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THE ART OF IMMEMORABILITY

In the January 1999 issue of the almost unreadably hyperdesigned *Wired* magazine, a quote from the poet and Zen abbot Norman Fischer is splashed across three full-color pages: "The real technology—behind all of our other technologies—is language."¹ This useful motto, echoing as it does the sense of language as *tekhne* suggested by Jerome Rothenberg in his preface to *Technicians of the Sacred* thirty years ago, appears in a paperbound journal of the new electronic communications technologies, a strangely amphibian publication with one foot firmly planted in the print past and the other ready to kick the ball into a digital future. But what ball? What past? What future?

And anyway, who invented language? While that question may have to be left to anthropologists and theologians, the question of the invention of writing in the West is quite a different matter, with a long and well-documented prehistory of inscriptions on rock faces and cave walls, an opening act consisting of Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs (emerging about 5,000 years ago) and a second act of North Semitic, Phoenician, and Hebrew consonantal scripts (as early as 3,700 years ago) followed by the Greek alphabet (2,700 to 2,800 years ago).

The technological significance of each of these phases of writing cannot be overestimated. North Semitic, Phoenician, and Hebrew (proto)alphabetic scripts, consisting of twenty-two letters, all consonants, eliminated the need to memorize the hundreds of characters necessary to decipher earlier writing and created a means of representing the sound of spoken language that remains fundamental to Western conceptions of literature. The Greeks built upon and improved this already revolutionary system, creating a set

A Book of the Book: Some Works & Projections about the Book & Writing, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Steve Clay (New York: Granary Books, 2000). Thanks to Tan Lin, Jerome Rothenberg, and Thomas McEvilley.

1. "The Wired Diaries," in *Wired* 7.01 (January 1999), http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.01/diaries.html?pg=15&topic=&topic_set=,15, accessed July 4, 2010.

of twenty-four letters, of which seven were vowels. The Greek alphabet was easy to form, decipher, and pronounce. In *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*, Eric Havelock tells the story of the evolution this alphabet, noting that the civil society of classical Greece controlled its own transition from primary orality to writing by using a system that they had invented and that was particularly suited to represent the sounds of spoken Greek.² The genius of the Greek alphabet was the invention of subsyllabic units that break sound down into "atomic elements" that can be combined to represent "any linguistic noise" (60). This was not quite wysiwyg (what you see is what you get), but close—what you see is what you hear; and the alphabet's simplification and supersession of previous systems of writing is not unlike the transformations from Fortran to DOS to Windows. Never before had writing been able to so efficiently represent the full sound sensorium of spoken language. The Greek alphabet was, in Havelock's words, the "first and last instrument to reproduce the range of previous orality" (60).

For those accustomed to rating computer technology in terms of storage memory and processing speed, the alphabetic revolutions can be measured in analogous terms: a remarkably accessible user interface and an enormous capacity to store retrievable information. In the West, Greek-style alphabets would dominate writing technology until the present; though no doubt there is a value in "thinking different," as the current Apple computer ads insist. The Hebrew alphabet showed a remarkable resiliency when revived midcentury as the official language of Israel. And the Chinese written character remains the longest-running show in the writing business. But just as current digital technology is eclipsing the alphabet, it is also forcing changes in Chinese writing as Asian language users converge on the Internet and try to find ways to adapt to the limitations of the alphabetic computer keypad.

While the Greek alphabet, and Greek verbal art, has had an enormous influence on the subsequent Western literature, it is not necessary to argue for the uniqueness of classical Greek literary culture or for the cultural supremacy of the Greek alphabet when considering the value of Havelock's claims. Havelock provides a richly suggestive case study of the effect of writing technology on poetry. In Havelock's view, the greatness of the verbal art in the period from Homer to Plato is significantly the result of the major technological shift that occurred during this time, when alphabetic writing

2. *The Muse Learns to Write* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

was emerging in an a/literate culture. Thus Homer, Hesiod, and Euripides are not the product of a fully literate culture; rather, they capture by alphabetic technology the existing and dominant oral culture. Yet to capture is also to misrepresent (all representation is also misrepresentation) and to misrepresent is, of course, also to change.

Havelock's perspective runs counter to transcendental humanist claims often made for classical Greek "literature," since he argues that the greatness of this work is partly the result of its *not* being the product of a fully literate culture and partly the result of technological innovation. While early Greek oral and performance art had an aesthetic and entertainment value, Havelock sees the primary function of such works as encyclopedic and memorial: to store for reuse the customs and manners of the culture. For a/literate verbal art to have this capacity, listeners must be able to memorize, remember, and echo. As a result, the language must be memorable. And, indeed, the works whose function is (at least in part) to store cultural memory are repeated over and over again, like children's stories, to allow memorization. The word games and songs of children preserve in our contemporary culture several of the features of such alphabetic verbal art.

Havelock argues that Greek alphabetic writing provided a new and better means for the storage and retrieval of cultural memory by providing a highly supple means to record the aural textures of performed language, thus preserving in writing the modes of information storage deployed by the oral culture of the Greeks. According to Havelock, and in this he echoes the findings of Albert Lord and Milman Parry, the oral (or pneumatic) forms of language storage employed by the Greeks relied on a range of mnemonic techniques that are preserved in a remarkably full-blown way by the Homeric epics. That is, the Homeric epics embody in writing alphabetic modes of language storage. The earliest Greek writing, marked by the emergence of a new alphabetic technology within a culture in which oral technology remained dominant for a few hundred years, takes from a/literate verbal performance the form of rhythmic verse, with much of the emerging "literature" written for the holdover medium of performance. Much of the new alphabetic writing, then, was an aid to memory, taking the form of scripts to be memorized for subsequent performance. As result, the prosody was, to some extent, carried over from alphabetic verbal art. In such scripted writing, the page is not the final destination but a preliminary stage, prompts for final presentation elsewhere.

Such holdover writing practices might be contrasted with more distinctively textual features of writing, ones that are less bound to transcription

and scripting—less bound, that is, to “transcriptive” functions of writing. If you write something down, then you don’t have to remember it and you don’t have to write it in a way that will help you to memorize it. The writing takes on the work of memory rather than being an aid to memory, and this function is not compromised by writing that is difficult or impossible to memorize. On the one hand, it’s the difference between the *Odyssey* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; on the other, between a counting game and a poem by Jackson Mac Low.

The distinction I am suggesting here is not unlike one that Marshall McLuhan makes in *Understanding Media* between the received and the new content of the emerging medium. The initial content of television was the product of the previous moving-image medium, film (which, in turn, not only shaped the TV but also changed movies). In contrast, “live” TV (initially broadcasts of sporting events but epitomized by live news broadcasts) is the best example of a distinct genre particular to the medium of television.

If “live” TV suggests a formal essence for the new medium of television, we might look at non-oral, non-speech-based forms of writing in order to identify the distinctly textual, rather than holdover or transcriptive, features of writing.

Greek alphabetic writing, because of both its ingenuity in phonetic reproduction (transcription) and its use as scripts for subsequent performance, may obscure the emergence of specifically textual forms. The almost immediate use of the Greek alphabet for inscribing epitaphs (a quintessentially memorial function of writing and one of the earliest uses of any kind of writing) is an important exception, since, like epigrams, epitaphs are neither transcriptions of, nor scripts for, performed verbal art. Greek prose, in the sense of nonrhythmic, non-performance-scored writing, emerged later, with Plato and Herodotus.

In contrast to the phonic agility of Greek writing, earlier nonalphabetic writing systems had a more marked separation of speech and writing, since such writing systems were less insistent on (or less effective in) invoking a phonemic reality outside the written characters. In such nonalphabetic writing, there are numerous examples of codes, laws, accounts, and other catalogs and compendia that appear to dispense with the mnemonic formula of a/literate verbal art and begin to mine writing’s textuality. These writing systems may have potentiated the textual and immemorial functions of writing more fully than alphabetic writing, which bears the trace of its phonetic transcription. The very effectiveness of the Greek alphabet’s apparent ability to “capture” speech may have resulted in the appearance of

speech “capturing” alphabetic writing. Except that, according to Havelock, the Homeric epics are not transcriptions of speech as such, but rather the translation into writing of the performed verbal art of the period. This suggests that the “transcriptive” process was twofold: notating the oral performance and creating scripts for subsequent performance.

The distinction between textual and transcriptive functions of writing is by no means clear-cut, since the definitions of each are recursive. On the one hand, my speculation about the greater textuality of nonalphabetic or early alphabetic writing is undermined by the possibility that what now appears as textual rather than scripted writing was performed or incanted, as is the case with biblical Hebrew texts. On the other hand, the alphabet provided novel, nonprosodic, means of textual organization, from alphabetization to the numerology of gematria. While not an opposition, a certain divergence can be noted: Writing as transcriptive retains the mnemonic features of a/literate verbal art either as reproduction or to facilitate memorization for subsequent performance. Textualized writing, in contrast, is not an intermediate stage to a performance elsewhere. The immemorial possibilities of textual writing put the memory in the text rather than using the text as an aid to memory.

Writing not only records language, it also changes language—and consciousness. Once some of the memory functions of language are shifted from oral to alphabetic technology, then language may be freed up from these tasks—or in the darker semiotic economy of Walter Ong or David Abram, it loses bodily touch with them. In other words, alphabetic writing makes its own particular marks on language, allowing for greater levels of abstraction and reflection, which has often resulted in diminishing the amount of action and “doing.” For example, descriptions of acts of seeing give way to the idea of sight; or consider, as another example: “Toronto-Hatted McLuhan exhorts his minions” versus “Language reveals truth.” Indeed, abstraction and reflection are two qualities that typify later classical Greek writing, but, contrary to much received wisdom, these qualities may be less truth-effects than media-effects. The rest, in other words, is history.

The means of language and cultural reproduction always become a means of production and variance, as what is “stored” is transformed by the means of its imagined storage—so that it is a matter of morphing more than storing.

Writing read in this way tells us more than what it purports to tell, since it embodies the story of its mode of telling alongside any tales it tells. However, it’s not the tail wagging the dog, as much literary criticism has

assumed, but a tale of the dog; though if the dog could talk, would we understand its bark or only its plight?

My speculative model here is not of one technology replacing another, nor am I suggesting that changes in the technology for language reproduction create social or cultural improvement. Alphabetic technology does not replace oral technology any more than cars replace walking. But it does shift the balance, and writing registers the change. After all, poetry precedes prose, but prose does not abolish poetry. Indeed, prose is as agonistic to poetry as it is complementary. Prose has killed poetry many times, but poetry doesn't seem to get the message. But maybe that's because poetry is the vampire medium, sucking the blood from other modes of writing and leaving them lifeless, while itself living on into an eternity at the cost of its mortality. This is why poetry often metamorphoses into prose—to regain its historical existence by casting aside its ghoulish triumph.

In any period, some poetry will discover that which can only be done as writing using new technical means, while other poetry will bring over into the present of writing the forms and motifs of previous technological and historical moments. Neither approach is invalid, just as neither is surefire, but evaluating one approach by the criteria derived from the other is misguided.

Havelock goes on to theorize that Greek lyric poetry is the product of the alphabet, which allows for the abstraction of the "I" and for the development of the individuated lyric self—a claim that modifies Bruno Snell's earlier Hellenophilic argument for the Greek invention of the lyric and the concomitant emergence of *polis* (the city-state).³ No sooner does the Greek alphabet appear than the "I" of writing also appears. And with the lyric so the satiric—Sappho and Archilochos—and also (the Greek version of) the civic. While early Greek lyrics were composed to be sung with musical accompaniment, early satiric verse was not. Lyric and satiric were the formally innovative poetry that emerged with the new Greek alphabet and with a new civic society; epic persisted, transformed by the new medium and by the company, if not rivalry, of the new genres.

This is not to say that the self was invented by the alphabet, but rather that the Western literary genre of the lyric (and also the satiric) might have been. By making possible a semblance of the speaking voice of the poet, the

3. Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind: Greek Origins of European Thought*, translated by T. G. Rosenmeyer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953); see especially chap. 3, "The Rise of Individuality in the Early Greek Lyric" (1941).

alphabetic lyric took possession of (or was possessed by) the "other" of that vexed double sense of "lyric"—words to be sung and words spoken by an individual. In this way, the alphabet facilitated the creation of a more stable author identity—the signature, a prerequisite for the lyric as literary genre. The lyric utilized the signature-effect of writing in ways not accessible to (or perhaps even desirable for) analphabetic verbal art. Various forms of self-expression, and of signature, certainly existed in the West prior to the Greek alphabet, and there are a number of precursors to lyric poetry in earlier Western writing as well in Greek verbal art prior to the invention of the Greek alphabet. Gregory Nagy has argued that the metrical patterns and possibly the phraseology of Greek lyric poetry predate the metrics of the oral epics associated with the names Hesiod and Homer and have their origins in far more ancient Indic religious hymns and prayers, such those found in the Rigveda, the oldest parts of which go back 3,500 years (though the means for any such possible transmission remain obscure).⁴ Such archaic meters may themselves be derived from earlier fixed phrases or "charms," providing a means for intact preservation over time. Moreover, the Hebrew "Song of Songs" (written about 400 years before Sappho) is often cited as protolyric verse. These examples notwithstanding, the Greek alphabet opened a set of particular possibilities for poetry, including a modulation in the effect of using the "I," which were immediately and brilliantly exploited by the secular early Greek poets in a way that had an indelible impact not only on the medium of poetry, as we know it in the West, but also on writing.

In his comparative study of Greek and Indic meter, Nagy notes that Alfred Lord defines "a truly 'oral' tradition as one in which every performance generates a new composition" (16). In contrast, writing has often been misunderstood as fixing texts. Transcriptive writing has its end not in a fixed and final text but rather in a series of alphabetic and performative versionings—a dynamic that carries over into textual writing as well. Contrary to the received wisdom of textual and bibliographic theory, based on a biblical model that seeks to recover the immutable scriptural original, textual "transmission" should be understood not only in terms of "corruption" but also as new alphabetic performances.

All early Greek writing bears the stamp of a/literate verbal art, and the metrics of both lyric and epic retain features of the mnemonic systems essential to that art. The question is what effect Greek alphabetic writing had

4. Gregory Nagy, *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

on these archaic modes, both epic and lyric. To what degree did lyric and epic poetry take on distinctly new textual attributes after the introduction of the Greek alphabet into an a/literate culture with a long history of both epic and protolyric modes? The Greek alphabet did not create the lyric out of the blue; nor did a particular technology determine a particular literature. Nothing is ever entirely new. But the "same thing" takes on new meanings in new technological contexts. Writing technologies affect poetry in ways that are often hard to explicate but nonetheless become part of their meaning. In this particular circumstance, it might be more fruitful to focus not on intrinsic features of lyric verse but rather on the "reading effects" that the alphabet created for the lyric, including those that took place over long periods of time, such as the possibility that a lyric might be read and not sung. That is, the lyric takes on a different quality in the new medium. While the lyric initially may have been a script for performance or song, it led to a newly textualized form of poetry.

After the invention of the alphabet, the next most significant Western technological revolution in the reproduction of language occurred in 1451 with the invention of the printing press (the Chinese were printing books eight hundred years earlier). There were other important technological developments between the Greek alphabet and the printing press, including the invention of the Roman alphabet and other scripts, the fabrication of new and more efficient surfaces to write on, and the development of codices and manuscripts and books. But none of these was quite so far-reaching in its impact as Gutenberg's press.

The printing press occurs very late in the history of the book; nonetheless, it ushered in what well might be called the Age of the Book, a period of unprecedented circulation for writing. If the stage epitomizes the transcriptive or memorial functions of writing, the book epitomizes the immemorial storage function of writing. The book is writing's own stage, not a prompt to some other stage. Insofar as literary works appear in books they make possible a circulation distinct from presentation in theatrical performance. The book is the place where writing as writing comes into its own, has its own "place," finds its own forms.

Many of the effects we associate with literacy were not yet dominant in the medieval Europe of Gutenberg, which held fast to many characteristics of analphabetic culture. Writing remained an aid to memory, and oral forms were still part of its infrastructure. Indeed, medieval poetry, scripted to be performed—that is, heard not read—retained many of the rhythmical and

rhyming qualities of oral poetry. Augustine of Hippo's 400 CE citing of silent reading is a crucial signpost along the road to changing the user interface with writing technology, since the emergence of silent reading is generally thought to begin only post-Gutenberg and with the advent of prose. As Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay note in *The Emergence of Prose*, prose in medieval France emerged from verse and gradually replaced a number of the functions of verse, simultaneous with the rise of a middle class.⁵

According to H. J. Chaytor, in *From Script to Print: An Introduction to Medieval Vernacular Literature*, during the script period of medieval Europe, reading was word for word, out loud, and not fluent. Poems were written for recitation.⁶ There was no uniformity of grammar or spelling because scripts were to be performed and were only rarely read; except for the case of Latin, only with printing did uniformity even become possible. Before Gutenberg, it was assumed that vernaculars were in flux in terms of pronunciation and vocabulary; the rise of uniform national languages as standard bearers for states was, in part, a media effect. Language stabilization and stylistic idealization (manuals, grammars) are the blowback of the printing press.

According to Chaytor, the first French prose appeared in the late twelfth century; before that, the literature that was produced for public entertainment and education was in verse. This first prose was for legal documents, Bible translations, and, subsequently, historical accounts. Prose was written for individual readers and it was reserved for "matters of fact, not fancy" (85). As part of an emerging, ultimately massive, deversification process, poetry was translated into prose (much as print databases are now being digitalized). The earliest prose by nonpoets or literary artists in France comes from 1202 in an account of the Crusades written in an unembellished, factual style. From the twelfth century on, Chaytor notes, all "important" households in England and Europe had at least one person who could read. By the late 1300s, the first "reading public" emerged in England, with the production of secular literature licensed by universities for students. By the 1400s, prose was preferred for erudition and instruction, while at the same time there was a gradual rise of literacy; but just being literate didn't mean you could read books. According to Irving Fang and the Media History Project's "Timeline," the first paper was used in England

5. Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, *The Emergence of Prose: An Essay in Prosaics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

6. *From Script to Print: an Introduction to Medieval Vernacular Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945).

in 1309 and the first paper mill was established in 1495.⁷ In the fourteenth and fifteenth century books were scarce and expensive and were willed to heirs. Educated men learned to read (women did not)—possibly one-half of the population of England was literate. Indeed, there were more schools in the 1400s than in 1864, suggesting the intensity of interest in literacy in the fifteenth century (Chaytor, 111). By 1450, the first newspapers began to circulate in Europe.

Four hundred years after Gutenberg, the next technological revolution for language reproduction began. For the purposes of defining this ongoing technological vortex, I would point to the telegraph (first invented in the 1830s, with the first transcontinental service becoming available in the 1860s), photography (invented in 1827, popular by late 1830s), the telephone (1876), the phonograph (1877), magnetic audio recording (1899), the loud-speaker (1898), wireless telegraphy (1894), the movie camera (1890–1895), radio (first regular broadcasting around 1907), television (first network TV broadcast 1949), photo-offset printing and “cold type” typesetting (late 1950s), photocopying (first plain paper copier 1959), and, finally, in the last two decades, digital writing and imaging (via computer, the Internet, and the web). Writing in this age of photographic and electronic reproduction is fundamentally postalphabetic in that it no longer relies on scripts to store and transmit information: cultural memory is becoming digital, more image than letter. At the same time, just as the Greeks lived through several hundred years of simultaneous alphabetic and oral culture, we are now living in a period of overlaid oral, alphabetic, and photo/phono electronic culture.

One crucial mark of the overlay of alphabetic and electronic technologies is the emergence of radical modernist art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Just as some of the Greek literary art of the period immediately following the invention of the alphabet formally reflected in the new writing the forms of an oral culture soon to be eclipsed, so radical modernism formally reflects the alphabetic culture soon to be eclipsed (but not replaced) by photographic, electronic, and digital media.

The other crucial marker of the overlay of the oral, alphabetic, and photo/phono electronic is the fact that in North America and Europe, the rise of

7. Media History Project, “Timeline,” <http://www.mediahistory.umn.edu/timeline/>, accessed July 6, 2010. The media history that follows is largely based on this timeline.

mass literacy in the late nineteenth century occurs just as the new era of photographic and electronic communications is beginning, making mass literacy and postliteracy intertwined historical developments. Indeed, the culture of literacy reaches its technical apotheosis in the mid-nineteenth and twentieth century, not only with the rise of a mass readership, but also with invention of nonelectronic and nonphoto/phonographic devices that made language storage and retrieval by writing even more efficient and accessible than ever; for example, carbon paper (1806), the typewriter (first manufactured by Remington in 1873), the mimeograph (invented in 1875 and retailed in 1890), linotype (1886), the Waterman fountain pen (1884), and the ballpoint pen (1938). (The pencil was invented in 1565 and the eraser in 1770, while steel pen points began to replace quill pens in 1780.) The nineteenth- and twentieth-century boom in the production of lyric poetry is coincident with the rise of mass literacy, since many more people were able to become authors. The ability to write and sign something as yours—the signature effect—remains culturally viable until literacy is fully distributed in the society, an event that has yet to occur.

This rise of mass literacy, late in the history of writing, has had the effect of putting the printed and bound book front and center, as the cathected object of the alphabetic unconscious. From the perspective of 1999, the printed book is the best picture we have of alphabetic textuality. As we enter into a postliterate period, we can begin to see the book as the solid middle ground between the stage (performed poetry) and the screen (digital poetry).

In making this broad overview of language reproduction technologies, I want to reiterate that one medium does not conquer another. It is not a question of progress but rather of a series of overlays creating the web in which our language is enmeshed. The alphabet did not prescribe the emergence of lyric poetry as a medium of art but rather created the possibility. Technology determines neither art nor politics, but politics and art are never free from the effects of technology. Technology informs, but it does not determine.

Havelock speculates that perhaps he and McLuhan were alerted to the importance of understanding media by hearing Winston Churchill's "blitz" speeches on the then relatively new and popular medium of the radio. The sheer oral force of the speeches, he says, helped him to reconsider the effects of centuries of silent reading and of the contrasting possibilities for oral performance in early Greek culture. Indeed, radio, and later TV,

marked a turn to a/literate modes for transmission and storage of cultural information, and, as we turn to the twenty-first century, alphabetic media are the primary source of information for most people: you are more likely to hear or see the news than to read it (even while newscasts continue to rely on alphabetic scripts). Yet, while audio and video reproduction have eclipsed both alphabetic and oral technologies, they have qualities in common with both. Postliteracy brings us back to preliteracy. In particular, the emergence of the World Wide Web in the 1990s has awakened a sharper appreciation for the medium of writing and for the visual and acoustic elements of language. Similarly, hypertext theory has reopened consideration of the achievements of radical modernist writing.

My interest in the technoformalist criticism of Havelock and McLuhan as well as Walter Benjamin, Clement Greenberg, and Stanley Cavell is not only that they draw attention to what it means to work within a medium, but also that they acknowledge the value of using a medium to do what can only be done in that medium. While humanist literary criticism naturalizes the medium of the art, just as it neutralizes its ideology, technoformalist criticism recognizes the medium (and by extension ideology) to have qualities of its own that some art within this medium will choose to foreground, which is to say, bring to consciousness. In poetry, this approach is at the heart of radical modernism composition, with its focus not only on what is conveyed, but also on the specific conditions of the conveyance. Perhaps the motto for this project can be taken from Jerome McGann's "Imagining What You Don't Know: The Theoretical Goals of the Rossetti Archive": "To treat all the physical aspects of the documents as expressive features."⁸

Writing is a storage medium. It stores verbal language. But the various technologies (hieroglyphs, scripts, printing, hypertext) literally score the language stored.

In other words: Writing records the memory of language just as it explores the possibilities for language.

In a formalist emphasis on the medium, we do not escape the question—a medium of what, for what? Can the medium be emptied out, so that it is just the medium, the pure medium? In that case what does it transport but the *contexts* (contents) in which it is placed, like a crystal ball reflecting the hands that (be)hold it.

8. "Imagining What You Don't Know," <http://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/links/pdf/chapter3/3.24b.pdf>, 6, accessed July 6, 2010. Collected in part 2 of McGann's *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

A medium cannot be in and of itself, autonomous, for only readers or listeners or viewers bring a medium into use. In this sense, a medium is a mediation, constituted by what it does, for whom, and how.

The “medium” is a metaphor, as Jack Spicer and Hannah Weiner demonstrate when they insist that their poems are mediums, receiving language from a place outside themselves, north of intention.

A medium is an “in-between” in which you go from one place to another but also the material of that in-betweenness. Metaphors are mediums of transformation, in Greek the bearer (*phor*) of change (*meta*). Metaphor involves transference/transport/transfer. A medium is the means of transport, the conveyance, and also the material or technical process of art, like brass or silver. But only use makes something a medium of art. Materials by themselves are inert. Yet sometimes one finds the use of a medium by relying on the resistance of the materials that constitute it.

If poetry in alphabetic culture maximizes its storage function through memorizable language (formulaic, stressed), then poetry in the age of postliteracy (where cultural information is stored orally, alphabetically, and digitally), is perhaps most fully realized through refractory—unmemorizable—language (unexpected, nonformulaic, dis-stressed). This is why apparently nonliterary writing—catalogs, directories, dictionaries, indexes, concordances, and phone books, as well as printing errors, textual variations, holograph manuscripts—have become so important for poetry. And this is also why the textuality of contemporary poetry is so often tested in performance. For the performance of a textual writing, refractory to memorization, creates a new-old *frisson* that is rich with structural meanings and acoustic resonances.

But what of the age between the two—the age of ascendant literacy? It is commonplace to say that photography freed painting from the burden of pictorial representation, as for centuries paintings and drawings had been the primary means of pictorial and image storing (morphing) and transmission. (The trope of being freed from a burden should not obscure the fact that pictorial representation goes on happily ever after in painting; the point is that the meaning of images change in painting because their use value changes.) Alphabetic writing ultimately freed poetry (though never completely) from the necessity of storage and transmission of the culture’s memories and laws—*poetry’s epic function*. In the age of literacy, this task was ultimately assumed by prose. Poetry, released from this overriding obligation to memory storage, increasingly became defined by the individual voice, *poetry’s lyric function* (the persistence of epic notwithstanding, since

epic in the age of lyric becomes less infrastructure and more art). In this speculative schema, the lyric is contrasted to the impersonal authority of (nonfiction) prose, constituted by such subjects as law and philosophy.

With the advent of the photo/phono electronic, postliterate age, the emerging function for poetry is neither the storage of collective memory nor the projection of individual voice, but rather an exploration of the medium through which the storage and expressive functions of language work. That is, the technological developments of the past 150 years have made conceivable, in a way hardly possible before, viewing and reproducing and interacting with language as a material and not just as a means. Poetry's singular burden in a digital age is to sound the means of transmission: call it *poetry's textual function*, making audible/visible the ethos enacted in and by the fabric of writing. Textuality does not erase poetry's epic and lyric functions; rather it supplements and transforms, and in so doing aestheticizes, these increasingly vestigial modalities of the medium.

Another way of saying this is that photography and phonography loosened the grip of representation not only on painting but also on poetry.

Humanist literary criticism cannot and will not recognize the necessity of a poetry of textuality in which "memorable language" is just one among many tools of the trade, and not an end in itself. The persistence of the criterion of "memorable language" as a primary category for evaluating poetry is a throwback to an actual social function poetry once had, but which has become in our age largely ornamental and nostalgic except when it is used to tap into the deep fissures of poetry's past, to locate sonic geysers that erupt in the surface of our verses.

A textual poetry does not create language that is committable to memory but rather a memory of the alphabetic that is committable to language. This is why so much textual writing seems to return to a/literate features of language, not only in other cultures but also in our own. This is what I mean to suggest, in part, by the term *a/orality*—the acoustic or aural dimension of language within a postalphabetic environment. The significance of speech for textual poetry is fundamental because such poetry is able to foreground features of speech that do not contribute to the memory function essential for poetry in cultures where oral art is the primary technology for language storage and retrieval.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Gertrude Stein discovered her own version of *a/orality* through a process of close listening to the vernacular—the African American vernacular in "Melantha," the broken German

English in "The Gentle Lena."⁹ In the context of a postliterate writing, the transcription of speech looks very different than it did at the dawn of the alphabetic age: static, noise, and other microtextures loom large when the art of memory is not at stake. Repetition without memorability uses the features of oral art for textual ends: it is not memory that is being stored but texture that is being exhibited. The result is not a poetry in the service of memory but a poetry, in Stein's phrase, of "the continuous present."

Textuality, sounded, evokes orality. Conversely, orality provokes textuality (polymorphously), albeit the virtual, aliterate materiality of woven semiosis. This is orality's anterior horizon, its acoustic and linguistic ground, embodied and gestural. The *stuffness* of language, its *verbality*, is present in both writing and speech, but it is particularly marked when language is listened to, or read, without the filter of its information function. (The material stratum that weaves together speech and writing provides not only the means for language's information function but also information in its own right.) Textuality is a palimpsest: when you scratch it you find speech underneath. And when you sniff the speech, you find language under that.

Poetry's social function in our time is to bring language ear to ear with its temporality, physicality, dynamism: its evanescence, not its fixed character; its fluidity, not its authority; its structures, not its storage capacity; its concreteness and particularity, not its abstract logicity and clarity.

To say we are in an age of postliteracy does not mean that literacy is no longer necessary, but rather that it is no longer sufficient; perhaps the better term would be hyperliteracy. Poetry in a digital age can do more than simply echo the past with memorable phrases. It can also invent the present in language never before heard.

9. Stein, *Three Lives* (1909), <http://www.bartleby.com/74/>, accessed July 4, 2010.