In sum then, Plato's conception of poetry, if we apply it to that pre-literate epoch in which the Greek institutions of the Classical age first crystallised in characteristic form, was basically correct. Poetry was not 'literature' but a political and social necessity. It was not an art form, nor a creation of the private imagination, but an encyclopedia maintained by co-operative effort on the part of the 'best Greek politics'.
This same technological situation was at least in part responsible for an interesting result: it tended to throw political power into the hands of the more cultivated members of the community—'cultivated', that is, in terms of an oral culture. That type of directive had more influence and carried further which was more effectively, that is poetically, composed. Hence, within limits, the community’s leadership lay with those who had a superior ear and rhythmic aptitude, which would be demonstrate in epic hexameter. It would also however show itself in the ability to compose rhemata—effective sayings which used other devices besides the metrical, such as assonance and parallelism. Again, the good performer at a banquet would be estimated not exclusively as an entertainer but as a natural leader of men, for he, like Achilles, was a superior ‘speaker of tales’. Since new directives and judgments were always to be framed in terms of the old—since oral precedents held such firm sway—the effective judge or even general tended to be the man with the superior oral memory. Likewise, such a memory kept a man in close psychological rapport with the ancestral tales in which the tribal encyclopedia was carried. He would be in this sense a more cultivated man even though not a creative minstrel. The general effect was to put a great premium upon the intelligence in Greek social transactions and to identify intelligence with power. By intelligence we specifically mean a superior memory and a superior sense of verbal rhythm. It has already been said, and is here to be repeated, that the portraits in Hesiod of the prince controlling a confused mob by the effectiveness of his epic decisions, and in Homer of the judges giving oral judgments in the speaking place, and of Achilles who as a future prince had been trained to be an effective speaker, are drawn from conditions of the so-called Dark Age and apply also to the epoch which immediately followed it.

This natural union of force with a certain kind of oral acoustic intelligence can be set in contrast against the situation in later Europe of the feudal baron, himself unlettered and sometimes coarse and brutal, but an effective governor so far as he has at his
side the monk or clerk who commands the essential technology by which his power is made effective in transmission. A similar situation had existed in the Near Eastern autocracies, which the Mycenaean must in this respect have resembled. The king understood the raw mechanisms of power. The Cyclopean masonry with which he surrounded himself symbolised at once his isolation from his community and the crudeness of his material concepts. The missing link is the scribe to whom he dictated and whom perhaps he despised. But he cannot do without him. The mechanisms of power, in short, are split and divided between the men of physical brawn or crude cunning and the men of skill, trained to use the clumsy elaborate script system.

In the early polis communities of Greece, because of the total 'orality' of communication, this split did not exist. You cannot flourish a document to command a crowd: it is symptomatic that as late as Aristophanes the use of the document for this purpose is regarded as funny and inept. But you can give an epic speech. Even this will only sweep them temporarily off their feet unless it is easily memorisable or carries phrases which are repeatable and which will be repeated from mouth to mouth. This is what Homer calls 'leadership in counsel'.

We can hazard the guess, in short, that that specific and unique Hellenic intelligence, the source or cause of which has baffled all historians, received its original nurture in communities in which the oral technique of preserved communication threw power and so prestige into the hands of the orally more gifted. It made the competition for power, endemic among all human beings, identifiable with the competition for intelligence. The total non-literacy of Homeric Greece, so far from being a drawback, was the necessary medium in which the Greek genius could be nursed to its maturity.

The condition of communication had an effect which, so it could be argued, showed itself in the field of the visual arts, not vice versa. Was the protogeometric style in painting initially a psychological reflex of that severe training in acoustic patterns
which the business of daily living and listening required? The
patterns of the *Iliad* have been treated as though they were a visual
arrangement, contrary to the premise that the composition was
oral, and have then been compared to the visual arrangements in
geometric pottery. Is it not more proper to view them as
patterns built on acoustic principles, which exploit the technique
of the echo as a mnemonic device? If so, then the visual geometry
of the plastic artist might be a reflex in himself of that acoustic
instinct now transferred to the sphere of vision, and not *vice
versa*.

This explanation can stand as debatable, but it conforms to the
established fact that in the Classical Age the specific genius of the
Greeks was rhythmic. What we call the Greek sense of beauty, in
architecture, sculpture, painting and poetry, was more than any-
thing else a sense of elastic and fluid proportion. This faculty,
presumably shared to a degree by all races, was, we suggest, in the
special Greek case perfected by an unusual degree of exercise in
acoustic, verbal, and musical rhythms during the Dark Age. It
was the popular mastery of the shaped word, enforced by the
needs of cultural memory, which brought the Greeks to a mastery
of other kinds of rhythm also. Their supposed disadvantage in the
competition for culture, namely their non-literacy, was in fact
their prime advantage.