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1 A World Inscribed – Introduction

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In 1900 or thereabouts, Lorina Bulwer, an inmate of the Great Yarmouth workhouse in the east of England, produced a remarkable and extremely long letter. It was embroidered on samples of different kinds of material which she had sewn together to form a scroll of multi-coloured cloth, five metres long (Image 1.1). On her sampler scroll, Lorina stitched a rambling autobiography in which she spat out her anger at being confined to the workhouse, and more specifically to its female lunatic ward. She asserted her identity frequently, repeated her name many times and declared that she was free. Lorina Bulwer's sampler reminds us of the importance of writing at all levels of society, for both intimate and public purposes as well as in the process of identity formation. It also demonstrates that writing is ubiquitous, and often uses unexpected materials and unorthodox technologies. In this book, we examine the importance of writing at different social levels in a range of historical contexts across the world. As in the case of Lorina Bulwer, the discussion will take account of writing's institutional frameworks, its personal expressions and the range of material support it has adopted in past societies.

Historians have often used written documents, of course, whether produced by institutions of power or private individuals. On the whole, however, they have seen them as testimony, as windows through which we can learn more about some other aspect of historical reality. Thus we study the letters of soldiers in the First World War in the hope of

understanding first-hand what life was like in the trenches, and how the morale of the belligerent armies rose and fell. In plundering documents for data such as this, historians focus on the content rather than the form of the surviving texts of the past. Historians of writing have a different perspective. They seek to understand the nature and function of writing *as writing*. They study the phenomenon of writing itself in order to assess its social and cultural dimension.

Written documents are not merely windows on the past. They are objects in themselves, so their history must focus also in the changing relations between humans and these meaningful artefacts, which are extremely complex ones. Indeed, they result from past speakers' knowledge of the limits of their languages, from past artisans' knowledge of the potential of their technology and from social actors knowledge of the place for their discourses.

The insights of Armando Petrucci provide us with a valuable and succinct guide to the study of this inscribed world, when he wrote:

‘Every age and every society can be better understood and appreciated through studying the uses it makes of writing as an instrument, the ways in which writing and reading competence is distributed throughout society, and the functions that it attributes to scribal production and its various typologies.’¹

Petrucci understood that the use of writing in any society gives us a vital key to understanding its workings and its structures of power. The social distribution of literacy skills and the various functions assigned to writing reveal the essential characteristics of all

¹ Armando Petrucci, *Scrittura e popolo nella Roma Barocca, 1585-1721*, Rome (Quasar), 1982, p. 9.

social formations. Petrucci was indicating that the use of writing describes the fault-lines and divisions within society, for instance between powerful clerico-bureaucratic elites and a mass of poor peasants who lived ‘on the margins of literacy’², or in more recent times between men who acquired literacy skills and women who were not encouraged to do so.

From authors like Petrucci³, Roger Chartier⁴ and Donald F. McKenzie⁵, to cite just a few of the first scholars to exert a strong influence, we have developed a history of scribal culture (or *storia della cultura scritta*), focussing on the meanings that different social groups have invested in written artefacts and technology throughout history. This history of scribal culture lies quite simply in a disciplinary middle ground, at the point where sociology and anthropology meet history. Here writing is seen as social interaction mediated through enduring signs. It is understood as a practice continually shifting through time, its power (or counter-power) being reshaped according to the perspective of the social actors using it. The challenge we all accept as historians of scribal culture is to see those written artefacts not as

² Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge UK (Cambridge University Press), 1968, pp. 11-24.

³ Armando Petrucci, *La scrittura: ideologia e rappresentazione*, Turin (Einaudi), 1986; Armando Petrucci, *Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy*, New Haven CT (Yale University Press), 1995.

⁴ Roger Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer*, Philadelphia PA (University of Pennsylvania Press), 1995; Roger Chartier, *Inscrire et effacer. Culture écrite et littérature (XI^e-XVIII^e siècle)*, Paris (Gallimard & Le Seuil, Collection « Hautes Études »), 2005, among many other works.

⁵ Donald F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Panizzi lectures, 1985), London (British Library), 1986.

traditional historical sources, in the sense of transparent pieces of evidence already mentioned above, but rather as opaque, complex discourses, that demand a thick description of the social knowledge and shared beliefs which they embody.

The term ‘thick description’ derives from Clifford Geertz’s suggestions about the appropriate ethnographic method to use in the interpretation of cultures. This is an interpretation based on ‘extrovert expressions’ formulated by the informants themselves, it is microscopic in its analysis of local behaviour and assumed truths, and it targets social discourse.⁶ In this sense, the chapters of this book are a contribution to a thick description of written cultures in history. Such description will combine what historical informants extrovertly expressed about their uses of writing with the microscopic analysis of behaviours and beliefs: the scribal behaviours patent in written artefacts and in the technology it took to produce them, the beliefs attached to the concept of literacy in different spatial, political and chronological contexts. The history of scribal culture also targets social discourse in the sense that it attempts a broader understanding of what went forgotten, unlinked, misunderstood or distorted in the history of literate societies due to a lack of attention paid to carefully located expressions, uses, artefacts, technologies and beliefs.

The written artefacts we encounter here, because location and contextualization is the basis for this modality of history too, can be as varied as the cuneiform clay tablets of the first millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia (discussed by Francis Joannès), public writings of the early modern Spain and modern France (in Antonio Castillo and Philippe Artières chapters,

⁶ Clifford Geertz, ‘Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture’, in his *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York (Basic Books), 1973, pp. 3-30; Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, New York (Basic Books), 1983.

respectively), the ego-documents of non-elite people in 19th century Finland (discussed in Anna Kuismin), the personal literature pieces by artisans and intellectuals of the French historical context (in Nicolas Adell chapter), handwritten copies made by women reading Korean novels in the history of pre-modern Korea (chapter by SeoKyung Han), one late 19th-century Cheyenne letter (discussed by Germaine Warkentin), typed manuscripts of the 19th and 20th centuries (in Lyons chapter), and children's writings from all chronologies (in Verónica Sierra Blas chapter).

The above listed written objects were meant to be taken by the successive contributors in three dimensions: as material object, as social practice, and, inevitably also, as text. In what regards material objects, in Francis Joannès' contribution, for instance, it becomes clear that it would be impossible to conceive of ancient Sumerian script without recognising its exclusive dependence on the support of clay. After the second millennium, the script struggled to compete with the Phoenician alphabet, which could be written on more pliable material, and it gradually became an esoteric cultural language, rather like Latin in modern Europe. We also come across the repercussions of the material supports for writing and the linked technologies in the chapter by John Gagné, a historian of Renaissance Europe, who raises the issues involved in the transition from parchment to paper, and in Martyn Lyons contribution, who discusses the impact of the typewriter. These and all other authors in the book, precisely because they adopt the history of scribal culture methodology, take past writings materiality together with the expressed views from their users and the unconscious beliefs that may have inspired them. The views range all the way from fear and mistrust to enthusiasm as they matched behaviours that could be either opportunistic or tyrannical or just oblivious and matter-of-fact. The protagonists we read here about are as varied as it could be expected in a 'world' inscribed: they are the novelist who was convinced of the participation of his typewriter's keys on the development of his book, the fans of typing races, the kings

who suspected their law would become fragile due to the disposability of rag paper supports. There are children, also, who felt adventurous in the freedom acquired together with the skills of literacy. There is the challenger with his pamphlets, the artisan with his biography, the peasant with his diary, the Indian with his letter, the policeman with his report.

The history of scribal culture purpose, along the lines we have been sketching it, has also constantly present that writing encompasses all marks carrying significance inscribed on whatever surface they appear. Writing is by no means confined to alphabetical scripts, but includes non-alphabetical systems and pictorial scripts such as Egyptian and Mayan hieroglyphics. It includes the *quipus*, the communication system of the Inca empire, in which the knots and cords of cotton or woollen material recorded assets or embodied the genealogical memory of a village.⁷ In Germaine Warkentin's chapter, it embraces the pictorial codes of Native Americans. This notion clearly contradicts anthropologists of writing like Walter Ong, who traditionally drew a clear distinction between societies using an alphabet and those which did not have a comparable 'writing system'.⁸ For Warkentin, the boundary between pictorial art and written communication is very elusive, and she proposes that we adopt the more inclusive term 'inscription' to avoid simplistic dichotomies between 'primitive' and 'advanced' forms of textual communication. Her suggestion is open to challenge and debate, but the subtitle of this book implicitly endorses her idea.

⁷ Frank Salomon, 'The Twisting Paths of Recall: Khipu (Andean cord notation) as artefact', in Kathryn E. Piquette and Ruth D. Whitehouse, eds., *Writing as material practice: Substance, surface and medium*, London (Ubiquity Press), 2013, pp. 15-43.

⁸ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London (Methuen), 1982.

At the same time, writing can be interpreted as a social practice, embedded in everyday life, although it is only recently that cultural historians and social anthropologists have adopted this approach. In the 1960s and 1970s, historians approached the study of writing as one aspect of the measurement of literacy. The statistics of literacy rates, which historians customarily accumulated in Europe and North America on the basis either of a signature test, or a religious examination in the case of Lutheran Sweden, never clearly distinguished the twin skills of reading and writing from each other.⁹ In Europe until the 19th century, they were distinct literary skills, taught independently, and writing competence was always rarer than reading ability. There were in fact two literacies¹⁰, and the social distribution of each one was distinctive in terms of its geography, social class and gender. In many parts of Europe and America, reading was taught verbally, as students were made to identify letters and syllables by chanting them, but an apprenticeship in writing was more demanding. A student who graduated from writing in a sand-tray or on a wax tablet required skill and practice in handling a goose quill. He or she had to master a new technology and a new body posture, and learn how to form evenly sized characters, keep a straight line and

⁹ Roger S. Schofield, 'The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-Industrial England' in Goody, *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, pp. 311-25; François Furet & Jacques Ozouf, *Lire et écrire: L'alphabétisation des français de Calvin à Jules Ferry*, Paris (Éditions de Minuit), 2 vols., 1977; Harvey J. Graff, Alison Mackinnon, Bengt Sandin and Ian Winchester, eds., *Understanding Literacy in its Historical Contexts: socio-cultural history of the legacy of Egil Johannson*, Lund (Nordic Academic Press), 2009.

¹⁰ Roger Chartier, 'Culture écrite et littérature à l'âge moderne', *Annales – Histoire, Sciences sociales*, 56:4-5, 2001, pp. 783-802.

avoid smudging the paper with ink. Often the student never reached this stage, if his or her schooling was cut short by more demanding activities like working to supplement the family income. Reading came first in the curriculum, and writing followed. At a higher level still, arithmetic would be taught. The three 'Rs', then, formed a pedagogical hierarchy, with reading at the base, writing in the middle and numerical literacy at the summit.

The gap between reading and writing competence was for a long time disguised by official literacy statistics, which never gave us equally good information about reading and writing, and hid from view many readers who could not write. Many women in particular were readers who never crossed the writing threshold. Women were taught by the Churches to read the Bible (if they were Protestants) or the catechism (if they were Catholics), but they were not encouraged to learn to write. The act of reading was conceived as passive and receptive, whereas writing seemed to confer independence, creativity and from the authorities' point of view it could be dangerous. For these reasons, writing was considered a male prerogative. Many women who delegated their signature to others or signed with a mark may thus have been competent readers even if they did not know how to write. The records of poor Irish women who arrived in Australia in the late 18th and early 19th centuries reveal just such a gap between female reading and writing abilities. In Deborah Oxley's sample of Irish-born convict women deported to Australia, 43 per cent could read only, and only 21 per cent could both read and write.¹¹

We no longer understand writing as a cognitive skill to be once learned and never forgotten, as historians tended to view it when they counted the statistics of literacy. Writing, rather, is a social and cultural practice, and our questions commonly ask: what uses did

¹¹ Deborah Oxley, *Convict Maids: the forced migration of women to Australia*, Melbourne (Cambridge University Press), 1996, p. 267.

people in past societies make of writing? What was writing's function and purpose in any given society? As the protagonists of the New Literacy Studies, argue, there are many different kinds of literacies, which today include home literacy, school literacy and workplace literacy, to name a few.¹² Literacy practices, in other words, must be situated within specific social structures and they are contingent on specific historical contexts.¹³ Barton and Hamilton place strong emphasis on vernacular literacy practices, which are learned informally and thus independent of institutionalised schooling, and which are not regulated by the rules and procedures of dominant social institutions.¹⁴ They refer to literacy practices which enable ordinary people to organise their life at a very pragmatic level (as in writing shopping lists), and to give it some meaning (as in writing up one's war experiences), as well as enabling them to participate in social organisations outside the home (such as the local school or a babysitting group). Here the historian of vernacular literacies is inevitably lending new value to forms of writing which were previously trivialised or simply invisible, like Lorina Bulwer's sampler scroll already mentioned.

This takes us also to a favourite theme in the history of writing – we might even call it a master narrative -, which concerns changes in the social distribution of literacy skills, as they ceased to be the prerogative of clerical and bureaucratic elites and were increasingly adopted by courtiers, merchants and commoners. There is a gendered dimension to this story

¹² David Barton and Mary Hamilton, *Local Literacies: Reading and writing in one community*, London & New York (Routledge), 1998, pp. 9-11.

¹³ David Barton and Mary Hamilton, 'Literacy Practices', in David Barton, Mary Hamilton & Roz Ivanič, eds., *Situated Literacies: Reading and writing in context*, London & New York (Routledge), 2000, pp. 7-15.

¹⁴ Barton and Hamilton, *Local Literacies*, pp. 247-55.

of the onward march of literacy, as literacy skills became less exclusively monopolized by dominant male elites, and increasingly acquired by women, too. Lorina Bulwer's scroll is one small but dramatic part of women's conquest of literacy. The history of writing is usually told as a narrative of gradual progress, leading up to the acquisition of mass literacy in the West at the end of the 19th century, when writing had become an indispensable everyday necessity for all. Nevertheless, the focus of the history of writing, as the discipline is practised today, has lost the deterministic bias it once had. We no longer think of such history as the tale of an ever-advancing triumph of civilisation, a chronicle of high cultures, closed elites and powerful individuals. The democratisation of writing is, of course, an undeniable multi-secular process, but, for one thing, it was not always a smooth one. The traumatic beginnings of the industrial revolution, for example, were probably a temporary setback for the advance of literacy in western countries.¹⁵

By consciously fighting this 'civilisation triumph' literacy bias, this book prepares the terrain for a levelled and comparative approach of both elite and subaltern literate communities. It investigates aspects of bureaucratic literacy in Babylon, and the uses of writing in the Korean script for refined secular purposes by the ladies of the Chosŏn court. On the opposite end of the spectrum, it considers one of the last social groups to achieve full literacy – peasants, viewed by Anna Kuismin through a Nordic lens. Side by side, it also shows how both the empowered and the ordinary subjects have a long history of acting through public writings, bringing to the urban outdoor their capacity to either rule or

¹⁵ François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, 'Literacy and Industrialisation: The Case of the

Département du Nord in France', *Journal of European Economic History*, 5:1, 1976, pp. 5-44; Michael Sanderson, 'Literacy and Social Mobility in the Industrial Revolution in England', *Past and Present*, 56, 1972, pp. 75-104.

challenge rulers by means of written messages, thus helping to shape our understanding of public spaces and their shared surfaces in different cultures (chapters by Artières and Castillo).

One salient conclusion to be drawn from these and other studies in the history of scribal culture is that they shed new light on a well-known phenomenon – namely, the stability of writing systems, the enduring continuity of their supports, codes and visual traces.¹⁶ Such stability and continuity are normally invoked in order to explain why spelling reforms are always so difficult to implement, for instance, or to explain why certain kinds of texts (religious, administrative, funereal or laudatory) get more readily written than others in the histories of written cultures. However, we can also discern a more hidden consequence of the said stasis. In fact, because of its endurance and stability, writing becomes transformed at a pace that is always much slower than that of the various uses attached to it, be they interactional, political, intellectual, recreational, etc. Such a mismatch between the slow rate of change in writing systems and the rapid transformations that may occur in social and linguistic contexts produces a paradox which demands a remedy, which is often the repurposing of the very functions served by writing. The process inevitably triggers the emergence of new values to old written symbols, to former writing systems and to traditional literate practices.

A clear example of repurposing in the history of writing is found in Francis Joannès chapter on the historical process along which the same cuneiform technology, which only clay could embody, was progressively adapted to the Akkadian language, the Hurrite, the

¹⁶ Martin, Henri-Jean, *Pour une histoire du livre (XVe-XVIIIe siècle). Cinq conférences*, Naples (Bibliopolis), 1987.

Hittite, the Canaanite and the Ugaritic, after its original design for the Sumerians' language. Writing cuneiform characters in clay was a practice that stretched all over Mesopotamia to the point where no more stretching became possible in the face of a competing system, that of Phoenician script, in its Aramaic derivative, embodied in parchment. The response in the Mesopotamian context, as Francis Joannès explains, was to repurpose the cuneiform script as the proper form for scholarly usage, thus guaranteeing its survival for many more centuries in a new function, and its appropriation by one specific group, more scholarly than the preceding ones.

In Germaine Warkentin's paper the dynamics of repurposing is overtly acknowledged, as the author concentrates herself on what she calls the 'adaptive uses of media' when observing the use of a paper support for a Cheyenne letter that witnesses the complex contact between the indigenous inscription traditions of North America and Western uses of writing brought there by Europeans. Likewise, the repurposing drift in written cultures and the symbolic innovation anchored to it is demonstrated to us by Anna Kuismin in another of its facets, this time involving written genres. In her chapter, she seizes the case of ordinary people gaining access to written communication at a time when reading and writing became generalised practices in the West, even among the under-privileged. Kuismin shows us Finns producing ego-documents in the 18th and 19th centuries as modern social actors, redirecting writing for purposes that were non-bureaucratic and non-scholarly, although they did not develop new textual genres for such uses. They clung to the traditional epistle, diary or account book, but re-invested them with new meanings of their own; the genres now served as tools which they could mould like plastic to adapt them to the complexity of the self-image they were trying to project.

We are using the neutral word 'repurposing', but it should be remarked that there are several alternative terms that would equally serve us, coming from linguistics terminology,

because what is at stake here is the dynamics of the symbolic activity by humans. Since the most complex symbolic system there exists, namely human language, abounds in instances of repurposing, the study of language variation and change has already come up with many names for such processes. Depending on the level at which linguistic symbols change their value, linguists talk either of 'semantic change' -- the change in the denotation of a word that stays phonetically identical -- or of 'reanalysis' -- the creative interpretation of ambiguous constructions (same word order and different assigned values) that gives rise to innovations at the morphosyntactic level. By semantic change, new meanings are given to old words, especially by metaphor and metonymy, meanings that later can become conventionalized. In time, semantic changes can go very far from the departure point: an original Proto-Indo-European root like *bhleg- 'to burn, gleam, shine, flash' can be the etymon of a word denoting 'white' in one descendant language (cf. Russian *bielo*) and of cognates denoting 'black' (cf. Old High German *blah* and, indeed, English *black*).¹⁷ By reanalysis, many changes can occur in languages, especially syntactic changes: new determiners, auxiliary verbs and complementizers are thought to appear by such a process, along which word order starts by remaining stable, but the syntax of the words involved shifts into a new status.¹⁸ The BE verbs *seer/ser* and *estar* in Spanish and Portuguese, for instance, come from the full verbs meaning 'to sit' and 'to stand' in the mediaeval Romances. They occurred frequently in front of non-inflected other verbs (eg: *siiia comendo* '(he) sat eating', *estava pregando* '(he) stood

¹⁷ For many other examples, cf. Campbell, Lyle, *Historical Linguistics: an Introduction*, Edinburgh (Edinburgh University Press), 2013, 3rd edition, chapter 9.

¹⁸ Roberts, Ian, & Anna Roussou, *Syntactic change a minimalist approach to grammaticalization*, Cambridge & New York (Cambridge University Press), 2003.

preaching' and were thus reanalyzed as auxiliary forms, bearing just the features of inflection and losing the reference to body postures. At a higher level, that of discourse, specialists in discourse analysis are finding the term 'entextualization' and 'resemiotization' growingly useful. They describe with it the empowering through discourse of social groups in nowadays multicultural societies. The groups at stake create new meaning for alien discursive practices and this way they manage to claim a new cultural originality, especially in the context of a larger and larger access to technology, as is the case of the environments of *Facebook*, *Youtube*, or web forum discussions.¹⁹ So be it along very well-known processes of variation and change in spoken languages, or along the processes of social interaction magnified by technology, it is constantly visible that humans keep shifting the purposes offered to them by the symbolic systems at reach. The role of the scholar is to spot the shifts and analyze their possible significances, avoiding to get trapped within the limits of the canons that are being broken.

This raises the question of challenges to literary or canonical genres. The historian of writing seeks to comprehend a broad range of writings in *non*-literary genres. Not all forms of writing considered here, in the book, fall easily into familiar categories like 'autobiography', 'correspondence' or 'novels'. We find instead a range of hybrid genres, like the fictionalised Buddhist sutras mentioned by SeoKyung Han in the Korean court, or the collections resembling 'memory books' discussed by Anna Kuismin. Memory books, also known in Europe as *libri di famiglia* or *livres de raison*, often consisted of a heterogeneous mixture of historical chronicle, practical information connected to agricultural work as well as a family record of baptisms and deaths. Dutch historians labelled such writings as 'ego-documents',

¹⁹ Sirpa Leppänen et alii, 'Entextualization and resemiotization as resources for (dis)identification in social media', *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies*, Paper 57, 2013.
https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/upload/a3d5524e-4413-4772-9f96-9fe0ee714c6f_TPCS_57_Leppanen-et-al.pdf

originally defined in the 1950s by Jacques (or Jacob) Presser as ‘those documents in which an ego deliberately or accidentally discloses or hides itself’.²⁰ Since then, Dutch and other historians have shown an increasing interest in the autobiographies, memoirs, diaries and personal letters which interested Presser.²¹ They have used self-writing as a means to trace the historicisation of the individual self between the 18th century and the present, from traditional manuscript sources up to the confessional culture of Facebook and today’s blogs and social media.²²

In this context, both literary historians and educationalists have expressed their faith in the transformative power of writing and its fundamentally creative aspects. Ursula Howard’s recent investigation into what learning to write meant to the poor of 19th-century England is profoundly penetrated by such convictions. Through writing, according to Howard, the poor could become historical actors, writing made them visible and gave them a new power.²³ Writing therefore had a subjective significance, since it was part of the process

²⁰ Jacques Presser, ‘Clio kijkt door het sleutelgat’, in his *Uit het werk van J. Presser*, Amsterdam (Athenaeum-Polak en Van Genneep), 1969, pp. 283-95.

²¹ Rudolf Dekker, ed., *Autobiographical Writing in its Social Context since the Middle Ages*, Hilversum (Verloren), 2002; Arianne Baggerman, Rudolf Dekker and Michael Mascuch, eds., *Controlling Time and Shaping the Self: developments in autobiographical writing since the sixteenth century*, Leiden (Brill), 2011.

²² Kyle Cardell, *De@r World: Contemporary Uses of the Diary*, Madison WI (University of Wisconsin Press), 2014.

²³ Ursula Howard, *Literacy and the Practice of Writing in the 19th Century: A Strange Blossoming of Spirit*, Leicester UK (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education), 2012, pp. 1-3 and 308-15.

of self-realisation and the formation of an individual identity. The search for the author's inner self in writings of the lower classes, however, is not always fruitful, partly because peasant writings tended to be very laconic and pragmatic rather than introverted or soul-searching. Because they only intermittently reveal the inner self, they do not fully correspond to the diaries and autobiographical writings which we label 'ego-documents'. In fact peasant writings had many practical purposes other than an exploration of the ego. The French peasant autobiographer Henri Norre was not untypical: he filled his notebooks with information about crops, agricultural equipment and the wonders of super-phosphate fertiliser.²⁴ There are of course notable exceptions to this lack of emotional depth, as Kuismin clearly illustrates. In Nicolas Adell's contribution, too, we find embryonic autobiographies emerging from an unlikely source: the songs of French artisans.

The importance of songs is one reminder of the close connection between vernacular writings and oral culture. The continuing relationship between written and oral culture is demonstrated by Antonio Castillo's chapter on the Hispanic world in the 16th and 17th centuries. He descends to street level to show us the importance of oral communication in the composition of texts, as well as in their diffusion in the public spaces of the city, and in appropriation by their readers. The popular culture of early modern Europe was what Marina Roggero called 'an amphibious culture', in which verbal communication, print and writing all nurtured and reciprocally influenced each other.²⁵

²⁴ Henri Norre, *Comment j'ai vaincu la misère: Souvenirs et réflexions d'un paysan*,

presented by Émile Guillaumin, Paris (Balzac), 1994, p. 44 (first published 1914).

²⁵ Marina Roggero, 'La Escritura de los grupos populares en la Italia del Antiguo regimen',

in Antonio Castillo Gómez, ed., *La conquista del alfabeto: Escritura y clases populares*, Gijón (Trea), 2002, p. 71.

Some anthropological theory, however, has posited a clear dichotomy between written and oral culture. In oral cultures, it is argued, people tell stories differently from the way they are told in a literate society. In Walter Ong's analysis, oral storytellers are prone to repetition and redundancy. They rely on memory, which may be prodigious, but needs signposts in the story ('mnemonic clues') to guide the narrator and jog his memory about what comes next. Only in writing, Ong argues, which is inherently more analytic and reflective, can distance and critical rationality be fully accomplished. There was an assumption here that literacy tended to drive out verbal communication, so that Ong even talked about literate societies which retained an 'oral residue'.²⁶ Historians of writing, paradoxically enough, would be among the first to question this rather dismissive attitude towards oral cultures, since they know that in vernacular writings the presence of the oral in the text is persistent and pervasive and by no means residual. The self-taught Sicilian labourer and road-mender, Vincenzo Rabito, born in 1899, showed us this, when he sat down in 1967 to write his autobiography. Half a million words poured out, described in the words of his presenter David Moss as:

'a mix of semi-literate Italian, Sicilian dialect and idiosyncratic coinings, covering 1,027 pages without a single break by chapter, section or sentence but punctuated by semi-colons, commas, question marks or exclamation marks between almost every word. The only divisions were the physical distinctions between the typewritten and numbered sheets of paper.'²⁷

The continuous stream of prose which made up his 'book' *Terra Matta* thus remained close to oral speech patterns, which in no way prevented its publication in 2007 by Einaudi, the

²⁶ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 32-67.

²⁷ David Moss, 'Introduction' to special issue on *Terra Matta*, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 19: 3, 2014, p. 224.

rapid sale of 15,000 copies and its adaptation into a film shown at the Venice Film Festival in 2012. The abiding orality of ordinary writings continues to offer both historians and historical socio-linguists a rich territory in which to explore the informal registers of language usage and the interface between oral and scribal culture.

In spite of the different perspectives which separate anthropologists and historians, ethnographic influences remain important in the history of writing. Nicolas Adell's chapter outlines the anthropological approaches which have inspired work on the history of scribal culture in France, for example. Adell believes that the insights of Jack Goody are crucial, especially in his definition of writing as a 'technology of the intellect', which changes thought patterns and produces new forms of rationality.²⁸ Writing, Goody argued, changes the way we think, and it changes the writer as well as the reader. Goody's arguments about the formation of a specifically 'graphic logic' have made him a more popular thinker in France than even his native England.

Philippe Artières' contribution takes a similar approach, although his chapter can be seen as part of a tradition of Foucauldian studies, focussing on new methods of control and surveillance in contemporary societies. The proliferation of writings and graffiti in later 19th-century Paris aroused police concern, which leads Artières to study repressive attitudes and vocabulary, and to pose questions about the policeman's 'gaze'. He approaches the history of writing from the archives of repression, in this case those of the Prefecture of Police, just as others have done, notably Antonio Castillo whose discussion of writings in the street relies heavily on the records of the Inquisition. Following his previous studies of prison writings

²⁸ Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge UK (Cambridge

University Press), 1977; Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, Cambridge UK (Cambridge University Press), 1986.

and convent writing, Artières views the streets of late 19th-century Paris in the looming shadow of Foucault's symbol of the all-seeing, all-knowing Panopticon.²⁹

These and other contributions demonstrate the value of interdisciplinary approaches to the history of writing. This history engages archaeologists, palaeographers, anthropologists, social and cultural historians, historians of education, historical socio-linguists as well as cultural historians. Many of these approaches are represented in this collection of studies. In ten chapters, presented by leading historians of scribal culture, we investigate the history of writing as a cultural practice in a variety of contexts and periods. We seek to analyse the rituals and practices determining intimate or 'ordinary' writing as well as bureaucratic, religious and courtly writing. From the inscribed images of so-called 'pre-literate' societies, to public inscriptions and the democratisation of writing in the modern era, access to writing technology and its public and private uses by men, women and children will be analysed. Our objective is to explore the uses and functions of writing in non-alphabetical as well as alphabetical script, in societies ranging from the Native Americans and ancient Mesopotamia to modern Europe. Many of the studies collected here emerge from a panel on The History of Writing Practices and Scribal Culture, selected for the 22nd International Congress of Historical Sciences which met in Jinan, China, in August 2015. We would like to thank all those who participated on that memorable occasion.

²⁹ Philippe Artières, *La vie des coupables. Autobiographies des criminels, 1896-1909*, Paris

(Albin Michel), 2000; Philippe Artières, *La Vie écrite: Thérèse de Lisieux*, Paris (Les Belles Lettres), 2011.