Dissolving the Primeval Community with a Book: Literacy Meets Marx and Engels in the Anglo-Saxon World.

Michele Gater

Department of English

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."¹ So say Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, first published in Germany in 1847. This initial statement is qualified by Engels in the English edition of the *Manifesto*, published in 1888. He says, in a footnote,

That is, all written history. In 1847, the pre-history of society, the social organisation existing previous to recorded history, was all but unknown. Since then, Haxthausen discovered common ownership of land in Russia, Maurer proved it to be the social foundation from which all Teutonic races started in history, and, by and by, village communities were found to be, or to have been, the primitive form of society everywhere from India to Ireland. The inner organisation of this primitive communistic society was laid bare, in its typical form, by Morgan's crowning discovery of the true nature of the *gens* and its relation to the *tribe*. With the dissolution of the primeval communities, society begins to be differentiated into separate and finally antagonistic classes.²

This footnote raises an issue which Engels fails to pick up. He suggests a connection between written history and the dissolution of the primeval communities. Yet why should all written history be the history of class struggles?³

It is my contention that Engels, while having a somewhat limited understanding of class division (basing it, as he did, on property ownership and, thus, economics) inadvertently hit upon an aspect of class division that existed in England from roughly 597 AD until early in the twentieth century: the "spectre" of literacy.

The Anglo-Saxon period of English history begins in about 440, when the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians are first invited to Britain to help the British against the marauding Picts, and carry out an invasion of their own by taking over the whole country and pushing the British into Scotland, Wales and Cornwall. The period ends in 1066 when William the Conqueror does what he's named for and conquers the English at Hastings. Covering a period of six centuries, the Anglo-Saxon period sees enormous changes on social, political and religious fronts. To name just a few significant events, the period sees the various tribes form into a single nation under one king (this happens during the reign of Athelstan, 924-39), Vikings come and go and manage to wreak a lot of havoc, the Anglo-Saxons interestingly produce 2 written histories: Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and the Anglo-Saxons go from being idol-worshipping pagans to

² Marx & Engels, p.32.
³ Indeed, while Teutonic races may well have started with a social foundation of common land ownership, there is evidence of individual land ownership before the written record of history.
upright and, at times, enthusiastic Christians. This begins in 597, a date I have already mentioned in connection with literacy.

In 597, Augustine arrived in Kent with a mission from Pope Gregory to convert the Anglo-Saxons. Prior to Augustine’s arrival, Anglo-Saxon society was an oral culture. It only became aware of literacy through the conversion to Christianity, a book-based religion. Because the Bible is of such importance to the dissemination of Christian thought, it was paramount that the conversion to Christianity entailed a conversion to the written word. To say that this entailed a full-scale conversion to literacy, however, is incorrect.

Prior to 597, no one could acquire knowledge through the study of written texts. Therefore, everything from the baking of bread to the laws that govern society could only be learnt through what I call “the memorisation of experience”; that is, experience acquired through example (such as apprenticeship) or experience acquired through recitation (the declamation of laws or the recital of narratives containing moral codes or other instruction). As Walter Ong, a prominent oral-formulaic theorist, has argued,

An oral culture ... has nothing corresponding to how-to-do-it manuals for the trades... Trades were learned by apprenticeship (as they still largely are even in high-technology cultures), which means from observation and practice with only minimal verbalised explanation. The maximum verbal articulation of such things as navigation procedures, which were crucial to Homeric culture, would have been encountered not in any abstract manual-style description at all but in such things as [the] ... passage from the Iliad i.141-4, where the abstract description is embedded in a narrative presenting specific commands for human action or accounts of specific acts... Primary oral culture is little concerned with preserving knowledge of skills as an abstract, self-subsistent corpus.4

Putting aside the memorisation of experience through practical example, in the oral climate knowledge such as laws and codes of morality was generally disseminated through poetry. Poetry, especially oral poetry, has built into it many mnemonic devices, many features that allow for it to be remembered. These include rhythm, alliteration, repetition and formula. These devices remain in the poetry for some time after the arrival of literacy, and they do so for two reasons: firstly, literacy is a slow process, so a residually oral climate remains for some time, and secondly, these devices become literary conventions. They are considered, from long use, as the way good poetry is composed, so they stay in place well after the point when they were purely functional in poetic composition.

It is from this source of oral poetry, as well as archaeology, that we determine the make-up, including class structure, of Anglo-Saxon oral society. While such a society did evidently have class divisions and property ownership, an equality existed among these classes in terms of the dissemination of knowledge. A poet would recite his or her poetry to the community. Poetry was therefore a social event, engaging all levels of society who would all hear the same stories, the same morals and, thus, the same lessons.

With the conversion of the English this social role of poetry changed. With the onset of literacy, the need for these memorised records became increasingly lessened as laws, codes and other forms of knowledge were able to be written down and recorded, at first in a similar fashion to the oral works and then in increasingly abstract form. This reduction in the social

---

role of poetry resulted in three major causes of the "desocialisation" of society, or, as Engels would put it, "the dissolution of the primeval community".

Firstly, because they establish words as things, as physical manifestations upon a page, instead of as utterances soon to be lost, writing and print establish the personal possession of words (which eventually gives rise to legislation regarding copyright and leads to heavy penalties for plagiarism). A word, once spoken, is lost, but, once written, lasts forever. Thus, the written word can be owned. As Walter Ong says,

Persons in a primary oral culture can entertain some sense of proprietary rights to a poem, but such a sense is rare and ordinarily enfeebled by the common share of lore, formulas, and themes on which everyone draws. With writing, resentment at plagiarism begins to develop ... Typography had made the word into a commodity. The old communal oral world had split up into privately claimed freeholdings. The drift in human consciousness toward greater individualism had been served well by print.\(^5\)

While this "drift" is by no means complete in the Anglo-Saxon period (especially as the advent of print was over four centuries away), this "greater individualism" is already evidenced in the example of one of the few Anglo-Saxon poets whose names we know. While still using the mnemonic devices of oral poetry, in the poetry of Cynewulf we find the poet's runic signature inserted into the text of his poems as an obvious literary device. The existence of such a device proves the visual and, thus, literary nature of the poem. Runes represent both letters and words, and thus have a dual function in Cynewulf's text: the runes, which represent real words in their context, must be seen as runes and not Roman letters within the text in order that their phonemic or lettered significance can be seen to spell out the poet's name. In an oral recital of these poems the name of the poet would be lost because the clues to his name are visual and not aural: when heard as words they no longer stand out from the text as spelling the author's name.

The second way in which the social role of poetry lessens in significance is by the fact that literacy creates the assumption that literature is a personal, individual and introspective thing (a notion which reached its height in the Romantic and Victorian periods, and which today is still considered the norm). A declamation of a poem in an oral society suggests a social event: someone must declaim and someone must listen. In a literate society, especially one in which there exists the novel, reading becomes an individual act, not a social one. Interestingly, Ong notes that "There is no collective noun or concept for readers corresponding to 'audience'."\(^6\) As Ong further suggests, "Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself."\(^7\)

The evidence of this in Anglo-Saxon society exists in the personalised literature of the so-called "elegies", an important genre of extant Old English verse. In these poems, social ideals give way to individual ideals as the poetry tells of an individual's plight (usually of an exile removed from the society). These poems do not necessarily express social concerns or conventional, communal wisdom, but, rather, they outline personal wisdom codes that may be in direct contrast to social wisdom codes, and that come about through personal experience. As such, they encourage personal introspection in much the same way as the elegiac poetry of

\(^5\) Ong, p.131.
\(^6\) Ong, p.74.
\(^7\) Ong, p.69.
the Romantic period (from which time they received their name), and in contrast to the social poetry of the Anglo-Saxon period, such as the gnomic poems.

This personalisation of poetry is also seen to occur in the act of composition. Writing is a solitary act, as seen in the example of Cynewulf. Unlike the traditional oral poet who may well have been able to compose spontaneously in the very presence of his audience, Cynewulf writes of composing at night and, presumably, alone. Furthermore, Cynewulf personalises his poetry by speaking of his own plight within the world, and, as mentioned above, signing it in order that his readers may discover his name and seek solace for him through prayer.

The third way in which literacy changed the social role of poetry was by creating a new social class. By placing knowledge that had previously been publicly declaimed, and thus the public domain, into manuscripts, charters and books that were of obviously limited access, literacy established a new elite, raising a social barrier between those who were illiterate and those who could read. The old adage that knowledge is power is nowhere proven to be so true as in this case; for this limiting of access to knowledge meant that such knowledge, and the necessary power to function socially as this was set out in such texts, was in the hands of the few. As Franz Bäuml explains:

> By definition, no one is literate in a preliterate society, and the members of at least the social elite, if not of all social levels, are dependent on the oral tradition, and particularly oral narrative, for the knowledge necessary to execute their social functions in a culturally acceptable manner. Conversely, in a literate society culturally essential knowledge is transmitted in writing, and whoever has no ready access to it is also by definition - disadvantaged in respect to his ability to carry out social functions requiring such access.  

One extremely important place in which such "culturally essential knowledge" was housed was, of course, the Bible. The conversion of the English thus brought a new moral code (Christianity), a new linguistic code (Latin) and a new form of encoding (writing) that severely disadvantaged those who could not read it. This, naturally, put priests and other clerics in culturally and socially advantageous positions, making them a powerful social elite.

To the preliterate Anglo-Saxons who, through shared lore, shared wisdom and shared formulas, possessed, communally, the language of their verse, and heard it, as one communal group, through the very public event of recitation, the notions of the commodity of words, the personal nature of literature and the existence of class based on access to knowledge would have been alien. Yet with the introduction of writing, these things increasingly became familiar.

The advent of literacy was therefore a cultural and social revolution that had far reaching effects and that must be viewed on a par with the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By making literature a personal possession, not a shared one; by lessening the demand of the social event of story-telling, which subsequently led to the end of at least one sort of communal gathering; and by creating a social elite whose power lay in their acquisition of this new and revolutionary skill, the "Revolution of the Written Word" led to a dissolution of the primeval community of Anglo-Saxon society with effects which were

---

felt not just in the field of literature, but outside as well, and which still touch our lives today, through our own acts of reading and writing.
References


Early Anglo-Saxon villages were named after the leader of the tribe that is for everyone to know who was in charge. For example, Reading was Redda’s village where Redda was the local chieftain. Anglo-Saxons set up their ham or home, for example Billingham or Clapham, and their ton or town, for example, Harlington or Brighton, near the mouth of a river or in a sheltered bay. The Anglo-Saxon period gave rise to the English spoken language as well as the spread of the written English. Writing came with the introduction of Christianity. There appeared professional poets, and in 7th century the greatest monument to Anglo-Saxon poetry was the Poem of Beowulf was created. It tells the story of a brave pagan warrior and his battles with monsters and dragons. Legal system. Please go to The Marx-Engels Internet Archive to access the full list of documents available in English as well as other stuff like photos etc. Note: Only a selection of works is given below. Many works are available only in a few languages, but most of the language archives have works other than those shown below. A full listing of the works by Marx and Engels in each language is available from the link in the header of the table. In the table below, shows texts online inside the Marxists Internet Archive, shows texts online outside the Marxists Internet Archive. If your browser supports the Anglo-Saxon helmet (replica). Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, early 7th C - an ornamental trophy rather than a practical piece of war gear? (British Museum). Anglo-Saxon burial urn, 6th C. Lincolnshire (British Museum). “As well a well-wrought urn becomes the greatest ashes as half-acre tombs.” (Sir Thomas Browne, Hydriotaphia, Or Urne Buriall 1658). Silver penny with inscription “AELFRED REX SAXONVM” - Alfred, King of the Saxons (871-899). Alfred was first called “the Great” in the 16th C - his victory over the Danes, together with his championing of literacy and Christi