 803. The Church assumed the divine task of punishing the breaking of an oath.

The use of the book in the pantomime of legal gesture soon led to the form of words used in the ceremony being committed to writing. The traditional cursing of oneself was replaced by an ingenious formula. In England it had become so complicated and strange that the plaintiff preferred to grasp the red-hot iron of ordeal rather than take the Gospels in his hand. He knew that he could never repeat the formula without making a mistake, and that would have been tantamount to a breach of oath.

Not only the oath but also broad areas of everyday life that had previously been governed by oral usage were made subject to a new formal and legal kind of literacy in the Middle Ages. A large section of the population discovered in this period that, before objects could be owned or rights made use of, they first had to be described, and held on a parchment: trust shifted from the given word to a sealed document.

Objects could now properly be "held" rather than pos-

sessed. The world that the theologians had represented as a book, the Book of God that man must decipher, now through the document became an object that only description could appropriate. Thousands of topographical descriptions have come down to us from this period; boundaries became effective through these descriptions: "From the old oak tree along the stream as far as the big rock and thence in a straight line uphill to the wall. . . ." This appropriative description of reality began as a jurisprudential method before it became the foundation of natural sciences.

M.T. Clanchy, on whose work we shall draw, estimates that in twelfth-century England, not more than thirty thousand charters were drawn up. In the period 1250-1350, by contrast, several million were made out in England alone—that amounts to almost five charters for each piece of describable property. Accompanying this change, writing materials increased ten- to twenty-fold in this period. The consumption of sealing wax at the royal chancery in England rose from three pounds per week in 1226, to thirteen pounds in 1256, and thirty-one pounds just ten years later in 1266. More sheep had to give up their skins as parchments for the purposes of documentation during a royal court hearing. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, it was a matter of a few dozen. For a perfectly ordinary session in Suffolk in 1283, over five hundred were skinned.

Not only the charters but also the *breve*, or brief, and the "letter" came into more common use. This can be shown by the number of such royal mandates that have come down to us from the period 1080-1180: For French kings this rose from 3 to 60; for English kings, from 25 to 115; and for popes, from 22 to 180. After 1180, the growth rate skyrocketed.

From the reign of Innocent III (1198-1215), 280 survive; from that of Innocent IV (1243-54), 730; and from that of Boniface VIII (1294-1303), 50,000.

In the twelfth century, the chancery was an exclusive attribute of the sovereign. Chancellor Becket already had an army of clerks to do his paperwork: Sixteen different hands can be distinguished under his control in the years 1155-1158. But then, beginning around 1200, individual bishops and princes began to join in. They could not manage any longer occasionally summoning a curate to read to them or to write for them. By 1350 the chancery was an essential element of spiritual and temporal dominion. Writing rooms multiplied even faster than mills, first widely used at this time for pumping, crushing, hammering, and darning. In the eleventh century, pieces of writing and articles of jewelry had been preserved in reliquaries as treasures next to the bones of saints. The overflow of charters, briefs, and copies thereof flushed these treasures out of their arks. What had been an heirloom was now an instrument of proof.

Into the twelfth century, the letter was often the visible indication of the importance, the weight, that attached to the news brought by the messenger. The letter became necessary only when the messenger was unworthy of the sender: When Jaufre Rubel sent a song to his lady by his own court jester, he insisted that he sing without handing her the piece of parchment. Some twelfth-century love letters are works of scholarship or works of art that refer the reader to the messenger for interpretation.

Only slowly did the missive become a memorial of a promise that the sender places in the hand of the recipient. In 1142, Heloise's letter to Abbot Peter the Venerable clearly implies

this. Abelard, her husband and castrated lover, had died as an exemplary monk in Cluny. Abbot Peter had him cooked and boned and the dry remains conveyed to the Paraclete for burial in a grave where Heloise could later join him. With the remains he sent Heloise a deeply moving letter of admiration for Abelard, and of praise for her. But she was not content. In her answer she requests from Abbot Peter a written promise that the monks at Cluny will forever honor and remember her dead husband. In addition to Peter's note having the nature of a sign, she requests an instrument on which the future demands of the recipient are to be based.

This becomes quite clear in testaments. A person's last will is no longer expressed through the presentation of a symbol, for example, a handful of heritable soil, a key, or a sword. A sealed document now takes the place of the thing. The inheritance is no longer determined by the witnesses of a person's last words spoken from his deathbed, but by a charter. The document itself becomes an instrument of witness.

"In witness whereof" signified an action, a gesture accompanied by words, an oath, coupled with the transmission of an object, by which sovereignty, or title, or rights of property were ceded. Leaving a dagger or a goblet might serve as a sign for the bequest of a piece of land. Later, the object sometimes bore an inscription. On the pommel of a whip in the possession of St. Albans Abbey we find the words to the effect that "this is a gift of four mares by Gilbert of Novo Castello." In this way the word, in conjunction with a tangible sign, was "witness." In the thirteenth century, word and sign collapsed into a written statement. In an initial step it was a paper record of a past event. In a second step, the preparing of the parchment itself became the event described. Lawyers by 1180 in-

sist that the instrument of witness should record a past agreement, *in perfectum*. One's word, through the signature, constituted assent to a written text.

Good faith being committed to a written document in this way made it important for the person issuing it and the recipient to have a copy of it. Otherwise, the scriptorium of the monastery that the sovereign had endowed with a gift could turn out unlimited numbers of instruments, attributed to his predecessors, which the sovereign's chancellor would have to honor. Nowadays if one attempted to acquire rights by producing written confirmation of fabricated promises, it would be understood as forgery. This was not so in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; the legal way of conferring rights substantiated by instruments of witness—not just incidentally supported by a memorial—was too new a concept. "Documentation," and the necessity for the issuer to keep a precise copy of the instrument, represent technical discoveries of the late twelfth century. The regest, the catalogue, the copy, the seal, the date, and the signature, are decisive elements of the new technique.

The making of regests, which are registers of the dictates of the sovereign, was already known to Roman lawyers. One or two popes had practiced it in the fourth century. From Innocent III on, it was the rule in the Roman Curia, but it was not until the fourteenth century that it became established in the chancellory of the Holy Roman Empire. Cataloguing techniques lagged behind the manufacture of copy instruments until well into the fifteenth century. Monastery libraries in the High Middle Ages had monks who remembered where to find manuscripts but as yet had no catalogues. Monks in the older monasteries in particular knew better than their pa-

trons what the latter held in their archives and thus were able to produce forgeries easily.

The first known *scrutinium* of a monastery library, a catalogue intended to serve as the annual inventory, dates from around 1170. With this invention, the book became dislocated from the sacristy. The book repository became an archive, pure and simple—a library. A report by a Dominican in 1260 tells of books being set out on shelves so the brothers might consult them *in promptu*—in readiness. It became important to verify the quotation from a theological authority, much as the described border of a forest had to be authenticated by reference to written evidence. In the thirteenth century, the making of catalogues of books owned and the making of regests, or registers, or charters granted proceeded in parallel.

There was a fundamental difference, however, between making a copy of a book in a monastery scriptorium and making a copy of a charter in a chancellory. The original of the book stayed in the monastery, while the original of the charter left the chancellory. The chancellor was responsible for the copy that remained *iden*—that is, the same as, *identical* to the original.

Making exact copies called not only for twice as much writing work but also for correction of the copy. In 1283, Cambridge established the first *beneficium* for a paid corrector. His job was to check documents according to form (*ratio*), legibility (*lettera*), word order (*dictio*), and spelling (*sillibo*). Two documents being identical thus became a new criterion of their legal validity. Two hundred years before Gutenberg, archives gave rise to the intellectual prototype of printed matter: an original (that might not exist anymore) from which a

number of identical copies had been produced and written. In fourteenth-century depictions of a law-court clerk, the corrector is often shown looking over the shoulder of a secretary and a copyist to verify and certify the identity of two documents. The issue of a notary's certificate attesting to the identity of two texts became a flourishing business. Even people now required identification. As early as 1248, Goliards in Burgundy were obliged to carry written credentials: the first step toward the "identification" of a person as an "individual."

To keep the individual charter identifiable forever, it must not only be vouched for by a copy, but also firmly placed in space and in a new kind of time. The place of issuance is already indicated on most eleventh-century documents. When the documents indicated time, this was usually related to events significant enough to stick in the memory of witnesses to the proceedings described. The document was drawn up on the Feast of St. Severinus, on a market day, at the vigil of a wedding, on the anniversary of the foundation of a monastery, or perhaps on the occasion of a visitation by the sovereign. It was not until some time in the thirteenth century that notaries ventured to place so trivial a proceeding as a change of ownership of a piece of farmland in direct relation to the birth of the Lord and thus to the course of the history of human salvation. Through this method, the history of salvation was chartered as the history of the world.

As a result of this dating, time through the text became something new: no more the subjective experience of a relative distance in the course of the world or the pilgrimage of the writer, but an axis for absolute reference on which charters could be nailed like labels. By the end of the fourteenth cen-

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subsidy

ture, the date on a charter could even be tied to the mechanical tower-clock. "Circiter nona pulsatione horologi," announced the contract, and at nine o'clock the document was signed. Memory grew a new dimension. Memories could now be shelved behind each other, not according to their importance or affinity, but according to the date from which they issue. And in the Dance of Death, the skeleton man begins to appear with an hourglass: By the fifteenth century, he insists that time is scarce.

The signature also changed its function in this transition from the description of an event to the production of an instrument that was essential to the event, because the signature helped render individual will "visible," and thus helped fix it in a universal grid. The swearer's resounding name no longer leaves an impression.

In the twelfth century, documents still spoke aloud: "The letters are symbols of things and have such power that they bring the speech of the person present to our ear without his voice." So said John of Salisbury (d. 1180), sometime secretary to Thomas à Becket, a sarcastic and elegant writer who with this definition harks back to Isidore of Seville, whose letters "indicate figures speaking with sounds." Until it had been promulgated (by a herald, "heard"), a legislative act had no legal validity. The written copy was as yet no more than a record of that oral promulgation.

So long as the document was conceived only as a reminder of something proclaimed, its sealing with a signet ring or a signature was an emphatic confirmation of the oral event it described; but not yet its authentication. Because he was not concerned with authentication, the same person arbitrarily

used a different signature each time. This changed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when documents became legally effective instruments. Courts concerned themselves with the question of authenticity. *Vellum* (calfskin) was replaced by *membranum* (sheepskin), which was thinner, did not easily permit erasures, and prevented forgeries. Signed documents were now required to stand as a guarantee.

The old Frankish *wera*, the old French *warandir*, "guarantor," slowly turned into a written warranty that drew its force from being signed. The seal became a mark of the power of writing. Even a man who could not himself write was empowered by the seal to take legally valid action on his own behalf by issuing documents. If his word was invalid, he could speak through the document, thus exercising his power by taking legal action. In the thirteenth century, even villeins, free peasants, occasionally carried their own seals and so could obtain a description of their property drawn up by a notary. In the twelfth century, the seal was still regarded by its owner much like any other object—a dagger, a chalice, or a whip. Like the St. Albans' whip pommel that stood for four mares, the sealed wax was the object through which a piece of property might change hands. If a document was at all attached to the sealed wax, which sometimes weighed more than a pound, this parchment was mainly a further inscription on the seal, analogous to the inscription scratched on the pommel of the whip. Only slowly did the seal change from a thing (*a res*) into the substitute for a person's handwritten signature. The text itself overshadowed its material vehicle, and threw this shadow deep into the daily life of everyone who purchased, inherited, sold, or lost property. Just as in the transition from orality to lit-

text
separated
from
event

eracy, language became detached from the speaker, so the text was no longer viewed as an extension of the event but assumed its own authenticity separate from the event.

Representations of the Last Judgement appear at this time in the arched spaces above many church doors that show how the book has separated from its writer. The Archangel Michael weighs the soul to establish if it may ascend into Paradise or must be cast into Hell. And, on quite a few of these reliefs, the Judge Himself holds the book, in which every deed and desire, nay every word and thought of the dead has been written down. Without ever having touched a pen or held a book, without ever having dictated a line or sealed a charter, every time he enters the church door the faithful is reminded that, even with his most secret thought, he *writes* the text of his life, by which he will be judged on that ominous day.

To write, however, at the time when the Book of Life gained prominence in Christian preaching did not yet mean to clutch a pen and draw letters on a parchment. What it meant to write can be well documented from the manner in which Bernard's scriptorium was organized. Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux in the early twelfth century, does not write with his hand. Like Cicero, the Abbot spoke emphatically in the presence of a scribe. He spoke clearly, but slower than the Roman, because unlike the latter's slave Tiro, Bernard's amanuensis (his secretary: literally, he who lends him his hand) did not know how to take shorthand. Some of Bernard's dictations survive in two versions that textual criticism is unable to reduce to a single original. These are undoubtedly two different secretaries' notes of the same sermon of which different fair copies were made from a wax tablet. Many of the old texts were prepared by secretaries in this way from statements by their dictators.

Once a fair copy had been made of his dictation, Bernard occasionally might have had it read back to him for checking. But there was no question as yet, for him, of a correction from a manuscript.

Some half dozen technical innovations in writing had to become commonplace before the author himself could become a writer. In this period the usual method of writing, both for copying and for originals, was and remained dictation.

In the Republican period of ancient Rome, to dictate meant to speak in the elevated, rhythmic manner of the *ductus*; *scribere* meant the physical act of writing as well as composing. In the Middle Ages the frontier between the two meanings was located quite differently. *Dictare* referred to the act of creating a text, and *scribere* simply to the work done with writing materials. It was suggested occasionally that, when he was alone in his cell, a monk could dictate. Up until the twelfth century, the *ars dictaminis* was the art of reading and composing rather than that of reading and writing. The art of writing was *one* of the many arts necessary for a manuscript to come into being. The skinner and the parchment maker, the beekeeper who produced the wax tablet, and the painter for the miniatures, were all as necessary as the bookbinder and the lector, or reader, in the copying room. This changed with the division of lines into words. When the copyist saw words in front of him, he was able to copy the original himself, word for word. There is some evidence that in the thirteenth century people who could not read were used for copying because they could copy more accurately.

In Antiquity, even after the great grammarians such as Varro and Quintillian had mastered the word intellectually and were able to teach its forms and functions in the sentence,

writing was still pure *grammatika*: a continuous series of letters. Words were strung together without any physical definition. Not until the sequence of letters was read aloud was it possible to grasp the words of the text. The author might in theory dictate a sequence of words; but for the scribe they became an unbroken series of letters. From that series of letters the ear had to extract not only the words but also the elevated rhythm of polished speech.

A very timid beginning at dividing up words was made by Jerome. He interrupted his sequence of letters with *cola* and *commata* in order to make legible some of his translations from the Hebrew that would otherwise have been almost meaningless in Latin. The first strict division of sentences into separate words occurs in the titles of an early manuscript of the *Etymologiae* of Isadore. Division into words first came into common use in the seventh century. It happened at the northern frontiers of the known world, where Celtic "ignoramus" had to prepare for the priesthood and needed to be taught Latin. Division into words was thus introduced as a means of teaching Latin to barbarians as a foreign language. Like the new pronunciation of Latin, it came to the Continent by way of Tours through Alcuin in the late eighth century. Unlike the new pronunciation, however, which was quickly rejected, the innovation of the word as a visual unit in writing won general acceptance. The ninth century provides us with the first reports of schools beginning to observe *distinctiones*, the spaces between words.

The new graphics of the separated word had an immediate effect on the copying room. Until the eighth century, the writing room was depicted by artists as a dictating room. Then, from the early eighth century, we have a picture of a writing

room for which there are no precedents. The scribe sits in front of long strips from which he is copying, although the most usual method of copying was still that of the copier dictating to himself. As early as the ninth century, artists occasionally represented the inspiration of an author—even that of the Evangelists—by showing an angel holding a tome before the writer at his desk; nonetheless, it was not until the thirteenth century that the really radical change occurred.

The writer depicted in early thirteenth-century miniatures no longer holds a knife in his left hand. Instead of writing on the hard leather membrane that had to be smoothed by scraping and sometimes even nailed to the desk with the point of a knife, he now writes on thin parchment and is even beginning to write on paper. His posture is much more relaxed. Writing is no longer strenuous work. His right hand, too, now has an easier job. The writing surface is smooth, the *ductus* flows, and at last the Middle Ages has produced its own cursive script—something that had been forgotten since late Antiquity. The master can now become a writer himself. He is shown with a quill in his hand and not, as he had been for centuries, as a dictator.

Thomas Aquinas, in the middle of the thirteenth century, already had newer writing materials—parchment, penknife, reed, and ink—at his disposal. Drafts in his own hand have come down to us, in the new Gothic cursive which, in its first generation of use, was insufficiently standardized: The master did not yet think that a secretary could copy from his notes. Copying from the master's handwriting by pupils became possible only in the next generation. Thomas still had to dictate in class from his arranged notes, creating his lectures from his written sources. He did not need to limit his notes

to a small number of wax tablets. Thomas used notes to assist his trained memory: he drew up a schema of the arguments he was going to deal with. And in many instances, he first dictated his schema and then the execution of it. Earlier teachers did not speak from notes, and they could not check most of their sources.

When Bernard referred to a source he did so from memory. Albertus Magnus and Thomas, two generations later, were the first to have reference books at hand. They quoted verbatim, and after their death, their own works lay chained to library desks, having become reference books in their turn. The new technique of "reference" enables the thirteenth-century author to check his quotations from sources. He can dictate while looking up a passage. The dictator began to have random access to a memory that was laid out before him. Chaucer obviously had before him the text of Boccaccio's *Il Teseide*, as his source, his *auctoritas*, for "The Knight's Tale." The mnemonic devices the rhetorician taught the pupil to build up in his own imagination had taken shape, hundreds of years later, on the page. The Lindisfarne Gospel comes with sixteen pages of canon tables constructed under decorated arches. In the Book of Kells, the fourth-century Eusabian Tables stand at the beginning and suggest to the reader that Matthew, Luke, Mark, and John can be read as one story, since they provide an inkling of the parallels between the four tales. But only in the late twelfth century is this memory device externalized. Any reader can return to any book he has read whenever he wants to do so. And soon it was no longer the works of one's own monastery that the students could reach: the first Union Catalogue came into being shortly after the foundation of the Sorbonne.

Much more significant than the creation of accessible library shelves, however, was the new way of arranging written matter within the book. The art of going back to the exact location of a source of Divine Revelation was from the beginning a necessity that distinguished the Christian from the pagan author. This makes it surprising that the techniques to do so took hundreds of years to be shaped. For a thousand years Holy Scripture was not referred to indirectly, but always quoted directly. Saint Augustine had experimented with a device meant to help the readers of the *City of God* find their way about his vast treatise. For this purpose he prepared a *brevicus* as a summary to each of the books. Cassiodorus had experimented in the sixth century with the use of key words as glosses: He extracted them from the text and placed them into the margins as he dictated. Isidore of Seville, just before the Arabs established themselves in southern Spain, first provided his vast *Etymologiae* with chapter headings. But only very slowly did the division of the Bible into chapters become standardized; the division into verses came even more slowly. Gradually the New Testament began to be cited by chapter and verse. Such citation—without the need of quotation—became possible for the Old Testament only after 1200. And then, quite suddenly at the end of the twelfth century, the devices to use the book as a reference tool were there: a subject index to the whole of Holy Scripture. Thus, some 250 years before printing made it possible to refer to the text by page number, a network of grids was laid over the book—a method that had nothing at all to do with the content itself.

During the twelfth century, written texts were visibly fixed in spatial relations to each other. With this text certain elements were made to stand out: Quotations were now written

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in a different color. The reader's eye, accustomed by the gloss to move from the body to the margin, had to be trained to move from the index to the page, and from one book to the other. Now the eye encompassed not simply the lines, but the entire text. Quite possibly, some of these techniques were developed under Arabic influence. The Moslems, who were not allowed to draw naturalistic pictures, sought to address the eye through the arrangement of letters alone. As a result, Arabic scribes developed a greater variety of colors and diversity of letter arrangements than contemporary Latin books. Certainly the influx of translations from the Arabic—often prepared by Jews from Toledo and Montpellier—inspired some of the new techniques used by the thirteenth-century monks. But Western bookmaking did not become iconoclastic. Precisely as the new methods allowed the text to take visible shape, this text entered into a new relationship to the painted margin and miniatures. Text and illumination are no longer interwoven in the ambiguous manner of Lindisfarne: the patterns do no more than intrude into the lines of the letters, as in the Book of Kells. To describe and to paint have come to be separate tasks often executed by different hands. And yet, the union of illustration and writing during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries gave rise to the great synthesis of the Western manuscript.

The world now lay described before the reader's eye. The book is now arbitrarily accessible; the reader can enter at will, wherever the index refers him. He sees what is written, and the illustration assists him in this task of visualization. His authorities are perceived as writers rather than as teachers: The "ipse dixit" is replaced by the "ipse scripsit." The pupils now sit in front of their teacher with their eyes fixed on his

text, which lies on their knees. They are no more asked to recall the sound of their teacher's words, but to grasp the architecture of his argument, which they must impress on their minds. By the end of the thirteenth century, students in Paris can borrow manuscripts from lending libraries to read with their teachers in class. Libraries become places of silence.

Now truly the reader can say what Hugh of St. Victor had said in 1128: "*Trimodium est lectionis genus: docentis, discentis vel per se inspicientis*" (I can read [aloud] to you, you can read [aloud] to me, and I can read contemplatively to myself). Now reading as an activity of the teacher—in other words, reading aloud—and reading as a listening activity are complemented by a third, silent type of reading: contemplative study of the book.

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