In some ways the maturational step that we begin to consider in this chapter is similar to the neonate’s entry into the linguistic dimension. It, too, has far-reaching implications; is mostly ignored or else misunderstood and trivialized; has ineffable roots; and, as we shall see, it, too, contributes to humanity’s madness. It is the phylogenetic step into reading and writing, humankind’s acquisition of literacy. Overall, both changes obviously have something to do with acquiring a new language-related ability. We will see that these two very different, apparently independent, developmental landmark events have become intertwined and related because of the complex, synergistic roles that they play in the generation and maintenance of humankind’s madness. To understand these connections will require further preparatory work, so for the time being we will focus on the nature of literacy and its predecessor as much as possible, letting the issues pertaining to individuals’ acquisition of language remain in the background.

Scholars have written and debated a good deal about the evolution of literacy. They have traced it from obscure beginnings in various pre-alphabetical symbolic notational systems through the early stages of writing as we now know it, to the various later technological developments ranging from the invention of printing to word-processing, texting and cell phones. Reading and writing were

a very late development in human history. The first script…was developed…less than 6000 years ago. The alphabet, which was invented only once, so that every alphabet in the world derives directly or indirectly from the original Semitic alphabet, came into existence only around 1500 BC. Speech is ancient, archaic. Writing is brand-new.¹
Thus a very long non-literate period preceded the emergence of reading and writing. There were eons during which humanity could not have had any inkling that there could be such a thing as literacy.

**Primary or pristine orality**

The linguist Walter Ong calls the state that preceded humanity's entry into literacy ‘primary’ or ‘pristine orality’ (hereafter ‘p-orality’). Although the idea of such a state seems straightforward, p-orality is not an easy, simple concept. Most literary scholars, linguists, psychologists and philosophers who study the development of literacy have shied away from studying this condition or even speculating about it, for a number of good reasons. By definition, textual data from p-oral times cannot exist, so there can only be some indirect evidence about the p-oral way of life. Scholarly inferences or hypotheses about it must necessarily be highly speculative, based on non-textual artifacts of some kind, and/or on clues and cues culled from later eras’ text fragments. Some speculations may be more convincing or commonsensical than others, but they still are, and must remain, speculation.

We have here a situation strikingly analogous to the neonatal state. Our knowledge about p-orality is just as innately limited as our knowledge about the infant’s initial way of being in the world. About the only aspect of p-orality of which we can be reasonably sure is that its dominant sensory modality would have been aural-oral. Without writing, languaging must have been almost entirely an acoustic affair. (I believe we can ignore the remote possibility that p-orals had a sign language. They may have had some rudimentary signaling systems, but the invention and development of any but the most primitive version of signing seems almost impossible in a non-literate culture. Signing is modeled on writing.)

The study of p-orality, then, is necessarily beset by innate difficulties. If scholars nevertheless wanted to tackle the state, they would have to work at its edges, so to speak. The work of Eric Havelock, a major scholar who investigated the literacy/orality doublet in several contexts, is typical in that regard. Speaking about one of his own important monographs, he comments that ‘The intention of this book is to present a unified picture of a crisis that occurred in the history of human communication, when Greek orality transformed itself into Greek literacy.’ ²

The Greek orality to which he refers is the orality of the age of Plato and Homer, an age when orality – no longer p-orality – had of course coexisted with reading and writing for a number of millennia. His study,