Alphabetic script as a material condition for Western Philosophy

Name: Manuel Llano
Student number: s1739743
Supervisor: Dr. J.Sleutels
Date: 15/06/2016
E-mail: m.llano.martinez@leidenuniv.nl

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University of Leiden

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Prolusion: The transformative element of writing

Ever since the advent of Marxism, many scholars from different fields and political persuasion have progressively stressed the importance of material conditions in the understanding of cultural phenomena. These factors, disdained by traditional academia as peripheral and trifling, reveal themselves of great significance to the human and social sciences. A good example of this unorthodox research sensibility is the so-called Toronto School of Media. In the second half of the twentieth century this group of intellectuals put forward a theory that is commonly referred to as media ecology. Members like Eric Havelock, Harold Innis, Marshall Mcluhan and Robert Logan, among others, claim that the medium of transmission has a deep impact on the content, to the extent that a naïve view on media should be avoided at all cost.

It cannot be taken for granted that technologies such as the printing press or electronic computers are innocuous ways to transmit certain independent intellectual feats and deserve only a tangential treatment from culture theorists. Rather, they are a necessary requisite for the emergence of new kinds of thinking. They are a condition of possibility and a transformative element of change. In the words of McLuhan, the most notorious member of the school: "all media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without the knowledge of the way media work as environments". (McLuhan 1967)

According to Eric Havelock, one of the most overlooked technological inventions is writing and, in particular, alphabetic script. This claim should not to be understood as meaning that the topic of writing has received little scholarly attention. Quite the opposite. However whenever it is mentioned, its essential transformative traits have remained unnoticed. We can mention the theory of social evolution of one of the 19th century founding fathers of cultural anthropology, Lewis Henry Morgan, to illustrate this circumstance. Morgan presents a threefold theory of social progression in his work *Ancient Societies (*1944*)* in which literacy played a major role. There are, according to him, three stages of social progress to be distinguished: savagery, barbarism and civilization. The transition between them is the product of the outbreak of a new kind of technology. For instance, the domestication of animals and agriculture marks the transition from savagery into barbarism. The technology of writing, in any of its many forms, marks from barbarism into civilization. Naturally Morgan´s evolutionist school of anthropology is uncontroversially obsolete and ethnocentric, but the example is useful to illustrate how, albeit writing is given a great importance, to the point of being the gateway into civilization, the approach to it is tendentious.

The same view of writing as the key to civilization was held, among many other thinkers, by Kant, Carlyle, Mirabeau and Renan. As Ignace Gelb (1962 p.221) puts it, the background assumption is that since language is what distinguishes man from animal, writing should be the criterion distinguishing civilized men from barbarians. Writing systems are considered essential for a society to keep a hard record -that is, to transit into History from Prehistory- augment its dimensions, create a bureaucracy, write down a code of law and engage in complex trading. To the critical eye it is evident that the opinion that writing makes a qualitative difference in the society is a value judgement and not a factual one, which should be avoided in a historical approach to the subject matter. It is not however, the only prejudice that all these authors share. The other problematic assumption,, perhaps less blatant than the one already mentioned, is that written language is conceived as a supplement to spoken language.

The difference between oral and written language, it is understood, is the one between two different media able to communicate the same information. As expressed in the classical adagio: *Verba volant, scripta manent.* Writing is tacitly considered an improved instrument to store information; a physical memory that allows for the objectivity and fixity of its content. While this is the case, there is more to writing than being a storage of information. The widespread and unspoken understanding of literacy is that script merely transcribes speech. Thus the transformative element is neglected and buried under a partial definition.

This uncritical conception of writing is ubiquitous in the western intellectual tradition. Aristotle already defines script as a transcript of speech: "spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same of all men, neither are spoken sounds." (*De interpretatione* 16a3 trans. J.L. Ackrill)". He establishes a perfect equivalence not only between script, speech, but also thought. Jumping many centuries ahead, Voltaire, in his article devoted to writing in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) provides a tantamount and quite poetic example of the prejudice*:* "*L'écriture est la peinture de la voix: plus elle est ressemblante, meilleure elle est*" (Writing is the painting of speech: the most accurate it resembles it, the best it would be[1]). In a contemporary account, Rousseau, claims that: "*L'écriture n'est que la représentation de la parole; il est bizarre qu'on donne plus de soin à déterminer l'image que l'objet.*" (Writing is nothing but the representation of speech. It is odd that one gives more care to determining the depiction than the object). Already in the 20th century, Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of scientific linguistics, famously assumed that "language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second one exists for the sole purpose of representing the first" (Saussure 1945 p.45). I hope these examples will suffice to prove that writing has been considered for centuries a

1 When not stated otherwise, my translation onwards.

mere supplement to speech, not a transformative agent able to influence spoken language, the cognitive capacities of the subject of knowledge and social structure.

Withal how can writing possibly affect cognition and rationality? In order for that to be the case, thinking would be historically conditioned, not a given dimension with no empirical determination. This contention, scandalous for the rationalists, appears platitudinous by means of simple observation of the differences between the thinking processes of children and adults. Not only the quantity of knowledge of a child grows with age but, as Piaget points out, also do his epistemological capacities. The Soviet psychologists, Vygotsky and Luria explore this possibility, which has a great affinity with their Marxist framework. Vygotsky investigates how human memory differs in relation to environmental and cultural resources. While biological memory is a natural capacity, he argues that the different cultural technologies available have a deep impact in the mnemonic process. Within this trend, Luria studied the peculiar society of Uzbekistan in the thirties, while it was undergoing the process of mass alphabetization but half of the society was primarily oral. This singular circumstance allowed him to study differently how literate and illiterate subjects dissent in their perception, ability to abstract and generalize, deductive and inductive reasoning and self-awareness. We will later on return to his conclusions, suffice it to say for now that both psychologists confirm their working hypothesis that human thinking is historically affected by the cultural and material conditions under which the subjects develop.“Human consciousness ceases to be an intrinsic quality of the human spirit with no history or intractability to causal analysis. We begin to understand it as the highest form of reflection of reality that socio-historical development creates: a system of objectively existing agents gives birth to it and causal analysis makes it accessible to us.” (Luria 1976 p.10)

If this is so, how could the transformative element of the technology of writing be overlooked for such a long time? The reasons behind the transcriptive prejudice are no doubt complex, but most likely related to the disdain for corporeality that characterizes the Platonic-Christian tradition. Writing is considered the material platform for transmission of incorporeal information in the same dualist fashion as the man and the body were conceived. It is not until the late 19th century when intellectuals, like Darwin, Nietzsche or Marx start giving great importance to contextuality, materiality and embodiment. This mindset grew stronger in the 20th century. In this context, after the modern discovery of primary oral cultures as an outcome of the Parry-Lord thesis, that will be studied in the first chapter, writing and literacy started to be considered as vital topics on their own. We have already mentioned that the Toronto school of media made literacy and orality their signature topic, but thinkers from different fields soon developed an increasing interest in the matter. In the field of linguistics, Gelb, founder of modern grammatology, and Roy Harris, head of

the Oxonian integrationalist school, approach to writing stressing its transformative element. In anthropology, the works of Jack Goody and his associates were ground-breaking in the understanding of traditional societies and its dynamics and led a new wave of studies on oral societies. In the realm of critical theory, Jacques Derrida, drawing from Heidegger, has argued that Western culture has long privileged sound and presence over sign and absence and stresses the independence and irreducibility of the written sign. Step by step, the influence of media ecology theory and its reconsideration of writing has been gaining scholarly momentum.

Nonetheless, the repercussion of media ecology in the fields of metaphilosophy and the History of Philosophy is still rather weak. When studying how philosophical thinking was born in Ancient Greece and what demarcates philosophy from other intellectual disciplines, writing is not given much attention, despite the suggestive occurrence that the appearance of alphabetic writing -its one and only appearance for that matter, since it was only invented once and then transmitted and adopted for different languages throughout the centuries- and the birth of philosophical thinking in Ancient Greece are contemporary. If the proponents of media ecology are right in arguing that writing restructures consciousness and rationality, it seems reasonable to think that one of the causes for the birth of philosophy is precisely the rise of this kind of script. This concurrence can hardly be random happenstance. Havelock´s (1982) contention is that the cultural changes that took places in the late archaic and classical Greece, among them, the birth of philosophy were prompted by the appearance of the alphabet. This view is shared by McLuhan, Ong and Logan. The task of the present paper is to assess their claim: Is the alphabet the cause of philosophy?

It would be indeed very fascinating to study the influence of different kinds of script in other philosophical traditions, perhaps that of Chinese philosophy, given the availability of sources and their completely different logographic system of writing. However, this kind of research evades the scope of this thesis, being quite problematic for several reasons. For instance, there is the issue whether there is such a thing as a non-western philosophy or the term ´philosophy` is imposed retrospectively in a foreign tradition of thought of different nature. My personal lack of expertise in Eastern and African cultures is also a great impediment for this endeavour. Thus, this thesis should not be interpreted as defending the position that philosophy is only to be found in the Greco-Roman tradition nor that alphabetic writing is a necessary condition for any kind of abstract thinking or rationality. Rather, with this work I aim to answer the question: Is philosophy, as it is known in the Western tradition, contingent to the devise, use and spread of alphabetic script?

My strategy to engage with this question is as follows: Having already introduced the aim and scope of my research, I shall expose in the following chapter the scholarly discovery of primary oral cultures that ultimately promoted the discussion on the importance of the transformative

element of writing and enumerate how the cognitive and social dynamics of oral and literate societies differ, as presented in the relevant literature. In the second chapter, I will examine and classify the different kinds of script according to Gelb´s phonetic criterion in order to assess what, if anything, makes the alphabet an exceptional kind of literacy. Having established that alphabetic script was introduced in Greece, I shall heft Havelock´s (1982) claim that the implementation and internalization of alphabetic literacy brought about the whole Greek cultural revolution, using as a counterbalance the historical research of Harris (1989) on the degree of literacy in Classical Greece and Thomas (1992) on the way the difference between literacy and orality should be interpreted. I will conclude that the alphabet, whose role was perhaps over-dimensioned by Havelock, did play an important part in the cultural changes that happen in Ancient Greece, among them, the appearance of philosophy. In the fourth chapter, the historical focus will be substituted by an analytical one and the main traits of alphabetic literacy and philosophy will be crossed referenced, concluding that some of the essential features of western tradition of thought would have hardly been possible without this kind of script, in other words, that while it can be difficult to prove that the alphabet is a sufficient cause for philosophy, it seems to be one of its necessary material conditions, which, in conjunction with others, allowed the birth of this new way of thinking. In the last chapter, drawing from Wittgenstein´s remarks on the nature of philosophy, I will tentatively explore how, if it is granted that philosophical problems are closely related to language and how language is understood, the changes caused by the alphabet correlate with the imposition of a paradigm of how language works that spans from the Greek times until our days. This linguistic paradigm provides the tacit theoretical matrix within which, according to Wittgenstein, the same recurrent problems beset philosophers, who are not able to advance any conclusive solution. This will further support the claim presented in the previous chapter and open up a line for a future research.

1. The dynamics of literacy and orality:

The scholarly discovery of the importance of primary oral cultures, that led to the contemporary discussion around the repercussions of literacy, is less the outcome of anthropological and psychological research, as it might be *prima facie* thought, than to a question concerning literature heritage and cultural canons. The Homeric poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, have been considered canonical works by the Western intellectual world since written testimony can be tracked back. They are indeed a paradigm of a classical piece, in the sense that J. L. Borges defines the notion: "a classic is not a book that necessarily has certain intrinsic merits. It is a book that the coming generations, moved by very different reasons, read with a previous fervour and a mysterious loyalty" (*On classics*). Homer´s work have been indeed analysed and praised for centuries, thus accumulating overlapping layers of interpretations and biases. Their true nature have been clouded by this devote appreciation, which, with Ong (1982 p.18) we might dub as cultural chauvinism and not until 20th century philology the experts have been able to go beyond these preconceptions of what the poems are and they have been understood properly, thanks to the works of Milman Parry and his disciple Albert B. Lord. Their discovery, called in the literature the Parry-Lord thesis, is commonly considered the seminal answer to the Homeric question and will be exposed in some detail as an introduction to the discovery of the different cognitive and social dynamics of literate and oral societies.

The Homeric poems are neither books nor poems in our contemporary sense, though the layman can be deceived by its format, since they can be purchased as a bound booklet, with its author´s name printed on the cover, and in its pages a text arranged in a column of verses can be found, translated into a perfect English stanzas by the likes of Hobbes, Dryden, Pope and Robert Graves. 19Th and 20th century philologist, as well as some forerunners in previous centuries, have regarded the Homeric epic as problematic. There are obvious discrepancies between the *Iliad*, an epic of a group of heroes and war, and the *Odyssey*, that follows the adventures of a single well-defined protagonist. One praises honour and hand to hand combat while the other glorifies deception and ingenuity. One is articulated around a group of heroes (Achilles, Hector, Agamemnon, etc.), while the other have an undisputed protagonist. The characters in the Iliad are rather plain and the psychological depth is quite lacking, while in the Odyssey it is possible to understand, from a modern perspective, Ulysses´ motives. They are written in an unnatural miscellanea of Ionian and late Aeolian Greek dialects, and the dating of the poems have been regarded as a matter of controversy, as well as the actual historical background of the events narrated, such as the Trojan War. All of these problems beg the question: Who was Homer? The debate during the 19th century was polarized between two different schools, the Analysts and the

Unitarians, who respectively believed that Homer was the one and only writer of the epic in our modern sense or, on the other hand, just compiler of different textual sources, maybe even a *nom de plume* for a collective, perhaps spanning many years and locations. In sum, the Homeric Question can be rephrased as: who actually wrote the poem, when and under which conditions?

The plain answer is that in fact the Homeric poems were not written at all. Both the Analysts and the Unitarians were mistaken in this regard. They were rather composed and performed orally during centuries by the primary illiterate Greek society until their very late commission to writing, which carried all the traits of an oral poem. This was already suspected by Giambattista Vico[2], and noted by Robert Wood (1717-1771), who signalled some passages proving that Homer was illiterate, but was hardly the mainstream opinion until the exploits of Parry. Milman Parry was an American linguistic who, in the first segment of the 20th century, became interested in traditional literature. He conducted field work studying the folk singers in the Balkans and came to the conclusion that, in the same fashion these contemporary minstrels used ready-made phrasal constructions to fill up their verses and help them improvised over certain structures, the same could be the case for the oral tradition that we inherit as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.* Parry explored this idea in a series of articles between 1928 until his death in 1935. The topic was retaken by his disciple Lord. Their common work has become known as the oral formulaic composition thesis or Parry-Lord thesis. It aims to explain how oral poets are able to improvise and remember thousands of verses that have never been committed to writing and why oral epic has a certain set of idiosyncratic characteristic. This is done by having a stock of ready-made fragments of a certain metrical pattern and can be seen by how the variations of the epithets used for a certain noun do not respond to semantic but strictly metrical reasons. The oral formulaic composition is not characteristic of Yugoslav and Homeric poets, but rather of any archaic oral tradition. In the second part of *The Singer of Tales,* Lord convincingly applies his theory not only to the Homeric poems but also to oral medieval tradition, such as the *Song of Roldan* or *Beowulf*. Lord contended that there was in fact a complete divide between oral and literate composition, their nature being completely different. By understanding how the archaic epics were actually composed in a strict oral environment, Parry and Lord also apophatically discovered literacy as an agent of change when they were questioning how an oral tradition comes to an end. "At first Lord assumed that writing, being the antithesis of orality, would undermine the old oral traditions. Then he conceded that it was not writing itself so much as a respect for the fixed text that writing brought with it which undermined the oral tradition of poetry" (Thomas 1992 p.45).

2 A thorough elaboration of this can be found in Haddock, B.A. (1979) *Vico's "Discovery of the True Homer": a case-study in Historical Reconstruction*. Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. 40, No. 4, pp.583-602.

As an outcome of their research, studies on the differences between oral and literate ecological niches grew during the sixties and seventies and the topic took a signitficant place in anthropology and media theory. Nowadays academic journals entirely devoted to the topic are not rare, for instance *Visible Language, Literacy* or *Scrittura e Civiltà*. Its importance is that the way of thinking and interacting with their world of literate and oral societies is radically different. Drawing mainly from Ong´s account (1982 pp.36-77) and other sources that will be opportunely mentioned, the opposed tendencies of the thought and expression of oral and literate societies can be distinguished in the following tentative pairs.

Parataxis vs. hypotaxis:

In oral societies, narration is essentially additive, following certain mnemonic conventions and structural repetitions, and accumulating sentences through juxtaposition. In literate societies, particularly those with a high degree of literacy, communication at almost every level relies heavily on subordination arranged as a stylistic and logical structure. The possibility to locate spatially the words allows for very complex patterns that would not be possible without the permanent fixation of writing. Spoken language is also affected by the possibility to arrange a text, making it possible to "speak like a book", that is, to bend the natural tendency towards juxtaposition in favour of complex structures. Even then, when alphabetization has shaped the minds of the speakers, oral narration and rhetoric tends to be more additive than subordinative compared to written communication.

Two good examples of these opposed dynamics of arrangement can be found in two famous pieces of literature. On the one hand, the *Book of Genesis*, which, let us not forget, is a record of a primary oral tradition- the paratactic formula "And Yahvé said x. And x was done. And Yahvé saw that x was good" is repeated profusely and the narration is a juxtaposition of simple sentences. On the other hand, Proust´s intricate prose in *Remembrance of Things Past* is notorious for its use of subordination. In its fourth volume*, Sodom and Gomorrah,* hypotaxis reaches the point of having a single phrase composed of no less than 958 words according to Moncreiff´s English translation, which would be inconceivable in a spoken discourse, where the length of a period correspond more or less to the possibility of pronouncing it without taking breath.

Redundance vs. synthesis:

Oral folk prefer the addition of redundant adjectives to implement memory and help the singer of tales to complete his verses, in a similar manner as the jazz player stitches arpeggios and ready-made patters in a melody. These qualifications are mostly redundant as their purpose is not so much to add information to the noun they accompany, that can increase the knowledge of the interlocutors, but rather to fulfil audience´s expectations, as a manner of a semantic leitmotifs as well as helping the speaker´s memory and improvisation. Repetition is the only way an oral society can achieve remembrance and by doing this, store information.

A good example of this tendency are the already mentioned Homeric epithets such as swift-footed Achilles, Agamemnon, son of Atreus or bright-eyed Athena. This kind of epithetic formula would appear sloppy and cumbrous in a written form, where adjectivation is expected to add information to the reader or listener, rather than pleasing the ears. Writing is a time-obviating technology: the reader can go back to a relevant passage without a need for constant repetition. Only through this visual process redundancy can be avoided.

Presence vs. absence:

On the one hand, oral learning and communication is a participatory collective enterprise. It requires the presence of the audience and the communicator and the language is abundant in vocatives and gesticulation. Any thought meant to avoid evanescence necessarily requires an interlocutor. On the other, written communication does not require the presence of an interlocutor. Writing can break the borders of time and space. This also affects the learning process; in a literate society nobody would be surprised to find a school classroom of thirty pupils and one master in complete solipsist silence devoted to silently reading a passage. Writing allows for a long deceased person to communicate and instruct to living, as can be found in a famous baroque poem by Francisco de Quevedo, which begins: "Withdrawn to this solitary place, With a few but learned books, I live conversing with the dead, listening to them with my eyes[3]", echoing Seneca, who in Moral Letters to Lucilius 67.2 says: "*Ago gratias senectuti, quod me lectulo adfixit, quidni gratias illi hoc nomine agam? Quicquid debebam nolle, non possum: cum libellis mihi plurimus sermo est*." (I thank old age, that has put me to bed. How so? Because I am not able to do what I should not be wanting to do in the first place: now my conversations are mostly with books). This idea, I presume, would be completely outlandish for an illiterate society and probably linked to some sort of suspicious witchcraft.

3 *Selected poetry of Francisco de Quevedo* trans. and ed. Christopher Johnson (2009) Chicago University Press.

In this sense, written language augments tremendously the dimensions of the group of possible interlocutors, which, as we will see further on, added to the capacity to store information without relying of collective memory allows for the opening up of a close society.

Credulousness vs. critical objectivity

Indeed oral transmission requires the presence and participation of the audience in the narration. It has been observed that not seldomly, minstrels talk in the first person, completely identifying with the characters. Not only writing allows for the separation from the audience, but also sets the conditions for objectivity thanks to the distance taken from the object of knowledge, which favours certain disinterestedness. At the same time, the material objectification of the words on the physical platform lead to a critical attitude, since it is possible to compare one account with others. "With writing, what is recorded or remembered becomes separate from the writer, existing in a book or a scroll. Knowledge takes on objective identity separate from the knower" (McLuhan & Logan 1976).

The absence of this critical disassociation in oral communication was noticed and criticised by Plato, according to Havelock (1963). He argues that Plato´s diatribe against poetry in the *Republic* is not the criticism to authors in our modern sense, but an attack on the Greek educational system, residually oral in his time. Plato contents that the memorization and repetition of the Homeric epics does not allow for taking a stance and separate the opinions of the reciter and those expressed in the tradition, distinguishing between facts, fiction and opinions. Plato´s quarrel with oral poetry can be seen as a quest for objectivity and will to truth. Ironically, Plato, maybe influenced by his master, criticises writing in the *Phaedrus*. It is curious that Plato was not able to see that writing, still a fairly new and controversial technology in his time, was the alternative to the credulousness favoured by oral epic and precisely the implementation and internalization of it allows his own revolt against the poets.

Tradition vs. innovation:

Oral societies have a well-known respect for their elders, who have a privilege status because they are both repeaters of the past and treasurers of communal information. For oral folk, information is extremely precious and it is only kept alive by constant repetition of what is already known in the past. This fact makes oral societies very traditional and reluctant to novelty, that it is seen as an obstacle to information storage and the social order that allows for it.

Another characteristic element of oral performances is what Roman Jakobson (Jakobson & Bogatyrev 1973 pp. 59-72) called preventive censorship of the community. The travelling minstrel selects the tales and poems that are most likely going to please their audience depending on the

place, probably the ones involving the local heroes and conflicts. Thus even before the performance, the content is censored by the audience. In the long run, those narratives that fell out of popular favour are forgotten. This does not mean that writing is necessarily an element of freedom and innovation, while orality is of serfdom. Since the very birth of writing it has been used to freeze and impose different codes of traditional law and, according to the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1961) the colonial fight against illiteracy is almost indistinguishable from the desire to enforce a foreign law to the natives: if everybody is able to read the Authority, then all must be bound to obey.

In his famous chapter ´A writing lesson` in *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss narrates how, while doing field work with the Nambikwara in Brazil, the chief of the tribe was bewildered by his jottings in a notebook and ask for the notepad, pretending being able to read and, through this masquerade, fooling his tribe into thinking that it was through the mediation of his literate skills that the tribe received presents from the anthropologist. In his own words: "(...)I could not but admire the genius of their leader, for he had divined in a flash that writing could redouble his hold upon the others and, in so doing, he had got, as it were, to the bottom of an institution which he did not as yet know how to work.(...)". This experience led him to reconsider to advance the idea that writing is primordially an enslaving device: "(...)If my hypothesis is correct, the primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings. The use of writing for disinterested ends, and with a view to satisfactions of the mind in the fields either of science or the arts, is a secondary result of its invention and may even be no more than a way of reinforcing, justifying, or dissimulating its primary function." (Lévi-Strauss 1961. pp. 290-93.).

Lévi-Strauss´ insights are indeed valuable and, in my opinion, he is undoubtedly right in the social dimension of writing. However it must be acknowledge that it is only through writing that script frees the mind from the mnemonic work and in that sense enables speculation beyond the tight restraints of the tradition. In this sense, using the conceptual pair of an open and a closed society, first enunciated by Bergson and popularized by Popper, we can say that writing represents an important step towards the opening up of a society, while, almost paradoxically, also being used as a social yoke.

Homestatic vs. historically mediated meaning

In illiterate societies there is no such a thing as a semantic history of a word. There is an immediate relation between sign and reference with no accumulation of meaning, since there is no recording of the previous usage of a word, there are no dictionaries nor formal semantic definitions. Goody and Watt (1968 p.29) called this the direct semantic ratification. A word only takes its meaning in the

context of its usage, without any sort of semantic discrepancy. Naturally the past usage of a term has minted the current meaning, but this process remains completely unknown, for human memory and lifespan cannot cover this generational process.

As Ong notes (1982 p47) it is true that oral epics preserve some archaic words but, as he rightly argues, these archaic words are brought to the present in the context of poetry and are not used in daily life. Their *raison d'ètre* is limited to a certain activity. Literate societies have a complex apparatus of semantic preservation, and the archaic uses of words can be consulted. The importance given to etymology, a kind of knowledge that has no place in an oral society, is enormous. This is evident when, for instance, philosophers like Martin Heidegger claim that a primitive usage of a word can be philosophically more relevant than the current meaning, already burdened theoretically.

Context vs. abstraction.

As it can be thought, the need for a direct semantic ratification of oral societies does not allow for context-free or abstract thinking. To address this issue, it is best to report to the thorough field-research conducted by Luria in Uzbekistan during the 1930s. He studied the differences in the criteria used to classify of a set of given object by illiterate and semi-literate people. He observed that illiterate people "instead of trying to select similar objects, they proceeded to select objects suitable for a specific purpose. In other words, they replaced a theoretical task by a practical one" (Luria 1976 p.54).

Thus, when offered the list of objects: hammer-slog-hatchet-log, they tend to group them all together, since they were all necessary for the construction of a piece of furniture, not distinguishing, as it would be natural for a literate individual, between tools and the raw material. When pointed that the first three are tools while the log is not, they agree but note that they are no good without the log, it has to belong with the others. Another example is that when showed three adults and a child, they do not discriminate between the grown-ups and the infant, but argue that the child should stay with the others and learn how to work. "References to general terms do not overcome their tendency to group objects in concretely effective ways. They either disregard generic terms or considered them irrelevant, in no way essential to the business of classification."

Illiterate subjects were also unable of geometric abstraction, and syllogistic reasoning. When confronted with the following problem: In the snowy North, all bears are white. Nova Zembla is in the snowy north. What colours are the bears there? The subjects reply that there are bears of different colours, and that they have never been to Nova Zembla. Their first-hand knowledge of the empirical data in the premises is questioned, but the syllogism is not seen as indicating anything

that experience does not teach. The thinking process of illiterate subject is very context-heavy. The degree of abstraction that they can obtain is minimal, compared to that of semi-literate subjects. They fail to recognize logical reasoning in as much as it is completely abstract and context-free and assume that they are asked about their personal experience or someone else´s report of a certain situation.

Social self vs. introspection:

Another important conclusion of the research conducted by Luria is that literate and semi-literate subjects treat their inner life in a generalized manner while illiterate people refer to instances of good behaviour or performance to illustrate their vices and virtues. Ever since Descartes, introspection has been considered a privileged kind of knowledge by idealistic epistemologists and psychologists. Introspection is considered the primary and irreducible access to the inner life of consciousness, indeed the only kind of knowledge that cannot be subjected to doubt, while the knowledge of the outside world is derivative and secondary. Subjectivity, subjectivation and introspection are thought to be a close family of notions.

Nonetheless, a corolary of Luria´s research is that introspection is a by-product of literacy, it is not the primary way of self-awareness. Originally, primary oral subjects reflect on their own self in relation to the external world and other people. Many of the illiterate individuals failed to identify their abstract shortcomings, talking about having bad neighbours as a shortcoming for instance. The ones that succeeded in identifying them, indicated their defects and excellencies based of what other people say of them. "Indications of a developing self-evaluation in (the illiterate group of subjects studied) show up in the subjects´ characterization of their own qualities on the basis of what other people say.(…) Typically, they most frequently replaced a characterization of intrinsic qualities by a description of concrete forms of external behaviour." (Luria 1976 p.147). Another idiosyncratic trait was the substitution of the first person of the singular for the collective ´we`. That is, when questioned about their proficiency in certain activity, often the illiterate subject talked about the performance of his brigade or collective farm. The illiterate assessment of the self is always engrave in a social interaction, while for the literate individual, there is a gap between himself and the rest of society and he is the best judge of his inherent properties.

2. A typology of script and the alphabetic exception:

Having highlighted the differences between the literate and illiterate cognitive, social and structural dynamics, it is time now to narrow down the scope of literacy to the alphabetic kind. Let us raise the question: In what sense is the alphabet an exceptional kind of script?

The backbone of our research this far has been the opposition between sound and sight; oral societies rely solely on sound, while literate societies also use visual marks to communicate, causing the differences mentioned in the previous chapter. Thus, the degree of phonetization, that is to say, the power of a writing system to depict the sounds of a given language, can be used as a criterion to set a threefold taxonomy of script. We can distinguish between logographic, syllabic and alphabetic script depending on how accurately the writing system is able to convey sounds of spoken language.

The selection of this criterion is not to be mistaken as yet another articulation of the prejudice that script is a transcript of speech, as was exposed in the introduction. The phonetic classification has been chosen to examine how the different kinds of script, depending on their idiosyncratic way of expressing speech, influence its users and their spoken language. Written language does represent speech to some degree, but perhaps it is more accurate to say, with Whorf (1956) that the users of a writing system introspect their spoken language along the tracks laid down by the categories created by that system: "the phenomena of a language are to its own speakers largely of a background character and so are outside the critical consciousness and control of the speaker (…). Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars." The degree of phonetization is one among many different criteria that can be used to classify systems of writing and it is by no means an expression of the "essence" of writing, but purely instrumental.

Yet another related caveat is pertinent. The mentioned threefold typology was proposed for the first time by Gelb in *A study of writing*. While it has been tremendously influential, our approach to it should be careful and informed. Gelb thought of systems of writing in evolutionary terms. Thus, he thought there is a continuous evolution from primitive scripts towards the most developed one, the alphabet. He proposed what he called the unidirectional development principle, meaning that once one step towards full phonetization has been taken, there is not turning back, no involution. Writing must pass through the stages of logographic, syllabic and finally alphabetic script. Hence, syllabaries evolve naturally from logograms and alphabets from syllabaries, without making any leaps. This principle is linked to the idea that new forms of script were developed *ex profeso* to achieve a higher degree of phonetization. The truth is other, as pointed out by Daniels

(1990). To begin with, since the progression from a syllabary into an alphabet historically only took place once, when a West Semitic syllabary was transformed in the Greek alphabet, there is not enough evidence to perform an inductive reasoning and conclude that this is a common law of development. Also, there are some historical instances of syllabaries that came about from alphabets, like the Caroline Island script from Micronesia, that was developed from the Roman alphabet introduced by missionaries. This historical information is enough to reject the principle of unidirectional development. By doing that, we reject the whole evolutionist flavour of the typology, that seems to give the alphabet the honour of being the best writing system, for it is phonetically precise. While it is true that its degree of phonetization makes it exceptional, the task of writing is not to be phonetically accurate. The creation and spread of writing systems is not done *ex profeso* with the objective of being accurate and parsimonious. The appearance of the Greek alphabet is not, as it is usually dubbed, a "genius feat" of fine tuning, but rather a random outcome of the adaptation of a Semitic script from languages where vowels and prosody are not very relevant to Ancient Greek, where they play a fundamental semantic and metric role, as it will be later exposed in detail. The typology of Gelb is very useful to analyse how alphabetic literacy differs from others as long as we are not led astray by these background assumptions. Without further ado, let us examine the differences between logographic, syllabic and alphabetic script.

Logographic script:

Logographic script is able to depict words by means of using signs or juxtaposition of these signs. In other words, its degree of phonetization is virtually non-existent, only being able to represent semantic units. This can be clarified with a very simple example. Let the signs "▲", "♯" and "♦" represent respectively the English words "mountain", "window" and "wealth". There is nothing inherent to these logograms helping the reader to know how the word actually sounds. Even if the reader is well acquainted with the system, every new sign will be, on its own, an unsolvable phonetic riddle. Both the words depicted by "♯" and "♦" share the sound [w] but this phonetic correspondence is not represented graphically. The representation is based on meaning, rather than sound. Some unexhaustive examples of logographic script are some Han characters, certain Egyptian hieroglyphs and many shorthand jottings. No historical system is purely logographic, just as there are no purely syllabic nor alphabetic writings. For instance, in written alphabetic English the logogram "&" is used to signify the word "and" profusely. In the case of Chinese script, there are logograms that are not meaningful in isolation, only being used to compose certain words clustered with others, there is not direct correspondence between each one of the signs and the atomic words.

Syllabic script:

Syllabic script, for its part, is unsurprisingly able to represent syllables. Being more precise, a syllable is a unit of sound composed of a peak of sonority and the modulations clustered around this centre. Two kinds of syllabaries, the vocalic and to non-vocalic can be distinguished, depending on whether the system specifies the vowel of the syllables or merely its modulations. Vocalic syllabaries represent syllables distinguishing between the vocalic value, while in a non-vocalic syllabary the vocalic value of the syllable is not explicit, accepting different readings. Let us illustrate the difference between vocalic and non-vocalic syllabaries.

In a hypothetical non-vocalic syllabary the sign "▲" can represent a gamut of syllables constructed around the consonant phone [p], say, for instance "[pa, pe, pi, po, pu]" and the sign "♯" conveying the range around [k]: [ka, ke, ki, ko, ku]. As a consequence of this, the phonetic value of a word, albeit restricted to a variety of sounds is ambiguous. The word "▲♯" can be read, among other combinations as "poko" or "pike", with different meanings in a sample language. The reader, fluent in that language, is able to guess which word is correct given the context but the syllabary itself has less phonetic power than a vocalic syllabary. Following this example, in a vocalic syllabary the sign "▲" will represent only the syllable [pi] and "♯" [ko], being "poko" the only correct reading of "▲♯". Vocalic syllabaries eliminate the reading ambiguity of non-vocalic at the expense of a proliferation of signs.

It is a matter of relative controversy, yet quite relevant for this research, whether non-vocalic syllabaries represent consonants or unvocalised syllables. Both Gelb (1963) and Havelock (1982) agree that syllabaries always represent syllables while Sampson (1985) defends that it is a consonantal system. I believe that in this regards Sampson is misguided by our alphabetic bias. As Roy Harris points out in *the Language Myth*, our specialized linguistics terms and instrumental entities are developed to explain a given language, but they are not an intrinsic to languages. Thus, the idea of vowels and consonants is a specialized distinction that requires a certain reflection upon language and the material conditions that allow for that self-reflection.

As it will soon discuss, the distinction between the different parts of a syllable was only made possible through the mediation of the chancy invention of the alphabet. In Havelock´s own words: "The invention of the alphabet was probably a prerequisite to the recognition that speech consists of discrete units of sound rather than a continuous flow" (Havelock 1982 p. 49). Historically, some non-vocalic syllabaries, such as the Hebrew script, have incorporated some sort of vocalic diacritics or *matres lectionis* but their pre-alphabetic use is very scarce and inconsistent. Only under the influence of the alphabet, the Semitic syllabaries incorporated systematic diacritics, in that particular case the so-called masoretic signs. Nonetheless, when pristine syllabaries are

considered on its own, there is nothing to them, but our own alphabetic categories retrospectively applied, that indicates a distinction between vowels and consonants.

Alphabetic script

We turn now our attention to alphabetic writing. This system is able to depict the segments of a language. By segment it is understood "any discrete unit that can be identified, either physically or auditorily, in the stream of speech" (Cristal 2003 p.408). Most alphabets are able to depict with a sign almost all the minimal segments of a language, the phones, that are abstracted by linguists as phonemes, the units of sound that allow to distinguish semantically one word from another forming a minimal pair. In lay terms we can say that broadly every letter of the alphabet represents one sound of the language although this is not entirely the case (for instance, in English script, there are instances where two letters are require to form a sound like "sh" or "th"). The degree of phonetization in natural alphabetic writing is never absolute, having all the alphabets different idiosyncrasies like the one mentioned above. Using again an example, the letters "▲", "♯" and "♦" to represent the sounds [p], [k] and [a] we can combine them in different ways, for example, "▲♦♯♦▲♦" sounding as [pakapa] or "♦▲♦♯ "[apak].

Havelock (1982 pp. 77-88) offers three requirements for a script to be considered properly an alphabet. The first one is to cover exhaustively all the phonemes of a language. Secondly, the letters must be restricted in number between twenty and thirty. Thirdly, each individual shape is not to perform more than a single duty. These three requirements are only met by the Greek alphabet and all the alphabetic systems that developed from it (like Roman and Cyrillic script) although some syllabic system were harbingers in the notation of some weak vowels with *mater lectionis*. The creation of the alphabet is wrongly credited to the Phoenician by authors writing before Gelb´s study, for instance by Diringer (1948). It is obvious that the Greek letters share a resemblance with the Phoenician signs and the names of the letters have a Semitic origin; the Semitic provenance of the alphabet is not in dispute. However, it was not until the Semitic signs were used to write down the Greek when the *matres lectionis* that were already in casual use became systematically employed to depict accurately syllabic quantity, an essential component of the Greek language. Andersen (1987) have argued that the primordial use of script in Greece was to record sung word, which makes sense, given that one of the most likely causes for the appearance of alphabetic writing is the importance of prosody in Greek verse, which turned Semitic syllabaries unprofitable for the purpose. Thus, vowels acquired substanciality and, negatively, the consonant was discovered. The syllable was broken down into two elements. This step taken by the Greeks is considerable, yet perhaps difficult to appreciate. When listening to the sounds of a language, the

most only noticeable elements are the vibrating column of air and the mouth modulations upon that vibration, that is, the syllable. However, the modulations alone are not the sounds of the language, they cannot be uttered without the resting point of the vocalic sound. The invention of the alphabet, it can be said, is nothing but the invention of the consonant. The consonants do not have an empirical correlative that can be pointed at. Aristotle and Plato, for instance, refer to consonants as *aphona,* that is, "non-sounds". It allows for an atomic system that breaks down the empirical syllable into two analytical components. According to Havelock, this characteristic is what allowed the alphabet to perform deeper changes than any other kind of literacy. "(The alphabet) democratized literacy, or rather made democratization possible" (Havelock 1976 p.45). The idea is not only that the reduced number of marks used in alphabetic writing allowed for more people to access literacy. Rather, as we have seen, the atomic phonetic analysis of the alphabet was internalized by children at an early age while still learning the oral sounds of spoken Greek, thus affecting the way they conceived their language. This is indeed the alphabetic exception, although we should not think of it as the creation of a genius, the alphabet is exceptional among the other systems of writing in its degree of unambiguous phonetic value and parsimony of signs. This is the reason why the Greek society was the first to make a true transition into literacy by making writing accessible to the population and exposing children to writing while their understanding of their language still was susceptible of being moulded by literacy.

3. The alphabet as catalyst of the Greek cultural revolution:

We approach now to the kernel of our investigation. From Mycenaean times (1600 B.C.) to 700 B.C., the Greeks were a purely oral culture and many of their peculiar feats were developed without the influence of any kind of script, like the organization in city-states, the Homeric poems, temple architecture. This alone should banish the prejudice that an oral society is culturally inferior than a literate one. Not all the greatness of Greece can be attributed to literacy. Yet, without falling in this extreme, Havelock (1963, 1982) and Goody (1987) note that there is a correlation between the introduction of alphabetic script and what has been called the Greek cultural revolution or Classical Greece (Around 500 B.C.), when different scientific and artistic disciplines flourish and philosophy took a well-defined and recognizable form in the works of Plato.

The "democratic" qualities of the alphabet made it the first historical instance of the transition into a fully literate society, as opposed to the highly specialized scribal and craft-literacy of the Egyptians and the West Semitic people that kept the practice of writing in a close and highly professionalized circle and thus prevented it to pervaded their societies. "The civilization created by the Greeks and Romans was the first on earth´s surface which was founded upon the activity of the common reader; the first to be equipped with the means of adequate expression in the inscribed word; the first to be able to place the inscribed word in general circulation; the first, in short, to become literate in the full meaning of that term, and to transmits its literacy to us" (Havelock 1982 p.40) The very well-documented cultural boom of Classical Athens also makes it the best historical case study to assess the consequences of literacy. "Greece thus offers not only the first example of the transition to a really literate society; but also the essential one for any attempt to isolate the cultural consequences of alphabetic literacy" (Goody & Watt 1963 p 320).

According to these authors, the alphabet should be understood as the catalyst of this changes, in other words, its sufficient cause. "The purely phonetic alphabet had its greatest impact on the Greeks, the very first people to achieve and to use it. Within 300 years the Greeks had developed from dependence on an oral tradition based on myths, to a rationalistic, logical culture which laid the foundations for logic, science, philosophy, psychology, history, political science, and individualism." (McLuhan & Logan 1977).

The time span from the appearance of the alphabet and the birth of this new theoretical gaze is barely two centuries. The first inscriptions of Greek letters can be dated around the 8th Century B.C. The use of early jottings was hardy esoteric, which speaks eloquently of the open character of the alphabet, as opposed to Semitic scribal literacy. Step by step, alphabetic literacy was growing within the deeply oral Greek society and by Hellenistic times, a system of schools guaranteed a widespread access to alphabetic writing to a certain segment of the free male population, which was

later incremented in Rome. Evidence can be found that a system of schools teaching reading and writing in the Athens of Pericles was already working (as proven by *Protagoras* 325d) and there was an existing audience consuming literate products, ridiculed by Aristophanes in *The Frogs*. It seems intuitive to think that the shift from the archaic oral Homeric tradition to the bookish Classical, Hellenistic and Roman world is somehow mediated to the appearance and consolidation of the alphabet.

How could literacy influence, among the other new disciples that appeared around this time, the birth of philosophy? Goody (1987 pp. 69-72) argues that alphabet cause the appearance of the critical attitude in as much the accumulation of evidence forced to recognize mistakes, while in the oral tradition, discrepancies between theory and facts are often overlooked, as the oral narrative is continuously bent. This idea, applied to the early Greek philosophy, is endorsed by Harris: "At the very least the desire of early Ionian philosophers to perpetuate and diffuse their opinions by writing them down inevitably created a sort of rudimentary dialectics, since all ambitious thinkers were increasingly compelled to confront the ideas of their nest-regarded predecessors" (Harris 1980 p. 63).

This circumstance might have had a looping feedback with the residually oral context in Athens, as highlighted by Giorgi Colli, where agonic confrontations in court and the public forum in front of an audience also favour the appearance of a dynamics of proof and evidence. The sophist, like Gorgias or Protagoras, were masters of public speech to which Plato opposed himself. The sophist were not aiming at objectivity, but rather persuasion, while the philosopher is supposed to leave all personal interest aside to approach truth.

However, there are some issues concerning historical facts that beset the theory that the cultural revolution of Classical Greece was prompted by this script. The problems were risen by two recent researchers, Harris and Thomas. On the one hand, Harris´s data questions that the degree of literacy in Ancient Greece was as high as Havelock and Goody seem to assume. On the other, Thomas challenges the idea that the Greek cultural revolution was literate rather than oral. Let us examine the arguments that these scholars provide to asses whether they disprove the contention that alphabetic literacy brought about the cultural changes of Classical Greece.

In *Ancient Literacy* (1989), Harris asses the historical facts about literacy in Greece. Although there is an absence of sources during archaic times (eighth to sixth century B.C.), Harris concludes that the regions with the highest degree of literacy were Athens and Ionia. In these places and others, although complete alphabetic literacy comprehended only around the 15% of the population, literacy was not scribal, that is, most of inhabitants were semi-literate, as proven by the practice of ostracism, and the literate population did not constitute a class. In other regions of

Greece, the degree of literacy was even lower. The highest point of literacy in Antiquity was around the 20% of the urban population and was only achieved in Roman Imperial times.

The research data provided by Harris is very relevant, and fills an important gap in the specialized literature, but I do not believe -nor does Harris, in any case- that it disproves Havelock´s claim, only nuances it. Literacy, as it has been defined in media ecology, is not so much the actual ability of the whole society to read and write fluently, but the changes in the communication dynamics that can be brought about by the actions of an intellectual elite or a cultural focus, like Athens, emanating its influence to other cities with a less significant degree of literate population. That is, the main dynamics of orality are only as prominent as they have been mentioned in the first chapter in pristine oral societies, like preliterate Greece. The society of Classical Greece was already permeated by literacy. While only a limited group of people were able to read and write fluently, the impact of literacy pervaded the way people think and interacted. As Harris points out that "the reaction of a historian faced with claims such as those of Havelock and Goody is likely to be a desire for detail. If the Greeks became more rational, sceptical and logical under the influence of literacy, how did this tendency manifest itself?". He believes that far from being disprove by his data, Havelock´s thesis needs a thorough historical investigation linking the precise literate practices to cultural changes while paying attention to other factors beside literacy, such as economical and religious, that could also have a major impact in these changes.

Rosalind Thomas in *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (1992) is not so much concerned about the actual degree of literacy in Greece, but rather the modern conceptualization of its dynamics that has been done up until date. She argues that the radical modern opposition between orality and literacy, as it has been exposed in the first chapter is bogus. According to Thomas writing was less critical for the Greek revolution than Havelock and his school have thought and it was permeated by oral habits. For instance, one of the roles writing took in Greece was that of a document or a contract. However, the use of these documents required some non-written knowledge of atavistic practices and expectations. Text was hardly self sufficient. Not only that, but also many of the uses of writing were not "rational" so to speak, but rather they obeyed magical, symbolic and monumental reasons. More than one hundred informal non-inscribed scribblings (technically called graffiti) from the seventh century B.C. have been found in Athens. These inscriptions were mainly dedications, votive offerings or property labels found in pieces of pottery. Public curses were common currency as well as funeral text engraved in bronze with instructions for the after-life up until the third century. Thomas argues that thee use of writing in Greece was more performative than locutionary and rely heavily on the oral transmission of contextual information. Orality is not to be regarded as antonymous to literacy, but as performing

complementary actions. In that sense, the Greek revolution cannot be said to be caused by alphabetic literacy.

To what extent is Thomas right in her claim? She provides conclusive evidence that the use of writing in Greece went far beyond the ones it has in our contemporary society. Havelock and Goody are perhaps misled by our contemporary understanding of what writing represents; It can be argue consistently that their conceptualization of script are too rationalistic and representational. Their observations on Greek literacy, I agree, have to be rephrased to fit the diverse uses it had. However, I think that her reflections, just as Harris data on literacy degree, only call for a refinement of the idea that the cultural revolution was caused by literacy. The works of Herodotus in history, of Plato in philosophy and Aristotle in natural sciences were fundamentally literate and could not be achieved in a primary oral culture. In my opinion, the conclusion that is that we should not be clouded by the explanatory power of literacy and stop regarding other material factors, such as slavery, political organization and the combination of literacy with residual oral traits when giving an account of why Greece underwent such a deep cultural revolution. It is not the time nor the place to engage in such an investigation, but only to remark that literacy cannot be taken as a sufficient cause, but as a necessary but insufficient cause of an unnecessary but sufficient set of causes for the eruption of the Greek revolution. In sum, it can be concluded that the alphabet was not the catalyst, but one of the condition of possibility of the Greek cultural revolution.

4. The alphabet as a material condition for Western philosophy:

The historical approach has revealed itself somewhat unsatisfying. The alphabet did play a role in the Greek revolution but it cannot be uncontroversially signalled as its straight forward cause of it. Does this mean that philosophy, as an outcome of that intellectual revolution, do not have such a close causal relation to alphabetic literacy, but it just incidentally influenced it?

Instead of looking at the particular case of Ancient Greece, we can now attempt another approach to the question, redirecting our gaze to what philosophy is, not historically, but analytically considered. This alternative strategy will be to contrast the main traits of literacy as opposed to oral tradition to some general characteristic of philosophy.

In the second chapter we concluded that the language used by literate subjects, both written and spoken, is characterised formally by the use of complex subordinative structures and favouring synthetic adjetivation, since repetition is seen as redundant. The hypotactic structure that literacy allows, both in written and in spoken language, is the condition of possibility of the logical complexity and intricate structure that characterizes the great systems of philosophy. Suffice it to think, on this regard, of the works of Aquinas or Christian Wolff or simply the logical arrangement of a book, like Spinoza´s *Ethics* or Wittgenstein´s *Tractatus.*

It can be argued that many philosophical issues can be exposed in paratactic manner, in other words, that the content of philosophy does not depend on the way the proposition containing it are articulated. Yet the possibility of subordination is not only a stylistic expression but it is inherent to the thinking process, that is to say, the way that philosophy is produced. Without a certain level of subordinative level, the logical complexity that philosophy requires cannot be achieved. I reckon that the deepest thoughts that can be expected in a primary oral society are intuitions expressed in apophthegms, not fully developed ideas. Nietszche, for instance, expressed his ideas in an aphoristic form, formally rather very simple, but his thinking process was purely literate. The selection of this way of expressing his ideas is explained as part of his whole philosophy. His views could not be exposed in a systematic manner because he is precisely criticising the desire for closure that characterize western thought. On the other side of the spectrum, Hegel exposes his thought in a highly elaborate system because he believes in a complete logical closure of his *systema mundi* replicating the rational structure of reality.

Another attribute is that writing can preserve unchanged opinions throughout time, and individuals can take a critical stance towards them, separating themselves from the inherited discourse. Goody´s idea that the accumulation of philosophical opinions led to a critical attitude in Ancient Greece can be applied to the whole tradition of philosophy. The tendency to confront the opinions of others in search of truth and the possibility of accumulating and accessing knowledge in

a physical format and to communicate *in absentia* through time and space allow for the assessment of the previous work on a topic that characterizes philosophy. Any modern philosophy paper starts by posting a problem and stating the previous opinions on the matter before suggesting a new one or providing further grounds in support of an existing thesis.

This habit can be traced back to Aristotle, who tends to begin his theories reporting the opinions of his predecessors on the matter (The first book of the *Metaphysics* can be quoted as an example of this). Doxography would not be possible in an oral society, since it requires a certain objectivity. The very rediscovery of the works of Aristotle in the 12th century by the Christian intellectual world, that was preserved in the Arab tradition was only possible thanks to the quirographic recopying of his opus. Many trends in philosophy commonly start as the rediscovery or revitalization of a neglected thinker, whose works would not be possible have survived what has been previously dubbed preventive censorship of an oral society.

The semantic homeostasis of an oral society, where meanings are validated in their context of the usage do not favour the abstraction and generalization, which are essential to philosophy, in as much, it aims for the most general and inapplicable principles. Even a casuistic position that defends the assessment of particular cases and opposes any kind of generalization requires an environment where those general principles are postulated and defended to exists.

The psychological research of Luria proves that situational thinking, rather than abstraction is preferred by oral folk when asked to a classification. Nonetheless, the concepts used in philosophy are characterised by their abstract nature and rigid hierarchy. In this regard, perhaps it is usefull to think of the Kantian pure concepts of understanding, that can be used to deter any entity: substance, quantity, quality, relation, action, affection, place, datation, position, and state. This degree of abstraction from empirical experience cannot be possible expected in an oral society, where not even general categories such as “tools” or “adults” have theoretical value. Historically mediated meanings, typical of a literate society, allow for the creation of a specialized philosophical vocabulary that is inherit as the thesaurus of the tradition of thought. Indeed one of the first steps of the student of philosphy is to become acquanted with the vocabulary of the trade.

It is hopeless to guess whether some kind of activity relatable in some way to philosophy would have existed in Greece, should alphabetic writing not been invented, but it is certain to say that it would have taken a complete different form than the one that we know. On this basis, it is safe to defend that the alphabet is indeed a material necessary condition of possibility for philosophy.

5. A tentative line for further research: the Augustinian conception of language.

In the previous chapter, the lax list of characteristics of this kind of thinking provided match the outcome of alphabetic literacy, but it can be argued that the enumeration is not sufficient to characterize philosophy, that it is not encompassing and that it does not demarcate philosophy from other intellectual disciplines clearly enough.

The field of metaphilosophy is indeed a treacherous ground in which it is difficult to take a step at all, given that it is not clear neither the content, nor the methodology nor the definition of this self-questioning discipline. This is the reason why I attempted to provide an informal list of traits that can be attribute to philosophy. While they are not exhaustive and probably will not be satisfactory to many, I hope that they will suffice to persuade the sceptic that at the very least, alphabetic literacy played a role shaping our cultural tradition and the way philosophy has come to be. In this last section, however, instead of avoiding controversy looking for an overlapping consensus on what philosophy might be, I will explore the relations between alphabetic literacy and my personal conception of philosophy, elaborated mainly from the later works of Wittgenstein and secondarily from remarks by Quine and Roy Harris.

The most relevant development in modern philosophy since the outbreak of transcendental idealism is without a doubt what has been called the linguistic turn. Both analytic and continental philosophers are highly conscious of the importance of language in philosophical enquiry and are aware that it is by no means an innocuous instrument to convey their thoughts. Rather, language is thought to have an intimate connection to the very nature of philosophical problems.

One of the best-known quotes about the nature of philosophy, commonly use to vindicate the historical dimension of the syllabus of Philosophy degrees, can be found in the second part, first chapter, of *Process and Reality*: “the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” (Whitehead 1929). Philosophy, as opposed to the sciences or arts, seems to know no progress at all. The same problems that were posted by Plato, concerning knowledge, the essence of reality or the characteristics human nature still prevail. This is the reason why ancient authors are studied not as historical anecdotes, but as a fundamental part of the programme, while in, say, a physics degree, the study of the history of the discipline is almost non-existent. This curious fact about philosophy bewilders Ludwig Wittgenstein, who thinks that there must be a reason behind it related to the very linguistic nature of philosophy. I believe it is worth quoting a full passage from his posthumous works:

> “We keep hearing the remark that philosophy really does not progress, that we are still occupied with the same philosophical problems as were the Greeks. Those who say this however don't understand why it is so. It is because our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions. As long as there is still a verb 'to be' that looks as though it functions in the same way as 'to eat' and 'to drink', as long as we still have the adjectives 'identical', 'true', 'false', 'possible', as long as we continue to talk of a river of time & an expanse of space, etc., etc., people will keep stumbling over the same cryptic difficulties & staring at something that no explanation seems capable of clearing up. And this satisfies besides a longing for the supernatural for in so far as people think they can see the "limit of human understanding", they believe of course that they can see beyond it. I read: "philosophers are no nearer to the meaning of 'Reality' than Plato got". What a singular situation!. How singular then that Plato has been able to get even as far as he did! Or that we could get no further afterwards! Was it because Plato was so clever?”
> (Wittgenstein 1998 p.22)

Wittgenstein argues that philosophical problems arise due to a misconception about the nature of language. We are misled by it, by the apparent general blueprint of how our language works. We are led astray by figures of speech that suggest that states of affairs are certain way and close any other possibility. The explanation of why Plato and contemporary philosophers are engage with the same problems is that they share this underlying conception of language, a defective and partial picture, that give way to the appearance of these problems. This picture of language has been received the name in the literature of the Augustinian conception of language, not because Wittgenstein thinks that St. Augustine was responsible of it, but rather because he chooses a lengthy quotation from the *Confessions* to open his *Philosophical Investigations* as an example of how a conspicuous thinker whose main issue is far from being the nature of language and is temporally remote nonetheless shares with us an underlying conception of how language works.

In brief, Agustine exposes how, as a child, he acquired linguistic proficiency. He talks about how his seniors uttered words and directed their attention and gestures to such or such object until the point where the infant Agustine could linked the word and the object and express his desires. The underlying assumption is that the mastery of language is based on the learning of object´s names, that is, nouns. It is thought that the task of language is the representation of reality, that is, to refer to the world.

The Augustinian picture of language, according to Wittgenstein, encompasses the dogmas that every individual word has a meaning and this meaning is mainly referential. That is to say, the meaning of a word is the entity (physical or mental) that it stands for. As for sentences, they are mere combinations of names and they obtain their meaning out of this combinatory of atomic

elements. I think a metaphor that Quine uses perfectly illustrates Wittgenstein´s idea: "Uncritical semantics is the myth of a museum in which the exhibits are meanings and the words are labels" (Quine 1969). We should not however consider this so called picture of language or uncritical semantics a closed theory. Wittgenstein "treated Augustine´s view not as a full-blown theory of language, but as a proto-theorical paradigm or ´picture` which deserves critical attention because it tacitly underlies sophisticated philosophical theories"(Glock 1996).

For instance, since we use the word ´being` in our daily language, it is assumed that it refers to something, in the same fashion as the term ´apple` is sometimes used to refer to a fruit. This lead to question: "what is the nature of being?". Since we can define quite easily and uncontroversially what an apple is, we expect to do the same I this case. We examine instances in which the word ´being` occurs and try to establish a generalization abstracted from the context in which these uses are meaningful. Questions like "What is time?", "What is truth?" produce in us something that can be defined as a mental cramp. We do not know our way out of them, no answer seems to be satisfactory enough. This is an indication that these questions are defective, they are the expression of a wrong picture of language. All the philosophical problems, according to Wittgenstein are actually pseudo-problems that cannot be solved, but only dissolved by means of showing how they are based on a wrong conception of language. Wittgenstein shows the myriad of actual uses of language, that are not reducible to representation, but rather we do many different things with language: give orders, giving measurements, speculating, reporting, telling jokes, cursing, praying…By enumerating the different ways language works, he aims to break the spell of our intelligence done by language. His way of doing philosophy is not substantive, but therapeutic, whose aim is to dissolve traditional problems.

Roy Harris (1981, 2002) expresses a similar view. He argues that within the Western tradition a common paradigm about language has been shared, what he call the language myth. He distinguishes two main dogmas of this myth, the telementional fallacy and the determinacy fallacy. The telementional fallacy is the belief that linguistic knowledge is essentially a matter of knowing which words stand for which ideas. The determinacy fallacy consists on the idea that a language community is a group of individuals that have come to use the same words to express the same ideas. This is in harmony with the Wittgensteinian characterization of Augustinian semantics as referring to mental and physical entities and the unambiguousness of the reference process. As Harris (2002). "My contention is that there is, and long has been, a language myth deeply entrenched in Western culture. The origins of this myth can be traced back over two millennia and more to the Classical period of ancient Greece".

Either we call it the Augustinian picture of the language myth, neither of the authors that denounce this pre-theoretical matrix have explained the reasons why it became prominent, although both point at the Greco-Roman antiquity as a time were it was already assumed. It is my opinion that a very compelling explanation of how the Augustinian picture became the mainstream background assumption is alphabetic literacy. If Wittgenstein is right, as I believe, in his characterization of what Western philosophy is, his account of the Augustinian picture can be use as further evidence for the claim that the alphabet is a necessary cause for philosophy. How could the alphabet have promoted the appearance of the Augustinian picture of language?

The changes created by literacy introduce a new paradigm, a background within which theoretical problems are posited. In Luria´s research, the illiterate subjects could not understand many of the question asked to them of a logical or abstract nature, they simply could not recognize them as problems. It is only through alphabetization that subjects start asking themselves philosophical questions, in the Wittgensteinian sense. The physical display and recognition of words allows for reflection upon language, that otherwise would not be noticed at all. Words are separated from the speech flux and are identified as the basic unit of meaning. This leads to the idea that language is mainly referential and representative; a correspondence between nouns and objects is established, helped by the abstraction from the context of use of this words. The dissociation of the actual use of words in daily life favours the idea that different instances of a word must have share a common ground, there must be something like the essence of a word, and, given that there is not more to language than reference, also the essence of the objects, that can be discovered by means of conceptual thinking.

Wittgenstein is more interested in his own philosophical problems than historical erudism and did not show any intention of researching how this picture of language was established in the western world. The alphabet seems to be one key element in this conception, but surely there are other elements that require a careful examination and constitute an interesting subject matter for future research.

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