

Orality, Literacy, and the Tradition

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I WANT TO DISCUSS what I take to be the basic, or the *deep*, justification of the traditional curriculum. By “the traditional curriculum,” I mean the Greek and Roman classics, the Bible, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and items from modern and national literatures. I would be perfectly happy to endorse the list in Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon* (1997). But I also mean by “the traditional curriculum” the basic training in literacy that comes before any acquaintance with the classics, or with a literature of any kind.

It is worth remembering that alphabetic literacy, the precondition of literacy in the larger sense, constitutes a very recent development in the half million years or so of incontestable human presence. The literary tradition is the cumulus of a particular type of intellectual activity that first became possible less than three thousand years ago in Syria and the Levant and, a bit later, in the Greek cities from Ionia to Magna Graecia. Just how much this activity differed from anything else that human beings had ever done I shall try to indicate in what follows. That the alphabet itself might be, in its way, the first great work of literature in the Western tradition, is not a thought that most of us are used to thinking. (On

the contrary, we take the alphabet for granted.) Yet there could well be a pay-off in contemplating the ABC’s anew.

Like poems and dramas and novels, the alphabet imposes a wholly artificial order on an element of human experience—speech—and therefore puts that element in a new and unprecedented perspective. Our confrontation with poems and dramas and novels is a continuation of, our confrontation with, what the letters and their combinations reveal about the distinguishing human trait: language. I will begin, then, at the beginning.

I

Barry B. Powell, in his *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (1991), postulates an individual whom he calls the *adapter*. A Euboean Greek of the early eighth century B.C., the adapter, in Powell’s words, “took from a Phoenician informant an abecedarium and created from it his own system” of writing.¹ The adapter learned from his informant that each regular stipple of the Phoenician consonantal alphabet represented a particular recurrent syllable of the Phoenician language. Powell imagines the adapter as patiently asking the informant how one would write this or that Greek word, beginning with the names of persons and places. The pairings-up of

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stipples and sounds so generated through the collaboration corresponded with imperfect exactness, of course; and the adapter likely found himself further handicapped in not understanding his collaborator's language and so in not hearing it with any great accuracy. The Greek ear, Powell argues, would have been "ill-attuned to the different phonemes of Semitic speech."²

The adapter's appropriation of Phoenician characters to represent the sounds of spoken Greek entailed, then, many small inconsistencies. Indeed, when he had found rough correlation between the foreign characters and the consonants of Greek, he noticed that several marks remained—so he decided to employ five of them to indicate the Greek vowels. That was the stroke, as Powell reminds us, that made the Greek alphabet the first genuine alphabet, and so established the alphabetic—that is to say, the phonetic—principle as *the* basis of Western literacy. The alphabet rapidly made reading and writing available to large numbers of people. Unlike earlier systems of recording language graphically, the alphabet required only the minimum of study, and it could be used to represent any language, as its swift adoption by the Etruscans and then by the Latin-speaking neighbors of the Etruscans shows.

But there is more to Powell's story than the mere formal invention of the alphabet. The adapter had another end in mind, namely to commit to a settled form two heroic stories that were popular in Euboea, the ones attributed to Homer: the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. As did H. T. Wade-Gery fifty years ago, Powell concludes that Greek literacy began with the conscious effort to preserve spoken verse in graphic form. If true, Powell's contention would mean that alphabetic literacy was *literate* (or *literary*) from its inception. Greek writing had to do with aesthetic judgment and thus, however primitively, with a concept of criticism, features that

distinguish it sharply from previous graphic systems. The beginnings of cuneiform script, for instance, appear to lie in inventory-control. Egyptian priestly writing was just that—liturgical, and under the domain of the temple. The kings of the Greek Bronze Age counted scribes among their servants, but here too the application was restricted to terse summaries of the palace stores and brief orders to the soldiery. Powell points out that "while not a single intelligible graffito survives written in Linear B script, not a single accounting document survives from early alphabetic Greece. Writing in alphabetic Greece is in the hands of men different from those who wrote in the Greek Bronze Age."³

We do not have to take Powell's word only for these ideas. The audacious claims of *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* fit congruently with other, less radical assertions about the significance of Greek, hence of Western literacy. Consider Eric Havelock's contention in *Preface to Plato* (1963) and in the somewhat less familiar *Origins of Western Literacy* (1976) that the appearance of alphabetic writing corresponds to a revolution in thinking. One passage from Havelock stands as a precise anticipation of Powell: "The first new phenomenon caused by the invention of the alphabet was the preservation of non-didactic poetry composed for private occasions or on themes disconnected from the educational apparatus."⁴ Havelock refers specifically to the lyric poets, whose work does suggest an origin in the drinking-party hexameters, cited by Powell, that constitute an important part of the earliest evidence of sentential writing in Greek.

It is, moreover, in the lyric poets, especially in Sappho, that epic poetry first appears as an object of critical consideration. I am thinking of the fragment "To Anaetoria," which begins with a rejection of military imagery as a sufficient sign of what is beautiful and thus expresses a

certain critical consciousness on the part of the poet. If Powell were right, and the Greek alphabet sprang from a perceived need to write down poems, and if Havelock were right that internalizing the new graphic technology fostered an equally new, as we would say critical, style of thinking, then Sappho's fragment is just what we would expect. And there it is.

Havelock also ascribes other intellectual transformations to the assimilation of alphabetic writing. The habits of logic and of rhetorical analysis emerge, he argues, from the exactitude of expression that writing nurtures, so that philosophy itself stems from literacy. The new type of distinctly literate thinking also de-emphasizes the egocentricity of spoken discourse, which always takes place between physically present interlocutors who are personally involved in their assertions and counter-assertions. Speech is rapid, but writing is slow and occurs in isolation from the ego-clash. As the *ad hominem* pronouncement, the grammatical first and second persons and copious self-justification are the staple of oratory, so then does the syllogism, condensed and rigorous, constitute the basis of the new graphically controlled type of argument. With literacy, argument can become non-personal or objective. Havelock even derives *physics* from alphabetic literacy, and goes so far as to link the atomic theory of matter, in speculators like Democritus and Anaxagoras, with the "atomic" relation, as he says, of marks and sounds in alphabetic script.

This is not as far-fetched as it sounds, as a little reflection will prove. The idea of an alphabet is to analyze the continuum of spoken language into its constituent particles. Alphabetic writing makes language the first object of a genuinely scientific attention, whereupon an atomistic analysis can be applied to other, non-linguistic, objects. The very fact that a statement, once impressed on a medium, retains its character and is unchanging,

influences the notion of a stable and explicable world amenable to analysis and subject to internal limits or laws. Grammar, of course, becomes thematic with writing in a way that it never can be with spoken language. There is also a quantum increase in the complexity of syntax. A mentality capable of thinking in subordinate clauses, of qualifying tentative hypotheses, is a different thing from that which rarely gets beyond simple statements, and which usually expresses itself in expostulations and sudden retractions, as we do with awkward inveterateness in speech.

Havelock is not alone in these observations. "In a primary oral culture," writes Walter J. Ong, Jr., "to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence."⁵ Such "mnemonic patterns" must conform to a rule of simplicity. They must have an obvious, and indeed a kind of danceable, rhythm, and they will normally make use of assonance and alliteration. Involving the whole body in the iteration of the saying is what impresses it on the otherwise obdurate memory. Ong notes how, "by contrast with natural, oral speech, writing is completely artificial," and how "the process of putting spoken language into writing is governed by consciously contrived, articulable rules."⁶ Ong suggests that we become aware of language, and of our thinking, only when we can represent our words externally and permanently in some retrievable form. Writing separates "the knower from the known"⁷ and "develops a new kind of precision in verbalization by removing it from the rich but chaotic existential context of much oral utterance."⁸

Havelock similarly observes that "refreshment of memory through written signs enabled a reader to dispense with most of that emotional identification by which alone the acoustic record was sure

of recall. This could release real psychic energy, for a review and rearrangement of what had now been written down, and of what could be seen as an object and not just heard and felt.⁹ Havelock contends that the historic transition from an acoustic psychology to a graphic one finds its primary representation in the dialogues of Plato. He argues that we should understand Socrates as someone who has grasped the potential for a new precision of reasoning inherent in alphabetic writing. Socrates aims to reveal the incapacity of the acoustic psychology, on its own, to engage in corrective self-criticism. *Preface to Plato* consists largely of an extended reading of *The Republic* in these terms. It is the case, however, that the historic change connected with literacy that Havelock discusses can be seen equally well, perhaps even a bit more schematically, in an earlier and shorter dialogue, *Protagoras*.

Like many of the dialogues, *Protagoras* is a narration from memory, but of a sort that the pre-literate mentality simply could not produce: it is the recollection of a complicated exchange about the precise definition of certain words. Protagoras was the orator who notoriously asserted that “man is the measure,” a fair summation of his sophistic relativism. Is it possible that relativism, whether ancient or modern, is simply the egotism of the orator, as this is characterized by Havelock and Ong? (Given the predominance of the relativistic assumption in the range of contemporary polemics, I think that this is not at all a trivial question.) At one moment in the debate, Plato shows us Protagoras’s cognitive limitations in a way that is striking, especially if we put it in the context of Havelock’s and Ong’s discussion of orality and literacy.

Socrates has been arguing with Protagoras about “virtue”: what it is and whether it can be taught. Protagoras claims to teach it; Socrates remarks that he had never thought it teachable. In his

speech to prove the teachability of virtue, Protagoras glosses the term in a way that appears inconsistent to Socrates. Pointing this out, Socrates makes Protagoras angry, whereupon Protagoras accuses his opponent of having *tricked* him into a rhetorical corner. Notice how for Protagoras argument is not a thing in itself, either true or false, but an instrument of manipulation in a struggle for preeminence. As Powell reminds us, “the rhetor gains his power by thinking aloud for his audience, replacing their thoughts with his own.”¹⁰ No wonder Protagoras is miffed. His attempt to think for his audience has failed. Socrates, declaring further debate useless, rises to leave. The audience, however, wants more, and persuades the debaters to remain. Protagoras now proposes to talk about virtue as it is discussed by the poets. He offers for discussion some relevant lines by Simonides of Chios. The heart of Simonides’s poem consists of two statements:

[I.] Hard it is on the one hand to become
A good man truly, hands and feet and
mind
Four square, wrought without blame.

[II.] Nor do I count as sure the oft-quoted
word
Of Pittacus, though wise indeed he was
Who spoke it. To be noble, said the sage,
Is hard.¹¹

Protagoras claims to see a contradiction. Statement one and statement two exclude one another, he argues, for “[f]irst [Simonides] lays it down himself that it is hard for a man to become truly good,” and “then when he is a little further on in the poem he forgets. He finds fault with Pittacus, who said the same thing as he himself did, that it is hard to be noble, and refuses to accept it from him; but in censuring the man who says the same thing as he does, he obviously censures himself.”¹² Socrates answers that the two statements

mesh perfectly well. "To become" and "to be" are not at all the same, he reminds Protagoras. And becoming good moreover requires a difficult struggle for self-mastery, just like any form of training. Once the disciple achieves nobility, however, maintaining it is easy. Along the way Socrates cites his Delphic motto, "Know Thyself." Protagoras wishes that he had never started the contest.

In this exchange, Havelock would likely note Protagoras's highly mimetic deportment, his agitation and gesturing, all symptomatic of the "verbomotor" performance characteristic of the acoustic *paideia*. Ong would likely observe that the situation is more than vestigially oral: that the contest between Socrates and Protagoras, especially on the Protagoran side, reveals the oral person's marked competitiveness and his inability to separate himself, as knower, from the thing that is known.

Simonides's poem itself deserves consideration under the orality-literacy distinction. Protagoras calls on it as an item from the prevailing curriculum, after all. Ong would likely observe that while exhibiting something of oral antagonism in its disagreement with Pittacus and something of oral-formulaic practice in its sententious content, it nevertheless functions as an item of written expression and, as such, shows considerable complexity in its grammatical procedures and inferential requirements. Readers must translate the hesitant "nor do I count as sure" into a straightforward denial. They must follow through by supplying the negation of Pittacus's claim, translating "to be noble is hard" into something like "it is not at all the case that to be noble is hard." Finally, they must contrast Simonides's initial claim in the first statement with his revision of Pittacus's claim in the second statement. Socrates can do this, but Protagoras cannot. This is a bit of close reading at the inception of philosophy.

Yet if Socrates proves himself adept at analysis, where lies the orator's strength?

To extol literacy is not to say that orality does not have its place in the human realm, merely that it has intrinsic limits. Earlier in the dialogue Protagoras has shown a talent for story telling. Indeed, when Socrates asks for a definition of "virtue," Protagoras responds with a story about it. (People needed virtue, so Zeus gave it to them.) Havelock reminds us that knowledge in an oral culture can really only be codified as figures engaged in action: "data...have to be stated as events in time."¹³ Havelock also reminds us that "the basic grammatical expression" associated with the oral tradition "would be simply the phrase 'and next....'"¹⁴ Writing, on the other hand, permits knowledge to be formulated in "a syntax, [in] which [abstract assertions are] true for all situations and so timeless."¹⁵ Simonides's poem, at least the heart of it, consists of an abstract, hence "timeless," assertion. It urges a Platonic truth—which should not surprise us, after all. So much, then, for the *Protagoras*.

II

Perhaps the tension between the oral and the literate mentalities could be summed up in words from the book that I propose to consider next: "The orator yields to the inspiration of a transient occasion, and speaks to those who can hear him; but the writer, whose more equable life is his occasion, speaks to all in any age who can understand him."¹⁶ Hearing, it seems, is different from understanding.

It is perhaps not unexpected to find this Havelockian assessment of communicative styles in one of the most frequently assigned of American classics, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Thoreau thought carefully about the difference between life lived entirely within the confines of speech and life opened up to itself through the mediation of writing and reading. What conclusions did he reach?

Those who have read *Walden* will recall that most colorful of the characters from the chapter on "Visitors," the Canadian woodsman whom Thoreau calls a "true Homeric or Paphlagonian man."¹⁷ The phrase is curiously apt. While Homer's poems were, after centuries of oral transmission, written down, thereby becoming the foundation of Western literature, they depict bronze-age types, and indeed an entire ethos, which predate literacy and are defined by the hallmarks of an oral society. By no means an unmitigated illiterate, Thoreau's woodsman has learned as a boy "to read his verse in the Testament,"¹⁸ and, Thoreau adds, "he has heard of Homer."¹⁹ To the woodsman, indeed, "Homer was a great writer, though what his writing was about he did not know."²⁰ Thoreau says that his woodsman could *read* in a childish way and "had read and written letters for those who could not."²¹ But, as for writing down his own thoughts: "No—he could not, he could not tell what to put first, it would kill him, and then there was spelling to be attended to at the same time."²²

Tellingly, orthographic rules do not trouble the woodsman when he confines himself to the inscription of simple nouns. In a low joke that many people miss, Thoreau explains how in winter he "sometimes found the name of [the woodsman's] native parish handsomely written in the snow by the highway, with the proper French accent, and knew that he had passed."²³ It is the *non plus ultra* of "verbomotor" expression. But putting ideas in a hierarchical order—and not merely cultivating, so to speak, a decorative hand—is what troubles this wielder of an axe who customarily dines on what he has just shot. "He had been instructed," says Thoreau, "only in that innocent and ineffectual way in which the Catholic priests teach the aborigines."²⁴ In this manner, "the pupil is never educated to the degree of consciousness, but only to the degree of trust and reverence, and a

child is not made a man, but kept a child."²⁵

We learn something about how the woodsman conceives of writing: "When I told him that I wrote considerably, he thought for a long time that it was merely handwriting which I meant, for he could write a remarkably good hand himself."²⁶ The woodsman simply has no conception of a grander intellectual purpose implicit in the action of making one's letters. Thoreau makes a familiarly Ongian claim, then, when he observes that "the intellectual and what is called spiritual man in him were slumbering as in an infant."²⁷ Like the acoustic psychology as set forth in Havelock's study of Plato, the affable Canadian "appear[s] to know nothing of things in general."²⁸ He does not deal in abstractions. He remains oriented to the concrete and the immediate, toward the "sensorium," as Ong has put it.

Thoreau tells this little story: "Hearing Plato's definition of man—a biped without feathers—and that one exhibited a cock plucked and called it Plato's man, he thought it an important difference that the *knees* bent the wrong way."²⁹ Notice the practicality of the observation; notice also the failure to appreciate the ironic point of the definition. The oral, or pre-literate, or semi-literate, person lives and loves and creates and is entirely human, but he is also intellectually limited compared to us. While the literate can, by an effort of memory and negative imagination, work his way back into the mentality of the illiterate, the illiterate finds it impossible to imagine the mentality of his counterpart. The woodsman struck Thoreau as kind of natural "genius," although "dark and muddy in his thoughts."³⁰ A certain pathos justly enters the description when Thoreau divulges that the woodsman's mental style "was so primitive and immersed in his animal life, that, though more promising than a learned man's, it rarely ripened to anything which can be reported."³¹

When we turn to what Thoreau says

about reading, we again find him anticipating Havelock and Ong: "There is a memorable interval between the spoken and the written language. The one is commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost brutish, and we learn it unconsciously, like the brute. The other is the maturity and experience of that[,] which we must be born again in order to speak."³² To learn to read is, furthermore, a matter of "exercise" and of "training, such as the athletes underwent."³³ *Hard it is to become literate truly!* as Simonides might say.

III

Contemporary theorists of pedagogy, by contrast, frequently claim just the opposite. Consider some important definitions from the recent *Standards of the English Language Arts* (1996) published by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). In the *Standards*, one of the recurrent terms is the by now unavoidable "text." "We use the term text broadly," the compilers of the glossary say, "to refer to printed communications in their varied forms; oral communications, including conversations, speeches, etc.; and visual communications such as film, video, and computer displays."³⁴ Where Thoreau carefully separates speech and writing by placing that "memorable interval" between them, thus anticipating the careful distinctions made by Havelock and Ong, the NCTE glossary promiscuously conflates them. Within this conflation, a sonnet by Shakespeare and the ingredients on a cereal box become equally and interchangeably examples of a "text."

Of course, "text" is a loaded term, borrowed from recent critical theory, so-called. What does the NCTE say about the plainer notion of "writing" and the closely associated idea of "literacy"? Under the former, we find two definitions. The first refers to "the use of a writing system or orthography by people in the conduct of

their daily lives to communicate over time and space."³⁵ Writing, as we might paraphrase it, is what people do when they write, a less than helpful explanation. The second definition refers to "the process of recording language graphically by hand or other means."³⁶ Both definitions are tautological. Against the background that I have been sketching, furthermore, it should also be obvious that they are both impoverished. Supposing the authors of the *Standards* to be aware that writing constitutes a technology that transforms thinking, these glosses do not betray that awareness.

This suspicion of a real failure by the *Standards* authors to come to grips with what alphabetic writing has meant for its beneficiaries finds confirmation in the entry under "literacy." "Until quite recently," the entry claims, "literacy was generally defined, in a very limited way, as the ability to write one's own name."³⁷ Against this straw man of a limited definition, the *Standards* opposes its allegedly "much more ambitious definition of literacy [as] the capacity to accomplish a wide range of reading, writing, speaking, and other language tasks associated with everyday life." Like the gloss on "text," this one conflates the literate and oral dimensions. It also leaves thinking out of the discussion, as if writing had nothing to do with the ordering of thought. In sum, the NCTE promotes a garbled and confusing picture of what literacy is and what it entails and how it has been understood in the past. The *Standards* offers no separate entry under "oral language" although, as Ong and Havelock show, literacy emerges against the background of oral language, and needs to be understood in contrast to oral language, with which it exists in considerable tension.

When the discussion turns explicitly to the college-level reading and writing curriculum, a similar distorted picture quickly emerges. Some of these distortions stem from the same obtuseness that

yields the NCTE conception of literacy and some suggest an underlying ideological motivation. I offer a sampling from *College Composition and Communication* and from *College English*.

A recent article in the former shows an awareness of Havelock and Ong's theory of literacy, which however it dismisses by placing it under the label of "grand narrative."³⁸ It is axiomatic for the author that such narratives are narratives merely and exert no compelling force on contemporary people engaged in the edification of the young. Havelock and Ong become "keen rhetoricians and master story-tellers"³⁹ whose correlation of evidence and statement can safely be ignored. In a *College English* article, also recent, the author asserts that all forms, "essays, magazine articles, arguments, book reviews, [and] poems," are really "stories."⁴⁰ "Traditional academic writing, informed by Western rationalism," this author goes on to say, "encourages students to adopt a guise of objectivity" and so blinds them to "the situated nature of texts,"⁴¹ whatever that means. The same author denies the existence of "a unified reality"⁴² and argues for the usual malleable construct of a world.

Another *College Composition and Communication* article asserts that "tight ideological control usually surrounds reading and writing instruction."⁴³ This comes from an argument against the imposition of so-called "elite" standards on student writing. Yet another *College English* author, taking aim once again at Havelock and Ong, extols image over language, arguing that "language taxonomizes" while "images synthesize."⁴⁴ Engaging in "imagistic thinking" will purportedly offer "a counterbalance to the hegemony of a phallogocentric linguistic system."⁴⁵ Finally, another *College English* article from five years ago (Walker's) argues for the equivalent value of enthymeme, a type of emotive pseudo-syllogism, and syllogism itself. Why should we privilege logical

over emotive structures in our accounts of humanity and the world?⁴⁶

It might be useful, at this point, to recall how Plato divides the competencies between the orator and the philosopher in his dialogue. Protagoras makes good use of stories and images and emotive expression, but he falls short in extended analysis, or what one of the *College English* authors refers to pejoratively as "taxonomizing." Socrates tells a good story, but he does not rely on stories by themselves to get his arguments across. He pursues definitions, engages in extended analysis, and seeks the cause that explains the effect. Plato illustrates the intellectual advantage that Socrates has over Protagoras in the episode of Simonides's poem. Socrates, it turns out, is good at close reading. Protagoras is not. It is Socrates who can sort out the subordinate clauses and reconstruct the rhetorical negations, and who therefore understands the poem. Just these aspects of the Platonic corpus are what led Havelock to formulate the thesis of *Preface to Plato*: namely, that the career of Socrates marks a fundamental turning point in the development of Greek civilization related to the presence of alphabetic writing.

Let us also recall Thoreau. My main purpose in adducing *Walden* in the context of this discussion was to put forward Thoreau's idea that, where literacy is concerned, individual development might well recapitulate historical development. The Canadian woodsman talks an amusing story, but the idea of organizing his thoughts in writing scares him to death. Thoreau laments the loss of what a better education might have given to his friend. What a literate tradition has achieved, the individual might also achieve, if he only finds his way, somehow, to the tradition.

That individual development does, in fact, recapitulate historical development is, curiously, taken for a positive fact by those *College English* essayists who either strongly imply or explicitly assert that

the last thing we should let students attain is “objectivity.” These writers appear actually to possess an understanding of what the leap from oral to written language demands and what it entails. But seeing the leap as the submission of the subject to something foreign and intolerable, they oppose making it. At least they oppose their students making it. We thus see the emergence, in our time, of a kind of ideology of illiteracy, which rejects the cumulus of literate experience in the name of a spurious liberation, and which enshrines aspects (not the totality, but aspects only) of oral language.

Repeatedly and emphatically, current pedagogical theory embraces the subjectivity, the emotionality, and the argumentative relativism that are characteristic traits of oral language. “Man is the measure,” as Protagoras said. Current pedagogy describes these traits under new terms that valorize them as usefully proletarian and subversive. But the intellectual condition to which the new advocates of the oral style would consign their students is as limited now as it was before the habits of literacy prevailed over those of the acoustic-mimetic order. It should come as no surprise, given these limitations, that the opponents of literacy should also be opponents of the difficult reading that we call the canon. If one rejects the prerequisite to a literary education, one necessarily rejects a literary education, and one’s aim is necessarily something other than literacy. If you can not do the type of basic linguistic analysis that permits Socrates to understand Simonides’s poem, what chance do you have of understanding Brutus’s monologue or Mark Antony’s address to the Roman people? What chance do you have, finally, of ever thinking critically about anything, as Sappho thought critically about Homeric images and her relation to the polis in her lines “To Anactoria”?

The consequences of such a rejection of literacy are indeed so obvious that

even *College English* sometimes feels moved to remark on them, as in “Reclaiming the Active Mind,” an article by Ann E. Berthoff. Writes Berthoff: “If we steadily confront the evidence that our students are impaired in close observation, in the patient examination of what is in front of them, whether it is a poem or a frog’s leg, then the rational response will be despair.”⁴⁷ As does Havelock, Berthoff understands how, in the habit of “close observation” fostered by practice in written language, a connection exists between poetry and science. Put more simply, we might say that Berthoff understands the kinship that exists between literacy and thinking. She understands further that the curriculum consists in a hierarchical sequence of stages, the later ones linked rigorously to the earlier ones. Disrupt the sequence in an early stage and one destroys the very possibility of the later stages. Despite “whole language,” one must learn one’s abecedary before one can be “enriched” through the presence of books. Despite the buffet approach to literary offerings in the undergraduate curriculum, one needs to master *A Christmas Carol* before one masters *Bleak House*, and one needs to master Dickens before one masters Joyce.

Is it a coincidence that remedial English courses proliferate in the same historic moment when the reading requirements of education at all levels steadily decrease? Why is the new *ersatz* curriculum so heavily inclined to slogans, so addicted to verbal mimesis, and so adverse to the spiritual adventure of deeply informed analysis? I find it telling that the ubiquitously assigned *I Rigoberta Menchu* takes the form of taped interviews in transcription. Whatever else one might say of it, *I Rigoberta* is easy to read. If the freshman were unable to grapple successfully with *Macbeth*, maybe he could still live up to *Rigoberta*. Like the archaic oral performer, *Rigoberta* even thinks for its audience. The categories are made to order

and neatly laid out. *This is not literacy.* Neither is the reductive thematics that are nowadays imposed on literature so that no one has to read it.

IV

There is a simple answer, then, to why civilized people traditionally made students memorize first the alphabet and then the rules of spelling and those of grammar, and to why we made them read Virgil, Shakespeare, Plato, and Thoreau, among many others. Everyone who becomes literate must begin by assuming the role of Powell's adapter *vis-à-vis* his informant. The learner must tackle reading by graded steps and he must be immersed in reading as he masters writing. These steps lead to the interior transformation that yields the mentality capable

of conceiving and sustaining the complex of technical developments and social relations that civilized people take for granted.

Quite apart from the acquisition of particular knowledge about history and the shifting of *moeurs* that students, at all levels, derive from steady intensive reading, students also acquire subtle cognitive habits which would otherwise be unavailable to them. Even the belletristic achievement of aesthetic judgment is a cognitive habit, by no means unsubtle or unimportant. The ideal and the utilitarian justifications of the traditional curriculum turn out, after all, to be one and the same. Literacy is, in its way, the invaluable "operating system" of thinking. The *why* of the tradition considered as the source of any individual curriculum should not, therefore, be a mystery.

1. Barry B. Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (New York, 1991), 20. 2. *Ibid.*, 25-26. 3. *Ibid.*, 181. 4. Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 292. 5. Walter J. Ong, Jr., *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York, 1981), 34. 6. *Ibid.*, 82. 7. *Ibid.*, 105. 8. *Ibid.*, 104-105. 9. Havelock, 208. 10. Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. by Guthrie, in *Protagoras and Meno* (New York, 1984), 223. 11. *Ibid.*, 72-73. 12. *Ibid.*, 73. 13. Havelock, 180. 14. *Ibid.*, 180. 15. *Ibid.*, 180. 16. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and "On Civil Disobedience"* (New York, 1980), 73. (Slightly altered.) 17. *Ibid.*, 100. 18. *Ibid.*, 100. 19. *Ibid.*, 100. (Emphasis added.) 20. *Ibid.*, 100. 21. *Ibid.*, 103. 22. *Ibid.*, 103. 23. *Ibid.*, 102. 24. *Ibid.*, 102. 25. *Ibid.*, 102. 26. *Ibid.*, 102. 27. *Ibid.*, 102. 28. *Ibid.*, 102. 29. *Ibid.*, 103-104. 30. *Ibid.*, 104. 31. *Ibid.*, 104. 32. *Ibid.*, 72. 33. *Ibid.*, 72. 34. National Council of Teachers of

English (NCTE), *Standards* (Urbana, Ill., 1996), 117. 35. *Ibid.*, 112. 36. *Ibid.*, 112. 37. *Ibid.*, 112. 38. Beth Daniel, "Narratives of Literacy: Connecting Composition to Culture," *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (February 1999), 393, 395. 39. *Ibid.*, 395. 40. Lee Ann Carroll, "Pomo Blues: Stories from First-Year Composition," *College English*, Vol. 58, No. 8 (December 1997), 920. 41. *Ibid.*, 920. 42. *Ibid.*, 932. 43. Deborah Brandt, "Sponsors of Literacy," *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (May 1998), 179. 44. K. Fleckenstein, "Images, Words, and Narrative Epistemology," *College English*, Vol. 58, No. 8 (December 1996), 915. 45. *Ibid.*, 923. 46. Jeffrey Walker, "The Body of Persuasion," *College English*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (January 1994), 46-65. 47. Ann E. Berthoff, "Reclaiming the Active Mind," *College English*, Vol. 61, No. 6 (July 1999), 672.