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The Alphabetic Mind: A Gift of Greece to the Modern World

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Up until about 700 years before Christ the Greek peoples were non-literate. About that time they invented a writing system conveniently described as an “alphabet,” the Greek word for it. The use of this invention in the course of 300 to 400 years after 700 B.C. had a transformational effect upon the behavior of the Greek language, upon the kind of things that could be said in the language and the things that could be thought as it was used. The transformation, however, did not substitute one language for another. The Greek of the Hellenistic age is recognizably close kin to the Greek of Homer. Yet the degree of transformation can be conveniently measured by comparing Homer at the upper end of the time-span with the language of Aristotle at the lower end. The earlier form came into existence as an instrument for the preservation of oral speech through memorization. This memorized form was not the vernacular of casual conversation but an artificially managed language with special rules for memorization, one of which was rhythm. The later form, the Aristotelean one, existed and still exists as a literate instrument designed primarily for readers. It preserves its content not through memorization but by placing it in a visual artifact, the alphabet, where the content can survive as long as the artifact and its copies survive also. The transformational effect made itself felt slowly in the course of 350 years. It was a complex process. What precisely was its nature? Its complexity can be summed up variously as on the one hand, a shift from poetry to prose as the medium of preserved communication; or again as a shift in literary style from narrative towards exposition; or again as the creation of a new literate syntax of definition which could be superimposed upon the oral

syntax that described action. Or again we discern the invention of a conceptual language superimposed upon a non-conceptual; or alternatively a creation of the abstract to replace the concrete, the invention of an abstract version of what had previously been experienced sensually and directly as a series of events or actions.

If one uses such terms as “concept” or “abstraction” to indicate the end result of the transformation, one has to clear up some basic confusions in the use of these terms. Critics and commentators are fond of calling attention to the presence of what they call abstractions or abstract ideas in Homer. This at bottom is a mistake, the nature of which can be clarified by giving an example of what the abstractive process in language involves, as opposed to Homeric idiom.

The poet Homer begins his *Iliad* by addressing his Muse: “Sing I pray you the wrath of Achilles, the wrath that ravages, the wrath that placed on the Achaeans ten thousand afflictions.” Suppose we render these sentiments into prose and translate them into abstract terms; they would then run somewhat as follows: “My poem’s subject is the wrath of Achilles which had disruptive effects and these caused deep distress for the Achaeans.” A series of acts signalled in the original by appropriate transitive verbs and performed by agents on personal objects is replaced by abstractions connected to each other by verbs indicating fixed relationships between them. Instead of a “me” actually speaking to another person, i.e., the Muse, who in turn has to perform the act of singing aloud, we get “my *subject is* so and so;” an “is” statement with an abstract subject has replaced two persons connected by an action. Instead of the image of wrath acting like a ravaging army, we get the “effect” created by this instrument; instead of a bundle of woes being placed like a weight on human shoulders, we get a single impersonal abstraction— “deep distress” —connected to a previous abstraction— “disruptive effects”—by a causal relationship— “these caused.”

In a pre-alphabetic society like that of Homer, only the first of these two alternative modes of describing the same phenomenon was available. Why this was so I will explain later. A literate critic, that is a “literary” critic, analyzing the substance of the story will use terms of the second mode in order to understand the language of the first. Too often all he manages to do is to introduce misunderstanding. He undercuts the active, transitive, and dynamic syntax of the original which is typical of all speech in

societies of oral communication and particularly of preserved speech in such societies.

The second mode, which I will call the conceptual as well as the alphabetic, had to be invented, and it was the invention of literacy. Such a statement as “my subject is the wrath” would in orality represent something to be avoided. As a type it represents the kind of analytic discourse which does not meet the requirement of easy and continuous memorization.

I call your attention in particular to the formal announcement: “my subject is the wrath.” The clue to the creation of a conceptual discourse replacing the poetic one lies in the monosyllable “is.” Here is the copula as we call it, the commonest version now of the verb “to be” familiar in daily converse, let alone reflective speech, connecting two conceptual words, “subject” and “wrath.” “Wrath” is linked to “subject” as its equivalent, but also as an alternative definition of what this subject “is.” To give a simpler and even more commonplace example: when in modern speech A remarks to B “your house is beautiful,” the copula assigns a property to an object which is not abstract but which by the copula usage is attached to the “attribute” beauty (or in the new practice of analytic discourse it is “implicated”). In ancient Greek as it was spoken down to Plato’s day, the “is” would be omitted.

These illustrations bring out a fundamental fact about the language of the conceptual mind: clues to its nature are not to be found by isolating mere nouns as such and classifying them as abstract or concrete. It is the syntax in which they are embedded that betrays the difference. The word “wrath” could if you so choose be viewed as a kind of abstraction, a psychological one. But it is not a true abstraction because it is an agent which performs, in the course of three lines (only two of which I have quoted), no less than four perfectly concrete actions: it ravages; it picks up a burden and puts it on the shoulders of the Greeks; it catapults human lives into Hades; it converts men into things for animals to eat.

Complete “conceptuality” of discourse (if this be the appropriate word) depends not on single words treated as phenomena *per se*, but on their being placed in a given relationship to one another in statements which employ either a copula or an equivalent to connect them. The growth of abstractionism and conceptualism in the Greek tongue is not

discoverable by a mere resort to lexicons, indexes, and glossaries, common as this practice has become. Single words classifiable as abstract like “justice” or “strife” or “war” or “peace” can as easily be personified as not. What is in question is the ability of the human mind to create and manipulate theoretic statements as opposed to particular ones; to replace a performative syntax by a logical one.

Homeric and oral discourse often resorts to a personification of what the literate critic is tempted to call abstractions. But considered as abstractions they fail the syntactical test; they are always busy, performing or behaving. They are not allowed to be identified categorically as terms under which the action is arranged and classified. They are never defined or described analytically; they are innocent of any connection with the copula which can link them to a definition, give them an attribute, link them to a class or kind. They never appear in what I shall call the “is statement.”

Let us revert again to Homer’s preface to his *Iliad*. The story is ignited so to speak by a quarrel between Achilles and his commander-in-chief. The poet asks rhetorically “and pray then which one of the gods combined these two together in contentious strife to fight?” The Homeric name for this kind of strife is *eris*. Later in the narrative it acquires a capital letter (to use an anachronism). It becomes “personified,” as we say, as a kind of feminine principle, though again the term “principle” is wholly anachronistic. “Her” behavior is evoked in a rich variety of imagery: “she” can be discovered “raging ceaselessly, a little wave which then extends from earth to heaven, throwing contested feud into the throng, enlarging agony”; or again “painfully severe (a missile) discharged by Zeus, emplacing might and strength in the heart”; or again “bewept and bewailed”; or again “keeping company with battle noise and ravaging fate”; or again “arising in force, rousing peoples to rage, as the gods mingled in battle.” Nowhere is the term given either social or psychological definition: we are told what “she” does, we are never told what “it” is.

A modern poet or writer of fiction might choose imagery for his subject which allowed equal freedom. But behind his imagery in the language of his culture there lurks in parallel an alternative type of language which could be chosen to define or describe analytically what he is talking about. In oral cultures, for reasons to be explained later, no such language is available.

In dealing with the history of human civilizations, the terms “Western” and “European” are used loosely to draw a definition of culture based on geography. The counter-cultures are those of Arabia, India, China, or sometimes the “Near East” and the “Far East.” The geographic distinction is supported by drawing a parallel religious one, which refers to the differences between a Judaeo-Christian faith on the one hand and Islam or Buddhism or Confucianism on the other. These stereotypes are in common use. The classification I am proposing, one which has more operational meaning, is that between the alphabetic cultures and the non-alphabetic ones, with the qualification that in the present crisis of modernity, with technological man increasingly dominant over traditional man, the alphabetic culture shows increasing signs of invading the nonalphabetic ones and taking them over. That is to say, written communication world-wide, as it is used to preserve and re-use information, is tending increasingly to be alphabetized. This can be viewed as an effect of the superior military and industrial power wielded by the alphabetic cultures. But I would argue that this power itself, as it originally emerged very slowly in antiquity, and as it has gained rapid momentum since the end of the eighteenth century of our era, is itself an alphabetic phenomenon. Power has been derived from the mechanisms of written communication. Communication is not merely the instrument of thought; it also creates thought. Alphabetic communication, which meant literate communication, brought into existence the kind of thinking which remodels the dynamic flow of daily experience into “is statements,” of one sort or another. This permits a conceptual analysis of what happens in the environment and in ourselves and creates the power not merely to reason about what happens but to control it and to change what happens. This power is not available in oral cultures.

Those familiar with the history of the alphabet will be aware that by alphabetic cultures I mean those that use either the original Greek form, or its common Roman adaptation which I am using at the moment, or its Cyrillic version as used by the Russian state and some other peoples.

I throw out another suggestion, merely as an aside to my present argument, that one of the causes of the profound unease that exists between the Soviets and the “West,” to use the convenient term, is not merely the result of competing social systems. It has some seat in the unlucky accident that the

Russian Cyrillic script seems somehow alien to western habit; it constitutes an extra barrier to be surmounted on top of the formidable one created by language. The barrier is of this peculiar sort that a script is something you can *see*, an *object*, not simply a noise heard like language. Man even today does not live merely in a tower of linguistic Babel, he lives also in a Babel of competing scripts. This competition and collision is an unnoticed element in the evolution of modern societies. Here is a theme which I predict will have to be taken up one day by historians of culture.

Support for some rather sweeping affirmations as I have made them lies originally in the Greek story. It was in ancient Greece that it all started. The alphabetic mind is the Greek mind as it in time became, but not as it originally was. Greece created it, but Greece also preserved the oralist mind. The history of Greek culture is the history of the confrontation of these two minds, or more accurately their creative partnership as it developed over three and one-half centuries to the point of their amalgamation—something which has endured in the alphabetic cultures that inherited the Greek invention.

In the Greek case, the intrusion of conceptual language and thought into oral language and thought and the replacement of one by the other can most easily be measured as it occurs in the changing Greek descriptions of human behavior, particularly what we style “moral” behavior. Moral philosophy, as understood in the West and as usually taught in the classroom under the rubric of ethics, is a creation of alphabetic literacy which came into existence in the last half of the fifth and the first half of the fourth centuries B.C. in the city of Athens.

By the term “moral philosophy” I intend to indicate any system of discourse, and by extension of thought, in which the terms right and wrong or good and bad are assumed from a logical standpoint to be not only formally speaking antithetical but mutually exclusive of each other and from a referential standpoint to define all human behavior as divided exhaustively into two categories, right and good and wrong and bad. Thus positioned in human discourse the terms right and wrong, good and bad supply norms by which to classify what is done or thought as right or wrong, good or bad.

In popular speech these terms are frequently reinforced by substituting the words “moral” and “immoral.” It is assumed that these denote universals which can be used unambiguously to guide

choices we have to make as between the two types of action. They provide foundations for moral judgments which theoretically are final. Different linguistic formulas have been employed to designate the overall nature of the right or the good; one thinks of the moral imperative of Kant or the intuited indefinable goodness of G. E. Moore or a theory of justice as proposed by John Rawls. But always the existence of such a norm in the full formal sense of the term is assumed as fundamental to the human condition. What I am proposing here is that the mental process we identify as forming a moral judgment has not always been a necessary component of the human condition but had its a historical origin in late fifth-century Athens. Its effectiveness depended upon a prior ability of the human mind to conceptualize the rules of behavior as moral universals, an ability which emerged only as the oral culture of Greece yielded to an alphabetic one.

To test this assertion let us turn to the earliest extant discussion in Greek of the term “justice.” This occurs in a poem composed soon after Homer’s day but long before Plato, namely, the *Works and Days* attributed to Hesiod. The style of composition reveals the beginning of a transition from a poetry of listeners towards a poetry which might be read—but only the beginning. One of the component parts—the whole poem runs to over 800 lines—is a discourse of less than 100 lines, a poem within a poem, which possesses an identity of its own, addressing itself as it does with considerable concentration to the single Greek term *dikê* which we normally translate as “justice.” Let us observe the syntax in which this term of moral “reference,” as we normally think of it, is employed. My translation, which selects those statements where the syntax emerges, will hew as close as possible to the sense of the archaic original (*Works and Days*, 214 ff.):

O Perses, I pray you: hearken to (the voice of)
 justice nor magnify outrage . . . justice over
 outrage prevails having gotten through to the
 goal. Even a fool learns from experience; for
 look! Oath is running alongside crooked
 justices. Uproar of justice being dragged
 away where men take her— . . . she follows
 on weeping to city and dwelling places of
 people clothed in mist carrying evil to man-
 kind, such as drive her out and they have not
 meted her straight.

They who to stranger-guests and demos-dwellers
 give justices (that are) straight and do not
 step across out of justice at all—for them
 the city flourishes merry and the people in it
 blossom . . . nor ever among men of straight
 justice does famine keep company . . .
 O lords I pray you: Do you, even you, consider
 deeply this justice. Near at hand, among mankind
 being-present, the immortals consider all who with
 crooked justices inflict attrition on each other
 regarding not the awful word of gods. Present
 are thrice ten thousand upon the much-nourishing
 earth, immortal guards of Zeus, of mortal men,
 who keep guard over justices and ruthless works clothed
 in mist going to and fro all over the earth.
 Present is maiden justice, of Zeus the offspring
 born, both renowned and revered of the gods who
 tenant Olympus, and should one at any time disable
 her, crookedly castigating, straightway sitting
 beside father Zeus the Kronian she sings the
 non-just intention of men till it pay back . . .
 The eye of Zeus having seen all and noted all
 intently, even these (things) should he so wish
 he is looking at nor is (it) hidden from him
 what kind of justice indeed (is) this (that) a city
 confines “inside . . .
 O Perses I pray you: cast these up in your thoughts:
 hearken to (the voice of) justice and let violence
 be hidden from your sight. This usage for mankind
 the Kronian has severally ordained, for fish and
 beasts and winged fowl to eat each other since
 justice is not present among them, but to mankind
 he gave justice which most excellent by far comes-to-be.

Granted that these statements focus upon a term which in our alphabetic society has become central to moral philosophy, what do we learn from them about its nature? Surely the account of it is from a modern standpoint anomalous. What is one to make of a discussion which can make free, both with a “justice” in the singular, which we might try and squeeze into the guise of a “conception” of justice, and with “justices” in the plural, intermingling and interchanging them without apology, as though

the “concept” on the one hand, if we can call it that, and the specific applications of the concept on the other, if that is what they are, were indistinguishable? Worse still; what can we make of a term which at one time symbolizes what is straight and good and at another can symbolize what is crooked and obviously “wrong”?

The problem receives some illumination when we notice that whether in the singular or plural this word symbolizes something which is spoken aloud, pronounced, proclaimed, declared or else listened to, heard, and remembered. Personified it can scream or sing, and become the recipient of verbal abuse, and is disabled by oral testimony which is false. In this guise it becomes a procedure conducted in oral exchange. The constant imputation of crookedness probably refers to crookedness of speech (rather than unfair manipulation of boundary lines in property, as has been suggested).

In short this is that kind of justice practiced in an oral society not defined by written codes. But having got this far, any further attempt to define what justice really is fails us. “She” or “it” or “they” are Protean in the shapes they take and in the actions performed. “She” becomes a runner in a race and is then reintroduced as a girl dragged along in distress; and then becomes a girl now travelling to town in disguise before being thrown out. When transferred to Olympus, the scene reveals a personal justice complaining to Zeus that men are unjust, apparently to get him to intervene. “She” is then replaced by Zeus himself looking down on a justice confined inside a city until at last in the conclusion, “she” is given some universal color by being described as a gift assigned to mankind by Zeus.

Let us recall the Homeric behavior of that personification styled *eris*, the symbol of contentious strife behaving in a similar variety of configurations. Here is no “concept” or “principle” of justice, no analytic definition, no attempt to tell us what justice is. Such a statement is still beyond the poet’s capacity, even though his assemblage of instances and examples marks an attempt to mobilize the word as a topic, a chapter heading, a theme. In going this far, the poet is composing visually as a reader for readers. He is trying to break with the narrative context, the storytelling that oral composition has required, but which his written word does not require. But his break is only partial. His justice is still something that acts or behaves or becomes, not

something that “is.” The language of reflective philosophy, let alone moral philosophy, is not yet available.

It was becoming available perhaps two centuries later, and a little later still can be observed at work in the written word as it is composed by Plato. Here is a documented discourse which no longer needs to be phrased in specifics or in images. It can be, of course, if the composer so chooses, but it can tolerate in increasing quantity something that orally preserved speech cannot, namely, statements of “fact” or statements of “universals,” statements of “principles” rather than descriptions of “events.” That is, it can state that something always “is so and so” rather than that something “was done” or “occurred” or “was in place.” In Platonism these linguistic objectives have been achieved. They are woven into the syntax of argument, appearing there casually without exciting attention from a literate readership which is used to using them in its own discourse. Here, for example, is how the term “justice,” after being created as a topic by Hesiod, makes its first appearance in the Platonic text which deals with it demonstratively, namely, Plato’s *Republic* (I. 331 C):

Now take precisely this (thing) namely justice:
Are we to say that it is truthfulness absolutely
speaking and giving back anything one has taken
from somebody else or are these very (things) to
be done sometimes justly and at other times
unjustly?

This sentence, occurring near the beginning of the first book of the treatise, introduces the concept with which the remaining books are to deal. The syntax which identifies justice as truthfulness meets a complex requirement. First, the subject is non-personal. Second, it receives a predicate which is non-personal. Third, the linking verb becomes the copula “is.” In the alternative definition that is then posed, the same verb “to be” is used to connect a neuter pronoun with a predicate infinitive, an abstraction. These are characteristics of Plato’s argumentative text which we normally take for granted.

To cite another example, which is more professionally stated with profuse use of the neuter singular to express abstraction (*Euthyphro*, 5 C-D):

So now I implore tell me that which you
insisted just now you thoroughly knew:

What kind (of thing) do you say the pious is,
 and the impious, in the case of manslaughter
 and so on; surely the holy in all action is
 identical itself with itself; whereas the
 unholy is completely the opposite of the holy,
 something always resembling itself having one
 specific shape completely in accordance with
 unholiness, whatever the unholy *turns out to be*.

This passage makes plain the kind of syntax now available and necessary for didactic argument and the particular reliance of the Platonic method upon this syntax: the subjects have to be impersonals, the verbs must take copulative form, and the predicates have to be impersonals.

It is convenient to identify Plato as the discoverer of the necessity of this syntax in its completed form and therefore as the writer who completed the process of linguistic emancipation from the syntax of oral storage. For good measure it is possible to cite some less perfect examples from thinkers who preceded him, from both the pre-Socratic philosophers and the “sophists” as they are usually styled. The language of the fifth century as it was employed by intellectuals exhibits a gradual acceleration of the abstractive process.

It is equally to the point to notice that Plato’s relationship to orality is still intermediate. He can use language that hovers between oral and literate discourse, that is, between the syntax of narrative and the syntax of definition. Thus, as Plato approaches the task of defining justice in its political dimension, he indulges himself in a passage like the following (*Republic IV*. 432 B-D):

The time has come for us to behave like huntsmen
 encircling a thicket concentrating on preventing
 justice from slipping through and disappearing.
 Evidently it is present somewhere around here.
 So keep looking, be ready to catch sight of it,
 and if you happen to sight it before I do point
 it out to me—I wish I could, but you will make
 quite adequate use of me if, instead, you use me
 as a follower who can look at what is shown to
 him—Then follow and let us both pray for luck.
 I will; you just go ahead—Well here we are;
 this place by the look of it is hard to get

through; it is cut off from the light, it presents
 itself dark in fact and scarcely to be
 tracked through. However let's go in—yes
 let's go—whereupon I caught sight of some-
 thing and shouted: Glaucon, we probably are onto
 a track; I don't think (the object) will quite
 succeed in getting away—That's good news!

The quarry sought is justice, but this kind of dramatic interchange is going to lead up to a quite different type of discourse in which it will be proposed what justice really is, namely “doing one's own thing.” It will lead up to an argument which is analytic and conceptual. Yet one observes the continued effort to conciliate the reader who is still close to his oral inheritance. By letting the discourse relapse into a syntax which narrates the activities of living subjects and objects we are invited to join a hunt in a forest for a quarry. Will it slip through the thicket? No, the hunters have spotted it. This is “Homeric,” not philosophic, prose.

By way of contrast to this intermediate style of discourse occasionally adopted by Plato—intermediate between oralism and literacy, between the pre-conceptual and the conceptual—I quote a passage taken at random from the beginning of David Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature*:

I perceive therefore that though there is in general a great resemblance betwixt our *complex* impressions and ideas, yet the rule is not universally true, that they are exact copies of each other. We may next consider, how the case stands with our *simple* perceptions. After the most accurate examination of which I am capable, I venture to affirm, that the rule here holds without any exceptions, and that every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it, and every simple impression a correspondent idea.¹

The Platonic passage expresses awareness that the act of conceptualizing justice and defining it axiomatically in entirely abstract terms requires from his reader an extraordinary effort, a new order of thinking, an order of intellection. To reach to this order, the passage reverts to the simpler language of orality: hunters are closing in on their quarry hidden in a thicket, ready to catch sight of it and so forth. Hume's exposition prefers to present statements as the result of perception, consideration,

examination, affirmation. Over the 2,000 years since Plato wrote, these terms have become commonplaces of description of intellectual processes which are analytical, the purpose of which is to construct statements which are either analytic or synthetic.

The predicates in Plato's text do not describe fixed relationships between entities, but describe linkages which are achieved through action as it is performed: encircling, slipping through, "we have to get through," "we are cut off," "this is hard to be tracked," "it will get away." The corresponding linkages in Hume's text are conveyed in statements of being, that is, of relationships which are permanent, and therefore require the copula in order to be described. "There *is* in general; the rule *is* not universally true; they *are* exact; how the case *stands*; the rule here *holds*; every simple idea *has* a simple impression." These are expressed in the present tense—the timeless present and not the "historic" present—such "tenses" are not really tenses at all. They do not refer to a present moment of a narrated experience now recalled as distinct from other moments. The verb "is" shares with the verbs "hold" and "have" the predicative function of presenting a "state of the case" as determinate fact, not as a fleeting moment of action or response.

This is the language which Plato himself strives after through all his written works. It had to be fought for with all the strenuousness of the dialectic which he inherited from Socrates. The need he still feels to conciliate his oralist reader by reviving the epic oral syntax would not occur to Hume, still less to Kant or any modern moralist.

Hume's discourse is that of a professional philosopher and most of us are not philosophers. We normally avoid involving ourselves in discussion of such abstract problems. But we can drop casually into Hume's kind of language, in personal converse. Conspicuous and noticeable examples are furnished today in the vocabularies of the bureaucracies that manage our affairs for us; not least the military ones. Names of actions which are specific and concrete, and which would be described as such in oral language, are perversely translated into abstractions; to kill a group of villagers becomes a liquidation of opposition, to demand more tax money becomes "enhancement of revenue resources." There now exists a whole level of language which is basically theoretic, and it did not become possible until after language became alphabetical.

Side by side with it, in much of our daily life, we drop back into the concrete realistic dynamism of oral converse, as we prepare to eat breakfast or get the children off to school or mix a drink after a tiring day, and most of all when we make love or quarrel or fight. There is a basic honesty inherent in the oral medium—Homeric honesty that calls a spade a spade—which is transcended in the conceptual version and converted into a linguistic medium which often requires a degree of hypocrisy. It creates a distance between the oral language which simply registers and the language which categorizes it.

However, to point out certain disabilities which have arisen in the way we use speech, in the course of our conversion from orality to literacy, is one thing. To focus on these as though they were central to the discussion, in the manner of a George Orwell, is something else and quite misleading. We can allow for the greater directness of the oral medium, and its historical importance, and its continuing presence in our culture, whether in formal poetics or informal converse. But it is a mistake to romanticize it, as though Homer represented the language of a lost Eden; a mistake also to hail its apparent revival in the voices and images of the electronic media (as described by Marshall McLuhan) replacing what is described as linear communication.

The fact is that conceptual syntax (which means alphabetic syntax) supports the social structures which sustain Western civilization in its present form. Without it, the lifestyle of modernity could not exist; without it there would be no physical science, no industrial revolution, no scientific medicine replacing the superstitions of the past, and I will add no literature or law as we know them, read them, use them.

Quite apart from its specialized use in works of philosophy, of history, of science, this syntax has penetrated into the idiom of narrative fiction—precisely that idiom which had been Homer’s peculiar province, the province of all speech as it had been preserved orally within the pre-alphabetic cultures. Here is a quotation from the two opening paragraphs of a famous novel, Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell To Arms*:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the

channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year, and we saw troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.

The plain was rich with crops; there were many orchards of fruit trees and beyond the plain the mountains were brown and bare. There was fighting in the mountains and at night we could see the flashes from the artillery. In the dark it was like summer lightning, but the nights were cool and there was not the feeling of a storm coming?²

Ernest Hemingway would not be considered a conceptual writer. His proven power lies in the direct simplicity of his images, the narrative force of his descriptions, the dynamism of his style. His style would seem to be preeminently in this way an oral one, and the present example is no exception. The paratactic “and” recurs eighteen times in this short excerpt. Parataxis has been rightly noted as basic to the style of orally preserved composition, basic that is to its narrative genius, as required by mnemonic rules. The conjunction “and” is used to connect a series of visually sensitive images, themselves linked together by the resonance of echo: house-house, river-river; trees-trees-trees; leaves-leaves-leaves; dust-dust; marching-marching; plain-plain; mountains-mountains; night-night. The vocabulary, following oral rules, is economical and repetitive.

And yet, the original oral dynamism has been modified and muted. Language which might have described actions and events as such, as doings or happenings, has been translated into statements of “what is.” The syntax of the verb “to be” has become sovereign, joining together visions which for all their sharpness are etched in temporary immobility:

In the bed of the river *there were* pebbles and boulders . . . the water *was* clean and swiftly moving . . . the trunks of the trees *were* dusty . . . The plain

was rich in crops . . . there *were* many orchards . . . the mountains *were* brown . . .
There *was* fighting . . . it *was* like summer lightning.

Students of Greek (or Latin) drilled in prose composition (now a lost art) learn the habit of converting such expressions back into the dynamics of the ancient tongues, a dynamics orally inspired. Verbs of action or situation have to replace definitive descriptions, as in the following version:

Pebbles and boulders were lying scattered in the depth of the river . . . the water flowed rapid and sparkling and showed the depth below . . . the trees as to their trunks were covered by dust . . . the plain indeed flourished bountifully with rich crops and many orchards, but behind appeared mountains shadowy and barren . . . and there soldiers were fighting with thrown spears which flashed in the dark like the bolts of Zeus.

The Hemingway version favors a presentation of the scene as a series of “facts”; the Greek, as a series of episodes. Here is a confrontation between the genius of literate speech preserved visually in the alphabet, and oral speech preserved acoustically in the memory. Narrativization of experience was not an idiom or idiosyncrasy of ancient tongues (though it was often treated as such in the instruction I received sixty years ago). It is an essential ingredient of all speech preserved orally in all the tongues of the world.

The Greek alphabet came and took this over and remolded it to give us a new universe of language and of the mind; a universe of principles and relationships and laws and sciences, and values and ideas and ideals. These now ride on top of our immediate sensory apparatus and on top of the orality in which this apparatus finds readiest expression. A visual architecture of language has been superimposed upon restless acoustic flow of sound. This has been the fruit of the literate revolution in the West, whether for good or for ill.³

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Notes

¹David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. and introduction by D. G. C. Macnabb (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1962), p. 47.

²Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner, 1929 et seq.), p. 3.

³An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Third Axial Age Conference, held under international auspices, at Bad Homburg in West Germany between July 15 and 19, 1985.