

THE PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH SOCIETY

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CONTRIBUTORS' BULLETIN

April, 1986

ORAL TRADITION AND THE PRINTED WORD

Dear Friends:



A few thousand years ago, the achievements of the human race were preserved by oral tradition alone. As there were no books to read, knowledge was perpetuated by story tellers, often referred to as "bards." There were two kinds of story tellers. One group was dedicated to the preservation of heroic deeds of ancient heroes and dealt mostly with wars, migrations, and the perpetuation of illustrious families. The other class dealt with theology, mythology, and moral integrity. The Druids of Britain and Gaul belong to this class and imparted to the young the knowledge essential to the maintenance of education.

In many parts of the world, the story teller survives to this time and is a highly respected member of non-literate tribal communities. In sober fact, the labors of antiquity and the accumulated wisdom of ages have survived only by oral tradition. American Indian tribes depended upon the elders who were no longer able to perform labors of valor, but were largely responsible for the survival of their brood families. These tribal sages were able to answer nearly any question that arose. They often dabbled in primitive magic, perpetuated the secrets of the healing arts, and led the young through their adolescent years preparing them for full tribal membership.

Most Asiatic peoples had their story tellers, and the art is being strongly revived in Japan, possibly because more sophisticated types of entertainment have become distasteful. There were always poets and mystic versifiers in the caravans that crossed the barren deserts between Mongolia and Europe. They were the entertainers and became quite expert in perpetuating the lore of ancient times with its superstition and well appreciated humor. Europe had its troubadours who entertained kings and noble ladies who could neither read nor write. In those days, literacy was a stigma and even notaries were looked down upon. Things went on like this until egotism and arrogance created biography and history. Rude pictures were painted on the walls of caves so that no one would ever forget the brave man who slew the bear or defied the mastodon. This procedure was not entirely satisfactory, however. The deed survived, but the doer was never identified.

There is no certainty as to who invented the art of writing. The Egyptians developed pictoglyphs, or hieroglyphic symbols to identify objects and actions. They gave these pictures names from their verbal dialects and, when they put a group of glyphs in a frame, the pictures became sounds, and when these were grouped together in a cartouche, the result was a name. The Chinese developed much the same idea with their pictoglyphs and they gradually built up a group of nearly ten thousand arbitrary shapes and this resulted in a written language. There was considerable originality and a few dedicated researchers have found ways to translate most of the ancient written languages.

The Egyptian scribes and the Chinese intelligentsia became very skillful with brush and black ink. It was assumed also that written language should be beautiful as well as informative. Many ancient peoples appreciated the word forms as works of art and bestowed great honors upon skillful scribes. It was only a matter of time when seal impressions intrigued progressive scholars. All types of information from lawsuits to prayers for the dead gained distinction for their appearances and rubrications.

The oldest moveable type we have found to date probably originated in Korea, but the assumption is tentative. In any event, the reproductions of texts helped the spread of literature and encouraged literacy. By the middle of the fifteenth century, printing as we know it now became possible. Several factors had to make special contributions to the production of the printed book. First, paper had to be invented. Papyrus was unsuitable, and parchment hopelessly expensive. Type had to be cut from metal or cast in clay, and ink was made from soot captured on the inside of a metal bell or bowl. Early printings were works of art, and it has been said that the earliest examples have never been excelled. With the printer came also the illustrator and expert bookbinders and gilders who served the cultivated tastes of kings, popes, and early businessmen.

It should be noted that once printing was invented, it spread to every part of the world. In the beginning when materials were scarce and labor tedious, only the noblest thoughts of humanity would be preserved on the printed page. The great historians of the past like Josephus and Seneca were treasured and a great library might contain a hundred volumes, chained to the wall and guarded by zealous librarians. Regretfully, we should note that a noble art has fallen into evil times. We no longer contemplate the early editions of Vergil or Homer, but have contributed generously to the creation and distribution of "penny dreadfuls" dedicated to trivia and with no legitimate claim for existence.

This does not mean that we can no longer create great books and highly priced editions sell readily, but are a joy mostly for the illustrations. We are indebted to the unknown man who wanted to be remembered for having slain the cave bear with a stone ax for the tedious details about inconsequential persons and their insignificant activities. Indeed, the ancient mountain has given

birth to the modern mouse. Not only is a large part of modern printing irrelevant, but much of it is untrue. The bards of old have been replaced by public relations experts who are far more verbal than the bards of old. It follows that those who enjoy reading should discipline their inclination and make sure, if possible, that they are not victims of propaganda and intentional dishonesty.

Modern fiction has little to recommend it and the present theater seldom compares favorably with the dramatic productions of Euripides and Sophocles. In old days, nearly every decent home had a library. The space, if it still exists, may have a shelf or two of popular paperbacks and a few comfortable chairs for dedicated T.V. addicts. It has been suggested by some casual observers that reading and writing will be extinct within a century. Everything will be televised or computerized, or available through electronic devices. Your schoolwork will be on a tape, the Sunday religious service will be radioed, and credit cards will be magnetized so that not even your signature will be necessary. When this happens, there will be so little demand for valuable books, that the small group that appreciates them can buy the best editions at reasonable prices and will no longer be forced to depend upon public entertainment for the cultivation of character or the pleasures of thoughtfulness.

Most sincerely yours,

Marilyn P. Hall

P.S.

In the last century, a new problem has arisen. In older times very few persons were inspired to become linguists. Scholars who traveled had Latin in common and communicated with each other in the hallowed atmosphere of the church or university. As the one world crisis developed, a universal language became necessary. To meet this emergency Volapuk was introduced. It was largely based upon English with a few common words from other tongues. This experiment languished until Esperanto was introduced, named for the nom de plume of its inventor. The vocabulary was a polyglot from several languages and it has survived to the present day and is becoming increasingly popular in Europe where language barriers are a nuisance. The need for a world language is obvious in education, commerce, and international policy.

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