

# **Recollect Orality**

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**A brief historical overview, playfully  
presented, reminds the reader  
of the relationships between orality,  
literacy and our current electronic  
social condition.**



*Enter history.*

In all human cultures, societies create distinctive identities by conserving their history and mores and then re-presenting this collective consciousness as a model for living. In oral cultures, representation of social consciousness exists exclusively inside the human mind. In order to share and maintain the social conditions someone (*the poets*) must recite (*rhapsodize*) to the community the history (*the genealogies*) and the mores (*the myths*). The mental intensity required to memorize and recall vast quantities of information and to compose, on the spot, a comprehensive and cohesive narrative is difficult for the literate mind to wholly appreciate.

Oral recitation is a collective ritual, an emotionally charged experience, involving a trance-like interplay between the poet and the audience. The rhythm of the continuous rise and fall of the voice, the accompanying gestures and the spontaneous response of the audience all determine, from moment to moment, what will happen next. No two recitations are exactly the same, but the social model does not decay because a general mental understanding is created within the group as a result of experiencing the ritual.

*In fourteen hundred and ninety two  
Columbus sailed the ocean blue . . .*

**But the rest of American history?**

*Enter ancient Greece.*

The social conditions of ancient Greece varied widely and were in constant flux. There were serfs, farmers, mining and textile merchants, foreign slaves and city workers. The government was first a monarchy then an aristocracy, followed by alternating periods of tyranny and democracy. Vicious wars raged on and on.<sup>3</sup> In this vast and diverse setting, oral knowledge

> > > **roots in history. ancient tongue. sound in sanskrit *svanati*.  
from greek *rhaptein* to sew or stitch together plus *adain* to sing.  
then *rhapsoidos* epic poem singer. and to *rhapsodia* recitation happening.  
recall the patterns of poetic universe. then latin *rhapsodia* epic poem written down.<sup>14</sup>  
a rhapsody. impassioned expression. verbalized or literary. public enemy's sound: >**



alphabet, Homer and other unknown poets began to translate the verses of Greek culture into the first written documents of their history. This transformation probably took about two hundred years, from 750 to 550 BC.<sup>5</sup>

When the Homeric poems were brought to Athens, they were examined by the aristocracy. Soon oral epics, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, were adopted as the literature of the educated elite, and orality became connected to the less educated classes, to a primitive way of thinking. The erosion of an ancient tradition began, simultaneously, with the expansion of a profound and entirely new consciousness. How – and in what forms – can the human intellect exist outside the mind?

**The works of Greek literature after the Homeric transcriptions occurred are composed in an increasing tension between the genius of oral and the genius of written composition.**

E. A. HAVELOCK<sup>6</sup>

## no escape nouscape

Writing fixed, froze, imprisoned the moving continuum of oral recitation. The poet's dynamic voice, and the inter-active social ritual, was reduced to quiescent visual space. Response shifted from the mass audience to the individual reader, who, detached from the writer, responded only inside his own mind. Writing created a consciousness of self. *I write, therefore I am*. Logic, geometry, philosophy, theory – abstract thought was formulated by writing.

**The first hunters and gatherers looked at themselves in astonishment one day, for an interminable instant, in the still waters of a poem.**

OCTAVIO PAZ<sup>7</sup>

> > > as they fell to the floor and got rougher. now the family has got to suffer.  
pallbearers got to carry them. while the families cry loud just to bury them.  
newscast and people were heavily amazed. flavor flav just stared in a daze.  
eyewitness news – channel seven. more news at 11."<sup>15</sup> > > > > > > >

*Enter politics.*

The newly enlightened Greek aristocracy became quite aware, it seems, of their new power. . . . **the first creatures**

**on earth to become aware of time**

**were also the first creatures to smile.**

VLADIMIR NABOKOV <sup>8</sup>

Plato, who was skeptical that this artificial new device could portray the reality of the mind, at first rejected writing as inhuman. But later, he decided – “*not that I mean to depreciate them*” – to reject the poets themselves, who – “*have plenty of brave words and fair conceits*” – are – “*not fitted by nature and education to take part at once both in politics and philosophy*” – excluded from his *Republic*.<sup>9</sup> Skillfully does the pupil turn against his masters.

**I will throw out everything from the past except that  
which is still of service to me.**

LE CORBUSIER <sup>10</sup>

*Exit poets.*

Thus died the collective consciousness of Greek civilization. Literate propaganda, not literacy itself, discredited orality in the Western world and displaced the poets from the mainstream of society.

**By the fourth century BC propaganda had become  
an ancient art in Athens, even if the Greeks chose  
to call it ‘persuasion’ or some other benign term.**

GEORGE N. GORDON <sup>11</sup>

> > > **current transmission. cultural condition.** > > > > > > > > > > > > >

language  
slanguage

The educated elite in Athens felt that the new knowledge they had acquired from written texts was theirs and theirs alone. The management of knowledge, education through distribution of specific texts, had become a commodity. Most academic institutions today continue to practice this kind of restrictive control over the intellectual development of their students.

# apocalypse epochellipse

*Enter the present. Echo ancient Greece.*

The social conditions of postmodern America vary widely and are in constant flux. We have television, teleprompter, telephone, telefax, telecom, CDROM, desktop, laptop, PC, CRT, CAV, DAT. We are bombarded with information. *A!e!i!o!u!* Graphic designers, formerly facilitators of messages presented in silent visual space, are now faced with the task of articulating information transmitted both visually and aurally. We hesitate. We feel so far removed. We ask, ourselves,

**Do I dare**

**Disturb the univers?**

**In a minute there is time**

**For decisions and revisions which a minute  
will reverse . . .**

**So how should I presume?**

T. S. ELIOT <sup>11</sup>

# ensorship sensorship

> > > **resonant sensation. sympathetic vibration.  
direct transference from thought to thought. correspondence on a wireless wave.  
unheard. unseen. undeniably felt.** > > > > > > > > > > > > >

Surrounded by the spectacles of video, film, hypermedia, multi-media and virtual reality, we search for ways to orient ourselves in relation to the rapid-fire onslaught of communication technology. New products dazzle, and the information, the message being sent, seems to fade by comparison. We seem to lose our sense of vision. Is our work responsible or reactionary in relation to the social conditions? With an unclear vision of the future, we cast our gaze to history, hoping to discern a clue.

: Attention, Attention. This is a test of the fire alarm system.  
Please disregard any and all alarms you may hear. Thank you :

ReVerse. ReVise. ReFlect. ReFract. ReCall. ReAct. *Hear! Here!* is *Civilization and its Discontents*. Freud offers sound advise: "Go ask the poets." After all, this is just . . .

> > > "you cannot travel on the path before you have become the Path itself."  
gautama buddha<sup>16</sup>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. 1975. Springfield: G. & C. Merriam Company.
- <sup>2</sup> Walter Ong, 1982. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World*. New York: Routledge, 83.
- <sup>3</sup> Bertrand Russell. 1945. *A History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Simon Schuster, 9.
- <sup>4</sup> Richard Lattimore, trans. 1951. *The Iliad of Homer*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 182.
- <sup>5</sup> Bertrand Russell. 1945. *A History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Simon Schuster, 10.
- <sup>6</sup> E. A. Havelock and Jackson P. Hershball, eds. 1978. *Communication Arts in the Ancient World*. New York: Hastings House Publishers, 19.
- <sup>7</sup> Octavio Paz. 1990. *The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 159.
- <sup>8</sup> Vladimir Nabokov. 1947. *Speak, Memory*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 22.
- <sup>9</sup> B. Jowett, trans. 1892. *The Dialogues of Plato Volume 2*. New York: Random House, *Timaeus* 19, 5.
- <sup>10</sup> Le Corbusier. 1987. *The Decorative Arts of Today*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 163.
- <sup>11</sup> E. A. Havelock and Jackson P. Hershball, eds. 1978. *Communication Arts in the Ancient World*. New York: Hastings House Publishers, 56, essay by George N. Gordon, "Aristotle as a Modern Propagandist."
- <sup>12</sup> T.S. Eliot, from his poem, "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock."
- <sup>13</sup> This is a general reference to the Aboriginal people of northern Australia, an oral culture which has existed for many thousands of years. They believe that every individual has a totemic spirit ancestor that lived during the mythological Dream-time and traveled throughout the land, singing the world into creation. In their wake these spirit ancestors left paths sprinkled with words and melodies. When a person walks along the path of his ancestor, he sings again the ancient songline, thus recreating the world for himself.  
Bruce Chatwin. 1987. *The Songlines*. New York: Penguin Books, 12-14.
- <sup>14</sup> *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. 1975. Springfield: G. & C. Merriam Company.
- <sup>15</sup> Public Enemy *Apocalypse 91...The Enemy Strikes Back*, Sony Music Entertainment Inc., New York 1991.
- <sup>16</sup> Bruce Chatwin. 1987. *The Songlines*. New York: Penguin Books, 179.