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The heart of knowing

How is the mind to live its life, in the coming time? I shall begin this sequence of reflections with the parable which Plato put near the end of his dialogue, *Phaedrus*. Socrates tells how, once upon a time, the Egyptian god Theuth—the inventor of mathematics and geometry and astronomy, of games of skill and chance, and of the art of writing—brought all of his discoveries to the divine king Thamus. He explained the merits of each, saying of writing that "this knowledge, O king, will render the Egyptians wiser and better able to remember; for it represents the discovery of a medicine for memory and wisdom". But his master saw the matter otherwise, replying,

> O you most ingenious of the gods! It is one man's task to bring an art into being; but it falls to another to judge what harm or benefit that art is destined to bestow upon those who will make use of it. And now you, being their father, have out of fondness assigned to letters the opposite of their (true) power.
>
> For this art will bring forgetfulness to the souls of those who learn it, through failure to exercise the memory: trusting in writing, they will make use of various external signs, not of those forms which are within, in order to recollect. Indeed, it is not a medicine for memory, but a medicine for reminding which you have discovered.
>
> You provide your students not with truth, but with an appearance of wisdom. For, becoming acquainted with many things while lacking instruction, they will seem to know much, but will in most respects be ignorant and unpleasant to live with; for they will have become wise in their own eyes, rather than truly so.[1]

Socrates goes on to draw the moral that living discourse is the only effective medium of thought.

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Plato was a master of irony, and there are many ironies here. The fable which Socrates has related concerning the preciousness of oral tradition is, he claims, itself a tradition, a 'thing heard': but his companion Phaedrus easily discerns that Socrates has made it up then and there. The greatest irony, however, is in Plato's own relationship to the story: for he has of course written Socrates's denunciation of writing. In doing so, he has underlined a paradox fundamental to all his dialogues: while maintaining that the search for truth is to be pursued in conversation, Plato himself created works of written literature, in which the spontaneity of speech is counterfeited by the static arrangement of letters on a page.

How are we to understand this contradiction? I do not think it adequate to suppose that Plato was simply *unaware* of it;[2] or that, turning a blind eye to the benefits which he had himself derived from literacy, he aspired to turn the clock back on behalf of others.[3] In fact he was, as is well known, harshly critical of the poetic culture of preliterate Greece, and it has been persuasively argued that his own achievement reflects the impact of writing's cultural ascendancy: "Plato, living in the midst of this revolution, announced it and became its prophet".[4]

I suggest that it is not writing versus orality *per se* with which Plato is concerned in the fable of Theuth, but rather the difference between the two modes of apprehension which he calls 'memory' and 'reminding'—between the possession of knowledge within our own minds, and a dependence on external repositories of information. Literacy does not of course *necessitate* the latter condition; but it makes it possible, and in many ways encourages it. Plato, while not seriously calling for the abandonment of writing, wishes nevertheless to warn us of this risk which it entails.

And why should it be seen as a risk? What, in the end, distinguishes 'memory' from 'reminding'? Nothing at all, presumably, if we are simply thinking machines, storing and manipulating data. But of course we are more than this. We are living intelligences, transformed by every idea which we take into ourselves, and transforming those ideas in their turn. There is all the difference in the world between information which we can 'access', and that which has become a part of our own being: flavouring our speech, colouring our perceptions, lurking in our dreams. This is some of what A. K. Coomaraswamy had in mind when he stated that "from the Indian point of view a man can

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only be said to *know* what he knows *by heart*; what he must go to a book to be reminded of, he merely knows of."[5]

Let us look again at Thamus's concluding words: "You provide your students not with truth, but with an appearance of wisdom. For, becoming acquainted with many things while lacking instruction, they will seem to know much, but will in most respects be ignorant and unpleasant to live with; for they will have become wise in their own eyes, rather than truly so."

What divides wisdom from its empty semblance is the vital presence of the teacher: it is because they take knowledge in 'without instruction' that those who trust entirely to reading are essentially ignorant. Again, the emphasis is on a personal encounter with knowledge, and on the inner awakening which can result from this. As Plato says of the pursuit of philosophy in his *Seventh Letter*:

> It is necessary to study [good and evil] at the same time that one studies the false and the true in the whole of existence, taking all pains and spending a long time at it... When each of these things—names and statements, appearances and perceptions—was laboriously compared with the others, examined in friendly discussion, employing questions and answers without envy: then the intellect and mind of each, straining human capacity to the utmost possible, were filled with light.
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> No one seriously concerned with such matters would attempt to replace this process with a written account: such a text, falling into the hands of the uninitiated, would produce only 'envy and consternation'.[6]

The highest mode of learning is not the accumulation of facts, but the mind's training for enlightenment. And such enlightenment is, for Plato, the truest kind of memory: a recollection of what the soul knew before birth, and still preserves hidden within itself.[7]

We can compare all of this with an anecdote from China, a generation or two after Plato's time. The Taoist sage Chuang Tzu relates how a humble wheelwright told Duke Hwan, as the latter sat on a dais reading 'the words of the sages', that he was only busying himself with 'the dregs and sediments of those old men'.

> The duke said, "How should you, a wheelwright, have anything to say about the book which I am reading? If you can explain yourself, very well; if you cannot, you shall die!" The wheelwright said, "Your servant will look at the thing from the point of view of his own art. In making a wheel, if I proceed gently, that is pleasant enough, but the workmanship is not strong; if I proceed violently,

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> that is toilsome and the joinings do not fit. If the movements of my hand are neither (too) gentle nor (too) violent, the idea in my mind is realised. But I cannot tell (how to do this) by word of mouth; there is a knack to it. I cannot teach the knack to my son, nor can my son learn it from me. ... But these ancients, and what it was not possible for them to convey, are dead and gone: so then what you, my Ruler, are reading is but their dregs and sediments!"[8]

These words too are not without their irony, as we read them more than two millennia later! What can their relevance be to us? And has the passage which I have cited from Plato's *Seventh Letter* anything to say to our culture as a whole, or does it only describe the experience of philosophers and mystics?

We have seen both Plato and Chuang Tzu speak of a kind of knowledge which is an integral part of the knower. When such knowledge can be communicated at all, this communication is a mystery or miracle. It flames forth like a spark within the mind, transforming the awareness: and the awareness must already have been strenuously disciplined before the spark can be attained. Such epiphanies are milestones in the search for wisdom, for holiness, for beauty, for justice, and for any of the forms of truth.

But even if we do not feel ready to attempt the heights, we can recognise that *any* knowledge, if it is to change or ennoble us, if it is to help us toward the completion of our being, must be taken fully into ourselves. Plato, who saw writing as a system of external signs, as a *substitute* for inner knowledge, feared that it would prevent this intimate assimilation. The reader would absorb the words, but not the living teaching of which those words had been the vehicle: he would be left with nothing but 'dregs and sediments'.

Happily, the unfolding of literate civilisation has not realised all of Plato's fears. Experience has shown that we can in fact turn what we read into an essential component of ourselves. Indeed, writing makes possible a privacy and individuality of expression which invite the thoughtful reader to enter minds remote in time and space. A poet of the Middle Ages gives us a beautiful example of this, in a verse for a tombstone:

> Do you wish to know, traveller, whether
> poets live after death?
> Behold: what you read, I utter. Truly,
> your voice is my own.[9]

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But to say that what Plato feared has not come to pass is not to say that he had nothing to be afraid of. The alphabet, and the printing press which so radically amplified the alphabet's effect, have in the event not divided us from the ability to transform ourselves through learning. But does that mean that nothing can so divide us?

A computer can 'remember' incomparably more than can be stored in any human brain; given the right instructions, it can sift this ocean of data at dizzying speed, retrieving just those items which its operator requires. Now, moreover, any single machine can tap into a seemingly limitless network beyond itself, a labyrinth of interwoven conduits of information. The new technology can, far more than mere writing, accomplish everything of which Theuth boasted. But it also represents, far more than writing, the dangers of which Thamus warned.[10]

It is not my concern to find fault with such technical imperfections as may exist within this system, or with the trivial or destructive uses to which it can be put. This would be beside the point, and in any case a waste of ink or breath: the computer is here to stay, and its development represents a triumph of human inventiveness. It would be foolish not to recognise this achievement, and doubly foolish not to acknowledge the extraordinary power of the tool which has been placed in our hands.

But what if the tool begins to master the user? We can consider a commonplace example. Let us say that a scholar is studying the *Upanishads*, and wishes to compare all of the instances of a certain collocation of words. Unless he has memorised the material in its entirety—and for the purposes of our illustration we can discount this increasingly improbable scenario—even the simplest project of this kind would until recently have involved the reading (even if this were only skimming) of hundreds of pages of text. But now, if the *Upanishads* are on a disk and the scholar issues the correct command, his computer can find what he wants within seconds. He may not even need to have typed the material into it in the first place: a good enough scanner (and here too the technology is constantly improving) could do the lion's share of this work for him.

Hours or days or weeks of toil have been saved—so far as this goes, it is admirable, and opens up exhilarating vistas and opportunities. But perceive the cost. In carrying out his task, apart from striking some keys and then reading off the result, our scholar has

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entered into no direct contact with what he is studying: it remains *outside* him. We are on our way from a conception of knowledge as a part of the living fabric of culture, a means of enriching our individual and collective being, to the view that it is a vast inorganic Other which only a computer, or a network of computers, can contain. The scholar, in such a scheme of things, is no omniscient emperor of data: he is more like a worker in some enormous factory, tending a machine of which he is now merely an extension.[11]

Information technology has, I believe, brought us closer than we have ever come before to the state of ignorance and forgetfulness of which Thamus spoke: a world in which machines will do our knowing for us, and our own minds will be empty of whatever is not being projected there by an exterior stimulus.[12] It is not enough that pressing a button can bring everything back (even if that were true): what is not within us does not really belong to us. It is a kind of knowledge which cannot turn into wisdom.[13]

But it is not the computer, or any other modern contrivance, which is to blame in this: otherwise Plato could not have foreseen our danger two and a half thousand years ago. The responsibility lies with ourselves,[14] and with underlying attitudes whose seeds he could even then discern.

The computer was developed, in the first instance, to confront the challenge of *quantity*: a volume of information, originally (and still essentially) numerical, whose bulk could not be encompassed by merely human faculties. It is precisely this challenge which, millennia earlier, occasioned the invention of writing. Lewis Mumford makes this point in a discussion of the 'megamachines', vast orchestrations of specialised human labour, which accomplished the monumental feats of antiquity:

> The written word ... went along historically with the control of large numbers; and it is no accident that the earliest uses of writing were not to convey ideas, religious or otherwise, but to keep temple records of grain, cattle, pottery, fabricated goods, stored and disbursed. This happened early, for a pre-dynastic Narmer mace in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford records the taking of 120,000 prisoners, 400,000 oxen, and 1,422,000 goats. The arithmetical reckoning was an even greater feat than the capture.[15]

Even if it were possible, it would be absurd to commit information of this kind to memory. And as societies grow larger and more complex, there is more and more such information to be dealt with—

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external supplements to memory come into being to meet this need. With this I can see nothing wrong. The danger is in being overawed by bigness and speed, by the swelling mountains of data and the ever-more powerful technologies with which we seek to master them—in coming to believe that we grow in knowledge insofar as we become more able to encounter this flood of facts *on its own level*. In Simone Weil's words, "The spirit, overcome by the weight of quantity, has no longer any other criterion than efficiency".[16]

To the extent that we succumb to this seduction, our minds will become components of the 'megamachine' in its contemporary incarnation. It is intriguing to see Soren Kierkegaard, long before the computer age, recognising not only the soullessness of such knowledge but also (like Mumford and Plato) its foreshadowings in ancient Egypt:

> The law for the development of the self with respect to knowing, insofar as it is the case that the self becomes itself, is that the increase of knowledge corresponds to the increase of self-knowledge, that the more the self knows, the more it knows itself. If this does not happen, the more knowledge increases, the more it becomes a kind of inhuman knowledge, in the obtaining of which a person's self is squandered, much the way men were squandered on building pyramids.[17]

Such slavery, like all slavery, can end by persuading us that it is our true nature. We can forget that knowledge is ever more than a quantifiable commodity, external to ourselves; and if we acquiesce to such estrangement, our relationship with what we know will degenerate into one of sterile exploitation. Some of the intellectual consequences of so acquiescing are suggested in two further passages: one from a lecture delivered by Friedrich Schiller in 1789, the other from a piece written two centuries later by Wendell Berry.

Schiller is contrasting the academic hireling, whom he calls the 'bread-scholar' (*brotgelehrte*), with the 'philosophic mind':

> The former, whose diligence has as its one and only goal fulfilling the conditions which will qualify him for his job, and enable him to enjoy its privileges ... will when he embarks on his academic training have no higher concern than that of scrupulously separating those subjects which he names 'bread-studies' from those which satisfy the spirit as spirit only. All the time which he devoted to the latter has been, he believes, stolen from his future profession: and for this theft he will never forgive himself. ... He does not seek a reward in the treasures of his mind—he expects it from the

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> recognition of others, from prestigious posts, from affluence. If these things elude him, who is more unfortunate than the bread-scholar? In vain has he lived, remained wakeful, toiled. He has sought for truth in vain, if truth cannot be transformed for him into gold, the praise of newspapers, the favour of princes. ...
>
> How different is the approach of the philosophic mind! All his strivings are devoted to the completion of his knowledge. His noble impatience cannot rest until all of his ideas have arranged themselves in a harmonious whole—until he stands in the midst of his art, of his discipline, and from there surveys its expanse with a contented gaze.[18]

Berry refers to these two types as the 'professional' and the 'amateur', remembering in the case of the latter word its original meaning 'lover':[19]

> Professional standards, the standards of ambition and selfishness, are always sliding downward toward expense, ostentation, and mediocrity. They tend always to narrow the ground of judgment. But amateur standards, the standards of love, are always striving upward toward the humble and the best. They enlarge the ground of judgment. The context of love is the world.[20]

How is the mind to live its life, in the coming time?

Answers can be sought, and much achieved, in writing, in lecturing, in attempts to reform educational systems. But the final answer must lie, as it has always done, in each of us individually. We must each learn to recognise a distinction between two kinds of knowledge: one pertaining to the outer world, and the incalculable multiplicity of its disparate phenomena; the other forming a part of an internal journey, and participating in the wholeness of our being. The essential difference, as Blake never tired of saying, is not in what is known but in how it is known. If we do at last come to the place of illumination, we will not need to write down what we find there: as Plato knew, "there is no risk that anyone would forget that, if once he should clasp it with his soul; for it abides in the shortest [formulations] of all".[21]

The key to such knowing—whose other name is wisdom—is the love of what one seeks to know: the philosophic love of the amateur. As an image for such intellectual love, we can meditate on one of the turning-points of the Christian revelation: the miracle of Pentecost. From throughout the world, the speakers of innumerable languages have gathered together in the city. But it is those to whom the Spirit has come like fire who can speak to the multitudes in a single voice.[22]

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Notes and References

1. *Phaedrus*, 274e-275b; my translation.
2. Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963), 56 n. 16, describes Plato's position here as 'not only conservative but illogical'; for Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982), 80-1, 'Plato of course was not at all fully aware of the unconscious forces at work in his psyche to produce this reaction, or overreaction, of the literate person to lingering, retardant orality'. The fable's 'inconsistency' is more appreciatively considered in Jacques Derrida's essay 'Plato's pharmacy', in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, 1981), 61-171: an ingeniously nuanced treatment, whose premises however differ fundamentally from those of the present discussion.
3. E. G. Turner, cited in Havelock, loc. cit., speaks of Plato as fighting 'a rearguard action' in this passage.
4. Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, i. This seminal book presents a valuable analysis of many aspects of the question being considered here. Much of Havelock's argument is summarised on page 189: 'It may indeed be suggested that it was increasing alphabetisation which opened the way to experiments in abstraction. Once rid of the need to preserve experience vividly, the composer was freer to reorganise it reflectively'.
5. A.K. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy* (London, 1949), 32.
6. *Seventh Letter*, 344b-c; my translation.
7. See the illuminating discussion by A. K. Coomaraswamy, 'Recollection, Indian and Platonic', in *Coomaraswamy*, ed. Roger Lipsey, 3 vols (Princeton, 1977), ii.49-65.
8. Chuang Tzu, XIII.10, in *The Texts of Taoism*, trans. James Legge, 2 vols (Oxford, 1891; repr. New York, 1962), i.343-4.
9. My translation; the original reads '*Viuere post mortem uates uis nosse uiator?/ Quod legis ecce loquor, uox tua nempe mea est*'. I have mislaid (forgotten!) the source of this verse.
10. This analogy with Plato's observations (or rather this extension of them) has been noted among others by Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London, 1993), 18-19.
11. In itself, the quest for truth in matters of minute detail is an essential service to humanity: what I find disquieting in the mechanistic research considered here is not its *humbleness* but its *alienation*. Compare Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London, 1963), 139: 'As collective thought cannot exist as thought, it passes into things (signs, machines ...). Hence the paradox: it is the thing which thinks and the man who is reduced to the status of a thing.'
12. Cf. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 210: 'We are (in ways both fortunate and unfortunate) destined to become surrounded by, used to, dependent on, clever machines which *separate* us from the old simpler furniture of the world and even from the activity of our own minds. ... What is, and not implausibly, envisaged here is an apocalyptic change in human consciousness, involving vast social changes and the disappearance of old local ideas of individuals and virtues. A loss of sovereignty.' She adds (and the same point should be stressed regarding the present essay) that this forecast is not a prophecy, but rather an extrapolation from current trends: 'We cannot see the future, but must fear it intelligently' (211).
13. This point must be insisted on, despite the intoxicating possibilities made available by the new technology (most notably the Internet). That enhanced access to knowledge does not *as such* lead to self-transformation is perhaps most evident,

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ironically enough, in the words of the enthusiasts who believe that they have found a 'spiritual', 'transcendent' plane of being in 'cyberspace'. Illustrations of the impoverishment of these conceptions may be found in the seventh chapter of Margaret Wertheim's book *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* (London, 1999): an account rendered all the more damning by the author's evenhanded approach to her material.

14. This is already implicit in Plato's contrast between 'memory' and 'reminding', both mental processes. Derrida comments that 'the boundary (between inside and outside, living and nonliving) separates not only speech from writing but also memory as an unveiling (re-)producing a presence from re-memoration as the mere repetition of a monument; truth as distinct from its sign, being as distinct from types' (*Dissemination*, 108-9).
15. Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (New York, 1966), 192; Narmer was an Egyptian king who flourished *c.* 2900 BC. More recent findings, corroborating the evidence known to Mumford, are cited by J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 86. Mumford characterises the 'megamachine' itself as 'an invisible structure composed of living, but rigid, human parts, each assigned to his special office, role, and task, to make possible the immense work-output and grand designs of this great collective organization' (189).
16. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 140. Compare page 84: 'A number which increases thinks that it is getting near to infinity. It is receding from it.'
17. S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton, 1981), 31.
18. From 'Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?', in *Schillers Werke*, ed. Gerhard Stenzel, 2 vols (Salzburg, n.d.), ii.684-6; my translation.
19. Schiller too, in speaking of the 'philosophic' mind, uses a word which originally designated the *love* of wisdom.
20. Wendell Berry, *What Are People For*? (San Francisco, 1990), 90. Compare Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 56-7: 'The mind is not forced to believe in the existence of anything. ... That is why the only organ of contact with existence is acceptance, love. That is why beauty and reality are identical. That is why joy and the sense of reality are identical.'
21. *Seventh Letter*, 344e; my translation.
22. Acts of the Apostles 2:1-11. Writing in the ninth century, Anastasius the Librarian said of the scholar Eriugena that the Holy Spirit had made him 'both burning and eloquent ... for love was his school-mistress' (cited in my article 'Symbol and mystery in Irish religious thought', *Temenos* 13 (1992) 101-11: 105).

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