THE CRITICISM—AND THE PRACTICE—OF LITERACY IN THE ANCIENT PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

Mathilde Cambron-Goulet

Abstract

Is the philosophers’ practice of literacy, as described in their works, consistent with their criticism of it? This paper aims to answer this question, firstly, by comparing the ancient philosophers’ criticism of literacy to their practice of it, through the study of what various authors from various periods say about reading and writing. On the other hand, since earlier works on this topic have proposed that the classical period witnessed a sudden and, to a certain extent, definitive turn to literacy, and have tried to locate this turn in time, I have examined the situation in a broader perspective, over a longer period of time. The results show that, if we consider how philosophers criticize literacy and how they describe themselves in their own discourses, literacy patterns tended to remain similar until Late Antiquity; and that, in spite of Aristotle’s new use of literacy, the criticism we find in Plato lingers on. As a result, what we usually call the transition from an oral tradition to a written tradition could be better viewed as a cultural continuity.

When we read ancient works such as Plato’s *Phaedrus*, we are surprised to find that the Greek philosophers strongly criticize literacy, as we are nevertheless confronted with a written text. Is it not paradoxical to reject a technology while still using it? Or is the philosophers’ practice of literacy, as described in their works, consistent with their criticism? It often seems doubtful to us in the modern world that knowledge rationally acquired by philosophy could be transmitted by means of oral technologies.¹ For ancient philosophers, quite the opposite seems to hold true, as it is the acquisition of knowledge through written texts that seems to be problematic.

¹ This question has been abundantly discussed in the last thirty years. See Goody (1979), Havelock (1982), Couch (1989), Glassner (2007), Robson (2007), Goody (2007).
In our account of oral societies, learning depends upon the relationship between the listening audience and the performer. For instance, the transmission of Homeric epics was assured by the bard, whose duties included both narrating the epics and evaluating the apprenticeship of the participant in festive circumstances, which presupposes a friendly convivial atmosphere among the participants. Moreover, it may be expected that the performer at least partially belongs to the community and chooses a tale which is suitable for the audience. Learning is in this context understood as being dependent on discussion and seems self-evidently connected to friendship. The same data apply to philosophers as well, who, desiring to convey scientific knowledge, often reject literacy. If students could learn through books—that is, outside the boundaries of friendship and discussion—no mechanism could evaluate their apprenticeship. The use of literacy is thus circumscribed by the will to maintain that learning relationship.

Previous works by Eric Havelock (1982) and Tony Lentz (1989) have demonstrated, respectively, that Plato and Isocrates could be called writers in the modern sense of the word and have consequently both postulated that, in the classical period, the dynamic tension between an oral and a written tradition took a sudden and, to a certain extent, definitive turn to literacy, at least in the philosophical field. My broader study aims to show, however, that literacy patterns tended to remain similar until Late Antiquity (although there may of course be some exceptions) when it comes to the way in which philosophers criticize literacy and describe themselves in their own discourses. As a result, what we usually call the transition from an oral tradition to a written tradition should preferably be considered in terms of a cultural continuity.

Two major remarks should be made about the methodology used in this paper. First, my very broad corpus includes both authors usually considered as philosophers (like Plato or Plotinus) and philosophers’ biographers, such as Diogenes Laertius and Eunapius, for the latter group of authors offers precious testimonies about the actual practices of their subjects that are not always recorded in the philosophers’ own works. It should be noted that such a broad corpus requires some selection and

---

2 Maybe the best way to see this relationship between performer and participants is to observe what happens when the teller chooses the wrong tale at the wrong moment, for example, Demodocus at Od. VIII. 521–541. See Leary (1975), Tedlock (1977), Ben-Amos (1971).