

Writing/Literacy (2)

July 14th, 2010

Quiz #1

- ▶ 1. Which author from our reading views symbols, images, and notations “functionally” as part of understanding prehistory?
- ▶ 2. Which author(s) trace the alphabet to Ancient Greece? Based on this connection, name one or two claims they make about writing.
- ▶ 3. Besides Heilbroner, name an author or article that you think follows the model of determinism. Give reasons why.



Havelock and Goody/Watt

- ▶ The example of Ancient Greece; its language and culture are instructive within the history of the West.
- ▶ Distinction between non-literate and literate culture.
- ▶ Emphasis on writing systems as the example of cultural diffusion that brings with it organized society, democratization (determinism?)
- ▶ Issue of myth/poetry/epic as a vehicle for memory, “mores, manners, law, religion”



literate vs. non-literate culture

- ▶ Myth and ritual on the one side; society based in experience, transmission of a common cultural heritage...

- ▶ Society built around documented information:

The storage of accumulated information “covering our law and literature, our science and technology... [to] educate ourselves and from which we absorb our values and attitudes...” (Havelock)



Literate culture

- ▶ A technology for producing new forms of discourse, though long used for perpetuating what had first been composed orally (Havelock's paradox).



Example of Poetry

- ▶ Poetry, in this context, is used as a technology of preservation, is restricted to narrative syntax
- ▶ Though eventually, for Havelock, poetry comes to represent the “twin possibilities” of “preserved prose” (documentation), no longer telling a story, “now it can allow itself to express other types of discourse.”



Remembering McLuhan

- ▶ “The Gutenberg technique...extended from production to consumption. Planned production means that the total process must be worked out in exact stages, backwards, like a detective story. In the first great age of mass production of commodities and of literature as a commodity for the market, it became necessary to study consumer experience. In a word it became necessary to examine the *effect* of art and literature...”
- ▶ Like Havelock, two sides to this: homogenous segmentation, but also shift towards production/consumption paradigm.



“Violence”

“The teaching and practice of literacy has thus involved some considerable manipulation in the use of the senses, and has done some violence to the way in which we have been programmed during our evolution as a species.”



The re-experiencing of documents

- ▶ “Once... speech is placed in documented form, the pressure to memorize is relieved, though not at first abolished. The document can lie around available for re-reading and re-consultation...”
- ▶ Documents here have an almost therapeutic quality, while they also enable a certain kind of repetition.



Goody and Watt

- ▶ Alphabet: supreme example of cultural diffusion
- ▶ With this diffusion, myth is replaced with prose writing with a sense of “the common and all-encompassing truth”
- ▶ Non-literate society: based in face-to-face interaction and conditions that favor consistency.
- ▶ Literate society: other forms of dialogue with a complicated sense of culture.



Goody and Watt

- ▶ “The pastness of the past, then, depends upon a historical sensibility which can hardly begin to operate without permanent written records; and writing introduces similar changes in the transmission of other items of the cultural repertoire. But the extent of these changes varies with the nature and social distribution of the writing system; varies, that is, according to the system’s intrinsic efficacy... and according to the social constraints placed upon it...”



Wandering Encyclopedias?

- ▶ “From the standpoint of the individual intellectual, of the literate specialist, the vista of endless choices and discoveries offered by so extensive a past can be a source of great stimulation and interest; but when we consider the social effects of such an orientation, it becomes apparent that the situation fosters the alienation that has characterized so many writers and philosophers of the West since the last century.”

