

THE READING REVOLUTION

— by *Steven Lagerfeld*

Writing “will implant forgetfulness in [men’s] souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written.” Thus Plato (speaking through a character in one of his dialogues) questioned the value of literacy some four centuries after the Greeks began adopting the alphabet. Only knowledge gained through spirited debate, Plato argued, “is written in the soul of the learner.”

Of course, the ultimate reply to Plato is that his doubts about literacy are known to us only because he committed them to writing. Yet, in one form or another, Plato’s reservations have preoccupied thinkers through the ages. Do reading and writing transform human consciousness? How so? Is literacy best left in the hands of the few, or is *mass* literacy better? Will widespread literacy ensure social and economic progress? Never in the past were the answers to all these questions self-evident, and some remain, in one form or another, subjects of scholarly debate.

Despite the invention of the alphabet, which vastly simplified the task of learning to read and write, the spread of literacy was far from inevitable. The leaders of Greece and Rome had chosen to promote reading and writing among their citizens. For many centuries, their successors in the West did not.

Interestingly, the early Christians sided with Plato. Christ is said to have written only once—in the dust, as if to signify the transience of the written word. His disciples did not commit his teachings to writing until some 30 to 60 years after his death, preferring that the Word be transmitted orally, kept alive on the tongues of men. Yet Church leaders soon recognized that a holy book would be needed to keep the faith intact. (The Gospels and Old Testament had already been written.) Amid the cacophony of Europe’s hundreds of languages and dialects, few of them written, only the old imperial language of Latin could be read as easily in the British Isles as in Holland or Italy.

Reluctantly, the Church adopted Latin as its official language. The *litterati* of the Middle Ages—mostly priests, along with a handful of nobles and merchants—reserved the ability to read and write for themselves, in part because they believed that it gave them power over the souls of commoners. (Not only in Europe: In medieval India, for example, only the Brahmin, or “twice born,” were permitted to read the sacred Veda.) Indeed,



In Gutenberg's time, printing presses were few and compositors worked for months on each book. By the 16th century, every major town in Europe had a print shop, which often doubled as an informal university.

a mystical quality was attached to the written word; in Middle English, the word *grammar* referred to occult lore; in medieval Britain, those accused of murder who could read from the Latin Bible were automatically spared the hangman's noose.

But the truth was that from the fall of the Roman Empire until the 14th or 15th century, even most of the high-born cared little for literacy. "Letters are removed from manliness," a group of German Goths told Queen Amalasantha of sixth century Italy, "teaching . . . results for the most part in a cowardly and submissive spirit." Among the notable illiterates of the era were William the Conqueror and Charlemagne—whose clerics did their reading and writing for them. It was the Church, with its legions of literate men, that organized and spearheaded the Crusades. It was the Church that provided Western Europe with a semblance of cultural unity.

The common folk did not begrudge the *litterati* their monopoly on letters. Reading and writing, quite simply, were unnecessary luxuries for the peasant farmers of the Middle Ages. Knowledge passed by word of mouth from father to son, from

mother to daughter. As late as the 17th century, English country squire Nicholas Breton noted, farmers could "learn to plough and harrow, sow and reap, plant and prune, thresh and fan, winnow and grind, brew and bake, and all without book."

Imagining today what daily life was like in such an oral society is as difficult as putting oneself in the place of a blind man. Say a word and a literate person will immediately see it spelled in his mind's eye: It is the written word that has form, substance, and meaning, that produces the mind's order. But in an oral world, the written word is ephemeral. In the courtrooms of 12th-century England and France, written deeds and bills of sale counted for less in resolving legal disputes than human witnesses who, according to St. Louis University's Walter Ong, "were alive and . . . could defend their statements; writing was [viewed as] dead marks on a dead surface."

Even among the literate of the Middle Ages, old ways lingered. Reading more often meant speaking aloud (or *sotto voce*) than thinking in solitude. In the scriptoria of the monasteries, one monk would read from the pages of the Bible while his fellows labored over their rote transcriptions; in the classrooms of medieval universities, professors recited to their students from the few available texts. (Books were so lightly regarded that old writings were commonly rubbed out when paper and vellum were scarce so that the monks could continue their copying.) Writing was no different. Few medieval authors, observes Ong, wrote with quill in hand, painstakingly building their arguments word by word, brick by brick, a house of logic. Rather, most dictated their thoughts aloud to scribes.

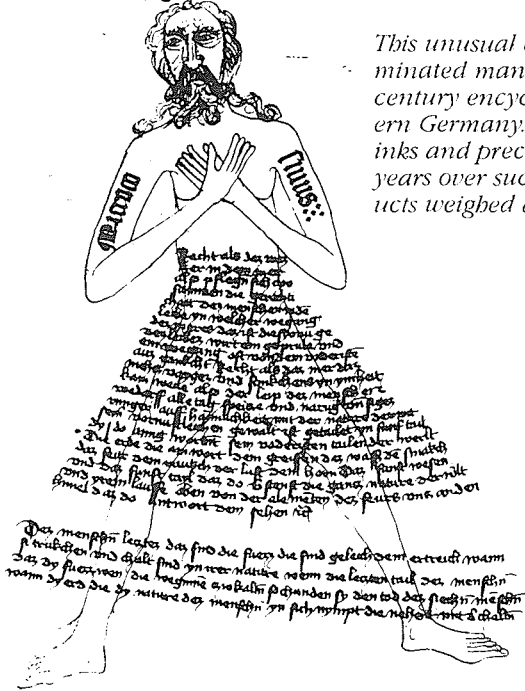
God's 'Extremest Act of Grace'

Reading (or writing) in silence, *internalizing* words, is an experience of a very different kind. "To engage the written word," notes New York University's Neil Postman, "means to follow a line of thought. . . . It means to uncover lies, confusions, and overgeneralizations, to detect abuses of logic and common sense. It also means to weigh ideas, to compare and contrast assertions, to connect one generalization to another."

Europe during the Middle Ages was not completely without literacy, but it shared some characteristics with the unlettered Third World tribes that contemporary scholars have studied. Such oral societies, says Ong, "must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conser-

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Ein verdrach sel vñ ein flecht
 ut cuiusmodi gra...



This unusual example of a hand-illuminated manuscript is part of a 15th-century encyclopedia made in southern Germany. Monks, using colored inks and precious metals, labored for years over such works; the final products weighed as much as 25 pounds.

vative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation. . . . By storing knowledge outside the mind, writing and, even more, print downgrade the figures of the wise old man and the wise old woman, repeaters of the past, in favor of younger discoverers of something new."

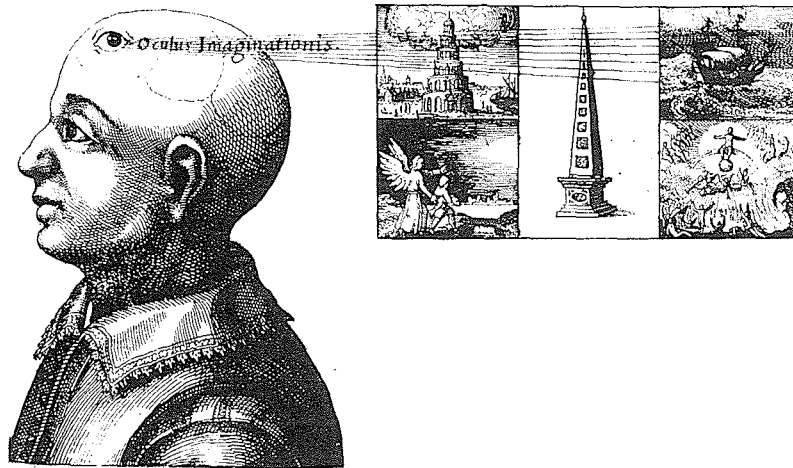
In Europe, the first discoverers of the new appeared in 14th-century Venice, Florence, and other wealthy Italian city-states. Owing to their energetic merchant princes, who bartered and bargained throughout the Mediterranean, these cities had grown large and affluent by European standards of the day. They also harbored distinguished scholarly communities, which the merchant princes favored with ancient Greek and Roman texts retrieved mostly from libraries in Egypt and the Arab world. Urbanization, prosperity, and the rediscovery of ancient works nourished a new skeptical and secular outlook on life, the early Italian Renaissance. Still, the revival might never have spread so quickly beyond Italy without two other developments.

The first was Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press during the 1440s and '50s; it stands alongside the cre-

ation of the alphabet some 2,500 years earlier as a landmark in the long history of the rise of literacy. As in the case of the alphabet, however, human choice was needed to transform a technical invention into a revolutionary device. Within decades of Gutenberg's discovery, Europe felt the first stirrings of the Protestant Reformation, led by Martin Luther (1483–1546). Luther was at first dismayed when the printing press made his famous 95 Theses, nailed to the door of a church in the tiny German village of Wittenberg in 1517, the news of all Europe. But during the ensuing years he broadened his challenge to the Catholic Church, calling for a more direct relationship between Man and his Maker. He insisted that the faithful be able to read God's Word themselves, and in their own "vulgar" languages, not in the Church's Latin. For him, Gutenberg's press was a weapon; printing was "God's highest and extremest act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward."

Printers responded to the new market with an outpouring of Bibles, Books of Days, and other holy works. Religious fervor propelled book sales and literacy rates to unprecedented levels in Protestant lands—Scandinavia, the German states, Holland, and Britain.

One of the most dramatic transformations occurred in 17th-century Sweden, where a Lutheran home-teaching movement swept the countryside. Once a year in Sweden's small towns and



In preliterate Europe, the "arts of memory"—repetition, proverbs, and rhymed verse—were essential to preserving the past. By the 17th century, the "third eye" of memory was regarded as an aspect of the occult.

villages, pastors assembled their flocks for public tests of reading and writing: Anyone who failed was forbidden to marry or take communion. Though lacking public schools, Sweden achieved near-universal literacy by the beginning of the 18th century, even before most other Protestant lands.

There is no telling what would have come of Gutenberg's invention without Luther's crusade. In China, an alchemist named Pi Sheng had designed a system of movable type during the 11th century, well before Gutenberg's time. It contributed to the flowering of literature during the later Sung dynasty and to the rise of the powerful Chinese civil service. China outstripped the rest of the world in book production until the end of the 18th century. But China's Confucian-trained scholars and bureaucrats restricted education to the elite, and it was virtually impossible for commoners to learn the tens of thousands of characters of the Chinese language at home. As a result, more than 70 percent of the Chinese population remained mired in illiteracy at the beginning of the 20th century.*

A Rearguard Action

Even before literacy reached Europe's common man, the printing press had an enormous effect on the life of the mind. At first, notes the University of Michigan's Elizabeth Eisenstein, the foremost historian of the printing revolution, printers churned out (apart from holy books) countless reproductions of ancient tracts on astrology and alchemy, fragments of "magia and cabala"—a "vast backlog of occult lore." But eventually, more illuminating works were put into print. The spread of reading and books alarmed some of the powerful. Pope Paul V, for example, banned Copernicus's *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* from Catholic-run presses in 1616.

Printing did for intellectual life what the invention of money thousands of years earlier had done for trade and commerce, spurring an explosive growth in the exchange of information and ideas. Now the astronomers and physicians and philosophers of 16th-century Europe had at their fingertips in book form all the accumulated wisdom of the ancients. When the great works of the past were placed side by side, writes Eisenstein, "contradictions became more visible, divergent traditions more difficult to reconcile. The transmission of received opinion could not proceed smoothly once Arabists were set

*The Arab world reluctantly adopted the press 300 to 400 years after Gutenberg, preferring instead the magnificent calligraphy and miniature paintings that flourished in books of the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. Today, literacy remains spotty throughout the Muslim Middle East, ranging from under 10 percent in countries such as Yemen and Qatar to nearly 30 percent in Saudi Arabia.

THE THIRD WORLD'S WARS ON ILLITERACY

"Can there be a more moving spectacle than . . . this tall old man with his white beard, his tremulous voice, his unsteady limbs, as he slowly lifts a long bamboo pointer toward the blackboard, and with difficulty tries to pick out the letters on it?"

Such scenes, from French schoolteacher Gerard Tongas's account of a mid-1950s literacy campaign in communist North Vietnam, have been repeated thousands of times in the Third World. With high hopes for spurring economic development, promoting national unity, or indoctrinating the "masses"—and at great expense—dozens of governments have launched efforts to eradicate adult illiteracy.

Progress worldwide has been slow but steady. In 1980, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 28.6 percent of the world's adults were illiterate, down from 32.9 percent in 1970.

The greatest fanfare has accompanied the all-out drives against illiteracy mounted by many communist regimes. In 1961, Fidel Castro sent "an army" of 100,000 literacy *brigadistas* into the hinterlands and later announced to international acclaim that they had taught some 700,000 Cubans to read and write. Cuba now claims a literacy rate of 96 percent; Vietnam, 85 percent; and Nicaragua, after a similar "war," 87 percent. Yet the North Vietnamese campaign, Tongas says, "merely consisted of teaching the illiterate masses to recite 20 or so slogans

against Galenists or Aristotelians against Ptolemaists."

The creation of a market for books also helped writers and thinkers free themselves from the whims of aristocratic patrons. New arguments and discoveries, treatises on theology and philosophy, poetry, fiction, works of outrageous fantasy, all shot through the ranks of the educated like jolts of electricity. The results were momentous. It was the age of Erasmus and Bacon, Shakespeare and Cervantes, Galileo and Leonardo. By 1704, when Jonathan Swift published *The Battle of the Books*, contending that the ancients were superior in wisdom and learning to modern men, he was fighting, as far as the small, educated sector of the English public was concerned, a rearguard action.

Gradually, books made their way into the hands of the common folk.* The ability to read and write spread slowly through Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries, partly through education. Frederick III, later the first King of Prussia, ordered farmers' children "to school, at least for two hours in the morning"

*Books were much cheaper than hand-illuminated manuscripts, but they still came dearly. In 16th-century France, for example, the cheapest New Testament cost the equivalent of a whole day's wages for a journeyman carpenter. Still, the popular market for books throughout Europe was huge. A prodigious 22,000 titles rolled off English presses between 1641 and 1662, about one book or pamphlet for every 42 readers.

['Long live President Ho!'] and to copy them more or less legibly." The old man with the pointer, like most of his countrymen, never really learned to read and write for himself. The Cuban story is similar.

Few non-communist lands have claimed results as impressive as Castro does. Even in the West, teaching *adults* to read and write is difficult. The chief obstacle: persuading men and women who have lived into their middle years without literacy that a heavy investment of time and effort will pay off. Most Third World adult literacy campaigns, writes Abdun Noor of the World Bank, "have been uneconomic with a high dropout rate and a high incidence of relapses to illiteracy."

Noor is skeptical of splashy, centrally directed campaigns. Churches and other local organizations are generally best suited to doing the job, he says, and textbooks that teach people practical skills (e.g., animal husbandry) are the most effective tools. Brazil, Uganda, and Tanzania are among the nations where such localized efforts have worked.

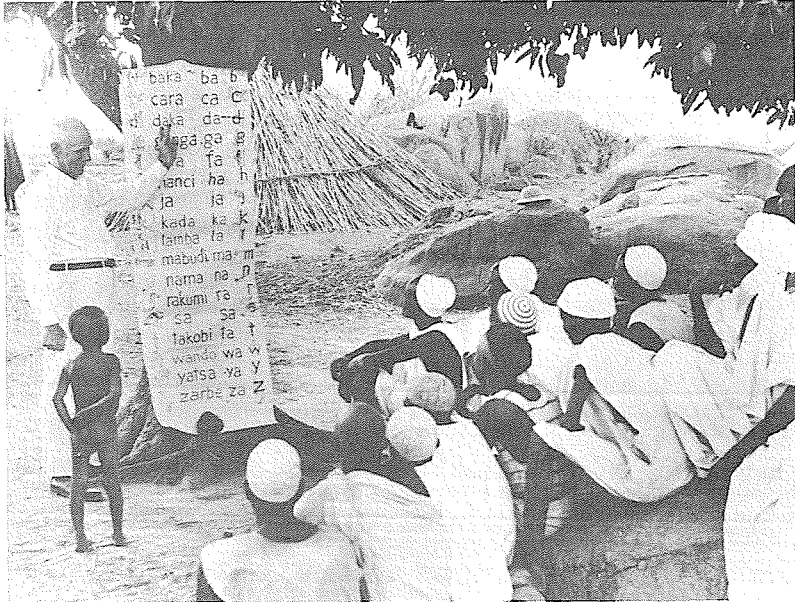
Few specialists predict that more than a minority of the world's 800 million adult illiterates will ever learn to read and write. The best hope may lie with the next generation. Even Africa, with its estimated 60 percent illiteracy rate, now enrolls 78 percent of its children in elementary schools. Asia and Latin America, with far less illiteracy, boast even higher rates of school enrollment.

Literacy alone may not deliver economic progress, enlightened minds, or any of the other benefits that it seems to promise to the Third World, but without it such gains will remain forever out of reach.

in 1698. But, as in 17th-century Sweden, most commoners learned from their literate acquaintances or from primers like preacher Valentin Ickelsamer's *A German grammar—from which one might learn to read for oneself* (1534).

Modern historians have been able to reckon early literacy rates only by digging through parish records, diaries, and deeds, counting men who signed with their names as literate, those who made an X as illiterate. By the end of the 18th century, printing and the spread of schooling had produced relatively high rates of literacy, at least in Protestant countries. The Swiss were 80 percent literate by 1850 (thanks to widespread public education), as were 80 percent of the Prussians and 50 percent of the English. Catholic Italy and Spain, by contrast, suffered much lower rates of literacy—20 and 25 percent respectively. Tsarist Russia, with a vast population of impoverished serfs who "did not see any material benefit" in becoming literate, as a 19th-century Russian priest remarked, still remained 80 percent illiterate at the turn of the 20th century.

Everywhere, the notion of literacy for all remained a distant dream. The well-to-do were more literate than the poor, city-dwellers more literate than farmers. Men, from France to China,



Youngsters learn to read their native Hausa, one of Nigeria's three major tongues. In many lands, literacy education is hampered by the need to create writing systems from scratch for spoken languages.

were far more likely to learn their letters than were their wives and sisters. Sweden's highly literate women were among the most fortunate in Europe, where literacy rates for women ranged variously from 20 percent in Italy and Spain to 55 percent in England by the middle of the 19th century.

Often literacy was a gift that unlocked in an individual an enormous potential that in times past would have remained dormant. Historian Margaret Spufford tells the story of Thomas Tryon, son of a poor 17th-century Oxfordshire plasterer, who left school at the age of six having "scarcely learnt to distinguish my letters." At 13, he learned to read from fellow shepherds; later he paid an itinerant teacher to teach him to write (tuition: one sheep). He moved to London, where he spent his wages on books, and before long he was writing them. There were six in all, including *A New Method of Education*, as well as *Averroes Letter to Pythagoras* and *The Good Housewife Made a Doctor*. For most people, however, limitations of social class, circumstance, and native ability tempered the impact of reading and writing. When they took an interest in the printed word, Europe's common folk favored "how-to" pamphlets offering in-

struction in carpentry or farming or home medicine.

Today, it is an article of faith around the world that the appearance of such a rapidly growing, educated reading public (however prosaic its reading) was one of the essential ingredients in sparking the Industrial Revolution. During the 1960s, sociologist C. Arnold Anderson and economist Mary Jean Bowman, both of the University of Chicago, concluded that a national literacy rate of 40 percent is the bare minimum needed to achieve such an industrial "take-off." England during the 1750s had reached the "40 percent threshold."

Fearing the Poor

Yet, as other scholars have since discovered, industrialization had an unexpected effect: In England, the literacy rate stagnated or fell (as it did in France) as factory owners hired young workers away from schools at the age of six or seven. The rate did not turn up again until the 1880s.

Nor did factory owners need great numbers of workers who could read and write. A few agreed with reformers such as Canadian educator Charles Clarke that literacy "has lightened the toil of the laborer [and] increased his productive ability." But as British historian Michael Sanderson writes, the new jobs—furnaceman, cotton cleaner, weaver—in the Yorkshire and Lancashire mills and factories "required even *less* literacy and education than the old ones (wood- and metalworking, for example)." Once a worker learned to operate a loom or a blast furnace, Sanderson argues, he (or in the cotton mills, she) needed to learn no more. A "knack" for things mechanical was more important than book learning.

There is no doubt that the printing press and the book, and the rise of literacy that followed, set the stage for Europe's modernization. They made possible new technology—James Watt's steam engine (1769), Sir Henry Bessemer's converter (1856)—and the educated managers, engineers, and technicians needed to run large factories and distribution networks. Whether *mass* literacy was needed remains an open question.

Indeed, many of the well-to-do of the mid-19th century plainly feared it. In England, as reformers waxed eloquent about the education of the workers, many of the gentry saw instead "the terrible spectre of a literate, politically minded working class," as Cambridge historian J. H. Plumb put it. Sir Joseph Banks, president of the Royal Society in England in 1807, feared that literacy would teach the poor to "despise their lot in life." Instead of burying their noses in harmless popular novels, he fretted, literate English and Scottish workers were reading "sedi-

tious pamphlets [and] vicious books."

Equally worrisome was the rise of a popular press frequently given to political agitation. During the French Revolution, an event that terrified Europe's aristocrats (and other Europeans as well), the Parisian press had become, in the words of one French observer, "simply a machine of war," educating what the *Paris Globe* called "a new generation . . . smitten with liberty, eager for glory." By 1820, the introduction of new technology slashed the cost of newsprint and sent circulation skyrocketing. Newspapers proliferated in London and the major cities of Europe and the United States, with some claiming up to 30,000 readers. In 1865, Paris's *Petit Journal* was turning out 250,000 copies a day. Years earlier, a little known journalist named Karl Marx had remarked upon the usefulness of newspapers in forging "party spirit" among the workers.

Khomeini on Cassettes

Despite conservatives' fears of mass literacy, most educated Westerners by the end of the 19th century had come to believe that it was the first step on the road to greater progress. Certainly, higher rates of literacy (along with widespread public education) eased the transition to industrial innovation in the United States and Canada. Teaching reading and writing seemed to be the key, as one writer put it, "to instruct[ing] a man how to live and move in the world as befits a civilized being." By the 1930s, state-supported schooling had made near-universal literacy a reality in the West.

Today, the scene of the struggle to achieve basic literacy has shifted to the Third World, where nations such as Ethiopia (with a seven percent literacy rate) and Pakistan (16 percent) have set their sights on the "40 percent threshold." Their leaders are convinced that mass literacy will secure what the Iraqi government once called "the political, economic, and social progression of the country." Maybe so. Yet, as the Cuban example shows (see box, pages 110-11), a literate population alone is not enough to ensure economic progress or political liberty. The Shah of Iran, who made literacy a keystone of his modernization efforts, was toppled by an old man who, from his exile in France, stirred the passions of his zealous followers back home with rousing polemics—tape recorded on audio cassettes.

For all that, no nation that hopes to tap the potential of its people can achieve very much without widespread literacy. Lacking the ability to read and write, the farmer most likely will continue to tend his crops just as his father's father did; his children will not dare to imagine what it is like to build a bridge

or write an essay; democracy will make as much sense as the theory of relativity.

Even if it is not a magic recipe for personal or national progress, literacy is an essential ingredient. Oddly enough, among the few people who now question that reality are some of the Western scholars who study literacy and related subjects. Literary "deconstructionists," such as Jacques Derrida, view language as a kind of prison that constricts human thought. But at least they acknowledge the power of the written word. Others do not. In the United States, a few education specialists have argued that spoken "black English" ought to be taught in the schools. Among anthropologists, one sometimes finds a certain sentimentality about oral societies—their unsullied traditions, their lively communal storytelling, their free exchange of local news and gossip at gatherings. And, like many other social scientists, literacy specialists tend to expound their views in a style so obtuse that it even makes Washington's federal regulation writers seem like prose artists of the first order.

If understanding our politics, our science, or simply one another is the ultimate purpose of achieving literacy, then the West still has a long way to go. Instead of more reading and writing (and thus, thinking), we have talk, talk, and more talk. The television set, the radio, the telephone, never-ending rounds of conferences and meetings, scholars and businessmen and bureaucrats all produce a continuous, deafening chatter. Marshall McLuhan saw the rise of television as a sign that the West had left the Age of Typography behind. But it may be that, like the medieval monks who read aloud from their handwritten Bibles, we have yet to reach it.
