
BACKGROUND BOOKS

LITERACY

"The first and the greatest of European poets," as Greek historian H. D. F. Kitto called Homer in **The Greeks** (Penguin, 1951, cloth; 1984, paper), may not have been the creative genius that most Western academics long assumed him to be. In 1923, classicist Milman Parry, whose work appears in **The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry**, (Oxford, 1971; Ayer, 1980), edited by Adam Parry and Richard M. Dorson, shocked his fellow scholars by arguing that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had been orally composed and recited by wandering bards for several generations before being written down.

For at least a century, scholars of ancient writing have split hairs over such questions as whether Homer was the sole author of his epics and whether the alphabet spread from a single source or was independently invented in several places. Among the notable works in this tradition are archaeologist Ignace J. Gelb's **A Study of Writing** (Univ. of Chicago, 1952, cloth; 1963, paper), linguist David Diringer's **The Alphabet: A Key to the History of Mankind** (Hutchinson, 1948), and the more readable **A History of Writing** (Scribner's, 1984) by the British Library's Albertine Gaur.

Parry and A. B. Lord, the student who continued Parry's work in **Singer of Tales** (Harvard, 1960, cloth; 1981, paper), may have solved what historians call "the Homeric question," but they also opened the door to a controversy among anthropologists, psychologists, linguists, and classicists.

Was the transformation of the Greek mind between the time of Homer's verse and that of Aristotle's logic *caused* by writing? Does literacy in the modern world change the way

people *think*?

In **Preface to Plato** (Harvard, 1963, 1982) and **The Greek Concept of Justice** (Harvard, 1978), noted classicist Eric A. Havelock answers in the affirmative. The nonliterate mind, according to Havelock, relies on concrete images, rhythmic patterns, and narrative. To put Euclid's abstract notion of an equilateral triangle in "Homeric dress," one would have to say something like: "The triangle stood firm in battle, astride and posed on equal legs." Only someone endowed with the abstract, analytic skills bestowed by literacy could have created the Platonic dialogues.

"Concrete" thought is not the only characteristic attributed to nonliterate. Soviet psychologist A. R. Luria, whose landmark study of Russian peasants during the 1930s, **Cognitive Development** (Harvard, 1976, cloth & paper), has only recently been published in the West, adds that language shapes perception. People who lack separate *words* for "blue" and "green," for example, may confuse those colors.

Likewise, Luria's peasants could not classify objects like a hammer, a saw, and an ax as tools or respond correctly to questions of logic. To the syllogism "In the Far North . . . all bears are white. Novaya Zemlya is in the Far North. . . . What color are the bears?" a peasant replied: "I don't know. Each locality has its own animals."

Language scholar Walter J. Ong, in **Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word** (Methuen, 1982), and anthropologists in **Literacy in Traditional Societies** (Cambridge, 1968), edited by Cambridge University's Jack Goody, offer other examples from medieval Europe, Af-

rica, and India. Goody and Ian Watt of Stanford University, for instance, write that the Eskimos of Alaska or the Tiv of Nigeria "do not recognize any contradiction between what they say now and what they said 50 years ago" because they lack written records. Myth and history for the nonliterate thus "merge into one."

On the other hand, psychologist Jean Piaget, in **The Development of Thought: Equilibration of Cognitive Structures** (Viking, 1977), and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in **The Savage Mind** (Univ. of Chicago, 1967), argue that there are few, if any, differences between the cognitive or intellectual abilities of literate and nonliterate people.

Nonliterate villagers in Africa, North America, or Asia, Lévi-Strauss contends, have their own sophisticated systems of classification and logic that do not depend on writing. The Navaho of old, for example, could identify more than 500 species of desert plants off the top of their heads—a feat that any literate person would be hard-pressed to equal.

"The use of more or less abstract terms," says Lévi-Strauss, "is a function not of greater or lesser intellectual capacity, but of differences in the interests . . . of particular social groups."

Psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole make much the same argument in **The Psychology of Literacy** (Harvard, 1981), a report of their

seven-year study among the Vai of Liberia. The two researchers found that nonliterate and literate but self-taught Vai performed equally well on most tests of cognitive ability. Only Vai educated in Western-style schools surpassed their fellows in what Scribner and Cole call "logical functions."

The notion that simply learning the ABCs is not enough would not have surprised the organizers of a major effort, sponsored by Northern Protestant churches and abolitionist societies, to "teach & civilize" illiterate freedmen after the Civil War. Historian Robert C. Morris, in **Reading, 'Riting, and Reconstruction** (Univ. of Chicago, 1976, 1982) describes what W. E. B. Du Bois called "the crusade of the New England schoolma'am."

To the dismay of some white Southerners, the Yankee teachers taught more than 7,000 young blacks in Dixie everything from reading and arithmetic to "John Brown's Body." The schoolma'ams were successful in attracting many of their students to the Republican banner and, during the 1870s and '80s, helped found many of the South's black high schools and colleges.

Today, as Third World governments struggle to make their citizens literate and U.S. colleges and corporations push remedial writing programs, academic specialists in the West continue to debate the impact of literacy on the human condition.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Many of the titles cited in this essay were suggested by Richard M. Long, Washington representative of the International Reading Association. Related works can be found in WQ's Background Books essays on *The Public Schools* (Autumn 1979), *The Brain* (Summer 1982), *Teaching in America* (New Year's 1984), and *The Mind* (Winter 1984).