

Nietzsche and Ancient Greek, Oral Culture: A glimpse of his philosophy through the anachronistic lens of some 20th Century classicists

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“That everyone can learn to read will ruin in the long run not only writing but thinking too.”

- Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, On Reading and Writing

In 1869, Friedrich Nietzsche was not a philosopher in any professional capacity. He was an exceptionally talented young philologist at the University of Basel in Switzerland² who had not yet ruined his promising career identifying himself with Richard Wagner and publishing *The Birth of Tragedy*.³ In May of 1869, he had only just met Richard Wagner and Wagner’s wife, Cosmina.⁴ In those years, Nietzsche’s career revolved around his reading knowledge of numerous, ancient languages which included several Indo-European ones (Latin, Ancient Greek, and Sanskrit) as well as Hebrew.⁵ He concerned himself professionally with the ancients; cultivating a refined understanding of the common characteristics of Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Western Civilization, including its sentiments, thought, and arts. In sum, for years of his life, Philology was his *métier* and he was, by most accounts, exceptionally good at it.

It should come as no surprise that the Nietzsche of that time concerned himself with a common 19th Century preoccupation: questions regarding the real or historical Homer.⁶ Was Homer an actual, living person or a composite? Said another way, how were the poems composed and by whom were they composed?

The questions were substantially resolved well over a half a century later, after Nietzsche’s death. They were answered in the 1930s when an American academic named Millman Parry began to observe the process of oral, epic singers in Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia.⁷ After his untimely death in a car crash, Parry’s student and colleague Albert B. Lord

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² Jensen, Anthony K., and Helmut Heit, *Nietzsche as a Scholar of Antiquity*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. p. 129.

³ Prideaux, Sue. *I am Dynamite! A Life of Nietzsche*. Tim Duggan Books, 2018.

⁴ *Ibid.* at pp. 40-87.

⁵ *Ibid.* at p. 25.

⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Homer and Classical Philology*. Translated by J.M. Kennedy. Gold Edition, 2002.

⁷ Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales*. Third Edition. Edited by David F. Elmer. Harvard University Press 2019. pp. xi-xxxii.



continued Parry's work and recorded the findings in a book, published in 1960, called *The Singer of Tales*.⁸

Lord and Parry recognized that oral, epic poetry was conducted pursuant to a formula and involved a significant amount of improvisation. Yet, the improvisation was greatly constrained by the exigencies of adhering to that formula. The formula served a mnemonic purpose and allowed poets to remember long, detailed poems in a performative setting.

"Hence," explained Lord "the question, 'when would such and such an oral poem be performed?' has no meaning; the question should be "when *was* the oral poem performed? An oral poem is not composed *for* but *in* performance."⁹

Much of what permits the poet to compose so quickly while performing is the poet's adherence to, what Lord calls, "the Formula."¹⁰ The Formula requires strict adherence to certain metrical requirements and part of the process involves using some of the same constructions over again. In Homer's poetry, Parry noted the presence of the Formula.¹¹

For example, why did Homer, obviously a brilliant poet, use the same epithets and phrases repeatedly. Why was it always the "rose fingered dawn?" Why was Achilles always "swift footed?" Why was Odysseus always "many counseled?" The Formula "leads the singer to make and remake phrases, the same phrases, over and over again whenever he needs them."¹² Parry removed the opprobrium attached to Homeric cliches and stereotypes and demonstrated how they were an essential part of the work.¹³ Like a chorus in a popular song, the repetition is not a cliché, but rather an essential, metrical part of the work itself.

Parry and Lord's work had an impact beyond Homeric studies. Some classicists began to glean an *aperçu* of an earlier, qualitatively different Western Culture: an oral culture. This was a culture, in one commentator's words, which stretched back millennia, perhaps to the Indo-European horsemen or beyond that.

As discussed below the distinctions between such an oral culture and a literate one are not trivial. Deep philosophical differences existed between the rational, literate world and the ancient, oral culture of becoming. Oral culture was performative by nature. It involved repetition and evoked a spiraling circular notation of time. Oral culture brought with it certain ways to perceive history and fundamental ontological categories. Ontologically, oral culture was more of a culture of becoming and not one of being.

Nietzsche died too early to be familiar with the work of Parry, Lord, and other like-minded philologists. Yet, he appears to celebrate the sort of values which were later associated with the oral culture of Ancient Greece, a society which Nietzsche the philologist, knew intimately well.

In addition, not only did Nietzsche celebrate the aspects of Greek culture which others saw as an oral culture, the inverse was also true. The Metaphysics Nietzsche attacked was built upon the values that were introduced with widespread literacy: Being, Permanence,

⁸ *Ibid. passim.*

⁹ *Ibid.* at p. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* at pp. 31-70.

¹¹ *Ibid.* at pp. 151-167.

¹² *Ibid.* at p. 49.

¹³ *Ibid.* at pp. 151-167.



and Linear Temporality. It is not surprising that as literacy shifted the nature of thinking, Monotheism emerged in the ancient world.

Nietzsche embraced, as a corrective to Christianity and Classical Metaphysics, the diverse, oral culture which preceded it. As the post-Darwinian reorganization of knowledge took root in the 19th century, Nietzsche was able to observe in the remnants of the older, oral culture preserved in early Greek Classics, a way in which man related to the Universe without an emphasis on Permanence, Immortality, and Propositional Truth.

This is not to say, of course, that Nietzsche's thought is a mere rehashing of oral, ancient Greek culture. Nietzsche's thought is something new and distinct. However, in his love of Heraclitus and Attic Tragedy, in his cyclical view of existence put forth with his doctrine of the Eternal Return, in his rejection of a monotheistic God but his penchant for invoking, *inter alia*, Dionysus, in his assertion of the importance of music, Nietzsche is always tugging at the roots of Western Civilization: its poetic, rhythmic, Dionysian, *oral* unconscious.

“Pre-literate” Greek Culture and Nietzsche

In the middle of the last century, Eric Havelock (1903-1988) an Anglo-American Classicist, took the findings of Parry and Lord, accepted Professor Rhys Carpenter's conclusion that the Greek Alphabet did not exist before 750 B.C.¹⁴ and put forth a view of ancient, Pre-Alexandrian Greek culture¹⁵ which stressed the fact that it was, in his words, “pre-literate.” According to Havelock, it was a rich, oral, and performative culture. Havelock ran into opposition to his viewpoint due to an unwillingness on the part of many philologists to admit that the Ancient Greeks may have been largely illiterate. For Havelock, “[i]t is a curious kind of cultural arrogance which presumes to identify human intelligence with literacy.”¹⁶ Havelock, therefore, aimed to disentangle literacy and intelligence. He reminds us that “[o]ur ancestors learned to count before they learned to write,”¹⁷ and that “[t]he Greeks between 1100 and 700 B.C., were totally non-literate yet developed a social organization and artistic achievement which was [their] glory.”¹⁸

Havelock's notion of what it means to be a literate culture is nuanced and not simply defined by the use of writing. Writing certainly existed in the Bronze Age. But, when we decode much of the Bronze-Age texts, it is clear that writing was used for limited purposes and was not the wide-spread cultural medium as it is today or even as prevalent of a medium as it was in Ancient Rome or Alexandrian Greece.¹⁹

¹⁴ Havelock, Eric Alfred. *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences*. Princeton University Press, 1982. p. 92.

¹⁵ Havelock generally associates Alexanderian culture with literacy and places the preliterate age at about 500 B.C. since, according to him, the real impact of the invention of the alphabet took approximately 150 years before it brought about a real change in consciousness. *Ibid.* at pp. 188-189, 261-262.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* at p. 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* at p. 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* at p. 42.

¹⁹ Havelock did not, of course, believe that “non-literate” Greece was completely without writing. But, rather, that it was “craft-literate.” “Craft Literacy” occurs when a small section of the population uses writing for limited, mostly functional purposes: recording of laws and interests in property, etc. Even when a craft literate society does write down essential myths such as the earlier Hebrews in the 1st books of the Bible, the writing appears formulaic because, in essence, the writing is a summary of a popular, oral story. He also believed that syllabaries, since they were limited in efficiency, required a craft elite

An example of Bronze Age writing is the Mycenaean writing referred to as Linear B. It took years to decipher Linear B and when it was finally uncovered it was clear that it focused primarily on documenting possession of chattel.²⁰ Writing clearly was not embedded in Bronze Age and early Iron Age culture as it was in 330 B.C. when the entire Greek upper class attended schools where they were instructed in reading and writing from an early age, or mid-19th Century England where the literacy rate amongst males was 72.30% and 61.20% among women or America today with its 86% literacy rate where 85% of its denizens have smartphones.²¹ Havelock's detractors can be forgiven when they associate literacy with intelligence because today they are so intertwined. But, are we to believe that, in the Bronze Age, only the scribes were intelligent?

Ancient writing was complicated and did not use an alphabet as we know it. Written language in the Bronze Age required knowledge of hundreds of characters since it used either hieroglyphs or syllabaries.²² Thus, at best 1% of the male population were literate, mostly scribes.²³ By contrast, "the true alphabet was simple enough for anyone interested to master quickly, and the possibility of male literacy rates of 10, 20, even 30 percent became a genuine prospect."²⁴

While the transformation from a tiny percentage of the population using written language to larger and larger percentages of the population doing so, must have been a significant cultural change, culture existed during the older times when the percentage of the population that read was less than 1%. Writing is not the same as intelligence and culture is not coterminous with literacy. Of the latter two phenomena, one is much older than the other. What therefore, must have existed in our past was a rich, oral tradition which plausibly may have stretched back millennia into Indo-European times.

According to Havelock, what Lord and Parry saw in Homer wasn't unique to Homer. Much of the earlier Greek works were, in essence, records of oral performances. Such performances were poetic in nature since verse served a mnemonic function and oral culture, to some extent, always required something like "the Formula" identified by Parry. Thus, Havelock does not believe that there was any real Greek prose before 650 B.C. since earlier Greek oral culture was "predominantly poetic."²⁵ Prose, as we understand it, appeared later in Greece when the culture became literate.

Since cultural events were not composed via the alphabet, when the alphabet first appeared it, in essence, "recorded" oral culture. Oral culture, which was performance focused, rhythmic and poetic in character was reduced to writing in the early years and the earlier Ancient Greek writings were, in fact, according to Havelock, records of these performances.²⁶ The works of Homer and Hesiod, for example, were initially oral

who could interpret this more difficult script. In Havelock's view these craft elites were not the elites in a society but merely individuals who relied on writing for a specific purpose. Havelock suggests that writing was used for functional purposes not necessarily cultural ones. It was not necessary in an oral, "pre-literate" culture for aristocrats to learn to write, however, it may be necessary for a merchant. *Ibid.* at pp. 10, 69-76, 189.

²⁰ *Ibid.* at p. 30.

²¹ <https://sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/education-in-victorian-england/> and <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>

²² McEvedy, Colin. *The New Penguin Atlas of Ancient History*. Second Edition. Penguin Books, 2002. p. 42.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.* at p. 54.

²⁵ Havelock at pp. 116 and 187.

²⁶ *Ibid.* at p. 119.



compositions created in a poetic and rhythmic style since such poetry was more consistent with the mnemonic approach taken in an oral culture. The first use of the alphabet, therefore, was merely to commit oral compositions to writing for the sake of preservation and the ancient Greeks' texts from 750 B.C. to 500 B.C. were more indicative of oral, poetic culture than the prose culture to follow.²⁷

Eventually, over 150 years, literacy as we know it became more widespread as a result of both the development of the Greek Alphabet (as noted above, a more efficient device than the Syllabaries which preceded it) and the importance of literacy being taught in schools starting in 5th century B.C. Athens.²⁸ Ultimately, Havelock posits that the transformation from an oral to a literate society changed "somewhat the content of the human mind."²⁹ He believed that the effect in the gradual transformation from an oral, "non-literate" culture to a literate one is also a move from a poetic, performative culture to a prose culture.

As the ancient, Greek world went from a pre-literate culture to a literate one, prose replaced poetry. Literate culture introduced prose and prose brought with it a different way of allowing concepts to be preserved without recourse to memory. Permitting language to be "rearranged, reordered, and rethought." Thought and culture was less bound by cadence and mnemonics and concepts were able to be expressed in a more arbitrary manner, without requiring a special connection with what occurred before it.

In a passage of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche presages many of Havelock's views acknowledging, like Havelock, the value of verse.³⁰ Nietzsche begins by invoking the utilitarians, addressing the utility of poetry. Nietzsche, uncharacteristically comes to the defense of the utilitarians (perhaps out of pity: "after all, they are right so rarely that it is really pitiful"). Nietzsche argues that Poetry is useful.³¹ Nietzsche says this was especially so in the ancient world. "In those ancient times in which poetry came into existence, the aim was utility, and actually a very great utility."³²

Nietzsche, sounding like Havelock, tells us that poetry can "impress the gods more deeply" because "**men remember a verse much better than ordinary speech.**"³³ Verse, Memory, and the Gods are all connected by Nietzsche in the same way that Havelock would connect these ideas. For both Havelock and Nietzsche, verse served a mnemonic function for the ancients and brought with it a certain communicative and epistemological structure.

Similarly, Havelock points out that this oral process required the existence of deities. Narrative is essential in an oral culture since things are remembered in and via the narrative. But, this focus on narrative also brings with it a need for constant agents. Havelock speaks of the centrality of the "god apparatus" in the oral tradition. Gods were an essential part of the oral tradition since an agent was always required to tell every part of the story. Like Havelock, Nietzsche sees an interconnectedness between verse and deities. Verse,

²⁷ *Ibid.* at p. 119-121.

²⁸ *Ibid.* at p. 27.

²⁹ *Ibid.* at 84.

³⁰ *The Gay Science* at p. 138.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

Nietzsche says, “compels the gods.”³⁴ Nietzsche asks, “[i]n sum what could have been more useful for the ancient, superstitious type of man?”³⁵

As noted above, Music plays a significant role in the mnemonic device that is The Formula. And, also as should be obvious, because musical performance is essential to this process, oral culture brings with it a certain orgiastic immediacy, each rendering of the tale is, in essence, a concert. Nietzsche says that in this ancient world “rhythm is a compulsion: it engenders an unconquerable urge to yield and join in: not only our feet follow the beat but the soul does too [. . .]”³⁶

In a word, this older rhythmic, oral culture is decidedly more *Dionysian* than the culture of a literate society. For Havelock, as noted above, this transformation from a rhythmic, oral, *Dionysian* culture into a literate one had a profound effect on the nature of the human mind. And, of course, Nietzsche, the radical Philosopher, sought to transform the human mind. Nietzsche, the philologist saw the ancients as people decidedly different in perspective--an ideal choice of interest for one who sought to propose a new way of thinking in a post-Darwinian world. Speaking of the ancient Greeks, Nietzsche sees in them people who have an entirely different world view and sees something qualitatively different in these “older Hellenes.”³⁷ Nietzsche sought entry into this strange mental world of the ancients. Nietzsche remarked later in his career that he had found a “new” way into the “ancient world.”³⁸ This view Nietzsche had of the ancients Nietzsche takes great pains to distinguish from that of Plato. The latter he describes as “decadent.”³⁹ Nietzsche may not rely on Havelock’s distinction between a written and an oral culture in ancient Greece but he embraces the world view of these older Hellenes and sees in them a viewpoint decidedly different than the more recent, “decadent” Greek philosophers.

Indeed, even Nietzsche’s work as a Philologist sought to rekindle an older, Greek worldview, Nietzsche, the philologist, went far beyond an antiseptic recitation of millennia old facts. He aimed to get a sense of the nature of ancient perspective, to see how the way the ancient mind worked. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, a 20th Century Philologist of note, described Nietzsche’s approach to philology. “Above all, Nietzsche insists that the philologist must love his subject; in listing the three requirements of philology: a bent for teaching, “delight in antiquity” (“Freude am Altertume”), and pure desire for knowledge, he clearly gives special consideration to the second. Modern classical education, he ruefully remarks, is designed to produce scholars; how different that is from the purpose of the Greeks themselves!”⁴⁰ Nietzsche’s delight in antiquity included a real understanding of the world-view of the ancient Greeks, the world-view of Havelock’s pre-literate Greece. As a philologist, he saw in the Greeks an irrational culture and he criticized other philologists as being flippant bookworms who lacked an understanding of this pre-literate Greek society.⁴¹

³⁴ *Ibid.* at p. 139.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Twilight of the Idols*, at pp. 117-118.

³⁸ *Ibid.* at p. 116.

³⁹ *Ibid.* at p. 117.

⁴⁰ Lloyd-Jones at p. 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* at pp. 9-11.



Nietzsche's interest in these older Hellenes also influenced Nietzsche's aesthetic decisions and choices when it came to influences. Nietzsche's writing reverberates with verse and aphorism and he rarely wrote in traditional prose. Havelock sees this oral culture present in, of course, Homer and Hesiod but, he also sees the imprint of this culture in Attic Tragedy before Euripides, in Pindar, Parmenides and in many of the Presocratics. While his reading of Heraclitus is nuanced, Havelock sees Heraclitus as clearly a figure of this period and thinks that aphorism itself smacks of oral culture. Nietzsche, of course, lauded Heraclitus. "With the highest respect, I except the name of Heraclitus. When the rest of the philosophic folk rejected the testimony of the senses because they showed multiplicity and change, he rejected their testimony because they showed things as if they had permanence and unity."⁴² He felt the same way about Attic Tragedy which he saw go through a qualitative change with Euripides who wrote during the classical age, the period in which, in Havelock's view, oral culture began to vanish.

Finally, beyond Havelock's observation, there are other aspects regarding oral culture which are apparent. First, because in an oral culture sacred narratives are expressed performatively via The Formula, there is no singular sacred narrative. There are sacred narrative performances. The Formula involved a significant amount of improvisation.⁴³ And, thus no two performances were ever quite the same. An essential part of sacred narrative involved a certain degree of uncertainty. Sacred truths were conjured in the present during a performance and thus, notions of permanence and propositional truth were of no moment. It was a culture of becoming, not of being, of immediacy, not of abstraction. As discussed below, Nietzsche's project was to reclaim that culture of becoming and to confront the ascendancy, in his post-Darwinian age, of the Christian/Platonic culture of permanence.

Literate culture, Classical Metaphysics, Monotheism and Linear Temporality

It is not merely that ancient oral culture smacks of Nietzsche's *Dionysian* worldview, it is also that the culture which came into bloom with the advent of literacy bears all the hallmarks of Nietzsche's great adversaries: Plato and Christianity.

Cedric H. Whitman, a classist and colleague of Parry and Lord, remarked, citing Parry, that written culture killed off oral culture.⁴⁴ Lord too believed that literate culture destroyed the oral tradition.⁴⁵ For one thing, once poetry is written, the oral tradition is less necessary and begins to fall into disuse and dies. Oral and written poetry are "contradictory and mutually exclusive."⁴⁶ "Those singers who accept the idea of a fixed text are lost to oral traditional processes. This means death to the oral tradition and the rise of a generation of 'singers' who are reproducers rather than re-creators."⁴⁷ Nietzsche also sees similar epochal changes with the introduction of Platonic thought since Plato opened the door for Christianity. Plato "deviated so far from all the instincts of the Hellenes, so moral effected,

⁴² *Twilight of the Idols*, at p. 46.

⁴³ Lord at pp. 31-70.

⁴⁴ Whitman, Cedric H. *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*. Harvard University Press, 1958. at p. 79.

⁴⁵ Lord at p. 147.

⁴⁶ Lord at p. 138.

⁴⁷ Lord at p. 147.

so much an antecedent Christian.⁴⁸ Plato's thought and the Christianity to which it was an antecedent, replaced the world of the older Hellenes.

One great difference between the oral culture and a written one, a difference which evokes Platonism, is the change from "stability of essential story" to "stability of text."⁴⁹ The distinction is not merely stylistic, it has to do with a change in how to value human knowledge and a change in how the poet (and the culture he is a part of) perceives truth and time. Cedric H. Whitman, makes a point which is later cited by Lord:

One might even say that, with writing a new idea of permanence is born; oral communication is shown for what it is—inaccurate and shifting. Writing has a god-like stability, and to anyone with an eye for the future, its significance is scarcely to be mistaken.⁵⁰

Writing "procures fixity of form", can be disseminated across large audiences and is produced with an eye towards retaining exactitude for the future.⁵¹

This idea of permanence and a different approach to temporality brought about the "change in consciousness" which Havelock described. The emphasis on writing clearly brought with it literate values. For one thing, the literate culture that followed ancient Greek oral culture was not as intimately connected to music and was not performative since it did not rely on music to convey information the way an oral culture would. It was a culture of preservation not one of constant flux.

This, of course, tracks closely the birth of Platonism and its concomitant values. "Truth" for a Platonist, is atemporal and fixed. It exists outside of time. Plato's theory of forms and its *locus classicus* the allegory of the cave hold that truth is unchanging, propositional and permanent.⁵² To use Whitman's words, it contains a "god-like stability." By contrast, Nietzsche's entire project is a self-described "inverted Platonism."

Platonism shares the same values which Havelock and others believe is contained in a written, prose culture. By writing prose texts, the author focuses on fixity and exactitude. In doing so, the author presupposes a singular, fixed, propositional notion of truth. It is easy to see how, by moving into a written tradition, culture can end up with one story about its gods and heroes since as noted above writing produces a fixity of form. There are no longer multiple, acceptable oral versions. There are no multiple truths. Truth is singular, fixed, permanent, and universal. A story is either true or false. Sacred truth becomes a fixed singularity.

It would be a vast understatement to assert that Nietzsche rejected Platonism. Nietzsche saw in Plato's thought the beginning of everything that went wrong. Plato and those who thought like him were "the counter-movement against the old, the noble taste."⁵³ "Christianity was the religion of pity", "pity is practical nihilism" and, "Plato is that ambiguity and fascination called the 'ideal' which made it possible for the nobler natures

⁴⁸ *Twilight of the Idols* at 117.

⁴⁹ Lord at p. 147.

⁵⁰ Lord at pp. 164-165 and Whitman at pp. 80-81.

⁵¹ Whitman at pp. 80-81.

⁵² Plato pp. 186-190.

⁵³ *Twilight of the Idols* at 119.



of antiquity to understand themselves and to step on the bridge which led to the ‘Cross.’”⁵⁴ The Platonic and the Christian focus on an eternal, permanent and universal truth which drew culture away from the immediate world of becoming, the world of ancient, oral culture.

Literate culture also brings with it a decidedly different attitude towards temporality. The focus on permanence brings with it a certain denigration of the ephemeral. “Truth” is what remains untouched by time. The extratemporal is the most highly valued. Thus, “concepts” and “forms”, which remain untouched by time are associated with truth and those affected by becoming and temporality are valueless. A certain anxiety about death follows and the immortal soul is eventually necessitated since the universe is understood to proceed via a linear temporality and not via a cyclical one. Linear temporality becomes all-encompassing save for that which can exist outside of time: the forms, the immortal soul, etc.

By contrast, in an oral culture, due to the role of memory, time is cyclical and the past is something which is continually evoked in the present. French Historian and Anthropologist Jean-Pierre Vernant discussed the importance of Memory in Greek Culture between the 12th and 8th centuries B.C.⁵⁵ Memory, according to Vernant, to the extent that it is something different from habit, was invented with difficulty and represents man’s “conquest of his individual past.”⁵⁶ Memory involves a complex notion of human operations, precisely those discussed above in oral cultures. The entire process of keeping a society functioning relies heavily on memory in an oral culture. Ancient Greeks therefore transformed memory itself, Mnemosyne, into something sacred. “The sacralization of Mnemosyne indicates its value in a civilization whose traditions were entirely oral, as was the case with Greece between the twelfth and the eighth century BCE, before the spread of writing.” But, Memory’s function is not to “reconstruct time, nor [. . .] abolish it.” Rather, Memory removes the barrier between the present and the past. “It brings an “evocation” of the past [. . .]” It therefore presupposed a cyclical notion of time since the past is remade in the present. Vernant makes an association with Memory and the doctrine of reincarnation. Just like oral epic poetry, through reincarnation, a cycle of the past and present is continually repeated but is distinct in every instance of repetition. The distinctions are both celebrated but also merely incidental. Whereas writing preserves an event exactly as is for the future and therefore, presupposes linear temporality. This oral, cyclical approach involves repetition as opposed to the linear approach which is analytic.

The idea that the past can be recreated in the present is a notion of “eternal life” which is decidedly distinct from the Christian notion of another world and is precisely what Nietzsche sees in the *Dionysian*. The “fundamental fact” of the ancient Hellenic instinct expresses itself through the Dionysian mysteries, in “its will to life.”⁵⁷ “Eternal life, the eternal recurrence of life, the future promised and consecrated in the past; the triumphant yes to life beyond death and change; true life as collective continuation of life through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality.”⁵⁸ This is what Nietzsche saw in the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* at pp. 117 and 130.

⁵⁵ Vernant, Jean-Pierre. *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*. Translated by Janet Lloyd and Jeff Fort. Zone Books, 2006. pp. 115-138.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* at p. 115.

⁵⁷ *Twilight of the Idols* at p. 120.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Dionysian which was not merely a philosophical notion that he celebrated. The Dionysian mysteries were also discovered by Nietzsche as a philologist and his approach to them was one of young Nietzsche's accomplishments. Nietzsche reminds us that he "was the first to take seriously that wonderful phenomenon which bears the name Dionysus as a means to understand the older Hellenic instinct."⁵⁹ Thus, Nietzsche's Dionysian approach is itself reminiscent of how oral culture addresses temporality and this is yet another example of how Nietzsche the philosopher was so indebted to Nietzsche the philologist.

Finally, there is, at the very least, a synchronous relationship between literate culture and monotheism. It was suggested by Lord that literate culture came from the same place as Monotheism: the East. The process of writing sacred texts moved from East to West and as did Monotheism.

In the ninth century in Palestine the oldest of the documents of the Old Testament seems to have been written, namely the J Document, and in the following century the E Document came into being. These writings or records told of the creation of the world and of the history of the founders of the Jewish people or of man in general. They contained the epics and myths of these people in the century Sargon II (722-705) established the library of Nineveh and under him the Assyrian Empire was at its greatest extent. His library contained tablets inscribed with epic, mythic, magic, and historical material in several languages including Sumerian, and dating from as early as 2000 B.C. Here were to be found the Epic of Creation and the Epic of Gilgamesh, among other texts. Two bodies of recorded lore, one already ancient in ancient times, the other new and exciting in its serious intensity, were thus available to any Greeks who might turn in their direction. And it seems that it would be normal for them to look to the East during these centuries; for it was in the east that the cultural center was then located.

Thus, if Lord is correct, at around the same time, in the culturally superior East, a different world view is seeping into Greek culture transforming its values. But, also at around the same time, Monotheism proper was developing amongst the Jewish People. Indeed, in the East, the trajectory from backwater Canaanite Gods into jealous individual entities into the single, Omnipotent and transcendent God of the old testament takes place during the same period as literate culture is developing.⁶⁰ Thus, Monotheism appears at the same time and in the same place where the idea of the importance of written sacred texts is being exported and Monotheism as we understand it and written sacred texts appear side by side. There can be no question that genuine Monotheism-the notion that there is only one "true" God-was replacing mono-idolatry around the same time as literate culture began to replace oral culture.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* at 119.

⁶⁰ This progress is discussed in Mark Smith's [The Early History of God](#) where Smith demonstrates that Yahweh began as the Canaanite God El and was primarily a tribalistic figure. Smith describes how the ancient Hebrews progressed from a polytechnic world into mono-idolatry which eventually progressed into monotheism. Over the period of development which concerns us here, from the 9th Century B.C. to the Alexandrian age, the tribalistic figure of Yahweh develops from a single mythic, tribalistic entity to the basis for a Universal, Omnipotent and Transcendent God. Smith, Mark S. *The Early History of God*. Second Edition. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002.



Of course, Nietzsche rejected Christianity and Monotheism. Yet, as previously noted, Nietzsche's atheism was complex and Nietzsche's philosophy is not without its deities and agents. For a thinker who is so associated with declaring God dead, his work is riddled with references to religious figures such as Zarathustra and ancient gods such as Dionysius. Indeed, Nietzsche's work echoes a more ancient view where Gods exist but do not perform the redemptive function which they later played in monotheistic traditions. As Lloyd-Jones notes, "Nietzsche saw the ancient gods as standing for the fearful realities of a universe in which mankind had no special privileges."⁶¹ This is the world of Homer, the epic oral poet, where gods appear to be stand-ins for the vagaries of existence and provide no real comfort to humanity. As Lloyd-Jones, explains, the "Greek universe was god-controlled, but not anthropocentric; the gods granted men occasional favors, but ruthlessly held them down in their position of inferiority; it was in the face of this that heroes showed their heroism. Nietzsche's theory of tragedy contains the essence of his whole metaphysic; so that the Greek influence on this can hardly be disputed."⁶² It is this past that Nietzsche harkens to- a polytheistic past of oral culture which was eventually replaced by written culture and Monotheism.

Thus, the appearance of literate culture, its concomitant world-view, a specific view of time, a certain anxiety about death, and the prominence of monotheism, all are part of a single *zeitgeist*, which an astute philologist such as Nietzsche clearly observed. Nietzsche, the philosopher, writing in the 19th century, saw his epoch as that of the decline of such *zeitgeist* and Nietzsche, the philologist, knew that such *zeitgeist* was a historical event not a fundamental truth.

III. Nietzsche and the Ancients⁶³

While an in depth discussion of Nietzsche's *oeuvre* and its connection to this early Greek Culture is beyond our current scope, a few points are worth mentioning. Firstly, Nietzsche was always navigating the post-Darwinian world and always struggling with the death of God. This is evident at the beginning of his career as a philosopher where he seems to acquiesce to the Darwinian-Materialist organization of the cosmos, a view of consciousness as a byproduct of matter and force. While Nietzsche does not often advocate such a reductive view, he at times, seems to presuppose it as factual reality.

For example, in 1873, when he was still a philologist, Nietzsche penned a philosophical essay entitled *On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense*.⁶⁴ The text begins with a decided dismissal of the purported, abiding significance of human knowledge. Rather than place human knowledge at the center of existence, Nietzsche suggests that it has no more significance than that of a mosquito's sense of self. Earth is described as a "remote corner" of the Universe where "there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge." In its diminishing of the importance of human intellect, Nietzsche also rejects rationalism as

⁶¹ Lloyd-Jones at p. 9.

⁶² Lloyd-Jones at p. 15.

⁶³Nietzsche's philosophy is of course nuanced and not easily summarized. But, while it would be foolish to assert that one can summarize Nietzsche's entire worldview in a few pages, it would be equally foolish to deny that some ineluctable strains of Nietzsche's philosophy constantly reoccur and can be straightforwardly abridged. Most notably his relationship with God, Truth and, Being admit to some concise condensation and it is precisely these themes of Nietzsche's thought that coincide with the worldview which Lord, Whitman, et. al. associate with Oral, Greek culture.

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated By Walter Kaufmann. Viking Press, 1968.

embodied in much of classical metaphysics. Truth, Justice, Reason, are all “inventions” of “clever animals” in a remote corner of the Universe. While they may have a functional significance to such “clever animals”, they don’t have an intrinsic value on their own. By this view, Plato’s theory of forms is reduced to a self-indulgent fever dream. “Truth” is an invention of some bipeds who accidentally evolved out of primordial ooze.

Secondly, and significantly, Nietzsche’s knowledge of the ancients defines the character of his response to the aforementioned, post-Darwinian realization. Perhaps, on some level, Nietzsche was motivated by his initial reading of Friedrich Albert Lange,⁶⁵ who perceived many of the ancient philosophers as materialists, perhaps it was just because of his exceptional knowledge of the ancients. Either way, Nietzsche’s atheism is qualitatively different from the rationalist atheism which so casually dismisses past beliefs as ignorance. Nietzsche correctly sees mankind’s belief in a single extramundane, omniscient God as a product of a particular time. Nietzsche aims to transcend this “error”, but is willing to embrace some of what was there before it.

Third, Nietzsche felt that a deeper understanding of man’s place in the cosmos was lost. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche provides a pithy but trenchant description of how this “error” came about:

The wise and pious man dwells in the real world, which he attains through his wisdom (skills in perception warrant a more accurate view of the real world).

The wise and pious man doesn't dwell in the real world, but rather it is promised to him, a goal to live for. (ex: to the sinner who repents)

The real world is unattainable and cannot be promised, yet remains a consolation when confronted with the perceived injustices of the apparent world.

If the real world is not attained, then it is unknown. Therefore, there is no duty to the real world, and no consolation derived from it.

The idea of a real world has become useless—it provides no consolation or motive. It is therefore cast aside as a useless abstraction.

What world is left? The concept of the real world has been abolished, and with it, the idea of an apparent world follows.⁶⁶

Humans did not always live in a world that, in Nietzsche’s view, denigrated life. Like Lagne, Nietzsche points out that Rationalism is relatively new. There is a gradual progression towards a rarefied, conceptual existence. It therefore follows that something was lost and that the ancients, humans living at the time of the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age viewed existence in an entirely different manner. Nietzsche is, at the end of the day, not just a philosopher but also a philologist who understood these older cultures well and had a very positive view of them. Put simply, they knew how to live and were not concerned about death or even “Truth” and “Justice.” The latter are nothing short of rarefied inventions.

⁶⁵ Prideaux at p. 50. Lagne, Frederick Albert. *History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance*. Translated by Ernest Chester Thomas. Second Edition, 1879.

⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, at p. 50.



Thus, Nietzsche's philosophy begins with an appreciation of Attic Tragedy and a celebration of the aspects of such thought which Havelock associates with Oral culture. He celebrates Heraclitus all throughout his career. He develops the ancient character of Zarathustra. He ends his career describing himself as Dionysus. He writes in an aphoristic style and is noteworthy for a philosopher in his frequent avoidance of prose. His philosophy is always tinged with an appreciation of this older, ancient culture of cyclical time and becoming, a culture which Parry, Lord, Whitman and Havelock defined as oral.

V. Conclusion

Reading the viewpoints of Lord, Parry, Havelock and Whitman one sees that they viewed the transformation of culture from oral to literate as a "change of consciousness." These philologists portray a cultural transformation over time from oral to written, from poetry and rhythmic speech to silent prose, from aphorism to philosophic prose, from cyclical time to linear, from the present to the extra-temporal, from being to becoming.

While Nietzsche did not recognize this older culture as oral, he still did recognize its significance and embraced it to develop his own philosophy. It is the "real world" that was lost to an error described in the *Twilight of the Idols*. As noted, his philosophy is not a mere rehashing of this culture. But it is influenced by it. For example, Nietzsche's view of Eternal Recurrence, itself purportedly ancient, puts forth a cyclical temporality, but unlike doctrines such as reincarnation, Eternal Recurrence has a certain scientific plausibility to it. It is both post-Darwinian and ancient at the same time: a metaphor for Nietzsche's thought itself.

Nietzsche the philosopher was deeply indebted to the younger Nietzsche, Nietzsche the philologist. But, Nietzsche didn't just wish to peruse desiccated old texts in forgotten languages. He was motivated by a recognition that the ancients thought differently. They had different notions of temporality, of right and wrong, and different views on human finitude. The intuitive understanding that the ancients had regarding man and the world was rejected via a series of significant philosophical errors. While it is uncontroversial that Nietzsche viewed Platonism and Christianity as proponents of that error, could it also have been brought about via the written word? To paraphrase Nietzsche, did literacy ruin thinking?

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