TRADITION

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Introduction:
Notes towards a Theory of Traditions

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To those who still hold the old-fashioned view that the aim of philosophy is, first and foremost, *conceptual clarification* – and I *do* hold that view – it could appear that the concept of *tradition* has certainly become ripe for another philosophical treatment. I say "another", since it is obviously not the case that philosophers have not, before now, discussed the topic. Those discussions, however, seem to have greatly contributed to, rather than to have dissolved, the conceptual confusions at work here. And it seems, also, that specific discoveries in the humanities have by now made possible a solidly scientific, as contrasted with a philosophical, treatment of the issue of traditions. It is for this reason that I would like to regard the notes here following as steps towards a *theory*, and not towards a philosophy, of traditions. My point of departure however is, still, defined by some current philosophical discussions.

The problem which these discussions primarily address is that of the relation between the traditional and the *rational*. The minority view is that rationality is itself dependent upon, indeed grounded in, tradition. This is the view adopted for instance by Feyerabend in his *Science in a Free Society*, where he regards rationality as "one tradition among many rather than a standard to which traditions must conform"[1] . This, too, is the interpretation proposed by Alasdair MacIntyre in his *After Virtue*. As he formulated it: "all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought... A living tradition ... is an historically extended, socially embodied argument".[2] Similarly in his subsequent book *Whose Justice?*: "The person outside all traditions lacks sufficient rational resources for enquiry and *a fortiori* for enquiry into what tradition is to be rationally preferred."[3]

The usual view of course is that traditionality and rationality mutually *exclude* each other. As H.B. Acton, in a paper given in 1952, has put it by way of definition: "A tradition is a belief or practice transmitted

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[1] London: Verso, 1982, p. 7. First published 1978.
[2] London: 1981, p.222.
[3] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, London: Duckworth, 1988, p.367. To be outside all traditions", the passage goes on, "is to be a stranger to enquiry; it s to be in a state of intellectual and moral destitution..."

from one generation to another and accepted as authoritative, or deferred to, without argument."[4] This is not to say that traditions cannot be subjected to a rational examination. "When a traditional belief has been questioned", writes Acton,

> investigation of evidence may show it to be true or false. [But t]hose who, after such an investigation, accept a traditional belief because there is conclusive evidence for it, are no longer mere adherents of a tradition, for they have considered and overcome the arguments against it. ... So too with practices. If, after discussion, it is decided that a traditional practice ought to be continued because it subserves some desirable purpose, then it ceases to be a merely traditional practice, for it is now deliberately pursued as a means to something else. The process of justification presupposes argument,

stresses Acton, "and thus cannot fail to undermine the traditional character of the practice that is justified."[5]

This last formula – *justification undermines the traditional character of what it justifies* – of course recalls the well-known observation by Nietzsche. "A historical phenomenon", wrote Nietzsche in 1874, "known clearly and completely and resolved into a phenomenon of knowledge, is, for him who has perceived it, dead."[6] This observation became the starting point for one of the main discussions in German philosophy, a discussion going on ever since. It was under Nietzsche's impact that Scheler in 1927 wrote: "Conscious 'remembering' represents the dissolution, indeed really the extinction of a living tradition."[7] It was in the course of interpreting Nietzsche that Carl August Emge in 1942 recalled Friedrich Schiller's distinction between *naive* and *sentimental* poetry and applied the same to the problem of traditions.[8] The sentimental endorsing of traditions, suggests Emge, is a characteristically *modern* attitude; it means the inability to accept traditions naively, *entirely*, with intellectual conviction; it is superficial, merely external, deliberate. It was in Nietzsche's spirit that Josef Pieper said in 1958: "The moment I accept a *traditum* as something verified,

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4   Acton, "Tradition and Some Other Forms of Order", *Proc. of the Ar. Soc.*, 952/53, p.2.

5   *Ibid.*, pp.2f.

6   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, transl. by R.J. Hollingdale, with an Introduction by J.P. Stern. Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983, p.67.

7   "Bewußte 'Erinnerung' stellt die Auflösung, ja die eigentliche Tötung der lebendigen Tradition dar." Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, 8th ed., 1928, p.29.

8   Emge, "Zur Philosophie der Tradition", in H. Wenke, ed., *Geistige Gestalten und Probleme*, Leipzig: 1942, p.256.

and critically known, by me, it will lose, for me, its traditional character."[9] And it was in this spirit that Habermas wrote:

> The reflected appropriation of traditions destroys the natural substance of the same... ... The structure of prejudices, once made transparent, cannot anymore function in the mode of prejudice ... Gadamer's prejudice for the right of prejudices legitimated by traditions contests the capacity of reflection ... to reject, in case, the claim of traditions.[10]

The reference is to Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*. As Gadamer there summarily puts it, "the ahistoric-dogmatic and the historical, tradition and the science of history, the ancients and modernity, do not stand completely and in principle in opposition to each other".[11] Gadamer's inspiration derives from Heidegger, partly also from Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences*. As Husserl there wrote: "Our human existence moves within innumerable traditions. The whole cultural world, in all its forms, exists through tradition." Contemporary geometry, for instance, is a "tradition of millenia ... and is still being worked on in a lively forward development [in lebendiger Fortar-beit]".[12] Husserl and Gadamer, as one will have noticed, very much foreshadow a MacIntyre-type view of traditions. But we also saw that that view is not at all uncontested. And I think it *should* be contested, because it relies on a much too broad, and indeed *uncritical*, use of the term "tradition".

It is to the term itself, then, we have to attend now. And here it will turn out that standard dictionaries have a much more complex understanding of what traditions are than does contemporary philosophy. Some main meanings of the term given by the *OED* are "The action of handing over (something material) to another; delivery,

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9   "Sobald ich ein traditum annehme als etwas von mir selbst Nachgeprüftes und kritisch Gewußtes, verliert es, für mich, seinen Überlieferungscharakter." Pieper, *Über den Begriff der Tradition*, Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen – Geisteswissenschaften, Heft 72, Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1958, p.16.

10   "Die reflektierte Aneignung der Tradition [bricht] die naturwüchsige Substanz der Überlieferung. Die transparent gemachte Vorurteilsstruktur kann nicht mehr in der Art des Vorurteils fungieren. ... Gadamers Vorurteil für das Recht der durch Tradi-tion ausgewiesenen Vorurteile bestreitet die Kraft der Reflexion, ... daß sie den Anspruch von Traditionen auch abweisen kann." Karl-Otto Apel et al., *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, Suhrkamp, 1971, pp.47–49.

11   Preface to the 2nd ed., Tübingen: 1965, p.XX.

12   *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Translated, with an Introduction, by David Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970, p.354.

transfer", "Delivery, *esp.* oral delivery, of information or instruction. Now *rare*", and "The action of transmitting or 'handing down', or fact of being handed down, from one to another, or from generation to generation; transmission of statements, beliefs, rules, customs, or the like, esp. by word of mouth or by practice without writing." And as a "more vague" sense the *OED* renders: "A long established and generally accepted custom or method of procedure, having almost the force of a law; an immemorial usage; the body (or any one) of the experiences and usages of any branch or school of art or literature, handed down by predecessors and generally followed". Johnson, in his *Dictionary of the English Language*, completed by 1755, here quoted after the 1832 edition, listed the meanings, first, "The act or practice of delivering accounts from mouth to mouth without written memorials; communication from age to age" (this sense illustrated by a quote from Hooker: "To learn it, we have tradition; namely, that so we believe, because both we from our predecessors, and they from theirs, have so received"), and secondly, "Any thing delivered orally from age to age" – this latter sense illustrated by the telling lines of Milton, "They the truth / With superstitions and traditions taint". According to the 1864 revised edition Webster dictionary *tradition* means "The act of delivering into the hands of another"; also "The unwritten or oral delivery of opinions, doctrines, practices, rites, and customs, from father to son, or from ancestors to posterity; the transmission of any opinions or practice from forefathers to descendants by oral communication, without written memorials". As the *theological* meaning of the term the Webster gives "That body of doctrine and discipline, or any article thereof, supposed to have been put forth by Christ or his apostles, and not committed to writing".[13]

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[13] As to the *German* usage of "Tradition", the Langenscheidt German–English Dictionary (1974 edition) gives three meanings: *Überlieferung*, translated as "tradition", and illustrated by phrases like "to cultivate a tradition", "to adhere to tradition", "to follow a tradition", "to break with tradition"; *Gepflogenheit*, translated as "convention, tradition", illustrated by "convention prescribes that"; and *Gewohnheit, Brauch*, translated by "tradition, (old) custom". The terms "Überlieferung" and "Tradition" are explained in great detail by the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* of the Grimm brothers. "Überlieferung", we learn here, originally means *delivery*, but it has also acquired a more technical meaning: "auch verengt für *mündliche* mittheilung von geschlecht zu geschlecht, entsprechend dem theol. begriffe der tradition, der *schriftlichen* entgegengesetzt", i.e. there is an emphasis on *oral* delivery, and on the continuity between generations. On the other hand Goethe is cited as using the phrase "von gedruckten überlieferungen", *printed* traditions. And there is another quote from Goethe: "indem wir nun von überlieferung sprechen, sind wir unmittelbar aufgefordert, zugleich von autorität zu reden, denn genau betrachtet, so ist jede autorität eine art überlieferung", i.e. all authority is a kind of tradition. – The *word* "Tradition" did not exist in German before the 16th century; and until the 18th its use was almost exclusively confined to the religious

Dictionaries, then, quite clearly distinguish between two senses of the term "tradition". There is the narrower, precise sense of *oral transmission* – i.e. of beliefs handed down by word of mouth, with the accompanying practices learnt by imitation – , and a broader, more vague sense, one that includes the handing down of complex methods and abstract intellectual structures by the help of *written* documents. Now in fact the difference between the oral and the written modes of transmission is a quite fundamental one, even, or especially, from an epistemological point of view. The ancients of course knew this; but then it was forgotten. In modern times it appears to be the British author Robert Wood who, in his *Essays on the Original Genius of Homer*, published in 1767, first recognized the problem:

> As to the difficulty of conceiving how Homer could accquire, retain, and communicate, all he knew, without the aid of Letters, it is, I own, very striking... But the oral traditions of a learned and enlightened age will greatly mislead us, if from them we form our judgement on those of a period, when History had no other

sphere: "im kampf der reformation gegen die katholische kirche ins deutsche aufgenommen; anfänglich meistens von der einzelnen religiösen vorschrift oder einrichtung, die in confessioneller polemik als zusatz zu dem göttlichen gebot hingestellt wird". And a typical line by Lessing is quoted: "du [Luther] hast uns von dem joche der tr. erlöset", i.e. *thou, Luther, hath redeemed us from the yoke of tradition*. From the mid–18th century onwards the term then acquired its secular meaning of "mündlich und schriftlich überlieferte kunde von geschichtlichen begebenheiten", and by the 19th century the broader sense "das herkömmliche in haltung und handlung, das sich in socialen und geistigen gemeinschaften, in culturellen überlieferungszusammenhängen aller art fortpflanzt". The Grimm makes it clear that this broader sense, too, had a partly negative connotation: "ich will ... nicht mehr ruhen, bis mir nichts mehr wort und tr., sondern lebendiger begriff ist", wrote Goethe, and "ich will brechen mit tr. und konvention, will rang und namen von mir werfen und mit dem mann meiner wahl in süszer verborgenheit leben", wrote R. Baumbach – tradition and convention were seen as suppressing spontaneity in thought and in life. – Jacob Grimm himself used "Überlieferung" mainly in the sense of *oral* delivery. Thus in his *Deutsche Mythologie* he contrasts "geschriebene denkmäler" with "volkslieferung", speaks of traditions becoming "silent" ("für orte und zeiten ganz verstummt, schlagen sie anderswo plötzlich wieder an"), and for instance writes: "Zu der schriftlichen aufzeichnung verhält sich die mündliche sage wie zur dichtkunst das volkslied oder zu den geschriebenen rechten von den schöffen erzähltes weisthum" (*Deutsche Mythologie*, 3rd ed., vols.1–2, Göttingen: Dieterichsche Buchhandlung, 1854, p.XII). But his terminology is not entirely consistent. Similarly Herder, by whom the Grimms had been of course very much influenced, "Tradition" means in the first instance oral tradition. Thus e.g. in his "Vom Erlöser der Menschen: Nach unserm drei ersten Evangelien" (1796) Herder stresses that Luke "nahm ..., was er hinzuthat, aus andern Evangelien, oder aus dem Munde der Tradition"; the age of Jesus he regards as a "Zeitalter der mündlichen Tradition"; and so on in a great number of passages, but again not without exceptions.

resource. ... [We can not] in this age of Dictionaries, and other technical aids to memory, judge, what her use and powers were, at a time, when all a man could know, was all he could remember.

By way of solution Wood refers to Aristotle's observation in *Problems*, Book XIX, according to which "before men knew the art of writing they used to sing their laws in order not to forget them". That is: in order to preserve identity of wording, pre–literal societies made use of the mnemonic devices of melody, rhythm, and rhyme. This is the argument the English folklorist Edwin Sidney Hartland formulates some hundred years later, when, referring to Tacitus, he writes:

> The Roman historian attests the prevalence among the German tribes of ancient songs, which he expressly mentions as their only kind of memory on record, – thus showing that all their tales, whether mythologic or heroic, were for better preservation cast into metrical form.[14]

By today the epistemology of the orality/literacy contrast has become a well–established field of inquiry. I will refrain from burdening these notes with bibliographical details, but some names at least should be mentioned. Let me just refer to the Homeric scholar Milman Parry, the anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski, Jack Goody and Ian Watt, to the psychiatrist J. C. Carothers, to the classical philologist Eric Havelock, to the literary scholar and historian of ideas Walter J. Ong, and of course to Aleida and Jan Assmann. And let me conclude this part of my paper by quoting an extended passage from Ong which sums up the epistemological characteristics of the condition he labels as *primary orality*, i.e. the conditions obtaining in a culture entirely untouched by literacy:

> In an oral culture, restriction of words to sound determines not only modes of expression but also thought processes. ... Think memorable thoughts. In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving ... thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings ... , in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily... Fixed ...

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[14] E. Sidney Hartland, *The Science of Fairy Tales: An Inquiry into Fairy Mythology*, London: Walter Scott, 1891, p.15, referring to Tacitus, *Germania* (2–3).

expressions ... in oral cultures ... form the substance of thought itself. ... In an oral culture, experience is intellectualized mnemonically.[15]

We are now in a position to state the connection holding between traditions and orality. In a society untouched by literacy the *storage and transmission of knowledge* is a task requiring specific institutions. Learning by imitation – acquiring *practical knowledge* – is one such institution; *oral poetry* is another; traditions are mechanisms for preserving knowledge – practices, techniques, as well as verbal knowledge – under conditions of primary orality.

If traditions are to fulfil their function of preserving knowledge, memorization must proceed unhindered. The audience, the listener, must believe what he hears; any attitude of doubt would be dysfunctional and must be suppressed. The supposedly ancient, and ultimately divine, origin of traditions on the one hand, and the fiction of unchanged transmission over generations on the other hand, are just such mechanisms for suppressing doubt. The bard invokes the Muses; what he sings, from them did he accept. "I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received", says Paul (1 Cor 15,3). But of course traditions are, when fulfilling their function, in fact *not* handed down unchanged. They *cannot* be and they *should* not be thus handed down. They cannot be, since oral mnemonic devices ensure ready recall, not however perfect textual accuracy. In fact the notion of textual accuracy does not make sense in an oral culture, there being no *original* text which could serve as a basis of comparison, and, most importantly, no way to *compare* texts *at all*. The text is never there; there is nothing to compare and nothing to be compared with. Also, traditions must, for functional reasons, in fact *change* over time. They tell about bygone times, but serve as charters of the present, echoing new circumstances. Traditions are homoeostatic devices, presenting, inevitably, a fictitious past.

Only with the development of writing does the permanent fixing of what is said, and the comparison of different texts, become possible. This is not to suggest that under conditions of orality questions as to the identity or difference of utterances, or the correspondence between utterances and deeds, do not arise. When for instance in the *Iliad* the feud between Achilles and Agamemnon is terminated, the settlement depends on the future observance of the "appropriate vows, promises,

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[15] Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word,* Methuen, 1982, pp.33–36.

and confessions orally pronounced and heard".[16] But to ensure such observance, specific circumstances must obtain. As Havelock puts it: "Since no documentary evidence of the settlement is available to be exchanged, the witness of a mass audience who will remember what they have heard and seen is vital."[17] What an oral culture lacks are the means to preserve the *exact* wording of *extended* texts over *longer* periods. It is the appearance of literacy, and especially the emergence of Greek alphabetic writing,[18] which for the first time allows a precise

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[16] Eric Havelock, *The Greek Concept of Justice,* Harvard Univ. Press, 1978, p.133.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] The position, held in its most radical form by Eric Havelock, according to which only *alphabetic* writing will foster a total break with the cognitive conditions of oral discourse, is a contested one. As Jan Assmann puts in his *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*: "Es ist sicher richtig, daß die orientalischen Schriften – unter ihnen vor allem die ägyptischen Hieroglyphen und die mesopotamische Keilschrift ... – schwerer zu erlernen und schwerer zu handhaben sind als das griechische Alphabet. Deshalb sind sie aber nicht weniger leistungsfähig in der Wiedergabe gesprochener Rede. ... Es gibt keinen Laut, kein Wort, keinen Satz, keinen Gedanken der jeweiligen Sprache, der sich in der zugehörigen Schrift nicht ausdrücken ließe. ... Die Folgen der Schriftkultur sind vielfältig und nehmen in den einzelnen Gesellschaften ganz verschiedene Richtungen. Dabei spielt aber die Struktur des Schriftsystems, ideographisch oder phonographisch, alphabetisch oder syllabisch, konsonantisch oder vokalisiert, eine eher untergeordnete Rolle. Entscheidend ist vielmehr das Zusammenspiel einer Vielzahl von Faktoren, die innerhalb der einzelnen Kulturen und Epochen in jeweils anderen Konfigurationen wirksam werden" (München: C.H. Beck, 1992, pp.262f. and 301). Or, as was formulated by Aleida and Jan Assmann in their postscript to the volume *Schrift und Gedächtnis*: "Nur die Schrift bietet die gleichzeitige Präsenz von obsolet gewordener Vergangenheit und aktueller Gegenwart. In Griechenland, im Gegensatz zu Ägypten, hat diese Möglichkeit zu einer Ideenevolution geführt. In einer Gedächtniskultur" – a culture relying on unwritten memories – "sind derartige evolutionäre Prozesse von vornherein blockiert. Ob sie zum Durchbruch kommen, hängt aber – wie der Vergleich Griechenland und Ägypten zeigt – nicht unmittelbar an der Schrift, sondern an der Art, wie eine Kultur sich dieser bedient: ob sie sich zu ihrem Traditionsgut in der Geste der Wiederholung oder des Widerspruchs verhält... Nicht das Medium, sondern der Mensch, der sich seiner bedient, entscheidet nach Maßgabe seiner praktischen und kommunikativen Bedürfnisse sowie nach den Zwängen und Chancen seiner jeweiligen sozialen und politischen Verfaßtheit darüber, in welchem Umfang die Möglichkeiten neuer Orientierung genutzt werden, die das Medium bereitstellt" (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1983, p.278). Compare also Anna Morpurgo Davies' arguments against the idea that "the development or the interiorization of the alphabet ... is in fact responsible ... for a complete change in the modes of thought of the users" ("Forms of Writing in the Ancient Mediterranean World", in: Gerd Baumann, ed., *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, p.63). However, the thesis that without some sort of literacy the critical scrutiny of traditions is indeed not possible, and, by implication, that the cognitive status of traditions inevitably changes once writing permeates society, does not seem to be called into doubt by these authors. As Aleida Assmann recently wrote: "Man muß Verschiedenes

objectivized representation of spoken thought. Thus arises that very *distance* of the cognitive subject to its own mental contents, that very intellectual space, in which conceptuality and reflection can for the first time unfold. The ideas of contradiction and of coherence take shape, critical–rational thought emerges. Only with the appearance of writing does there occur the differentiation of legend and fact, of myth and knowledge.

Still, the age of manuscript culture remains, in important respects, an oral one. Texts are hard to produce and expensive to obtain; early manuscripts do not allow for silent reading;[19] the word of the teacher still dominates the learning process. As the Hungarian historian István Hajnal, writing on the High Middle Ages, observes:

> Though waxed tablets might have been widely employed in the course of quick composition and recording, the fact remains that the time–honoured methods of the education of the *clerici* centered around severe drilling via word–of–mouth... the text to be written must have taken definite and exact shape in the mind prior to its being 'copied' on parchment... It is well known how teaching at the universities proceeded without books and without writing: at the *lectio publica* a strictly compulsory traditional book in the teacher's hand; there is lecturing, detailed explanation, repeated over and over again... But the students themselves at their *hospitia* are preparing in advance for the text of the daily lecture, their masters and seniors reciting it loudly into their ears, and as soon as the lecture is over,

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gleichzeitig im Blick haben, bevor man irgend etwas als neuartig oder gar sich selbst als unabhängig und eigenständig begreifen kann. Diese Bedingung des Vergleichs ist erst durch die Schrift gewährleistet" ("Das Problem des Neuen und seine kulturgeschichtlichen Rahmenbedingungen", in: *IFK materialien* 1/94, p.44).

[19] Since word division was unknown, texts had to be read out loud before their meaning could be understood. Word separation was first adopted on the British Isles. This was, as Saenger puts it, "not the result of conscious paleographic reform but an accidental result of the traumatic contact in Ireland between the ossified literary traditions of late Roman antiquity and the oral culture of the illiterate Celts. ... eighth–century Saxon and Celtic priests, living on the fringes of what had been the Roman Empire, had a weak grasp of Latin and needed spaces between words to recognize them in order to pronounce liturgical texts correctly as they read aloud" (Paul Saenger, "Silent Reading: Its Impact on Late Medieval Script and Society, *Viator* 13 [1982], p.377). With word separation, written lines became "a series of comprehensible images intelligible to the reader without syllabic pronunciation" (*ibid.*). Lines and pages could now be scanned for reference consultation; memorization based on the pattern of the visual page became possible. Silent reading evolved throughout the Middle Ages. By the thirteenth century, the spread of individual heresies was one of the consequences. Before that, as Saenger puts it, "if one's intellectual speculations were heretical, they were subject to peer correction and control in the very act of their formulation and publication" *(loc. cit.,* p.399).

they repeat the text again and again. ... It is simply indispensable for a student to have groups of mates, and elders around him; they are his living educational tools, carriers of scientific material available for exercises.[20]

The technology of manual copying submerges the possibility to maintain individual authorship; and by the inevitable phenomenon of textual *decay* an objective illusion of ancient truths and progressive falsities is established. The disfigured references to dates, names, and places in historical narratives result in an intermingling of fact and legend. Manuscript literature does not foster a radical break with traditionality.

With the age of print, by contrast, there arises not only the possibility of independent learning, but also, through the wealth of books, a hitherto unknown world of reliable and constant texts. The biographies of different personalities cease to be merged with each other, portraits showing characteristic features are reproduced unchanged over the time, the framework of the modern individual is created. Standardized chronologies and taxonomies come into being; a space for unitary science and for cumulative and critical knowledge is established, the idea of progress emerges, modern historical consciousness is formed. As Elizabeth Eisenstein in her *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* observes:

More abundantly stocked bookshelves obviously increased opportunities to consult and compare different texts. Merely by making more scrambled data available, by increasing the output of Aristotelian, Alexandrian and Arabic texts, printers encouraged efforts to unscramble these data. Some medieval coastal maps had long been more accurate than many ancient ones, but few eyes had seen either. Much as maps from different regions and epochs were brought into contact in the course of preparing editions of atlases, so too were technical texts brought together in certain physicians' and astronomers' libraries. Contradictions became more visible; divergent traditions more difficult to reconcile. ... Before trying to account for an "idea" of progress we might look more closely at the duplicating process that made possible not only a sequence of improved editions but also a continuous accumulation of fixed records. For it seems to have been permanence that introduced progressive change.[21]

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20 Hajnal, "Universities and the Development of Writing in the XIIth–XIIIth Centuries", *Scriptorum. International Review of Manuscript Studies*, VI/2, 1952, pp.179f. Published translation slightly amended.

21 *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural*

In the age of the printed book, the functionality of a traditional transmission of knowledge – of *primary traditionality* – is strongly reduced, though of course such transmission, a *residual* and *marginal* traditionality as one might call it, still plays a role in law as custom and application, in established religions, in local cultures, in family life and in child–rearing, among the illiterate, and in face–to–face communication – on the margins of literacy. Non–reflective layers of behaviour, like skills, practical knowledge, inherited institutions, do indeed retain their importance; traditions in the strict sense of the word however cease to have a dominant function. Traditions in a culture of a fully developed literacy are essentially different from primary traditions: They can be doubted, reflected upon, criticized, abandoned or artificially created.

While with the advent of printing the role of traditions became less important, the *expression* itself, the word "tradition", gained ever language, new phenomena invariably come to be designated by the broader meanings. This is an entirely natural development: in the life of names of earlier, related phenomena. The Aristotelian passage from which I had quoted begins by asking how it came about that the word *nomos* had the meanings both of "song" and "law", and answers that the Greeks "called the earliest of their subsequent songs" – that is, their first written laws – "by the name as their earliest songs". Even though traditions committed to writing came to embody a mode of transmission very different from oral handing down, they did retain the name "tradition". Thus Paul could write: "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle" (2 Thess 2,15). Still, the connotation *oral tradition* remained dominant well until the eighteenth century. After that, it receded into the background. Attempts to retain, or indeed regain, the original concept became the exception rather than the rule. One such attempt was that of the folklorist Hartland whose name I mentioned already. In 1899 Hartland wrote:

It is now well established that the most civilized races have all fought their way slowly upwards from a condition of savagery. Now, savages can neither read nor write; yet they manage to collect and store up a considerable amount of knowledge of a certain kind. ... The knowledge, organization, and rules thus gathered and formulated are preserved in the memory, and communicated by

word of mouth and by actions of various kinds. To this mode of preservation and communication, as well as to the things thus preserved and communicated, the name of Tradition is given; and Folklore is the science of Tradition.[22]

The next attempt I have been able to locate was that of the Hungarian historian István Hajnal, in a paper he published in a French periodical in 1934.[23] Hajnal's paper did play a role in future developments – Harold Innis, and members of the so-called Toronto school, a current with which both Havelock and Ong have been associated, do refer to it – but it never became generally known. It was under the impact of Innis that McLuhan's views took shape; by 1955 David Riesman could combine McLuhan's approach with his own research on traditional versus modern societies; and in the early sixties then appeared the works by Goody and Watt, by Havelock, and somewhat later by Ong. These developments, however, had no impact whatsoever on the discussions within philosophy.

Let me here consider Thomas Kuhn, certainly an interesting figure in his own right, and in the present context especially relevant – due to the obvious influence his work had on MacIntyre's book *Whose Justice?* One should recall that Kuhn's notion of a *paradigm* has, in various commentaries, repeatedly been compared to that of traditions. In the formulation of M. D. King, for instance: "Faithfulness to the traditions which spring from paradigms or sets of paradigms is the hallmark of genuine 'science'. To break faith with established tradition is to risk being labelled a crank, a charlatan, or being made an 'outlaw'."[24] Or take David Hollinger, according to whom Kuhn has in fact applied to the history of science the conventional historiographic view of the part played by traditions in politics, arts, and the life of society in general.[25] Kuhn himself, too, has actually drawn a parallel between paradigmatic and traditional practices, most markedly in his early paper "The Essential Tension: Tradition and Innovation in Scientific Research"

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22 Edwin Sidney Hartland, *Folklore: What Is It and What Is the Good of It?* London: David Nutt, 1904 (1899). Repr. in R. M. Dorson, ed., *Peasant Customs and Savage Myths: Selections from British Folklorists,* Chicago Univ. Press, 1968, vol.I, p.231.
23 Cf. Etienne [István] Hajnal, "Le rôle social de l'écriture et l'évolution européenne", *Revue de l'Institut de Sociologie* (Bruxelles), 1934, pp.62ff.
24 King, "Reason, Tradition, and the Progressiveness of Science" (1971). Repr. in Gary Gutting, ed., *Paradigms and Revolutions: Appraisals and Applications of Thomas Kuhn's Philosophy of Science,* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980, pp.108f.
25 Hollinger, "T.S. Kuhn's Theory of Science and Its Implications for History", in: Gutting, ed., *Paradigms and Revolutions,* pp. 196ff.

(1959). But it certainly seems to be a confusion to call the alleged organizing principle of modern natural science a *tradition*. Surely paradigms, even if involving a dimension of practical handing–down, are fundamentally dependent on the printed textbook. Now we know in the meantime that Kuhn did not get his conclusions right, indeed did not get his *facts* right, when not realizing that his so–called "normal science" was the exceptional phenomenon, and scientific revolutions – mostly minor ones, to be sure, but still –were the rule. And one of the reasons for not getting this fact right must have been his projecting the connotations of traditions in the narrow sense – the connotations of deference, of convergent thinking – onto the tradition of science in the broad sense, i.e. onto a "tradition", if you insist, of controlled observation, critical reflection, and conceptual innovation. Of course Kuhn is not alone, among philosophers of science, in confusing the narrower and the broader senses of tradition. Certainly Polanyi is guilty of the same confusion, when, for instance, calling the *art of free discussion* a "tradition"[26] , or when speaking, generally, of *freedom* based on *tradition*.[27] Or take Larry Laudan, in whose term "research traditions", again, the narrower and the broader connotations of the word "tradition" intermingle. Thus when he refers to traditions as "sacrosanct"[28] , the connotations awakened are those of traditions in the original, narrow sense; but when he speaks of a tradition of "critical discussion"[29] , or indeed of the "choice" of a tradition,[30] what he exploits are the broader connotations of the word. As far as I can see, Stephen Toulmin is the only philosopher of science who has succeeded in conveying a sense of the historical and collective nature of the scientific enterprise without falling back upon the authoritarian connotations of "tradition". To achieve this, he coined a new term, that of a "transmit". As Toulmin writes:

> Historically developing natural sciences are essentially communal affairs, outlasting a single human generation, and cannot be characterized in terms of thoughts and procedures of individuals alone. ... the set of concepts representative of a historically developing discipline forms a *transmit*. ... The characteristic transmit of a science consists – and *necessarily* consists – in the communal or 'public' aspect of its concepts.[31]

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[26] Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith, and Society*(1946). Enl. ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, p.71.
[27] *Ibid.,*p.74.
[28] Laudan, *Progress and Its Problems: Toward a Theory of Scientific Growth,*Berkeley: 1977, pp.99f.
[29] *Ibid.,* p.130.
[30] *Ibid.,* p.109.
[31] Toulmin, *Human Understanding.* Vol.I: *The Collective Use and Evolution of*

What I am trying to do here is no more than to outline a very rough idea of the way an investigation into the theory of traditions could *begin*. Sketching the details of the course such an investigation might take, describing the topics it ought to cover, these I am not even attempting. But let me at least *list* some of them. There are the issues of the *psychological*, or emotional, role of traditions as contrasted with their cognitive role; of tradition, as contrasted with *style*, in art; of economic modernization in so–called traditional societies; of *national* traditions as contrasted with ethnic ones; further – as alluded to already – of the status of *religious* traditions in the modern world; and, of course, that of *customary law* as contrasted with law by legislation. Of these issues, that of customary vs. legislated law will play an important role in the present workshop; and that of national traditions has, these days once again, a particular political significance. So let me just say a few words about each in turn.

The term "law" is to–day generally taken to mean law by legislation, law by decree, statutory law. While this attitude of course properly re–flects the contemporary Western practice of law–making, it should be clear that the interpretation of law as law by legislation is neither historically adequate nor conceptually defendable. A good introduction to this issue is, I find, Bruno Leoni's book *Freedom and the Law*. As Leoni writes, and let me here quote him at some length:

> Only sixty years after the introduction of the German Civil Code and a little more than a century and a half after the introduction of the Code Napole'on the very idea that the law might not be identical with legislation seems odd both to students of law and to laymen. – Legislation appears today to be a quick, rational, and far–reaching remedy against every kind of inconvenience, as compared with, say, judicial decisions, the settlement of dispute by private arbiters, con–ventions, customs, and similar kinds of spontaneous adjustments on the part of individuals. ... ...fewer and fewer people now seem to realize that just as language and fashion are the products of the convergence of spontaneous actions and decisions on the part of a vast number of individuals, so the law too can, in theory, just as well be the product of a similar convergence in other fields. ... [By con–trast:] Both Roman and English history teach us, for instance, a completely different lesson from that of the advocates of inflated legislation in the present age. ... Both the Romans and the English shared the idea that the law is something to be *discovered* more than

to be *enacted*... The increasing importance of the legislative process in the present age has inevitably obscured, both on the European Continent and in the English-speaking countries, the fact that law is simply a complex of rules relating to the behavior of the common people.[32]

H.L.A. Hart, too, in his classic *The Concept of Law* stresses that although custom in the modern world is an element of law not widely considered to be important, it would be false to deny that there indeed are customs that are recognized as law by a particular legal system, or to say that customary rules will acquire the status of law in such a system only if courts apply them in particular cases. As Hart writes,

> it is not *necessarily* the case that until they are used in litigation customary rules have no status as law. ... Why should it not be true that, just as the courts recognize as binding the general principle that what the legislature enacts is law, they also recognize as binding another general principle: that customs of certain defined sorts are law? What absurdity is there in the contention that, when particular cases arise, courts apply custom, as they apply statute, as something which is already law and because it is law?[33]

In fact it is part of Hart's main thesis that even if "a legal system should provide that no customary rule should have the status of law until the courts ... declared that it should"[34] , no legal system could possibly function if it had no recourse to customs or, to use Hart's technical term, to "primary rules of obligation"[35] .

Indeed there are a number of reasons for maintaining that customary law is, or should be, an indispensable element of any legal system. Without it the system is, first, *unpredictable* (politically uncertain), secondly *ambiguous* (logically uncertain), thirdly *myopic* (lacking long-term experience), and fourthly *vacuous* (not creating obligations). Let me briefly take up these four points.

The first point: unpredictability. It appears that law by legislation is "certain" in the sense that it is precise and recognizable – but of course only as long as it is in force. However, as Leoni puts it,

> people can never be certain that the legislation in force today will be

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[32] Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1961, pp.4f., 7, 9f., 84, 87f.
[33] Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961, pp.45f.
[34] *Ibid.*
[35] *Ibid.*,p.89.

in force tomorrow or even tomorrow morning. The legal system centered on legislation, while involving the possibility that other people (the legislators) may interfere with our actions every day, also involves the possibility that they may change their way of interfering every day. As a result, people are prevented not only from freely deciding what to do, but from foreseeing the legal effects of their daily behavior.[36]

Indeed it turns out that law by legislation is in *no* sense certain; the certainty it promises is an illusion. This conclusion emerges when we consider the second point: ambiguity. For it is simply not the case – and here we come to a point of crucial logical importance bearing on the notions not only of custom and law, but quite generally on those of rules and norms, too – that legislation, amounting to "communication of general standards by explicit general forms of language"[37] , will not leave room for uncertainties of *interpretation*. Application of law presupposes the "capacity to recognize particular acts, things, and circumstances as instances of the general classifications which the law makes"[38] , such recognition however will seem unproblematic only in familiar cases, cases "constantly recurring in similar contexts"[39] . In less familiar cases there will be a range of possibilities left open by the general rule; just as by the transmission of customary law through examples representing "traditional standards of behaviour"[40] . As Hart writes:

> Particular fact-situations do not await us already marked off from each other, and labelled as instances of the general rule, the application of which is in question; nor can the rule itself step forward to claim its own instances.[41]

Applying a rule, then, in effect always involves a choice, though that choice need not be "arbitrary or irrational"[42] . And since examples or precedents are, as it were, the embodiments both of customs or rules *and* their applications, one could even say that examples convey more than do general rules, or that they convey with less ambiguity. This seems to have been Kant's view in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and perhaps it will be conducive to the proper philosophical mood of the

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[36] *Freedom...,*p.8.
[37] Hart, *Concept...*, p.122.
[38] *Ibid.,* p.121.
[39] *Ibid.,* p.123.
[40] *Ibid.,* p.122.
[41] *Ibid.,* p.123.
[42] *Ibid.,* p.124.

discussions to follow if I quote the relevant passage in full: "If understanding in general is to be viewed as the faculty of rules", writes Kant,

> judgment will be the faculty of subsuming under rules; that is, of distinguishing whether something does or does not stand under a given rule... General logic contains, and can contain, no rules for judgment. ... If it sought to give general instructions how we are to subsume under these rules, that is, to distinguish whether something does or does not come under them, that could only be by means of another rule. This in turn, for the very reason that it is a rule, again demands guidance from judgment. And thus it appears that, though understanding is capable of being instructed, and of being equipped with rules, judgment is a peculiar talent which can be practised only, and cannot be taught. It is the specific quality of so-called mother-wit... Deficiency in judgment is just what is ordinarily called stupidity, and for such a failing there is no remedy. ... A physician, a judge, or a ruler may have at command many excellent pathological, legal, or political rules, even to the degree that he may become a profound teacher of them, and yet, none the less, may easily stumble in their application. For, although admirable in understanding, he may be wanting in natural power of judgment. He may comprehend the universal *in abstracto*, and yet not be able to distinguish whether a case *in concreto* comes under it. Or the error may be due to his not having received, through examples and actual practice, adequate training for this particular act of judgment. Such sharpening of the judgment is indeed the one great benefit of examples[43].

Third: myopia. The argument that ancient customs embody a wisdom superior to that of the now living is of course itself age-old. It was known to the Romans and vehemently restated in seventeenth–century England, to be repeated by Burke in the eighteenth. Of the seventeenth–century discussion J.G.A. Pocock's *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*[44] provides a detailed discussion. Summing up some main ideas of Sir John Davies's preface to his *Irish Reports* (1612), Pocock writes:

> Written laws contain no more than the wisdom of one man or one generation, whereas custom in its infinite complexity contains the wisdom of many generations, who have tested it by experience, submitting it to a multitude of demands, and by retaining it have

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[43] A132–134.
[44] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957.

shown that it has proved equal to them all.[45]

Against the thesis of immemorial wisdom the counter–argument by Bentham that earlier generations could not have foreseen the new problems facing later ones is of course valid; but it seems that reference to the past here is, once more, a simplified way of expressing a difficult idea of more general validity: the idea that knowledge pertaining to legal affairs is embedded in those affairs themselves; is dispersed in society; is such that it *cannot be centralized*. Leoni does hint at this when quoting Cicero on Cato:

> "the reason why our political system was superior to those of all other countries was this: the political systems of other countries had been created by introducing laws and institutions according to the personal advice of particular individuals... Our state, on the contrary, is not due to the personal creation of one man, but of very many; it has not been founded during the lifetime of any particular individual, but through a series of centuries and generations. For he said that there never was in the world a man so clever as to foresee everything and that even if we could concentrate all brains into the head of one man, it would be impossible for him to provide for everything at one time without having the experience that comes from practice through a long period of history."[46]

Leoni here goes on to refer to Ludwig von Mises's argument as regards the impossibility of central economic planning.[47] And I go on to my fourth point: vacuity. Legislation entirely disconnected from custom possesses no authority, does not create duties or obligations. Laws enacted by it might command obedience, as coercive orders – orders backed by threats – do, but will lack what Hart calls the "internal aspect" of rules: such laws will just not serve as *standards* by which members of the community judge behaviour in terms of right or wrong. However, to emphasize this means, from the point of view of the present workshop, to refer to the *problem*, not to the solution. Are customs in law *traditions*? The question is partly one of terminology, but also one of *analysis* – once in other areas of our joint investigations the terminology becomes agreed upon. Recall the point made by Maine already, namely that customs might actually *originate* in judicial sentences.[48] In the old days the will of the king could become custom;

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[45] *Ancient Constitution,* p.34.
[46] *Freedom...,* p.89.
[47] *Ibid.,* p.90.
[48] Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and its Relation to Modern Ideas* (1861), with an intr. and notes by Sir

and even in modern societies, the legislated law of yesterday quite often becomes the folk custom of today – an instance of *gesunkenes Kulturgut*. Another point: can customs in law, once written down, still be regarded as *customs*? Jack Goody, for one, does not think so. As he puts it in his *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*: "The very fact that laws exist in written form makes a profound difference, first to the nature of its sources, secondly to the ways of changing the rules, thirdly to the judicial process, and fourthly to court organization. Indeed it touches upon the nature of rules themselves."[49] As Plato already saw, "law" is a "wrong term" for unwritten customs; but still he maintained that these very customs are

> the bonds of the entire social framework, linking all written and established laws with those yet to be passed. They act in the same way as ancestral customs dating from time immemorial, which by virtue of being soundly established and instinctively observed, shield and protect existing written law.[50]

On the other hand contemporary society can obviously *not* rely on un-written customs. I admit I feel at a loss here. Should we realize that modern experience will, ultimately, force us to abandon the concept of legal obligation, of duty – or should we maintain that in the sphere of law *oral* traditions, even today, would have to play an indispensable role?

Now similar uncertainties need not arise with respect to *national tradi-tions*. Nationalism might appear to the observer as a perplexing phenomenon – actually it is one of the most successfully analyzed topics in social science. The course of its history has been charted; the essentials of its causes and functions have been laid bare. We are, by now, in a position to know that only with the spread of literacy, in the age of the printed text, did nations, in the sense we today attach to that term, come into being; and that so-called national traditions are conscious historical fictions – *artificial traditions*. As Eric Hobsbawm writes in his introduction to the volume *The Invention of Tradition*[51] :

> "invented traditions" are highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the "nation", with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the

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Frederick Pollock, London: 1906, pp.4ff.
[49] Cambridge: 1986, p.134.
[50] Plato, *The Laws*, transl. Trevor J. Saunders, Penguin Books, 1970. Book VII.
[51] Eric Hobsbawm – Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

rest... the peculiarity of "invented" traditions is that the continuity with [the historic past] is largely factitious. ... they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations.

Nationalism, the ideology and movement aiming at the establishment of a nation–state, is basically an instrument for facilitating monopolistic competition in the era of modernization. As Karl W. Deutsch had put it in his *Nationalism and Social Communication*:

the rise of industrialism and the modern market economy ... offer economic and psychological rewards for successful group alignments to tense and insecure individuals – to men and women uprooted by social and technological change, exposed to the risks of economic competition... In a competitive economy or culture, nationality is an implied claim to privilege. It emphasizes group preference and group peculiarities, and so tends to keep out all outside competitors.[52]

The *material* out of which national traditions are fabricated is of course real; it is provided by *folklore*. A book I here find particularly enlightening is William M. Wilson's *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland*, a book which, as the author says, focusses

almost exclusively on Finland, but the aim has been larger – to trace thoroughly in one country the history of an idea that has borne fruit in many lands, the romantic nationalistic idea that in order to survive and to maintain its independence, a nation must continually re-create itself in the image of its noble and heroic past and that it must seek that past in folklore.[53]

Nationalism is a phenomenon connected to the age of fully developed literacy not only in the sense that it presupposes a mobility of the labour force inconceivable without a relatively high level of standardized education,[54] but also in the sense that so–called national traditions are invariably the constructions of unstable and rootless *intellectuals*, craving for fame and fortune. This latter state of affairs has been amply demonstrated by historical researach;[55] it is today, once

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52 Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality*, London: 1953, pp.75f. See also the classic discussion by Ernest Gellner in his *Thought and Change*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964, pp. 164ff.

53 Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1976, p. 205.

54 As shown in Ernest Gellner's classic, *Nations and Nationalism*, Blackwell, 1983.

55 See esp. Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. This is a revised version of Hroch,

more, sadly corroborated by the part intellectuals played in the rise of the most radical form of nationalism in this region, the new wave of Serbian particularism. However, as the Serbian case also shows, nationalism can, under circumstances, very well be a post–typographic affair. In the history and distinctive mythology of Serbian particularism orally transmitted epic folk poetry has always played a specific role; today the oral tradition is taken up and intensified by electronic mass media, the vehicles of the new, "secondary", orality.[56] And this observation brings me to the concluding topic of these notes, that of traditions in the age of electronic communication.

The wane of the sociological importance of traditions is a result, as I have tried to explain, of the transition from a primary oral culture to a culture of writing and printing. Now since what *today* seems to be taking place is actually a *different* transition – one from literacy to a secondary orality (Ong's term), carried by the electronic technologies of the telephone, radio, television, sound and video tapes – the question to ask is whether that transition does not imply, once more, a rise of traditional ways and patterns? Certainly the new technologies do have aspects that tend to weaken the rational and reflective structures fostered by literacy. Thus already the telegraph brings back, with the mode of composition it compels, some of the fragmentary character of spoken language – *der verwünschte Telegrammenstil*, about which Nietzsche, driven to brevity by his failing eyesight, complains.[57] The telegraph–based newspaper becomes a mosaic of unrelated reports, lacking the unified point of view created by the printed book.[58] Telephone and radio re–establish the cognitive dependence on utterances voiced and heard – the message of the moment. Eric Havelock recalls the "oral spell" of an open air radio address he was listening to in 1939 – a speech from Hitler, "transmitted in the twinkling of an eye, across thousands of miles"[59] . Milan Kundera can today speak of "the irresistible flood of received ideas which – inscribed in computers, propagated by the mass media – threaten soon to become a force that will crash all original thought, and will thus smother the very essence of modern European culture".[60] However, the prevalent view still

Die Vorkämpfer der nationalen Bewegungen bei den kleinen Völkern Europas: eine vergleichende Analyse zur gesellschaftlichen Schichtung der patriotischen Gruppen, Prague: Universita Karlova, 1968.

[56] See esp. the papers by Mojmir Krizan and by John R. Lampe in *Studies in East European Thought,* vol. 46, Nos.1–2, Junie 1994.

[57] Letter to Köselitz, Nov. 5, 1879.

[58] Cf. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* New York: 1964, p.249.

[59] Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, p.32.

[60] *The New York Review of Books,* June 13, 1985, p.11.

seems to be that, even in the age of secondary orality, literacy does retain its dominant position. This is the view also of Walter Ong. As he puts it:

> The new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas... But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based ... on the use of writing and print.[61]

Yet there are two problems here that remain open. First, what is the impact of electronic media in cultures that have not, by the time of that impact, reached the stage of fully developed literacy? Secondly, does not the nature of literacy itself change, once writing is entrusted to electronics – that is, to the *word processor*? It was David Riesman who drew attention to the first problem, and the answer he arrived at was a rather pessimistic one. Considering in particular the parallels between oral transmission and the *film*, he pointed out:

> Books bring with them a detachment and critical attitude that is not possible in a society dependent on the spoken word. We can occasionally have second thoughts about a speech, but we cannot hear it, as we can read a book, backwards as well as forwards – that is, the writer can be checked up on in a way that the speaker or ... the movie-maker ... cannot be. ... When a whole society depends on what individuals can remember, it can hardly help depending on every device of the demagogue and the poet: rhyme, rhythm, melody, structure, repetition.[62]

Riesman suggests that although the spread of electronic audio-visual communication does obviously disrupt local communities and local traditions, it might well perpetuate, and indeed bring back, the cognitive attitudes characteristic of traditionality.

And now to the second problem, that of a possible relevant effect of electronic word processing. Written texts today increasingly tend to be produced, stored, and transmitted with the help of computers. The implications are profound; let me begin, however, by summarizing some of the immediately evident ones. A text composed on a word processor is revised, edited, formatted and re-formatted, printed, and even published, with very little effort. Writing on a word processor is

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[61] Ong, *Orality and Literacy,* p.136.
[62] Riesmann, *The Oral Tradition, the Written Word and the Screen Image,* Yellow Springs, Ohio: Antioch Press, 1956, p.8.

easy both in the sense of permitting for the provisory, the draft, the experiment, and in the sense of allowing for ready use of bits of texts already there – of one's own texts, or of texts written by others, the latter effortlessly amalgamated with the former. Huge masses of writings, contemporary and classical, become available either on tape, CD–ROM, and disk, or through networks, providing access to databases of various kinds, among them to electronic editions of a growing number of scholarly journals. Networking becomes, increasingly, a matter of course, especially since joining the e–mail community is an unavoidable must. This last point can be spelled out by saying that when one inquires about the sociological consequences of the use of word processors, the question ultimately relates to the word processor as enmeshed in a network. And let me here make the observation that the practice of networking undermines the habit of producing *printouts*. When paper is not needed to mediate between the writer and his reader, it will be less and less used to mediate between the writer and himself.

Even the isolated word processor however, even with the documents written on it regularly printed out, will give rise – I am now coming to the less obvious implications – to patterns of behaviour, in particular of linguistic behaviour, and indeed to patterns of thinking, that are significantly different from the patterns created, say, by typing and book printing. The text of a printed book or article is a finished product, is there to be referred to, looked up, read, reflected upon, criticized. By contrast, a text on the word processor's display is there to be *updated* – to be altered, revised. As Richard Dimler has put it: For the user of a word processor, language has "become dynamic rather than static, malleable rather than fixed, soft rather than hard, plastic rather than rigid. As a consequence language never seems to reach a finished stage"[63] . When a text is changed, the original wording usually vanishes without a trace. It is not there, anymore, on the display; and if the corrections were made in a printout in the first place, the printout is subsequently thrown away. Of course one *can* keep old printouts, and of course one can save the older versions of one's files – but there would have to be a special reason for one to do so. Texts stored in a word processor bear no marks of their history, they are ageless, they possess no temporal existence of their own. And by being subject to continual re–writing, they have a merely limited objectivity not just of meaning, but of form as well. When deliberated over, they will not be interpreted, they will be altered. Thinking about them is, typically,

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[63] G. Richard Dimler, S.J., "Word Processing and the New Electronic Language", *Thought,* vol.61, no.243 (Dec. 1986), p.463.

changing them. As Michael Heim puts it in his *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing*: "The immediacy of formulation in digital writing is akin to the immediacy of speaking. ... word processing reclaims something of the direct flow of oral discourse."[64] Also, as Dimler already observed, word processing "fosters a modular style in writing", "the writer will be tempted to repeat set formulas and phrases, a linguistic throw-back to the ancient 'singers of tales' who used oral formulas as mnemonic devices in recounting the great historic epics"[65].

Just as speaking, as a rule, is less coherent than writing, a text composed on screen tends to be less coherent than a text composed in handwriting or on the typewriter. The reason for this is clear. Maintaining coherence is a matter of comparing texts with each other, as well as of comparing one bit of a text with other bits of the same text. On screen such comparisons can be executed to a very limited extent only. Depending on the system used and the kind of display available, one, two, or even more documents can be viewed simultaneously; but of each document only a small segment will be exposed at a time. A synoptic view of all accessible and relevant documents, or even of a single extended document, is not possible to attain. Contradictions become difficult to spot; the unity of the text difficult to sustain. A decrease in logical rigor is the inevitable consequence. One might perhaps formulate the preliminary conclusion that using a word processor will give rise to a combination of pre-literal *and* typographic thought patterns. The kind of thinking thus emerging is fluid, fragmentary, formulaic, with no unity of perspective, and a diminishing sense of the self. At the same time it can rely on texts that are *given*, are there to be retrieved.

Now these characteristics are of course vastly amplified when the word processor becomes connected to a network. The basic form of net-working is e-mail, and it is fascinating to observe how closely the style of e-mail messages tends to resemble that of spoken language.[66] E-mail texts abound with false starts and incoherent sentences. The apparent reason for this is that e-mail letters arc, commonly, written in software surroundings which allow for corrections only to a very

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[64] New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, pp.154 and 209.

[65] Dimler, *op.cit.*, p.464.

[66] A recent summary of relevant research is given by Jacques Leslie, "Mail Bonding: E-mail is creating a new oral culture", *Wired*, March 1994, pp.42–48. While stressing the aspect of a new orality fostered by e-mail, Leslie also refers to findings according to which: "E-mail isn't just one thing – it has a multivalent character... Part of it falls under the norms and behavior of conversation, and another part falls under the norms and behavior of text."

limited degree. The resulting text then contains any number of mistakes, mostly innocent, but sometimes amounting to a truly Freudian spectacle – and still the message gets dispatched, because one is in a hurry and does not want to start all over again. And here I think the element of hurrying constitutes the essential reason, and the limitations in editing are merely a corollary. After all, as you of course know, e-mail messages can indeed be composed in subtle word processing surroundings, permitting any degree of careful consideration; but switching to an appropriate text editor takes time. Instead, the technical possibility of sending off an e-mail letter *on the spot* will be seized on. You read your mail and answer it – on the spur of the moment, just like in a conversation.

Networking radically blurs the notion of individual authorship. Already at the level of simple word–processing, cooperative writing is easy, co–authors can readily revise and complement each other's texts. With networking, one's ideas emerge and evolve in surroundings in which the ideas of many other persons are incessantly and actively present, affecting one's ideas, and themselves being affected by them. As Stevan Harnad, the editor of *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* with prophetic zeal emphasizes, the pursuit, as well as the dissemination, of *scientific knowledge* is thereby fundamentally restructured. Scholarly inquiry, says Harnad, "is likely to become a lot more participatory, though perhaps also more depersonalized, with ideas propagating and permuting on the net in directions over which their originators would be unable (and indeed perhaps unwilling) to claim proprietorship."[67]

Today's sophisticated word–processor user, immersed, through the network, in an endless flux of texts he can seize and repeat without reflecting upon them, losing, gradually, the notions of originality and individual authorship, might in fact become less of an autonomous thinker and more of a bearer of what is delivered unto him. That is, literacy itself might undergo a transformation such that it enhances, rather than counteracts, the effects of audio–visual communication. With collective consciousness increasingly embodied in a medium both accessible and active, and with the power of received ideas on the rise, one could certainly speak of the threat – or the promise – of a kind of *secondary traditionality*. To investigate the conditions for, and implications of, the emergence of a secondary traditionality seems to me today to be an urgent dimension of any attempt at elaborating a theory of traditions.[68]

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[67] Stevan Harnad, "Scholarly Skywriting and the Prepublication Continuum of Scientific Inquiry", *Psychological Science* 1 (1990).

[68] Let me here add some brief and incomplete references to some of the relevant

literature not touched upon in the foregoing. The best overall survey of the connotations of "tradition" is an essay by Dan Ben–Amos, "The seven strands of *tradition*: varieties in its meaning in American folklore studies" (*J. of Folklore Research* 21/2–3 [1984]). As befits a folklorist, Ben–Amos stresses the element of oral tradition, but also covers a variety of other aspects. Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965, is rewarding. A classic treatment of the *theological* issues pertaining to the notion of tradition is August Deneffe S.J., *Der Traditionsbegriff*, Münster/Westf.: 1931. Richard Bauckham and Benjamin Drewery, eds., *Scripture, Tradition and Reason: A Study in the Criteria of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: 1988) is a useful recent collection; Werner H. Kelber's *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA, Fortress Press, 1983) is essential. The modern tendency to interpret traditions in a broad, rather vague sense is represented by Edward Shils' classic paper, "Tradition and Liberty: Antinomy and Interdependence", *Ethics* LXVIII/3 (April 1958). Shils here emphasizes that traditions foster social cohesion, but contrasts the adherence to "normal tradition" with *traditionalism* which is "the self-–conscious, deliberate affirmation of traditional norms, in full awareness of their traditional nature and alleging that their merit derives from that traditional transmission from a sacred origin. This is a revivalist, enthusiastic attitude. It is always dogmatic and doctrinaire... it does not discriminate between the workable and the unworkable...". Normal traditions, Shils stresses, are an indispensable basis of *liberal values*. "The traditional affirmation of liberty", he writes, "resembles any other traditional affirmation. As such it draws strength from the traditional outlook in other spheres, e.g. the respect for family traditions and for religious traditions, however widely these might differ in content from the tradition of liberty. The disruption of non–liberal traditions in a free society might well have a disruptive effect on the traditions of freedom in that society." A rather different picture emerges from Shils' celebrated book *Tradition*, London: Faber and Faber, 1981, a book which I find boring, flat, and overly repetitive. Shils here stresses the technical terms "substantive tradition" ("traditions which maintain the received") and "substantive traditionality" ("the appreciation of the accomplishments and wisdom of the past and of the institutions especially impregnated with tradition"), retaining, for the term "tradition" itself, the widest possible meaning: "Tradition means many things. In its barest, most elementary sense, it means simply a *traditum*; it is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present." – The idea that without an adherence to traditions there can be no liberty, goes back, of course, to Burke; and it was given a memorable expression by F.A. von Hayek in his 1945 talk "Individualism: True and False" (in: Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* [1949], London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976). The themes of Shils' "Tradition and Liberty" paper are taken up in numerous writings by S.N. Eisenstadt, see e.g. his "Intellectuals and Tradition" (*Daedalus*, Spring 1972 – tradition, Eisenstadt here writes, should be seen as "the reservoir of the most central social and cultural experiences prevalent in a society, as the most enduring element in the collective social and cultural construction of reality"), his "Post–Traditional Societies and the Continuity and Reconstruction of Tradition" (*Daedalus*, Winter 1973), or his *Tradition, Change, and Modernity*, New York: 1973. It is the Burke–Hayek–Shils view of traditions as forming an indispensable factor of social cohesion even in modern societies that has been recently reiterated by Alasdair MacIntyre.