excerpt from **"A Writing Lesson,"** by Claude Lévi-Strauss, (from *Tristes tropiques.* New York: Criterion, 1961; pp. 290-93; translated by John Russell, with some modifications.)

That the Nambikwara [an indigenous tribe in Brazil] could not write goes without saying. But they were also unable to draw, except for a few dots and zigzags on their calabashes. I distributed pencils and paper among them, none the less, as I had done with the Caduveo [another South American group visited by Lévi-Strauss]. At first they made no use of them. Then, one day, I saw that they were all busy drawing wavy horizontal lines on the paper. What were they trying to do? I could only conclude that they were writing or, more exactly, that they were trying to do as I did with my pencils. As I had never tried to amuse them with drawings, they could not conceive of any other use for this implement. With most of them, that was as far as they got: but their leader saw further into the problem. Doubtless he was the only one among them to have understood what writing was for. So he asked me for one of my notepads; and when we were working together he did not give me his answers in words, but traced a wavy line or two on the paper and gave it to me, as if I could read what he had to say. He himself was all but deceived by his own play-acting. Each time he drew a line he would examine it with great care, as if its meaning must suddenly leap to the eye; and every time a look of disappointment came over his face. But he would never give up trying, and there was an unspoken agreement between us that his scribblings had a meaning that I did my best to decipher; his own verbal commentary was so prompt in coming that I had no need to ask him to explain what he had written.

And now, no sooner was everyone assembled than he drew forth from a basket a piece of paper covered with scribbled lines and pretended to read from it. With a show of hesitation he looked up and down his list for the objects [which Lévi-Strauss had brought with him to trade for local goods] to be given in exchange for his people's presents. So-and-so was to receive a machete in return for his bow and arrows, and another a string of beads in return for his necklaces and so on for two solid hours. What was he hoping for? To deceive himself perhaps: but, even more, to amaze his companions and persuade them that his intermediation was responsible for the exchanges. He had allied himself with the white man, as equal with equal, and could now share in his secrets. We were in a hurry to get away, since there would obviously be a moment of real danger at which all the marvels I had brought would have been handed over. So I did not go further into the matter and we set off on the return journey, still guided by the Indians.

There had been something intensely irritating about our abortive meeting, and about the mystifications of which I had just been the unknowing instrument. Added to that, my mule had mouth sores that were causing it pain, so that by turns it hurried impatiently forward and stopped dead in its tracks. We got into a quarrel with one another and, quite suddenly, without realizing how it happened, I found myself alone, and lost, in the middle of the bush.

What was I to do? What people do in books: fire a shot in the air to let my companions know what had happened. I got down. I fired. Nothing. A second shot seemed to bring a

reply. I fired a third shot. This scared my mule, who went off at a trot and pulled up some distance away.

I put weapons and photographic equipment nearby at the foot of a tree, memorized its position, and ran off to recapture my mule, who seemed quite peaceably disposed. He let me get right up to him and then, just as I reached for the reins, he made off at full speed. This happened more than once until in despair I jumped at him and threw both my arms round his tail. This unusual proceeding took him by surprise, and he decided to give in. Back in the saddle, I made as if to collect my belongings, only to find that we had twisted and turned so often that I had no idea where they were.

Demoralized by this episode, I decided to rejoin our troop. Neither my mule nor I knew where they had gone. Sometimes I would head him in a direction that he refused to take; sometimes I would let him lead, only to find that he was simply turning in a circle. The sun was going down, I was no longer armed, and I expected at every moment to be the target of a volley of arrows. I was not, admittedly, the first white man to penetrate that hostile zone. But none of my predecessors had come back alive and, quite apart from myself, my mule was a tempting prey for people who rarely have anything very much to get their teeth into. These dark thoughts passed, one by one, through my mind as I waited for the sun to go down, thinking that since I at least had some matches with me I could start a bush-fire. Just as I was about to strike the first match I heard voices: two of the Nambikwara had turned back, the moment my absence was noticed, and had been following me all afternoon. For them to recover my equipment was child's play and, at nightfall, they led me to the camp where our whole troop was waiting for me.

Still tormented by this absurd incident, I slept badly. To while away the hours I went back, in my mind, to the scene of the previous morning. So the Nambikwara had learnt what it meant to write! But not at all, as one might have supposed, as the result of a laborious apprenticeship. The symbol had been borrowed, but the reality remained quite foreign to them. Even the borrowing had had a sociological, rather than an intellectual object: for it was not a question of knowing specific things, or understanding them, or keeping them in mind, but merely of enhancing the prestige and authority of one individual or one function at the expense of the rest of the party. A native, still in the period of the stone age, had realized that even if he could not himself understand the great instrument of understanding he could at least make it serve other ends. *For thousands of years, after all, and still today in a great part of the world, writing has existed as an institution in societies in which the vast majority of people are quite unable to write* [emphasis added]. The villages where I stayed in the Chittagong hills in Pakistan are populated by illiterates; yet each village has a scribe who fulfills his function for the benefit both of individual citizens and of the village as a whole. They all know what writing is and, if need be, can write: but they do it from outside as if it were a mediator, foreign to themselves, with whom they communicate by an oral process. But the scribe is rarely a functionary or an employee of the group as a whole; his knowledge is a source of power so much so, in fact, that the functions of scribe and usurer are often united in the same human being. This is not merely because the usurer needs to be able to read and write to carry on his trade, but because he has thus a twofold empire over his fellows.

Writing is a strange thing. It would seem as if its appearance could not have failed to wreak profound changes in the living conditions of our race, and that these transformations must have been above all intellectual in character. Once men know how to write, they are able to preserve knowledge. Writing might, that is to say, be regarded as a form of artificial memory, whose development should be accompanied by a deeper knowledge of the past and, therefore, by a greater ability to organize the present and the future. Of all the criteria by which people habitually distinguish civilization from barbarism, this should be the one most worth retaining: that certain peoples write and others do not. The first group can accumulate a body of knowledge that helps it to move ever faster towards the goal that it has assigned to itself; the second is confined within limits that the memory of individuals can never hope to extend, and it must remain the prisoner of a history worked out from day to day, with neither a clear knowledge of its own origins nor a consecutive idea of what its future should be.

Yet nothing of what we know of writing, or of its role in evolution, can be said to justify this conception. One of the most creative phases in human history took place with the onset of the Neolithic era: *agriculture and the domestication of animals are only two of the developments which may be traced to this period. It must have had behind it thousands of years during which small societies of human beings were noting, experimenting, and passing on to one another the fruits of their knowledge. The very success of this immense enterprise bears witness to the rigour and the continuity of its preparation, at a time when writing was quite unknown.* If writing first made its appearance between the fourth and third millennium before our era, we must see it not, in any degree, as a conditioning factor in the Neolithic revolution, but rather as an already-distant and doubtless indirect result of that revolution. With what great innovation can it be linked? Where technique is concerned, architecture alone can be called into question. Yet the architecture of the Egyptians or the Sumerians was no better than the work of certain American Indians who, at the time America was discovered, were ignorant of writing. Conversely, between the invention of writing and the birth of modern science, the western world has lived through some five thousand years, during which time the sum of its knowledge has rather gone up and down than known a steady increase. It has often been remarked that there was no great difference between the life of a Greek or Roman citizen and that of a member of the well-to-do European classes in the eighteenth century. In the Neolithic age, humanity made immense strides forward without any help from writing; and writing did not save the civilizations of the western world from long periods of stagnation. Doubtless the scientific expansion of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could hardly have occurred, had writing not existed. But this condition, however necessary, cannot in itself explain that expansion.

If we want to correlate the appearance of writing with certain other characteristics of civilization, we must look elsewhere. The one phenomenon which has invariably accompanied it is the formation of cities and empires: the integration into a political system, that is to say, of a considerable number of individuals, and the distribution of those individuals into a hierarchy of castes and classes. Such is, at any rate, the type of development which we find, from Egypt right across to China, at the moment when

writing makes its debuts; it seems to favour rather the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind. This exploitation made it possible to assemble workpeople by the thousand and set them tasks that taxed them to the limits of their strength: to this, surely, we must attribute the beginnings of architecture as we know it. If my hypothesis is correct, the primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings. The use of writing for disinterested ends, and with a view to satisfactions of the mind in the fields either of science or the arts, is a secondary result of its invention and may even be no more than a way of reinforcing, justifying, or dissimulating its primary function.

There are, however, exceptions to this rule. Ancient Africa included empires in which several hundred thousand subjects acknowledged a single rule; in pre-Colombian America, the Inca empire numbered several million subjects. But, alike in Africa and in America, these ventures were notably unstable: we know, for instance, that the Inca empire was established in the twelfth century or thereabouts. Pizarro's soldiers would never have conquered it so easily if it had not already, three centuries later, been largely decomposed. And, from the little we know of the ancient history of Africa, we can divine an analogous situation: massive political groups seem to have appeared and disappeared within the space of not many decades. It may be, therefore, that these instances confirm, instead of refuting, our hypothesis, Writing may not have sufficed to consolidate human knowledge, but it may well have been indispensable to the establishment of an enduring dominion. To bring the matter nearer to our own time: the European-wide movement towards compulsory education in the nineteenth century went hand in hand with the extension of military service and the systematization of the proletariat. The struggle against illiteracy is indistinguishable, at times, from the increased powers exerted over the individual citizen by the central authority. For it is only when everyone can read that Authority can decree that ignorance of the law is no defence.

All this moved rapidly from the national to the international level, thanks to the mutual complicity which sprang up between newborn states confronted as these were with the problems that had been our own, a century or two ago and an international society of peoples long privileged. These latter recognize that their stability may well be endangered by nations whose knowledge of the written word has not, as yet, empowered them to think in formulae which can be modified at will. Such nations are not yet ready to be "edified"; and when they are first given the freedom of the library shelves they are perilously vulnerable to the ever more deliberately misleading effects of the printed word. Doubtless the die is already cast, in that respect. But in my Nambikwara village people were not so easily taken in. Shortly after my visit the leader lost the confidence of most of his people. Those who moved away from him, after he had tried to play the civilized man, must have had a confused understanding of the fact that writing, on this its first appearance in their midst, had allied itself with falsehood; and so they had taken refuge, deeper in the bush, to win themselves a respite. And yet I could not but admire the genius of their leader, for he had divined in a flash that writing could redouble his hold upon the others and, in so doing, he had got, as it were, to the bottom of an institution which he did not as yet know how to work. The episode also drew my attention to a further aspect of Nambikwara life: the political relations between individuals and groups. This I was

shortly to be able to scrutinize more directly.

Questions

1. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss describes the reaction of a community of non-literates in Brazil to his practice of writing in a notebook. In this incident, it is not meaningful words, a transcription of language, that has an impact, but the very technology itself. Explain.
2. It's common to assume that writing, and literacy, are responsible for the great civilizations of the earth. Olson challenges that simplistic view of literacy, and here Lévi-Strauss suggests that the great progress of the Neolithic age, with its invention of agriculture, shows that complex knowledge can be transmitted across time *without* writing. What are the implications of Lévi-Strauss's claim that writing is a by-product of this human advancement, and not its cause?
3. Lévi-Strauss then goes on to claim that writing historically has been a tool for enslavement, at worst, and for the top-down organizing of human activity, at best. Contrast this view with the common modern assumption that writing is both liberatory and revolutionary.
4. Lévi-Srauss draws these conclusions from his observations of the behavior of the Nambikwara group's leader. But he adds that the group quickly lost confidence in the leader, concluding that his use of writing was a deception. Lévi-Strauss doesn't go so far as to equate all writing with propaganda—enslavement is bad enough—but it certainly seems to be the case that here, and with no sense of irony, a writer critiques the tyranny of writing. Discuss.