Introducing 'Ill-literate Knowledge'

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'[…] the icy white of the lake encircling a tiny spot that was a man, the only human marker in all of nature, like the X of an illiterate's signature on a sheet of paper. There it was, if not the whole story, the whole picture.'

(Roth 2000: 361)

In June 2006 a workshop entitled 'Illiterate Knowledge' was held in Amman during the second World Congress for Middle East Studies. Its stated purpose was (quoting from the then advertised call for papers) 'to bring together scholars scrutinizing various aspects of illiteracy in today's and yesterday's Mediterranean and Middle Eastern worlds'. The present volume[*] is a follow-up to this first gathering[1].

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[*] Two more contributions have been submitted to the journal for publication in the present issue. For various reasons, though, their processing time has been extended. Taking advantage of the greater flexibility that the ' "post"-literate technologies' (Baumann 1986: 2) such as electronic publication afford, we hope to include them in the issue soon. One of these articles, by Jun Akiba, has formally been accepted for publication, which is why its title appears in the table of contents.

[1] A slightly more developed version of the initial call for papers has been published online for the preparation of the *EJTS* issue (see http://ejts.revues.org/553, here § 1). A quick comparison between this document and the present introduction will provide readers with insights into the line of argument along which contributors designed their papers in the first place, as well as into the shifting of this argument as these papers came to be finalized and compiled. I owe many thanks to Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye who, with unstinting alacrity, offered her comments and suggestions on the successive drafts of this introduction.

[2] — Hold on a minute: How come the title of this issue has become 'Ill-literate Knowledge'? What is this third 'l' poking round the hyphen? There must be a misspelling here!

[3] — No mistake about it: this distortion is precisely what the following issue is all about. As a matter of fact, a key development of the project has been to embark on a critical examination of the notion of 'illiteracy' itself. Which, to be sure, involves its (supposed) opposite, 'literacy'.

Layers of Literacy

[4] Let us then try sketching out an economical definition of the latter. One could arguably stress three distinct aspects: First, literacy is the ability to *use* letters, to establish links between verbal utterances and written signs. Second, the term also refers to a kind of training, whereby one has gained access to an elite of *literati*: what is at stake then is not only the use of written words, but also the mastery of their *production*. Thirdly and consequently, literacy is what grants access to (a selective) 'culture', which draws a dividing line between scholarly and lay knowledge, and in so doing brings about a differentiated distribution of *authority* and *legitimacy*. This may imply, as it was once suggested regarding 19th-century Egypt, that 'a transformation that occur[s] in the nature of writing correspond[s] to the transformation in the nature of political authority' (Mitchell 1988: 131).

[5] This three-pronged tentative definition points to a broader question, 'How does language relate to society and culture?', which is far from being unheard-of: even a shallow knowledge of what has come to be labeled, in some provinces of the humanities and social sciences, the 'linguistic turn', suffices to bear in mind that language not only expresses social and cultural experiences, but also constitutes them. In other words, while reflecting sociocultural distinctions, it also shapes and frames the standpoint of those who speak, hear, read or write[2].

[6] The focus on literacy creates a venue for addressing this long-lasting debate over the semiotics vs. semantics of experience. Many a study in 'literacy studies', old and new, aims to show that the warp of social order cannot be fully grasped until it has been enmeshed into a weft of differentiated linguistic abilities in flux. Yet there also is a specific twist to this approach: if literacy

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[2] On the 'linguistic turn', its spin-offs and fallout, one may (among others) quote Eley 1992 and 1996; Chartier 1998: 94, 102, 141; Iggers 2005: 118-133; Spiegel 2005; Guilhaumou 2006.

phenomena (be they 'events', 'practices', 'performances', you name it) are to be examined *to the letter*, it implies that 'language' cannot be stripped of its various inscriptions and guises – of a certain grammatology, some would say. Literacy issues thus point to a large array of linguistic *artifacts*, themselves embedded in notions of law and order, competence and authority, productivity and creativity. The very use of the term 'illiteracy' can be counted among these artifacts, since more often than not it derives from a value-laden contrivance aiming to stigmatize the outcasts of school curricula (Lahire 1999). As seen through the magnifying glass of several contributions herewith presented (Akiba, Bouquet, Georgelin, Oualdi), ways of learning – and their reshuffle through evolving school patterns – indeed appear to be part and parcel of the very definition of an 'illiterate' body.

[7] In short, and to borrow from Roger Chartier's 'abrupt proposition' concerning 'popular culture', literacy appears to be 'a category of the learned' (1995: 83). What has been called this name hence consists of multiple, intertwined layers of knowledge and power. Following on this tentative overview, two main edges of inquiry stick out for examining the relations between literacy and illiteracy as such.

Edge no. 1: Literacies Disseminated

[8] At first it is crucial to explore – as is often attempted nowadays through quantitative assessment, but not necessarily so – the whys and wherefores of one's reading and writing abilities. Such a perspective brings about a more 'flexible' conception of literacy, whereby the latter, rather than deriving from a 'dichotomous model or a "great divide" between the scholarly world of writing and the oral culture of those who could not read or write', is being located at 'the interchange between oral and written culture' (Hanna, 2007: 176, paraphrasing the title of Goody 1987). Questions regarding practices of orality, and their status in the polities and societies that are being studied, come up as a result. The contributions by Akiba, Aymes and Bouquet each, in their own way, investigate such issues, and unearth various loci within the late Ottoman administration where performances of writing and speaking intertwine, thus pointing to a continuum of textuality and orality.

[9] To some extent, such an approach is in line with the idea that 'a broad definition of literacy' ought to be adopted, so as to 'include listening to texts read out loud, or in this case reciting

texts, as one of the forms of literacy, albeit different from other forms' (Hanna, 2007: 181). In other words, one unique form of literacy (defined as the ability to read and to write) gives way to a wide range of literacies[3]. This pluralization helps remind us that, however focused the following case studies may be, they stand out on a background where several coexisting or competing orders of literacy have to be taken into account. Hence E. Eisenstein's insistence, as she set out to study 'the effects of printing on written records and on the views of already literate elites', that her main focus is 'not the spread of literacy but how printing altered *written communication within the Commonwealth of Learning*' (Eisenstein 1983: xii-xiii; emphasis is the author's). Oualdi's contribution below, while unfolding the criss-crossing training and recruitment patterns developed among the 19th-century Tunis palatial elites, points to a similar degree of overlap and infighting among differing literate orders. Notwithstanding the class-like social stratification that the literacy/illiteracy divide upholds or enacts, then, one has to stress that contrasting writing cultures could pit literate worlds one against the other as well[4].

[10] Speaking of norms of literacy, *primus inter pares* is an alphabet itself[5]. As analyzed by Caymaz and Szurek, the 'alphabetical reform' enforced in Turkey after 1928 testifies to the entanglement of literacy issues with the wider context of a top-down political project bent on triggering social and cultural landslides. Along with other contributions (Bouquet, Georgelin), such a case study reminds us of the need to acknowledge that a variety of lettering systems – some of them kept until today, others forgotten, struck through or replaced – have been imprinted on the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern worlds. Among them all, the Arabic script has been granted a

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[3] The whereabouts of such an argument are to be traced back in what has come to be termed the 'New Literacy Studies' during the past two decades or so. See Street 1984: 8 ('we would probably more appropriately refer to "literacies" than to any single "literacy".') and Collins, Blot 2003: 3-4 ('At issue will be a distinction between universalist or "autonomous" models of *literacy* – which conceive it as a uniform set of techniques and uses of language, with identifiable stages of development and clear, predictable consequences for culture and cognition – and relativist, sociocultural or situated models of *literacies* – which conceive literacies relationally, that is, as intrisically diverse, historically and culturally variable, practices with texts.' Emphasis in the original). Also see Baumann 1986: 16-20.

[4] E.g. see Métayer 2001.

[5] Which does not mean that Eric Havelock's analyses of 'the alphabetic mind' (1982) are to be endorsed outright. On the contrary, as emphasized by Anna Morpurgo Davies, the assumption that the alphabet ought to be 'given a special status which marks it off from all other forms of writing' calls for critical examination (1986: 54).

prominent standing, and the question of its vowelized enactment into verbal, non-written performances, is a compelling one: here the act of writing and reading appears to rest on competences that go beyond 'literacy' in the usual sense of the term – competences which develop in default of letters, in a literal no-letter's-land (see Aymes). Script and sound all at once, alphabets thus point to the versatile character of letters, and blur clear-cut borderlines between literacy and illiteracy.

Edge no. 2: From Semi- to Ill-literacy

[11] So far, yet, we have kept the word 'literacy' (and the shadow it casts, 'illiteracy') intact. With regard to the dissemination that affects the signification of this term, such a stance may appear confusing, and its motives unclear. If one is to argue that 'no dividing line can be drawn between the literate and illiterate, as though this antagonistic couple did not match up with any true opposition'[6], then why keep this artificial divide on active service in our own terminology? The result is that, while trying to characterize those who have some abilities in reading and writing, yet remain 'cut off from academic knowledge, *'ilm* ' (Hanna 2007: 182), one often ends up talking about 'semi-literacy' (*ibid.*), or, in other words, about 'the un- or only partly-initiated' (Fortna 2001: 34). Why not try overrunning these half-measures?

[12] This is where the hyphenated 'ill-literacy' comes into play: obeying the prod to move 'away from the social structure related to knowledge, which puts the learned on one side and the ignorant and illiterate on the other' (Hanna, 2007: 182), the shift from 'illiteracy' to 'ill-literacy' serves to acknowledge that these matters involve troublesome plays on words. 'Ill-literacy' means that literacy is not only challenged by those without the abilities and titles (the 'illiterate'), but also by perils from within; not only by non-written (oral and aural) performances, but also by differences *in* writing. It means that letters have to be taken up as a full-fledged force of *literality* (also involving some *literary* momentum), and not only as a reiteration of sociocultural habitus-paved hierarchies. It means, in a

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[6] Fraenkel 1993: 7-8 (my translation) ('Entre les lettrés et les illettrés, il n'existe pas de frontières assignables, comme si ce couple antagoniste ne recouvrait pas une véritable opposition. […] Nous devons accepter cette apparente contradiction : un illettré n'est pas l'opposé d'un lettré.')

nutshell, us taking into account bad manners inflicted on fine letters, a cacography not worth the paper it is written on[7].

[13] These writings that – as a result of painful infringements or of poetic license – depart from the normative legitimate literate culture, enable us to locate and unravel the grids of value judgments in which the notion of illiteracy would otherwise remain entangled. They cast doubt on the positivity – i.e., the posited non-fictitiousness (Klein 2007) – not only of the categories of 'literacy' and 'illiteracy' themselves, but also of their bipolar configuration. As such, these ill-literate writings point to the inextricable riddle that one faces when it comes to letters:

> [14] For, on the one hand, the Letter spells out the Law in the name of which any extravagance can be trimmed ("Won't you please remain faithful to the text's letter"), yet on the other, and for centuries, […] it has relentlessly released a profusion of symbols; […] on the one hand it means extreme censure (Letter, how many crimes committed in thy name!), on the other extreme delight (poetry and the unconscious are but a return to the letter)[8].

[15] To that extent, exploring ill-literate knowledge implies that we wobble literate certainties. Which, more broadly speaking, boils down to confronting 'culture' (as an authorized enactment) with the ever-brooding process of its own *counterfeit* [9].

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[7] Rather than about 'appropriation', which (as defined by Chartier 1995: 89-90) comes down to 'ways of making one's own that which is imposed', and thus implies a sense of the proper, this notion of ill-literacy is about *improvisation*, viewed as an intervention of difference. Inspiring here are de Certeau's approach to reading (1990: xlix; a passage which, interestingly enough, is also quoted by Chartier 1995: 91) and Becker's description of jam sessions (2000). See Aymes 2007.

[8] Barthes 1982: 95 (my translation): ('Car d'une part la Lettre édicte la Loi au nom de quoi peut être réduite toute extravagance ("Tenez-vous en, je vous prie, à la lettre du texte"), mais d'autre part, depuis des siècles, […] elle libère inlassablement une profusion de symboles ; […] elle signifie d'une part l'extrême censure (Lettre, que de crimes on commet en ton nom !), et d'autre part l'extrême jouissance (toute la poésie, tout l'inconscient sont retour à la lettre).')

[9] See Hanley 1989: 5-6, explaining that her study 'negates the dichotomy between structure and event and poses the historical process as a renewable dialogue or cultural conversation, wherein history is culturally ordered by existing concepts, or schemes of meaning, at play in given times and places; and culture is historically ordered when schemes of meaning are revalued and revised as persons act and reenact them over time. One might regard this process of reordering as one that "counterfeits culture"; that is, as a process that replicates a perceived original but at the same time (consciously or unconsciously) forges something quite new.'

[16] The title and drift of the present *EJTS* thematic issue have been conceived so as to leave room for such a trouble with the *authenticity* of letters. Be it through a study of oral archives, alphabets on the move, low-key self-narratives, gagged minorities or polyglot communities, the aim is to explore alternative forms of knowledge that eschew the established 'logic of writing' (Goody 1986) – and hence evince this disquieting irony that, both as a play on words and as a counterfeit, the very notion of 'ill-literacy' has been designed to stir up. Until it all dissolves into tears or laughter.

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