On the Cult of Books

In Book VIII of the Odyssey, we read that the gods weave misfortunes so that future generations will have something to sing about; Mallarme's statement, "The world exists to end up in a book," seems to repeat, some thirty centuries later, the same concept of aesthetic justification for evils. These two teleologies, however, do not entirely coincide; the former belongs to the era of the spoken word, and the latter to an era of the written word. One speaks of telling the story and the other of books. A book, any book, is for us a sacred object: Cervantes, who probably did not listen to everything that everyone said, read even "the torn scraps of paper in the streets." Fire, in one of Bernard Shaw's comedies, threatens the library at Alexandria; someone exclaims that the memory of mankind will burn, and Caesar replies: "A shameful memory. Let it burn." The historical Caesar, in my opinion, might have approved or condemned the command the author attributes to him, but he would not have considered it, as we do, a sacrilegious joke. The reason is clear: for the ancients the written word was nothing more than a substitute for the spoken word.

It is well known that Pythagoras did not write; Gomperz (Griechische Denker 1, 3) maintains that it was because he had more faith in the values of spoken instruction. More forceful than Pythagoras' mere abstention is Plato's unequivocal testimony. In the Timaeus he stated: "It is an arduous task to discover the maker and father of this universe, and, having discovered him, it is impossible to tell it to all men"; and in the Phaedrus he recounted an Egyptian fable against writing (the practice of which causes people to neglect the exercise of memory and to depend on symbols), and said that books are like the painted figures "that seem to be alive, but do not answer a word to the questions they are asked." To alleviate or eliminate that difficulty, he created the philosophical dialogue. A teacher selects a pupil, but a book does not select its readers, who may be wicked or stupid; this Platonic mistrust persists in the words of Clement of Alexandria, a man of pagan culture: "The most prudent course is not to write but to learn and teach by word of mouth, because what is written remains" (Stromateis), and in the same treatise: "To write all things in a book is to put a sword in the hands of a child," which derives from the Gospels: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn against and rend you." That sentence is from Jesus, the greatest of the oral teachers, who only once wrote a few words on the ground, and no man read what He had written (John 8:6).

Clement of Alexandria wrote about his distrust of writing at the end of the second century; the end of the fourth century saw the beginning of the mental process that would culminate, after many generations, in the predominance of the written word over the spoken one, of the pen over the voice. A remarkable stroke of fortune determined that a writer would establish the exact instant (and I am not exaggerating) when this vast process began. St. Augustine tells it in Book VI of the Confessions:

When he [Ambrose] was reading, his eyes ran over the page and his heart perceived the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent. He did not restrict access to anyone coming in, nor was it customary even for a visitor to be announced. Very often when we were there, we saw him silently reading and never otherwise. After sitting for a long time in silence (for who would dare to burden him in such intent concentration?) we used to go away. We supposed that in the hubbub of other people's troubles, he would not want to be invited to consider another problem. We wondered if he read silently perhaps to protect himself in case he had a hearer interested and intent on the matter, to whom he might have to expound the text being read if it contained difficulties, or who might wish to debate some difficult questions. If his time were used in that way, he would get through fewer books than he wished. Besides, the need to preserve his voice, which used easily to become hoarse, could have been a very fair reason for silent reading. Whatever motive he had for his habit, this man had a good reason for what he did.

St. Augustine was a disciple of St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, around the year 384; thirteen years later, in Numidia, he wrote his Confessions and was
The only things in the world: more exactly, it is the world. 

The world, according to Malherbe, exists for a book: according to Dufour, it profoundly hideth (L'Homme du Regard. 1972).

Where the lies and the periods are not worth less than the essences of the things in the Register of Light... History is an immense linguistic text.