

Writing and reading in the Greek auditory culture

In order to be able to read a written or printed text, a reader needs the so-called reading aids, usually a visual gap where the words are separated along with the necessary punctuation, such as the full stop, the comma, the semicolon or colon and the question mark in prose texts, and the break between lines in poetry, which indicates the metrical structure. But when we realize that the written texts of ancient Greek literature lack all these self-evident reading aids, we understand that the recording of these texts had only archival value and was not suitable for reading. Moreover, these texts deliver in written form only the pure and “verbatim” speech and offer no help for their oral performance in front of listeners since they do not mark the rising and falling of the tone or the long and short syllables, which means that these texts lack any trace of musical accompaniment, which is nevertheless a necessary feature of all kinds of recitation.

What is striking and remarkable here, however, is that these deficiencies were never recognized as such and that this should somehow be rectified.

From all this we finally conclude that writing is indeed a valuable tool as it contributes to archiving texts of poetic and rhythmic prose, but cannot be seen as an inhibiting factor that would challenge the priority of the auditory culture.

The texts that have gone through the process of being written down are therefore neither suitable nor intended for silent reading, but can only be re-read by a reader-listener on condition that they are properly recited, sung or melodically read, as intended by the poet or prose composer. In other words, what we read today was then heard.

The singer-reader makes the words resonate as he or she channels the predetermined pitch and duration of the tone into a correct and artful kind of reading. And the reader-listener was once trained to be able not only to perceive the poetic or rhythmic speech correctly through listening, but also to utter the relevant text himself in the proper way. This applies not only to the Homeric hexameters in the Aeolian-Ionian dialect, whose recitation was the job of the rhapsodists, but also to the lyrical work of the “poets”, as well as to the texts of the tragedies and comedies, when they were recited by professional actors with the accompaniment of musical instruments.

And whoever, as master of his house, would like to present, in the context of a symposium, certain texts to his guests, he would have to charge the “domestic” professional servant, i.e. the “boy” of the house, to practice these texts sufficiently, that is to learn them by heart, so as to be able to deliver them with the required and appropriate rhythm to the audience of the symposium. The master of the house would not recite them himself because reading them without the necessary aids would be tantamount to deciphering them. Moreover, the risk of being ridiculed while attempting a melodic recitation was great if, for example, his voice was not suitable for the task. And this, even when the master of the house, especially if he was called Plato or Aristotle, was familiar with both reading and writing.

These “boys” (paides) had the required special knowledge of reading in this limited field, but they did not need to go deeper into the text they were presenting. They read, they recited. They did not read as we do today. They did not study. Let us recall here the critical remark by a fellow banqueter in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* (*Memoirs*), who said that rhapsodists had the ability to present Homer’s epics, but were otherwise “idiots” (elithioi).

Since everyday oral speech with elements of the local or supra-local dialect was hardly ever recorded, the texts archived in papyrus scrolls or on stone stelae are as a rule documents of poetic or rhythmic speech anyway. And in order to be received and understood by listeners, they had to be set to music. A musical setting that the poet or composer or writer had decided while writing his speech, and that the listener had learned while attending the listening lesson.

This ultimately means: only if the student had practiced listening to certain texts according to the intended conception of the composer and the corresponding musical accompaniment, and then had memorized and stored them in his long-lasting memory, only then would he be able to dispense with auxiliary interventions in the written form of a text, such as, for example, the spaces between words.

Consequently, “readers” in the current sense of the word are not encountered. And if then the verb *anagignosko* had the meaning “to recognize anew” (*recognosco*), it becomes obvious that for this process there must have been a preceding “acquire knowledge” (*cognosco*). In the course of an elementary school, in which reading and writing were taught, both reading and writing functioned then in a way completely opposite to today. The teaching process was aimed at guiding the pupil in memorizing the text that he had practiced listening to along with its musical setting. The pupils were not, after all, taught to read and write so that they could later do their own reading and writing.

The wax tablets, which have survived from the regular lessons of the Hellenistic era in Egypt, prove exactly this: in the lesson, students were taught first the individual letters and their possible combinations, then individual words – in the form in which they came up in the text! And then simple sentences that were written and learned ... by heart.

The pupil, that is to say, filed these texts away, but not on his wax tablet or, of course, on paper. In fact he erased the text from his tablet as soon as he had learned it by heart in its artistic form and had registered it in his memory in order to record a new text in its place. So the “library” was in the mind of each student. It was a *textual library* and was not to be found on any scroll he might have in his possession. But because he knew that these texts, which he had learned by heart and had stored in his memory also existed in written form on papyrus, he could, if he had the necessary means, have them copied.

But where had these ‘boys’, who in the meantime had developed into professional readers, learned reading and writing themselves? Did they, those unfree youngsters, have access to public systems of elementary education?

Recent scholarly research attests to this. The profession of elementary school teacher could be practiced by anyone having the requisite skills because the lesson was certainly not free. These “teachers of elementary level” (*grammatistai*) were not particularly respected because they had to fight for their daily bread in front of the eyes of the world. And on top of that they were also embarrassed by their competitors. In other words: the quality of the lesson depended not only on the quality and knowledge of the teacher but also on the resources invested in finding the best and most expensive teacher to teach the lesson properly and consistently.

Besides, there is enough evidence that a large part of the citizens could participate in basic elementary education, i.e. they could learn to read and write. And this led scientists in later years in Western Europe, after the Italian Renaissance, to assuming that this knowledge was in everyday use. Indeed, in general, there is talk of a relatively early transition from orality to the use of writing, and of the evolution of the Greek culture of orality into a culture of writing. This opinion is contradicted not only by the aforementioned lack of any kind of reading aids, but also by the absence of any evidence as to how the music dressing was implemented.

Apart from this we must turn our attention to the fact of the continuous and sustained presence of a Greek auditory culture from antiquity, through the Middle Ages, up to the threshold of modern times. An auditory culture against which the culture of writing was clearly subordinate and always in a secondary position.

Modern Greek literature evolves in the 19th century into a European art of word/speech, literally *logotechnia*, as opposed to the European *literature*, *Literatur*, *letteratura* and *Belles Lettres*, from the Latin *litterae*, the letters. But when word/speech dominates, this kind of literature has other concepts and demands on writing and reading. So when we abandoned the principle “what we read we hear”, so

that we too became readers with our eyes, leaving aside reading with our ears, i.e. the reader-singer and the reader-listener, we finally became fit for the European culture of writing.

In the folk tradition, however, *melotechnia* and *rhythmotechnia* flourish to this day, alongside the *logotechnia*. The roots of modern Greek culture lie right here. And when we observe that even today, at every feast, at every celebration, Greeks immediately take up the song and set up the dance, we realize that this tradition of the Platonic unity of *melos* “word, harmony and rhythm” is not only ancient, but one of the most constant elements of Greek culture throughout the centuries.

Μετάφραση στα Αγγλικά Λεωνίδας Καρατζάς