ELITIST ORALITY AND
THE TRIVIALITY OF WRITING*

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It is no exaggeration to say that the question of orality and literacy is one of the major contributions of Classics to the contemporary discourse. Besides revolutionizing our view of Homer and other traditional poetries, the Parry–Lord hypothesis of oral composition stimulated, directly or indirectly, the insights of Eric Havelock, Marshall Macluhan, Walter Ong, Jack Goody, and other scholars whose work has deeply influenced the way in which the cultural role of technologies of communication is perceived in the contemporary world. However, while it is one thing to emphasize the importance of technologies of communication in any given society, it is quite another to claim that the identification of a society on the basis of its technologies of communication is in itself sufficient to predict the whole gamut of its cultural behaviours. As far as I can see, the main problem with this approach, known as technological determinism, is that it a priori excludes the possibility of cultural choice.

A by-product of technological determinism, deeply embedded in the attitudes of our own technology-oriented epoch, is that orality and literacy are habitually arranged in a hierarchical order, in which orality is associated with backwardness and social disadvantage and literacy is seen as an inseparable attribute of cultural elites. As Greg Woolf put it, “The idea that literacy implies higher levels of modernity and rationality remains deeply ingrained in our consciousness, popular as well as academic.”¹ This attitude is especially widespread in the study of the civilization of ancient Greece where, as distinct from most other major civilizations of the ancient world, the transition from orality to

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¹ Woolf 1994: 84.
literacy was not a prehistoric given but, rather, a relatively recent event that occurred within the limits of the civilization’s historical memory. It is not surprising, therefore, that the transition of Greece from orality to literacy is habitually interpreted in terms of technological determinism.

To take only one example: it has been argued that the introduction of writing, and especially the claim to veracity raised by the new prose genres of history and philosophy that it directly stimulated, undermined the traditional status of the old poetic genres and pushed them out of their former domain into the new sphere of fiction. However, this theory fails to explain why, long after the emergence of prose writing, philosophical, historical, astronomical, geographical, and other non-fictional compositions cast in verse still constituted an integral part of the Greek and Roman literary scene. As this evidence suggests, the relationship between poetry and prose was in fact much more complicated than technological determinism would have it. While prose indeed almost exclusively engaged in non-fictional genres, poetry continued to preserve its original status of a medium suitable for both fiction and non-fiction. That is to say, we have good reason to doubt whether the introduction of writing was the sole factor that determined the configuration of literary genres in Greece and Rome. The fact that poetry continued to play the role of the universal literary medium suggests a much more nuanced picture.

The classification of Greek civilization into (a) the oral, or pre-Platonic stage, (b) Plato as a transitional figure, and (c) the post-Platonic stage of the domination of literacy, first introduced by Eric Havelock, has become especially popular not only in classical studies but also in other fields. However, as some have pointed out, the material at our disposal does not necessarily lend itself to such sweeping generalizations. To quote what James J. O’Donnell wrote in this connection, “The great mistake is to imagine a sharp boundary created by a single development in society separating before and after. The lesson of historical investigation is that change brings complexity, and a suitable metaphor for social change will be multidimensional and disorienting—as disorienting a model as the real thing would be to have lived through.”

It should not be forgotten that the conclusion as to the transitional status of Plato and consequently the entire periodization is in fact

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