

FINAL LECTURE

I am often reminded of the time some years ago when Harvey and I and our children were driving through an unfamiliar part of Pennsylvania on our way to meet some people for dinner. There was a lot of traffic, it was dark out and starting to rain. We realized we'd never get there on time and wanted call our hosts to tell them we'd be late. But not a phone booth or gas station or diner could be found along the way. In the midst of our frustration, our older son said "One day, people will hear about this and they'll say 'You mean you had to look for a phone? Why didn't you just call from your car?'"

How prescient he was. Today phone booths are relics and distance is no obstacle to the sending and receiving of messages. For a course called Preserving the Past, you've used complex 21st-century technologies, often miniscule in size but powerful in purpose, to record the human voice as far away as China. Truly we are living in a transformative time in the annals of communication technology. But I'll leave it to Harvey to tell you about that.

Instead I'd like to talk about another transformative time in the annals of communication technology, one that occurred two and a half millennia ago in Ancient Greece during what we call the Classical Age. It was then that the culture which still stands as the basis of western civilization went from being an oral to a literate society because of a communications technology. Unlike the ones we're turning to today, it was non-electronic and non-digital. Still it was as far reaching then as the computer is today.

I'm speaking of the alphabet. Just think about it. A group of ikons that stand for the sounds of human speech. There are less than 30 of them; they're easy to recognize and copy. And they can be combined in limitless ways enabling anything that is thought and experienced to be written down and thus preserved indefinitely. This invention made literacy possible.

But it took a very long time before it became an operative factor. By the 8th century B.C., the alphabet had around for at least three centuries, and while some people had learned to read and write by then, the society as a whole remained oral. Writing was generally confined to inscriptions on monuments. It was not until the turn of the 5th into the 4th century B.C., that Greece, at last, was on the cusp of transforming into a literate society. And it was at this moment that Plato stepped onto the stage of human history.

Like no one else, Plato understood the changes literacy would bring about, and he got right into it. Among the things he wrote were kind of transcripts of the oral discussions his mentor Socrates had with fellow citizens, one-on-ones about subjects like TRUTH and JUSTICE and the USEFUL. Socrates was not literate, but he was able to engage in such arguments because the mentality of literacy had moved into the culture's consciousness. Had Plato not written these discussions down, they would have been lost in the mists of memory. Instead you can find them listed on Amazon under the title "The Dialogues of Plato." The same web page will feature Plato's magnum opus: "The Republic" -- this being a diagram of the utopia he envisioned, an ideal society ruled by what he called philosopher kings.

Now let's skip a couple of millennia to 1963 when Eric Havelock, a classical scholar out of Yale, produces a book called "Preface to Plato" which is devoted to the final chapter of "The Republic" which Plato devotes to poetry. Havelock says Plato wrote it in something of a white heat, claiming poetry is dangerous, it can cripple the mind, even cause disease. It doesn't matter if it's good poetry or bad poetry. All poetry is the enemy of truth. Therefore, Plato says, all poetry and all poets will be banned from his Academy that will educate future philosopher kings.

This prohibition has puzzled students and scholars down through the centuries. Why should the man who had such an enormous and long-lasting impact on the way we think reject a beloved literary art? No one had been able to come up with a satisfactory answer until Havelock came along. And he solved the riddle with a very simple argument: Poetry in Ancient Greece was a very different animal from what it is today and it served a very different purpose.

Havelock looks at works from the classical world— which you, at first, might not even think of as poems -- the Odyssey and the Iliad. Until the 1930s, everyone assumed they were written by Homer. But Homer existed way before writing was around. He had to have composed these epics orally and recited them. After his time, other poets had to have picked up where he left off and continued what became a long-standing tradition.

Now, these epics are great adventure stories, classics that have not lost their appeal over time and place. Only in pre-literate Ancient Greece, they and other poems were something more: the tribal encyclopedia of an oral culture. People gathered in stadiums to listen to them being recited by wandering poets, troubadours. And that was how everyone learned about the gods, the heroes, the battles.

But embedded in the narratives was technical information like how to build a ship, political information like the hierarchy of rulers, legal information like laws, rights, obligations, precedents that led to judgments, customs and mores -- in short, all the knowledge one needed to function as a member of society.

The recitations were rhythmic; they rhymed, they had alliteration and assonance -- all the devices of poetry. There was often musical accompaniment. The audience would participate in a call and response type of dialogue; people would repeat what the poet said. These were performances: absorbing, entertaining, eminently pleasurable to listen to and take part in. But their overriding purpose was to inform the audience, to get them remember, and then to constantly re-charge the collective memory. Because, in an oral society, memorization is key. Without written documents, the only place to store information is in memory.

I write poetry and when I have what we call “writer’s block,” I’ll complain my muse has deserted me. To me, a muse is a figure of inspiration. But in Ancient Greece, the muses were the semi-divine daughters of Mnemosyne, the goddess of MEMORY. The poet called on them not to help him create but to REMEMBER. He would hear the rhythmic beating of their feet as they arrived. That put him in a state of remembering. Only then would he begin his recitation.

Think of all the information such a poet had to have in his head and all the effort and psychic energy his audience had to invest in order to REMEMBER. They would have to fall under a kind of spell, become engaged in the kind of mass hypnosis Havelock called the Homeric state of mind.

As far as Plato was concerned, it wasn't the content of a poem, it wasn't the metaphors or similes or images the poet used that bothered him. It was the POETIC EXPERIENCE itself: the conditions under which people heard a poem, how they responded to it, and the fact this experience was the chief vehicle of education.

This was a threshold moment in human history. Events, laws, mores and beliefs were being written down. Now, if you want to know how the Trojan War ended, you could consult a document. You're liberated from the tyranny of memorization, free at last to let your mind run in new and different directions, to analyze, conceptualize, engage in reflective thought.

Ideas are born. Before, JUSTICE could only be realized as an example in a story. Now it has identity as an ABSTRACTION. Before, ADDITION was something achieved by counting sticks. Now it's a MATHEMATICAL PRINCIPAL.

As I said, this dawning was a long time coming. Over the centuries, there were people who were slowly, dimly, becoming aware of the ways you could think if you weren't spending every minute trying to remember everything. These people – whom we refer to as pre-Socratics (thinkers before Socrates) – gradually noticed the changes that were becoming possible as literacy started to infiltrate the culture's mentality. They struggled to develop a vocabulary and syntax that would enable them talk about their mental activities: organizing things according to subjects; coming up with abstractions -- the IDEA of a bed instead of a SPECIFIC bed, creating subject areas like THE TRUTH, NATURE, THE STARS IN THE SKY , in other words, DISCIPLINES.

In the process they became aware of themselves. The IDEA of the SOUL was born. The Delphic Oracle: "Know Thyself" and Socrates' adage: "The unexamined life is not worth living" become guiding principles. Both were unimaginable in the Homeric Age.

They come to a climax in the mind of Plato, the prophet of CONCEPTUAL THOUGHT. Conceptual thought comes natural to us, but then it was a feat of Herculean proportions. No longer was the focus on a SPECIFIC item but on an IDEA of body and space, matter and motion, permanence and change, emotions and morals reasons and opinion.

All of Plato's persuasive arguments come to bear in his book the Republic when he argues that the old habits of an oral culture would have to be put aside in his Academy in order for the BRAVE NEW WORLD he envisions to come into being. The old habits will die hard. People will still love to hear a talented bard recite "The Iliad." And that's why, Havelock says, Plato was so adamant about the need for leaders of the society he envisions to break with the past of falling under the poet's spell and putting every ounce of mental energy in remembering, remembering, remembering. Therefore no poets will be allowed in his Academy but there will be plenty of room for mathematicians and philosophers. There will be no recitations of "The Iliad," but a curriculum filled with courses in mathematics, science, honor, truth, utility, justice -- the study of abstract concepts.

Plato was perhaps the first to REALIZE and ARTICULATE the central truth of this course: the MEDIUM is a powerful determinant that forms the way we think. Over the past ten weeks, you have been moving through various media. Operating in the realm of orality, you headed out in search of memories. Then you took the memories you recorded -- via technologies undreamed of in Plato's day -- and brought them into the realm of literacy. Once there, you were forced to alter, to edit and to organize according to the demands of conceptual thought.

That's been our experience in MALS 191 and why I think this book is so relevant to what we are all about. But the invention of the alphabet and the gradual evolution of a literary state of mind has far greater significance than its application to this course. I urge you to read this book. You will come away from it not only with evidence of the "glory that was Greece," but with a sense of the overwhelming transformative powers of literacy, how it enabled the pre-Socratics to engage in the new art of conceptualization; how they then paved the way for Plato to organize a prose of ideas and rules of logic to govern it which Plato's disciple Aristotle would go on to systematize.

Plato and Aristotle -- familiar names across the millennia -- together they created 'knowledge' as an object. They gave the experience of everything we could think about and everything we lived organized existence in the ABSTRACT WORD. Western Civilization still lives in their shadow.