

Penumbra of Acquaintance

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In our time, once a book is published, everybody knows about it. This is not necessarily true of ancient texts, which may at first have addressed a limited audience. But we moderns too have our modes of narrower acquaintance: showing a chapter to a writer's group; reading poems in a bookstore. Churches meeting together in summer hear the other preacher, as they would not normally do.

From an earlier century comes this testimony:

My father lived ten miles from Shrewsbury, and was in the habit of exchanging visits with Mr Rowe and Mr Jenkins, of Whitchurch (nine miles further on), according to the custom of Dissenting ministers in each other's neighborhood. A line of communication is thus established, by which the flame of civil and religious liberty is kept alive, and nourishes its smouldering fire unquenchable . . . Coleridge had agreed to come over and see my father, according to the courtesy of the country, as Mr Rowe's probable successor, but in the meantime, I had gone to hear him preach the Sunday after his arrival. A poet and a philosopher getting up into a Unitarian pulpit to preach the Gospel was a romance in these degenerate days, a sort of revival of the primitive spirit of Christianity which was not to be resisted.¹

The same was true in antiquity ("ten miles" is a good one-day's journey), and this affects our idea of how widely a text might have been known, before it was handed to the copyists for systematic distribution.² Here are a few glimpses of such situations.

Confucius and His Neighbors

Movements, either originally or as they grow from more local beginnings, tend to locate in cities, and there they may be neighbors, one down the street from the other. It might seem that membership in one would preclude membership in another, but this was not necessarily so. Not just the school's teachings, but its teachings *in text form*, could be known to nearby schools. In an *Analects* passage of c0405, we read:

The Master said, The words of the Model Maxims 法語: can one but assent to them? But the point is to *change*. The words of the Select Advices 選舉: can one but delight in them? But the point is to *progress*. Those who delight but do not progress, who assent but do not change – I don't know what is to be done with them.³

Confucius' criticism is notably sharp. The point for us is the knowledge on which it is based. It is based on knowledge of the neighbor schools' house texts, and their titles. A *closely held* text (such as a school compendium) is not necessarily a *secret* text.

¹From Hazlitt, "My First Acquaintance with Poets."

²For this moment, which I call "Point P," see Walker **Interpolations** 21.

³Brooks **Analects** 35.

Vergil's Aeneid

This long poem (unfinished at its author's death, and completed by Imperial order) was known in Roman literary circles through private readings. And Roman literary circles surely overlapped with each other. Not only were Horace and Vergil friends, they had the same literary patron: Maecenas.

Contact Between Centers

A still narrow acquaintance could be gained by travel. Confucius, accompanying his exiled ruler to Chí, witnessed a musical performance which greatly impressed him; not long after, his native Lǚ began to catch up musically. The Dzwǒ Jwàn, a supposed ancient chronicle of Lǚ, was presented to the Chí throne in 0313; within a few years, an even more ancient chronicle of Ngwèi had been written in Ngwèi. The Micians had a permanent branch in Lǚ, from which they argued over ritual with the Lǚ Confucians. The *centers* are in touch, but it is not yet wide publication as we know it.

The Epistle of Jacob

This letter is addressed to the churches of the Diaspora, and its successive revisions were carried to them by the apostolic visits described in the Didache. The instructions to the Twelve in Mk 6 envision a day's journey between churches: visitors may receive from their hosts of today only what will enable them to reach their hosts of tomorrow. These closely-spaced churches were surely in touch *with each other* as well.

In large centers like Antioch, where there were presumably many small cell groups, maybe meeting in someone's house, opportunities for intergroup contact and sharing would have been no less great.

The churches were in contact in this way because they were *founded* in this way: by the spread of the Word from neighbor to neighbor, from one village to the next.⁴ For the later apostolic visits, the lines of contact were already in being.

And to return to our first example, were not the early churches in somewhat the position of the little Dissenting congregations of Hazlitt's day? Islands of belief, in a sea of contrasting and partly hostile belief? Would this not have tended all the more to keep them in touch with each other, as months passed, and difficulties continued? To share sermons, advices, and counsels in adversity?

Works Cited

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⁴For "contact missionarizing," see also Brooks **Parables** 91.