

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

Preface to Plato, by Eric A. Havelock. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963. Pp. xiv, 328. \$5.75.

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The frontiers of several fields of research meet in this rich and germinal study. Professor Havelock is concerned with Greek epic poetry and Plato's attack on it, with the whole of the Greek *paideia* as it existed before and after Plato, with the technological problems of communication, and, finally, with the emergence of Plato's doctrine of "forms," in its total cultural setting.

In brief, Havelock's point is that Plato's attack on poetry is integral to his philosophy as such if we see poetry as what it really was in his day. Plato's doctrine of forms emerges as a vindication of a new way of thinking, namely abstract philosophy, because Greek society was shifting in Plato's day from a stage of craft literacy, in which some persons knew how to write as others knew how to make vases or to make ships, to a stage of general literacy, in which the ability to write radically affected the storage of knowledge and thus altered man's entire view of his life-world.

Havelock reviews the evidence (pp. 49-52) showing that the Greek alphabet was introduced only around 720-700 B.C. and that thereafter (relatively) full literacy took over three centuries to achieve (pp. 294, etc.). Homeric epic belongs to the age when Greek culture was functionally oral, when knowledge was generally not stored in written records. The earlier Mycenaean script, if it survived at all on the margins of Homer's culture (as it probably did not), was of negligible currency and serviceability. Availing himself abundantly of the insights into epic composition and into the psychology of oral tradition made available by the Parry's and Lord's exhaustive studies of modern illiterate Yugoslavian epic singers and by the now many related studies, Havelock points out that, nevertheless, commitment to the spoken word was far more drastic in Homer's day than in modern Yugoslavia, which is at least governed by literates, as Homer's Greece was not. In Homer's society poetry functioned not simply as literature does now, but as a political and social necessity (p. 125), a practical aid serving the business of government itself (pp. 94, 134, 139).

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A society in which oral performance was the sole mechanism of recall naturally generated at many points typical elements picked up by epic technique—set themes and formulaic modes of expression adaptable to metric patterns. Epic poets were thus the greatest adepts at what was a widespread general skill: thematic and formulaic oral performance. The poet's basic social function was not simply to entertain or recall, but rather to repeat incessantly the accumulated wisdom of the culture, for without constant repetition, the wisdom would vanish. Under these conditions, the content of tradition becomes completely typical in order to implement memory. The genius of the epic poet lies not in "creativity" but rather in the extreme skill with which he plies a common craft. Traditionalism, not originality, makes him a center of cultural power. Homer's value as a poet coincided with his value as an oral encyclopedia, the great storer of knowledge performing at a time when knowledge could not be encoded in

any more abstract form because it remained unwritten.

In this setting, the hero is not merely a literary creation but a social and cultural necessity, since the tribal encyclopedia of an oral culture cannot handle abstractions but must deal with persons and events. "The psychology of oral memorisation and oral record required the content of what is memorised to be a set of doings. This in turn presupposes actors or agents. Again, since the content to be preserved must place great emphasis on public and private law, the agents must be conspicuous and political people. Hence they become heroes. All non-human phenomena must by metaphor be translated into sets of doings, and the commonest device for achieving this is to represent them as acts and decisions of especially conspicuous agents, namely gods" (P. 171). Thus oral culture positively favors polytheism. And it of course discourages formal philosophy, or renders it impossible. Havelock further notes (p. 188) that it also encourages visualization, for acts and their agents can be "pictured" as principles and categories cannot. As compared, however, with literate culture, which subjects the word itself to visual apprehension in space, oral culture minimizes the visual in verbalization proper and maximizes sound.

This is the world against which Plato set himself (with of course a comprehension less explicit than Havelock's today) in ousting the poets from his ideal state and in launching his campaign for thinking based on pure "forms" or "ideas." The poet had been a real *paideia* or encyclopedia for orally oriented Greeks — and Homer, even when used as the basic *paideia* of an increasingly literate culture was studied by being memorized, that is, was made to function as an oral encyclopedia still. Thought and society could rest on such bases no longer, so Plato felt.

Plato's permanent relevance to human thought and culture, his perennial appeal, appears in Havelock's perspectives as due in great part to the fact that he stood at the point in history when the function of poetry as tribal education was being transferred to prose. The mind itself was moving from a world of set themes, drastically economized formulaic expressions, rhythmic rocking, and paratactic organization to a prose state of causal connectedness. At another level or pitch, the state of relative innocence found in traditional oral culture (in which there were minimal body-spirit tensions and minimal personal guilt feelings, for too much reflection blocked the flow of verbalization in which memory had to reside) was being succeeded by a state of personal reflectivity, of increased drive toward the interior and exploitation of personal responsibility and guilt. Motivation was being interiorized. In the process, pleasure was more and more disqualified as a principle of cultural continuity. Previously learning had been achieved by listening to the poet sing. Learning henceforward was to involve more interiorized personal effort, that is, was to become more like "work." (In primitive cultures "work" is relatively unknown as a category of activity distinct from other types of activity.) Poetry henceforward was not to be so diffused through the entire social complex: it could be regarded as "different," nonconceptual, nonrational, nonreflective, ecstatic, and Plato did so regard it. As a controlling *paideia*, it belonged to an age when distinction between an individual thinker and an objective world was less operative.

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of "objects" apart from man and his *ethos*, to find the world which would lead eventually to that of science. The "ideas" represent the maximum distancing of objects from man. They appeal to the new need, induced by general literacy, which dispensed with the necessity for constant oral recitation — the need to establish relations in terms of causal connections rather than narrative vividness.

Professor Havelock is able to show how the work of Hesiod is in very precise ways intermediate between that of Homer and Plato. Descriptive cosmology (and geography) lies between the person-and-event world of oral epic on the one hand and true philosophizing on the other. Such cosmology and geography of course had initially to be in verse because Hesiod's society, post-Homeric but pre-Platonic, was a dominantly oral one still, and his work could be preserved only if it was cast in mnemonic verse form.

Havelock's thesis is a sweeping one and, on the whole, utterly convincing, tying in with the findings of an increasing number of recent psychological, historical, philosophical, and cultural studies. Literacy induces interiorization of the self, detribalization. In bringing out the self-discipline imposed by advance in civilization, the thesis of course parallels that of Freud in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* (*Unbehagen — Its Discomforts* would be a better translation), although it is infinitely better documented historically than Freud. Havelock says little or nothing about the shift in the ratio of the senses involved when the spoken word is transmuted to a spatial, alphabetic construct, and vision thereby heightened at the expense of hearing, nor does he advert to the limitations of the alphabet in processing sound, so patent to modern linguists. But his work is so seminal that he could not possibly touch on all the chains of thought it initiates. It was a good thing that Milton did not know all that Havelock and others working in allied fields know today, or he would never have written *Paradise Lost*. He would have understood how, for all its magnificent splendors, its relative failures were built in by the state of the media of communication and corresponding social and psychological structures endemic to the seventeenth-century and later sensibilities. Epic is most at home in an oral world.

The Hermes on the dust jacket of this book, incidentally, appears to be swinging not a cup and goblet, as a dust jacket identification states, but a cup and wine pitcher (*oinochoē*).

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The Letters of St. Jerome, translated by C. C. Mierow with introduction and notes by T. C. Lawler. Ancient Christian Writers, No. 33. Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1963. Pp. vi, 281. \$4.00.

St. Jerome, ascetic and exegete, is the first reliable historian of the ascetical movement in Rome. Finding the climate toward such a trend unfavorable, he, as it were, served his novitiate in the desert at Chalcis near Antioch, and later moved to and founded a monastery for men at Bethlehem. He was acquainted with some of the great men of his day, e.g., Sts. Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa. He was probably the first