Epilogue to Plato: The Bias of Literacy

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Eric A. Havelock and other scholars associated with media ecology have cited Plato's writings as evidence for dating the shift to literacy in ancient Greek culture. More recent research indicates there was no sudden change to literacy; oral traditional modes of communication persisted alongside and into written texts. In this study, comparative analysis of topics and ideas presented in two exemplary dialogues—Plato's *Sophist* and *Apology*—shows these works manifest formulaic patterns consistent with the oral modes of communication found in Homer and demonstrates the dialogues represent not a break with oral tradition, but its translation into written texts. This paper explores the implications of these findings for philosophy and for media ecology research today.

THE view that Plato marks the shift to literacy in ancient Greek culture is fundamental in a number of disciplines and serves as the paradigm for understanding all subsequent revolutions in communication technology. Media ecology research first touched on Plato's role in the change from primary orality to literacy with Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato*. Havelock (1963) compared the style of Homer, Plato, and Aristotle in light of the findings of Milman Parry (1928-1937/1971) and Albert Lord (1964) concerning formulaic methods for preserving and transmitting information in Greek oral culture. Stylistic differences, argued Havelock, were evidence that the move from oral memory to the phonetic alphabet was accompanied by profound changes in human mentality. With Plato, modes of thinking associated with the oral tradition gave way to the new vocabulary, syntax, and modes of cognition associated with abstract philosophical thought. He concluded that Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey* were the last representatives of purely oral composition, Aristotle's prose treatises were the exemplars of full literacy, and Plato's dialogues were the crucial transition point (Havelock, 1963, p. 46; 1966, pp. 44-67; 1986, p. 111).

Havelock's view of Plato's pivotal role in the modulation to literacy has been the subject of a remarkable level of consensus. To this day, scholars view Homer as oral tradition and Plato's dialogues as authored texts. Media ecologists, philosophers, classicists, and historians have all accepted Havelock's theory that with Plato, the balance of the tension between the oral and literate mindsets swung in favor of writing. Whereas the hypothesis that the technology of the phonetic alphabet was a determining, causal factor in Greek culture and human cognition has been extensively critiqued and challenged, the theory concerning Plato remains undisputed (Olson, 1994, pp. 1-45; Thomas, 1992). With few exceptions, researchers have not attempted to reconsider Plato's philosophical writings in light of more recent research concerning Homer, oral tradition, or communication and media studies. Whereas the understanding of oral tradition has revolutionized the study of Homer, scholars continue to interpret Plato by way of a literary paradigm and in light of contemporary notions of authorship and textual formation.

Havelock's arguments concerning Plato, in combination with the Parry-Lord research on Homer, provided the impetus for the work of other scholars associated with the foundations of media ecology and served as the ground upon which subsequent philosophical studies of Plato were constructed. Recognizing that for centuries before Parry, classical scholars had failed to discern the significance of Homeric formulas, Harold Innis (1951) cautioned that predominating technologies of communication produce a bias that makes it hard for users to tune into technologies that are different from their own (pp. 34-44). John Eisenberg (1992) developed a theory of *causal indeterminacy* to account for the profound transformation of "human consciousness, perceptions, relationships, society, even values" that followed in the wake of the adoption of the phonetic alphabet (p. 13). Marshall McLuhan (2003) argued that Plato "straddled the written and oral traditions" in Greek culture. With Plato, he asserted, the Greeks "flipped out of the old Homeric world of the bards" and into a new world characterized by philosophical rationality (p. 227). McLuhan used Plato's role in the *Literate Revolution* as a model for the *Gutenberg Revolution* and the *Electronic Revolution*. Walter J. Ong (1967/1981) took up Havelock's findings and argued that the "transformation of the word" moved in a chain of distinct phases from the poets, to the Sophists, to Plato, and then finally to Aristotle (p. 26). Ong (1982/1991) maintained that, "the relationship between Homeric Greece and philosophy after Plato was not continuous, but disruptive and antagonistic" (pp. 167-168).

It is now 40 years since Havelock and other early media ecologists first published the theory concerning the transition from orality to literacy and developed it into an approach for dealing with revolutionary shifts in communication technology. In the intervening decades, numerous studies have added to our knowledge of the complexity of oral traditional styles. Research that was not available to Havelock and other early pioneers in the field of media ecology has uncovered nuances in the organization of traditional works, which makes it possible to recognize more subtle patterns that may be traced to orality. It is now time to revisit the hypotheses concerning Plato's role in the transition to the phonetic alphabet. Is the argument concerning Plato correct as it stands—or does it require elaboration, refinement, or in some respects, revision?

I begin by looking at the theory concerning formulaic patterns in Homer's epic poetry through a history of contributions to this research made by Havelock and other founders of the field of media ecology. I then focus on the style of Plato's dialogues through a case study of two representative works, the *Sophist* and the *Apology*. More specifically, I examine the underlying shape of the discourse in the *Apology* by way of a comparison with the organization of the discourse in the *Sophist*. I then generalize evidence from these two case studies to Plato's dialogues as a whole. I look at Plato's medium and message in terms of the following questions: Are Plato's philosophical dialogues representatives of only literacy, or do they manifest stylistic forms similar to the oral traditional patterns of organization found in Homer's epic poetry? What are the implications of this compositional style for understanding the philosophy in Plato's dialogues and for our knowledge of subsequent revolutionary shifts in communication that were modeled on the Greek paradigm?

Evidence from the comparative analysis of these two exemplary dialogues will confirm the theory that Plato was a crucial fulcrum in the transition from oral to literate modes of communication in ancient Greek culture. To make this case, I show that there is

a basic inconsistency between the *theory* that Plato marked the transition between oral and written traditions and the *argument* that Plato was a representative of only literacy, with the dialogues dating an abrupt shift from modes of communication utilized by the Greek oral tradition to written works created by an individual author. If the theory that Plato marks the transition is correct, then we should anticipate finding a number of traditional features in Plato's philosophical prose. Moreover, if the theory concerning the bias produced by literacy is accurate, these oral traditional features will not be immediately transparent to literate readers and it will not be easy for alphabet users to tune in to the messages encoded in the traditional medium.

The argument is that Plato's dialogues are a hybrid medium, combining oral traditional modes of information storage and retrieval with a consummate literate prose writing style. I consider the significance of this hybrid form for interpreting the messages communicated by the traditional philosophical medium; its implications for contemporary studies of ancient, oral-derived literature; as well as its implications for the study of media more broadly construed.

Hypotheses Concerning Plato's Role in the Shift to Literacy

L ET us look at the hypotheses concerning Plato's role in the Literate Revolution in light of the main tenets of the theory concerning the transition from primary orality to literacy more generally. Havelock (1986) had argued that there was "a long period of resistance to the use of letters" following the invention of the phonetic alphabet, so that the transition from orality to literacy took centuries longer than previous scholars had supposed (pp. 29, 90). During this transitional period, oral habits of communication and instruction persisted alongside and in tension with the new modes of thought brought on by literacy (Havelock, 1963, pp. 45-46; 1982, pp. 9-10). When writing first appeared, the technology of the alphabet was used to capture and record information in the same form that it took when it was shaped for preservation orally (Havelock, 1963, pp. 136-37). Though the alphabet was destined to replace orality, "the first historic task assigned to it was to render an account of orality itself before it was replaced" (Havelock, 1986, p. 90). Havelock saw no evidence in Plato's philosophical prose of the formulaic style such as Parry found in Homeric poetry. He noted that Socrates led a sustained attack against the Homeric poets and the Sophists (those wandering teachers of rhetoric and prose oratory who emerged from the poetic tradition). He concluded that Plato was denouncing oral poetry as well as Sophistic oratory and rhetoric because they were representatives of the oral tradition. In contrast, Plato was advocating his own, literate philosophy. Thus, when the balance shifted in favor of literacy in the long transition to the use of letters, Plato was placed on the literate side of the fulcrum.

Innis (1951) contributed to the theory by noting that for centuries before Parry, classical scholars had failed to discern the communicative significance of Homeric formulas. He warned of a blindness to the bias or distorting power of the prevailing technology of communication. He cautioned that we must be continually alert to "the implications of this bias" and perhaps hope that consideration of the implications of other media to various civilizations may enable us to see more clearly the bias of our own" (pp. 34-44). Eisenberg (2006) pointed out that thought is so intimately associated with the conventions of a technology that it is hard for users to see that different media are

independent means for the expression of thought. The challenge is to break out of the confines imposed by immersion in the conventions of our own technologies to understand the thinking of cultures whose conventions for communicating are unfamiliar to us. McLuhan (2003) had suggested that Plato was a site of overlap between the two different systems and the "break boundary" between the oral and literate worlds (pp. 125, 227). However, when Ong (1982/1991) took up the findings of Havelock, Innis, and McLuhan, he argued that, "the relationship between Homeric Greece and philosophy after Plato was not continuous" (pp. 167-168). According to Ong (1967/1981), the "transformation of the word" moved in a sequence of distinct phases from the formulaic style of the poets, to the art of memory practiced by the Sophists, to Plato's dialogues, and then finally to Aristotle's descriptive prose treatises (p. 26).

Problems with the Hypotheses Concerning Plato

THERE are three main problems with these hypotheses concerning Plato's part in the Literate Revolution. First of all, the theory emphasizes the prolonged duration and gradual nature of the change of medium (Havelock, 1963, pp. 53, 294; 1986, p. 111). However, when the theory was applied to the Platonic texts and no evidence of formulaic patterns was uncovered, the relationship between the formulaic style and Greek philosophy was found to be "discontinuous" and Plato was seen as representing a sharp "disruption" in the tradition (Ong, 1982/1991, pp. 167-168). However, the hypothesis concerning a sudden discontinuity in the tradition is not consistent with the theory of a prolonged and gradual change. Further, recent research reinforces the evidence that the transition from primary orality to writing was more like the merging and interplay first postulated by the theory, not like a series of discrete and discontinuous stages that emerged when the theory was applied to Plato's dialogues.

Second, in theory, writing was at first used to record major works in the oral tradition and the organization of information in traditional patterns was preserved when information was initially documented. Yet when the theory was brought to bear on the actual Platonic texts, no evidence was found of a style that reflected the merging of oral and textual technologies, and no traditional patterns were discerned. In the early stages of media ecology research, orality and literacy tended to be identified with mutually exclusive techniques, representing two completely different language styles and forms of mentality. However, newer field research confirms the initial theory that for an extended period of time after the introduction of writing, oral traditional and alphabetic technologies co-existed alongside one another, and orally shaped information persisted even into written texts (Harris, 1989; Thomas, 1992).

The third problem concerns Plato's banishment of the poets and his critique of the Sophists. Havelock and Ong believed that Plato attacked poetry and the memory arts associated with Sophistic rhetoric because he was an advocate of the written word. They saw Plato's objections to Homer and the Sophists as representing a rejection of the entire oral tradition of Greek education. However, statements in the dialogues themselves contradict this argument. While poetry and rhetoric are attacked, it turns out that writing is also dismissed. In contrast, a form of speech and oral conversation called *dialectic* is praised, and Socrates emphasizes that the living word in service of philosophy is superior to poetry, the art of memory, rhetoric, *or* writing (*Phaedrus*, 275a-276 [Hamilton & Cairns, 1963]).

Havelock and other early media ecologists positioned Plato on the writing side of the shift in medium and construed the rejection of the poets and Sophists as an endorsement of the new mindset touched off by literacy. They saw Plato as marking "the end of the great transition from oral to literate habits of communication" (Havelock, 1963, p. 97), as an exponent of "the written tradition [that] brought the oral tradition to an end" (Innis, 1951, p. 50), as the break boundary between orality and literacy, and as "superseding the old oral-aural world" (Ong, 1967/1981, p. 35). However, Plato's writings openly question the educational value of written discourse and argue for the superiority of oral conversation. According to Havelock, Plato was denigrating poetry to make way for literacy. This hypothesis leads us to expect that Plato would have looked favorably on writing. Yet it turns out that Socrates invariably condemns writing and argues for the supremacy of the spoken word. Above all, the argument that Plato was on the literate side of the break with the oral tradition runs headlong into the greatest problem in Platonic interpretation, known, in the history of ideas, as the *riddle of the ancient academy*.

The Riddle of the Ancient Academy

STATEMENTS in Plato's *Phaedrus* (274b-278b), *Protagoras* (328e-329b [Hamilton & Cairns, 1963]), and *Letters* (*II* 312-314c; *VII* 341b-e, 344c [Hamilton & Cairns, 1963]), which express negative views on writing have been at the forefront of debate since early in the 19th century. These passages argue that the most profound philosophical truths—especially concerning "the nature of the first principle" (*Letter II*, 312d)—cannot be expressed via the written word. Moreover, Plato's writings never really provide an explicit explanation of the philosophic principles that serve as the foundation of his system. In fact, at crucial junctures in the arguments of a number of dialogues, there are warnings that certain information will not be revealed. In addition, in the *Metaphysics* (I. IV. 985b-VI. 988a [Hamilton & Cairns, 1963]), Aristotle testifies to Platonic theories that seem unlike anything in Plato's writings. In the *Physics* (209a30-210a [Hamilton & Cairns, 1963]), he notes a discrepancy between doctrines in Plato's *Timaeus* and in his "so-called unwritten teachings." Aristotle's account is supplemented by reports from other ancient commentators concerning the philosophic principles held by Plato. These are pieces of the puzzle that cannot be made to fit into our current paradigms for interpreting Plato's philosophy. Let us consider these issues in more detail.

Philosophers have always been puzzled over Plato's consistent expression of negative views on writing as a vehicle for pursuing philosophy. In the *Phaedrus* (274b-278b), Socrates states that it is impossible to pursue philosophy in writing. He says that only the *spoken word* is the *original,* whereas the *written word* is merely an *image*. Serious philosophy uses speech, he adds, whereas writing is legitimate only as a form of play and recreation. In a significant discussion of writing in the *Protagoras* (328e-329b), written texts are downgraded, so that we have, paradoxically, a written work that condemns written works. In *Letter VII,* Plato states that he did not put his thoughts on certain subjects into writing, insisting that, concerning many of his most important doctrines, "there is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be" (341b-e, 344c). This denial of the value of writing by one of its most able practitioners poses a conundrum that has been debated for over 200 years in philosophy (Hegel, 1840/1995, p. 11; Krämer, 1990, p. 29).

Scholars have been hard pressed to explain why a prolific writer like Plato would

state that he did not commit to writing anything concerning the ultimate principles of his philosophy (*Letter II*, 312d). However, even though over 40 dialogues have come down to us through history in Plato's name, there are few explicit explanations concerning the principles of the *Forms* that serve as the foundation of the Platonic system—in spite of the centrality of the Forms to Plato's philosophy. Instead, at key points in the arguments, the characters caution that this information has been "omitted," "passed over," or will not be discussed (*Republic*, 509c [Hamilton & Cairns, 1963]; *Timaeus*, 48c-e [Hamilton & Cairns, 1963]; *Meno*, 76e-77a [Hamilton & Cairns, 1963]; *Phaedrus*, 107b).

More perplexing still is the fact that in the *Metaphysics* (I. IV. 985b-VI. 988a), Aristotle testifies to Platonic theories that commentators have not been able to locate in Plato's dialogues (Brisson 1995, p. 124; Cherniss, 1945, p. 7; Sayre, 1983, pp. 11, 78). In the passage in the *Metaphysics* in which Aristotle mentions Plato's education and influences, he also reviews the history of philosophy up to his own time and comments on the contributions of his intellectual forebears. He goes on to attribute to Plato certain Pythagorean theories that many scholars have had difficulty finding in Plato's writings. In previous centuries, some commentators believed that while "reflections of the doctrines Aristotle described" could be seen in later dialogues such as the *Republic*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws*, "they could not be deduced from the dialogues alone" (Dillon, 1977, p. 3). Today, the majority view is that doctrines corresponding to Aristotle's description cannot be located in the Platonic texts. As Luc Brisson (1995) observes, "It is a fact that, on a number of topics, Aristotle attributes to Plato doctrines of which it is impossible to find any trace in the dialogues" (p. 124). At the very least, as Kenneth Sayre (1983) points out, "generations of careful scholars . . . have agreed that these doctrines cannot be found in the written dialogues" (pp. 11, 78).

Complicating matters further are the remarks made by Aristotle in *Physics* (209 a30, b14; 210a), in which he notes a discrepancy between doctrines in Plato's written dialogues and in his "unwritten teachings." This reference to an unwritten teaching has led scholars to conclude that Plato had an oral teaching that he shared with members of the Academy, but did not record in the dialogues. Or at the very least, that the philosophy he expounded orally in his lectures contained "something more" than the philosophy that he documented in his plays (Burnet, 1914/1920, pp. 178, 214; Findlay, 1974; Klein, 1977; Vlastos, 1963/1973, p. 397).

Oral Tradition and Media Ecology Research

One possibility seems to have been overlooked. Could there be a link between the transition in Greek culture from an oral to a written technology following the adoption of the phonetic alphabet and the fact that Plato's philosophy takes the form of oral conversations (rather than treatises setting out Plato's own philosophical views)? Could there also be a connection between Aristotle's comments concerning the difference between Plato's "written" and "unwritten" doctrines and the postulation by contemporary philosophers of an "oral" teaching that was more comprehensive than the philosophy expressed by the explicit statements offered by the characters in the dialogues?

Innis warned of a blindness and bias produced by the dominant medium of communication. Eisenberg pointed out that it is hard for those who use writing to step back from the thought patterns associated with literacy in order to understand the thinking of cultures whose technology for communicating is unfamiliar. We also know

that the works gathered into the Platonic collection have been dated to the time when Greek cultural knowledge was first set down in writing. Furthermore, we know that when the communication of a primary oral civilization is first translated into alphabetic notation, the previous technology is simply converted into the new format (Havelock, 1963, pp. 136-137). Finally, we know from the study of traditional referentiality in Homer that formulaic patterns in orally derived compositions convey meanings over and above the literate meanings conveyed by the words and phrases. So while Plato's dialogues have come down to us through history as written texts, there may be more going on in these works than meets the eyes of literate readers.

To investigate this possibility, let us retrace the steps in the development of the theory of oral traditions and in the application of the theory to the ancient Greek philosophical works.

In the late 1920s, Parry (1928-1937/1971) theorized that the formulaic patterns of organization in Homer's epics were too complicated to have been created by one person. The epics, he argued, must be derived from an oral tradition to which generations of poets contributed over centuries. Parry showed that Homeric verse was a total structure built up by weaving stock expressions (which he called "formulas"), into intricate patterns (p. 272).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the group of scholars who established the theoretical foundations for media ecology research—namely, Innis, Havelock, McLuhan, and Ong—described the introduction of the alphabet and the shift from oral to written media in ancient Greek civilization as a revolutionary threshold in human cognition and culture. These scholars tended to identify the formulaic style with a word for word reproduction of phrases in one or more passages of a work. However, Parry (1928-1937/1971) himself had later extended his definition of the formula to include larger word groupings, which he called "types." With types, repetitions have many of the same details and they follow a "typical" progression that proceeds from beginning to end, treating each stage in a nearly identical order (p. 357). Parry's definition was expanded still further by Lord (1964) to include the generic element he called the "theme," which he defined as "groups of *ideas* regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style" (p. 68). Lord recognized as formulaic instances in which there are one or more repetitions of a series of events, acts, or objects (every journey, for example, reiterates a consistent order in the sequence of topics [*tөpoi*, i.e., places]). While the wording may vary in different passages in a composition, Lord showed that types or themes involve the repetition of an identical *sequence of topics and ideas*.

Thus, Parry and Lord recognized early on that exact reiteration of words and phrases was not the only sign of the oral traditional style and that thematic sequences that repeat an identical order are major indicators of oral derivation.

By the late 1950s, researchers had begun to recognize the principles behind even more complex structural forms, whereby thematic patterns link together to form the level of the overarching story pattern or typology. Cedric M. Whitman (1958) described these patterns in Homer's *Illiad* and diagrammed them in his now famous chart (pp. 249-254). He demonstrated that the order of the themes follows a precise series (A-B-C) that is reiterated in the "responsion" (A'-B'-C' [here the inflection mark following the second B'-A' is to indicate that these elements reiterate the initial series]). Either the series is repeated in parallel order (A-B-C-A'-B'-C'), or the order is reversed, so that the

responsion starts with the final episode of the earlier series and returns to the beginning topic, forming a ring composition (A-B-C-B'-A'). A number of different thematic sequences are then linked together to form episodes that, in turn, combine to form the overall plot structure. Ong (1967/1981) pointed out that if a composition's plot is "built like a Chinese puzzle, boxes within boxes" of nested sequences, then we may be sure that the organization of information into these structural patterns are residues of oral modes of composition (p. 84).

In terms of form then, orally shaped structuring operates at three orders of magnitude: (a) words and phrases, (b) themes involving recurrent sequences, and (c) typologies that encompass chains of themes and entail a consistent series of episodes. If the discourse in a composition manifests these typical kinds of structures at any one of these three levels of organization, then scholars today pronounce a text *oral-derived* or *traditional*.

Ong contributed further to this research by bringing Whitman's findings together with Havelock's work and the Parry-Lord research. He then added to the mix of Francis Yates's studies concerning the memory arts practiced by the Greek Sophists and philosophers. Yates (1966) had demonstrated that by 500 BCE, the Greeks were using memory techniques that grew out of the formulaic system developed by the poets (p. 230). She identified two different branches of the memory tradition. One branch practiced "the art of memory," which was associated with the poet Simonides and refined by the Sophists. The "sophisticated" technique for remembering involved mentally picturing a spatial structure (such as a landscape) as the background "places" (*topoi*). Items to be remembered were converted into mental images or "icons" (*eikones*), and then set into the places in this imagined background. While speakers talked, they envisioned the background space in their mind's eye and, looking at each of the places in turn, recollected the images they had set in them. Since the images were placed in the background in a series, speakers were able to move in their imaginations either forward or backward from the place selected as a starting point.

Ong (1967/1981) hypothesized that the topic system was a device used to organize groups of epic formulas into episodes and thematic units. He developed Yates's research on the Greek memory arts, pointing out that, over time, the system was refined and elaborated. Similar ideas came to be stored in a "commonplace" (*topikos*), giving rise to classifications for storing related notions so that "causes," "effects," "contraries," "comparable things," and "related things" were envisioned as occupying similar regions. The residue of the topic system may be found in the way that the formal and ideational pattern of themes all conform to a nearly identical shape (pp. 80-83).

The second branch of the memory tradition Yates had identified practiced the "method of dialectic," which was attributed to Pythagoras and systematized by subsequent generations of philosophers. Philosophers rejected the use of a landscape or a building as a background and an image for an item to be remembered. Instead, they employed a geometric form (*eidos*, i.e., shape or figure—such as a square, circle, or triangle) as the background places, and the item to be remembered as an idea (*idea*, i.e., the look, class, kind, sort, or species of a thing). The philosopher's art concentrated on dividing, separating, and distinguishing the material to be remembered, and then ordering it into nested sequences beginning with the more general aspects of a subject, and then descending through a series of polar classifications to subdivisions containing more specialized aspects. According to one ancient report, the links in the "sequence" were so

well known to those who were "initiates" of the dialectical method that nothing could be inserted or omitted into the scheme without it being obvious to them (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* [*Training of an Orator*], Book XI. ii. 38 [trans. 1922]). Thus, in contrast to the Sophists who memorized by envisaging vivid "images" in a background, the thinkers who employed the method of dialectic tried to see by "distinguishing and composing" the material into the abstract geometric order of the "divisions."

McLuhan utilized the figure-ground relationship in describing how the medium of communication not only conveys a message, but *is* a message. More recently, John Miles Foley (1999) expanded this idea by demonstrating that traditional phrases and themes were ancient technologies of communication that bore meanings beyond their literal sense (p. 3). Formulaic structures functioned as a "code" that referred "institutionally toward a traditional network of associations" that people steeped in the culture were tuned into, but which were not recognized by listeners and readers unfamiliar with this background context (p. 31). Traditional patterns acted as markers to index meanings that signified much more than what appeared on the surface. Individual details in different compositions were "slotted" into different topics in a stable sequence that served as a familiar, identifiable context to audience members in the know. The content (figure) changed with each composition but the overall ideational form (ground) remained constant. In this style, the audience or reader had a role or responsibility for figuring out what the work meant. If listeners or readers did not "have the right background," then the communication was not received.

Innis's research on the bias produced by literacy and Foley's findings concerning traditional referentiality help explain why meanings that would have been understood by informed spectators more than 2500 years ago were overlooked by early media ecologists and philosophers who did not posses this cultural background. When we consider the initial vision of Havelock and others and compare this vision to the evidence from subsequent research, we find a tension and inconsistency between the *theory* of communication technology and its *application* to the works of Plato. Havelock's hypotheses that Plato's writings represent a new mental era made possible by the alphabet and the final eclipse of the old oral tradition are not consistent with other premises of the theory. If the theses concerning the late dating of the alphabet and the gradual transition to the use of writing are correct—if Plato was the mediator and break boundary between the oral and literate worlds and if the first task of orality was to document the oral tradition—then we should expect to find many expressive features of the oral traditional style in the writings of Plato.

Traditional Style in Plato: Case Studies from the *Sophist* and *Apology*

As it turns out, that is precisely what we find. Over the past 10 years, a number of studies in the philosophical literature have confirmed that the Platonic dialogues manifest the typology that classicists identify as the oral traditional story pattern (Brumbaugh, 1989, pp. 17-22; Notomi, 1999, pp. 39-42; Pritzl, 1999; Thesleff, 1999, p. 143). Research demonstrates that Plato's dialogues manifest traditional patterning at the level of typology. There is agreement among contemporary scholars of oral traditions that typical structures at any one of the three levels of organization are evidence of oral derivation; moreover, a number of commentators have acknowledged the presence in Plato of compositional sequences conforming to traditional ring composition. This

evidence indicates that the dialogues are orally derived compositions. To confirm this finding concerning the oral derivation of Plato, I will now show, by way of two case study examples, that the dialogues also make use of traditional themes. Whereas formulas are inextricably linked to the ancient Greek language due to the metrical considerations of rhythmic verse, themes are not. As Lord proved, the content of a theme can be expressed any number of ways, that is, by different words and phrases. This fact is consistent with the arguments in Plato's dialogues (*Letter VII*, 342b-c, 343a-b; *Cratylus*, 433d-438c [Hamilton & Cairns, 1963]), wherein words and phrases are arbitrary and changing conventions. According to Socrates, only the Forms remain constant. The demonstration of traditional patterning at two orders of magnitude will provide decisive indication that the dialogues are rooted in oral tradition.

If Plato's philosophical prose is of oral derivation, then we should expect the words and the details that make up the content to change from one composition to the next, while the overall sequence of ideas and topics—the form—remains stable. Furthermore, if each performance in the philosophical prose style is governed by the same language rules, then it should be possible to compare different passages dealing with the same themes to assess the constant and variable features in their structure.

In Plato's *Sophist*, the lead character, known as the "Stranger," takes the other literary characters through a number of sequences that make up the different branches of the definition of art or technique (*technē*, i.e., craft, skill, technique, profession). At the end of the dialogue, the Stranger presents the branch of the definition associated with imitation or representation (mimesis). He specifies with precision the placement of the lines that divide the topics into a series, allocates different ideas to different places, and then goes on to lay out the relation of the different branches of the definition. Moreover, he classifies the techniques of poets, orators, dramatic actors, other speech makers, and writers to this mimetic sequence (267a-b). At each stage, he marks off the divisions that separate different topics (266d), acknowledging along the way that they are using the "method of dialectic" to search for the "real cleavages among the Forms." He also establishes that thinking and discourse are among the most important "kinds of Forms" (254b-255e; 263d-e). We can take the next step to the expectation that—on one level at least—Plato's Forms are the principles governing the patterns of organization in the dialogues themselves. We may anticipate as well that the thematic structure of the dialogues is divided into a sequential pattern that conforms to the topics in the definitions.

In other words, I am suggesting that what are called "definitions" in Plato's philosophical discourses are analogous to themes in epic poetry. That is to say, I am positing that the Form of the definitions serves as the organizing framework for the sequence of topics in the discourse in philosophical works composed in an oral-derived, traditional style, and that the words and phrases in the narrative are slotted into this sequence. Further still, I argue that the shape of the traditional definitions—though "unwritten"—communicates meaning over and above the meanings conveyed by the words and phrases in these compositions. However, a demonstration of these meanings requires larger compass than this present work can accomplish. Still, for the sake of the argument in this paper, it will be sufficient to show that the same multipart, thematic sequence occurs in two works. Given that scholars have already identified formulaic typology in the *Sophist* and *Apology*, demonstrating traditional patterning at the thematic

level will provide additional evidence allowing us to confirm, based on two case study examples, that Plato's dialogues are rooted in oral tradition.

To demonstrate how the style works, I take as a model theme the definition of imitation (mimesis, that is, representation) within the overall series for art (*technē*) that is spelled out explicitly by the Stranger in the *Sophist*. The definition for imitation is selected because this notion served as the basis for Havelock's arguments concerning the shift from oral to written technologies in ancient Greek culture. In Figure 1 (next page), I have identified the outline of the main topics in the mimetic sequence by way of the Stephanus numbers for the passages and by excerpting key ideas classed under each topic. I have taken these statements from the most widely used Hamilton and Cairns (1963) translation of the collected dialogues. The representation in Figure 1 can be compared with the actual passages in the text in order to get a fuller sense of how the discourse moves from place to place as the discussion in the dialogue proceeds. It will be clear how the passages in the *Sophist* that explain the definition of mimesis are themselves structured into a thematic series that corresponds to the definition of mimesis and, further, that these passages manifest the ring pattern identified by Whitman. In Figure 2, I have set forth key ideas from passages from one other major dialogue—the *Apology*—that manifests the serial pattern for mimesis. In this instance, the sequence is organized in parallel order—the alternative construction to ring composition. The representation is set up so that the key idea from the definition presented in the *Sophist* is presented at the beginning of the line and a quotation taken from the *Apology* appears afterward. It will be clear from these two case study examples that the exact words that figure in the content vary in different compositions. However, in the background, the discourse moves through the same sequence of topics and ideas as the conversation unfolds. Again, this exercise demonstrates that the sequence of topics in the definition of mimesis in Plato's *Sophist* is organized into the pattern of the ring composition. It demonstrates as well that when the discourse in the *Apology* deals with notions having to do with imitation, the order of the topics discussed by the characters "conforms" to the thematic sequence for mimesis. Setting passages from these works "side by side" and lining up the topics makes it easier to see the theme and "variation."

Though it is not possible within the confines of this study to present a complete explanation of the meanings that inhere in the traditional formulas, diagramming the ring composition in the *Sophist* makes it easy to see that some of the places in the series are "passed over" or "omitted" when the Stranger reiterates the sequence in the response (these missing sections have been indicated by way of square brackets). Recall that the links in the sequence were so obvious to those initiates of dialectic that gaps in the structure were clearly evident to them. Thus, those who knew the system well enough could recognize the "unwritten links" in the chain. Initiates would have been able to "figure out" the missing information based on the parts of the structure that were mentioned explicitly, in tandem with a knowledge of the principles governing the traditional formulaic structure. In other words, the unwritten Platonic teaching had to be worked out by those who knew the places in the sequence well enough to identify the gaps in the framework. Since the audience was partly responsible for creating meaning, those "in the know" would then have been able to go on and use the rules of the traditional system itself to "fill in" the missing pieces, thereby completing the communication transaction.

Figure 1. The definition of imitation (mimesis) in Plato's *Sophist*.

A **art** (265a-b)
B   **acquisition** (angling, hunting, contention, merchant of learning, and other kinds, 265a)
C   **production** (power to bring into existence what did not exist before, 265b-e)
D   **divine** (gods, elements of nature, fire, water, living animals, plants, lifeless bodies, 265c)
E   **human** (things made out of nature by man are works of human art, 265b, e)
F   **original** (in building, produces an actual house, 266a)
G   **image** (266a, d)
H   **likeness** (eyes, dreams, 266b-d)
I   **semblance** (reflection, shadow, 266b-d)
J   **tools** (uses an instrument, in painting, produces a man made dream for waking eyes, 267a)
K   **mimicry** (producer takes his own person or voice as an instrument, 267a-b)
L   **knows** (knows the thing they are impersonating, acquainted with traits or voice, 267b)
M   **does not know** (no knowledge of virtue, only an opinion, conceit, 267c-e)
N   **simple** (sincere, imagines that what he believes is knowledge, 268a-c)
O   **ignorant** (insincere, deceives others, 268a-b)
P   **private** (short arguments, forces others to contradict themselves, 268b)
Q   **public** (long speeches to large assembly, 268b)
R   **statesman** (268b)
S   **demagogue** (a long-winded type, 268b)
T   **wise man** (the real, genuine, 268b)
U   **sophist** (268c)
U'   [sophist]
T'   [wise man]
S'   [demagogue]
R'   [statesman]
Q'   [public]
P'   [private] **the art of contradiction making**, (268c)
O'   **descended from an insincere kind of conceited** . . . (268c)
N'   [simple]
M'   [does not know]
L'   [knows]
K'   **mimicry** . . . (268c)
J'   [tools]
I'   **of the semblance-making breed, presents a shadow play of words** (268c-d)
H'   [likeness]
G'   **derived from image making, distinguished as a portion** (268d)
F'   [original]
E'   **but human** (268d)
D'   **not divine** (268c-d)
C'   **production** (268d)
B' [acquisition]
A' [art]

Figure 2. The definition of imitation (mimesis) in Plato's *Apology*.

A **art** . . . he really was a master of this **art** (20c)
B   **acquisition** (merchant of learning) . . . and **taught it at such a moderate fee** (20c)
C   **production** (brings into existence what did not exist) . . . to **invent it for ourselves** (20d)
D   **divine** (gods) . . . the **god at Delphi** . . . pointing to my **divine authority** (20d-e)
E   **human** . . . said that I was the wisest of **men** (21c)
F   **original** . . . but here is **a man who is wiser than I am** (21c)
G   **image** . . . I **formed the impression** (21c)
H   **likeness** (eyes) . . . **he appeared to be wise, in fact he was not** (21c)
I   **semblance** (reflection) . . . I **reflected** as I walked away (21d)
J   **tools** . . . I turned to the **poets**, **dramatic**, **lyric**, and all the rest . . . (22a-b)
K   **mimicry** . . . I should **expose myself as a comparative ignoramus** (22b)
L   **knows** . . . in the hope of incidentally enlarging my own **knowledge** (22b)
M   **does not know** . . . **without knowing** in the least what they mean (22c)
N   **simple** . . . **made them think that they had a perfect understanding** (22c)
O   **ignorant** . . . of subjects of which they were totally **ignorant** (22c)
P   **private** (short argument) . . . so I left that **line of inquiry** (22c)
Q   **public** . . . to the **politicians** (22c)
R   **statesman** . . . I made **myself spokesman for the oracle** (22e)
S   **demagogue** . . . which has resulted in **malicious suggestions** (23a)
T   **wise man** . . . **the wisest is** he who has realized, like **Socrates** (23b)
U   **sophist** . . . that in respect of wisdom **he is really worthless** (23b)
A' **art** . . . that is why **I still go about** (23b)
B'   **acquisition** (hunting) . . . **seeking and searching** (23b)
C'   **production** . . . I try to **help** . . . (23b)
D'   **divine** (gods) . . . the **cause of God** (23b)
E'   **human** . . . a number of young **men** (23c)
F'   **original** . . . have **attached themselves to me** (23c)
G'   **image** . . . These often **take me as their model** (23c)
H'   **likeness** . . . **and go on** (23c)
I'   **semblance** . . . **to question other persons** (23c)
J'   **tools** . . . they go on to find an unlimited **number** (23c)
K'   **mimicry** . . . of people who think (23c)
L'   **knows** . . . they **know** something . . . (23c)
M'   **does not know** . . . but really **know little or nothing** (23d)
N'   **simple** . . . **not knowing** what to say (23d)
O'   **ignorant** . . . they **do not want to admit their confusion** (23d)
P'   **private** (short argument) . . . they fall back on **stock charges** (23d)
Q'   **public** . . . against any philosopher, that he **teaches his pupils** (23d)
R'   **statesman** . . . about things in the **heavens** and below the earth (22e)
S'   **demagogue** . . . and **makes the weaker argument defeat the stronger** (23e)
T'   **wise man** . . . **convicts of pretending to knowledge** (23b)
U'   **sophist** . . . when they are entirely **ignorant** (23e)

Oral-Derived, Traditional Patterns of Organization in Plato

THE identification in these two exemplary Platonic texts of traditional patterns of communication that scholars have identified in Homer provides evidence that the philosophical prose style is of oral derivation. Plato's discourses are break boundaries, sites of overlap between two different communication technologies, the oral and the written. Thus, these dialogues are *both* oral-derived, traditional compositions *and* works of literate prose philosophy—precisely what we should expect to find when applying the theory to the Platonic writings.

Passages in the *Apology* manifest an overall form that corresponds point by point to the sequence of the definition of imitation in the *Sophist*. The presence of a recurring

theme that tallies in overall outline with the sequence of ideas in Plato's definition confirms that these works are different variations on the same traditional theme. These two prose discourses in the philosophical style rely on formulaic patterning at both the thematic and typological levels. These works of Plato are not strictly products of the technology of the alphabet—they are, at the same time, the outcome of an ancient technology that existed prior to and during the transition from memory to written record as the primary means for storing and retrieving communication in Greek culture.

How does the recognition of the traditional medium affect our interpretation of the messages taken from these texts? It becomes possible to clarify a number of outstanding issues of interpretation once we know Plato's "unwritten doctrines" as described in Aristotle's report refers to the meanings communicated by the oral-derived, traditional forms. It shows that we cannot fully understand the philosophy by considering only what is said in the content of the argument. We need to understand the form in which it is said. Only by understanding the form in conjunction with the content is it possible to get a sense of the range of meanings encapsulated in the traditional medium. Thus, *the medium is the message.* However, since Havelock's (1963) arguments in *Preface to Plato* have not been questioned, the research concerning the meanings that inform works in an oral-derived, traditional style have had no influence on the field of philosophy. An understanding of traditional patterns has not been integrated into our paradigms for interpreting the teachings in Plato.

Conclusion

THIS study proposes that Plato's writings are compositions in an oral, traditional style as much as they are works of philosophical literature. Setting different passages that discuss the same themes alongside one another shows that these discourses follow the same linear progression and are therefore of the same *type*. In the philosopher's system, words and names are conventions that change with different instances, whereas the Forms that give shape to the words remain constant. The poetic structure known in Homeric studies as the type or theme corresponds to the definition in the philosopher's system; and in both Homeric poetry and philosophical prose, the principal of sequential order governs the underlying morphology of the text. This observation forces us to revise existing paradigms concerning Plato that ground both media ecology research and philosophical interpretation. We must now adopt a view of ancient Greek philosophical prose literature as derived from oral tradition.

Does the theory concerning Plato's role in the transition from orality to literacy require revision? Having examined the thematic structure of key dialogues, we are now in a position to offer an answer to this question. The theory is correct as it stands. These compositions, which have been dated to the crucial time of transition from orality to literacy in ancient Greek culture, are products of the interplay and merging of oral and literate styles of communication. The hypotheses concerning Plato's literacy require revision. Plato banished the poets and attacked the Sophists because they were rivals (*Laws*, 817b). Plato was arguing for a competing branch of the oral tradition, one that preserved and transmitted information by the method of dialectic, rather than by imitative formulas or the art of memory. The *application* of the theory to the Platonic writings therefore needs amending, along with the implications that were drawn from the view of Plato as an advocate of writing.

Above all, the fact that Havelock and other early media ecologists did not discern the traditional forms in Plato is consistent with the theory of a profound cognitive bias produced by literacy. That scholars from a culture dominated by the technology of writing had difficulty tuning in to oral-derived communication techniques is exactly what the theory leads us to expect. Moreover, it suggests the thesis that literacy produced major cognitive changes is much more accurate than critics have allowed. That Havelock and others found no formulaic patterns in Greek philosophical works, even though they were looking for them, is itself a powerful demonstration that the theory concerning the cognitive bias produced by literacy—at least in the Western philosophical tradition—is essentially correct.

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