Those familiar with Marshall McLuhan’s career will recognize that the title of this article mimics that of his PhD thesis at Cambridge, for I wish to suggest that the change in perception he saw necessary in regards to Thomas Nashe is paralleled by one necessary for our understanding McLuhan’s own place in modern thought.¹ For McLuhan, in sympathy with his religious convictions (he was raised a Protestant and converted to Catholicism at twenty-six), in the beginning truly is the Word—and in the end, as well as in between. Indeed, this has been the stance of Western education from its beginnings up through all but the last hundred and twenty-five years, but our subsequently compartmentalized system of knowledge—not only in the sciences and social sciences but the humanities as well—has alienated us from the wellsprings of this tradition. Such an assumption that knowledge is a series of fragmented “disciplines” rather than a unitary whole serves to make McLuhan appear an oddball, even a crank and a “visionary,” simply because he chose to retrieve the core values of Western culture and discuss how they have been conditioned by our evolving technologies, particularly those that most directly affect the essence of what makes us human—the partnership of cognitive behavior and language. In light of the intellectual traditions not only of the West but of all great cultures, it is we who are the oddballs in thinking that knowledge and experience can be subdivided and dissected without somehow being made whole once again.

In this spirit McLuhan wanted us to appreciate that human technologies, like all other artefacts (to adopt the Anglo-Canadian spelling he naturally used), are outerings, or “utterings,” of our human faculties. Technologies, whether they be devoted to communication or not, are thus extensions of our humanity, not the cold, alien, external forces envisioned by the paranoia of bad science fiction. Seen as utterings (to advert to the word’s Middle English roots), technologies can thus be seen as utterances, as rhetorical tropes we use to express and enhance our humanity, and can therefore be read and analyzed for their cognitive, social, and cultural effects. True also to the medieval philosophy he knew so well, he wanted us to see that Nature, including humankind, is a book that we can read, if we can only know and decode its language and analyze its significance. Such a methodology should have an interpretive power akin to that of the medieval four-level exegesis of the Book of God—the literal, the figurative (allegorical), the tropological (moral), and the analogical (eschatological) levels.

But McLuhan created a more fundamental means to a more organic understanding in the very aphoristic style in which he chose to convey his ideas—one consciously embodying the concept that the medium is the message. Its means is not to follow a continuous, linear, and unbroken line of thought, but to create a tessellated mosaic of observations and quotations, with each of the tiles a particular facet of the overall pattern.² Like fractals, an analogue that has gained currency only since McLuhan’s last work,³ the grand, overall pattern is contained in miniature in each of the parts. He also took as models for this style writers in the Symbolist and Modernist movements, particularly Mallarmé, Eliot, Pound, and Joyce.

According to his view, the Symbolists and Modernists were creating insights into the modern world and its relationships with the past not by smoothing over transitions from one perception to another, or by providing perspective from a fixed point of view, or by creating a consistently toned discourse (all mental habits fostered by print)—but by presenting the observer with fragmentary images of reality and forcing
him or her to become a participant in the process of piecing them together in a pattern of significance. Hence, in order to make sense of the modern world, McLuhan himself would take a similar approach.

But it may fairly be asked why these methods of discontinuity should be appropriate to, and be an outgrowth of, the modern age and the supposed clash between print and electronic sensibilities. The answer to this question hinges on two ideas: that there are fundamental differences between oral and literate cultures, and that electronic communication is retrieving patterns of thought and culture fostered by orality. The first idea can be explored in modern ethnographic, literary, and linguistic research done on primary oral cultures and on literatures containing residues of their origins in orality. The second idea depends upon the contrast McLuhan posits between the sense of “acoustic space” predominant in oral cultures and the “visual space” characteristic of writing and print cultures. To McLuhan, these ideas are intimately connected, and they result in his assertion that television, as an “audile–tactile,” rather than a visual medium, is leading to a reversion to many of the cultural forms of orality.

Awareness of the contrasts between purely oral cultures and those in which literacy has either been developed or introduced has never been part of the academic and scholastic mainstream, and in fact in modern times there have been strong pressures to marginalize this type of inquiry. Ever since Milman Parry was told by the classics faculty at Berkeley in the 1920s that there was no chance he would get a PhD by following up on his Master’s thesis on oral formulary patterns in Homer, the idea that there is a strong correlation between the patterns of a culture and its primary means of communication has only seldom been able to put a dent in the easy identification, in the general run of academe, between literacy and high levels of culture. The notion that high literacy is the normative state of language and civilization, and that its only alternative is the fallen state of illiteracy, and hence darkness and ignorance, seems to occupy the vital center of humanistic studies with remarkable energy and intensity. As Eric A. Havelock puts it,

The overall presumption is that civilizations to be worth the name have to be based on writing of some sort, have to be in some degree literate ones. Probably a majority of specialists who have considered these matters still share this view, including classicists. It is certainly true of the layman. When some advanced cultures like those of the Incas of Peru are observed to be wholly nonliterate, the lesson that might be drawn, namely that a civilized society with its own art, architecture, and political institutions need not depend on writing for its existence, is quietly passed over.4

This state of affairs is responsible for much of the resistance to McLuhan’s ideas, but it has also meant that other researchers doing work in this area have not always gained the recognition that they should, given the cogency of their work. In this group we may include Albert B. Lord and Jack Goody in ethnography,5 Harold Innis in political economy,6 Parry and Havelock in classics,7 Ian Watt in literary studies,8 Father Walter J. Ong in communication studies,9 and Elizabeth L. Eisenstein in history.10 There are, of course, many other researchers who have made significant contributions to the field but who remain even farther in the background, despite the inspiration McLuhan and others have derived from their work. Most notable in this regard are Sigfried Giedion,11 Georg von Békésy,12 H. J. Chaytor,13 Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin,14 E. H. Gombrich,15 and William M. Ivins, Jr.16

Seeing McLuhan as a fellow-traveler, as it were, with these researchers, despite their relative obscurity, may help us appreciate that, far from being some kind of lone figure on a wind-swept intellectual promontory, or especially some pushing a solipsistic monomania, McLuhan is part of an established intellectual movement of which almost all of his detractors and at least some of his cybernaut “disciples” seem unaware. Such an understanding will help us gauge the epistemological biases that underlie both kinds of responses to his legacy and that reveal what McLuhan would consider the “somnambulism” lying at their heart. It will also help us see the intellectual foundations for his true followers who, disparate as they are, have used the inspiration of his vision to help establish solid intellectual approaches to the impacts of technology on culture and to broaden the arena of discourse.
The best guide to the field, and a comprehensive overview to which Havelock acknowledges indebtedness in writing *The Muse Learns to Write*, is Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*. To show how greatly interest in the field has grown since 1963, Havelock refers to Ong’s extensive bibliography, which lists 25 works written before that date and 136 thereafter. One can only speculate by how much such interest has increased since 1982, signaling the need for an updated treatment of research in the field. But the value of Ong’s work goes far beyond the bibliographical, for in it he presents not only an historical overview, but more important, a research-based schema describing what he calls “[s]ome psychodynamics of orality” in preparation for discussing how “[w]riting restructures consciousness” and the effects of print technology on the form of the codex book, on narrative, and on modern theories of textual interpretation. While McLuhan goes much farther than Ong in exploring the electronic galaxy, Ong does provide the useful concept of what he calls “secondary orality,” by which we can understand how electronic media share at least some of the psychodynamics of primary orality.

The most appropriate place to start in surveying the development of this field is with the work of Milman Parry in the 1920s and ‘30s on the formulary structure of the Homeric poems, particularly his dissertation written at the Sorbonne. Parry’s discovery of the way in which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were created and performed was to have significant implications concerning the cognitive and cultural differences between totally oral cultures and those in which writing is the normal means of recording and passing on knowledge and wisdom. Parry noted that the fabled Homeric epithet or formulary phrase (such as those translated into English as wily Odysseus, wise Nestor, and the like) was actually one of a variety of phrases that differ according to the metrical requirements created by where they may fall in the strict hexameter unit, with its regular pattern of long and short vowels. The performer of the verse apparently had at hand a repertoire of ready-made phrases that could be stitched together to suit the varying circumstances under which the poems were performed, answering to an economy of form that could be created only under the conditions of relatively extemporaneous delivery of traditional materials. Such a repertoire could have been devised only because the poems were not written but memorized—and not verbatim, as in writing- and print-oriented cultures, but flexibly according to standard themes and formulary situations. Thus, far from fulfilling the model of the totally original poet, which has been engrained in our consciousness from the cumulative effect of two and a half millennia of writing and printing, the Homer that Parry revealed was instead, from our point of view, a tailor of ready-made pieces off the rack, a vendor of what we now consider to be clichés.

But the concept of a cliché, with its pejorative connotation, is a product of print culture and thus would lack meaning in an oral universe, where any thoughts worth having and saving would need to be memorized if they were not to be lost. The word cliché itself is a printing term that comes from stereotyping, the past participle of the French *clicher*, which is an imitation of the sound of dropping a matrix into molten metal to make a plate. To us Western, secular moderns, a cliché is a shopworn expression unworthy of serious consideration because of its overuse. To an oral culture, triteness is inconceivable, for only those thoughts that can be formulated into sayings, apothegms, proverbs, and other dicta are likely to survive the entropic effects of oral transmission. Conversely, idiosyncratic, abstract, unique expressions and lists that are not tied to action or human agency do not survive because they lack the characteristics of rhythm, metre, balanced antithesis, and repetition crucial to their being remembered. But once writing comes on to the scene, the cognitive environment is changed. While the onset of writing by no means erases the expressionistic structures fostered by oral memorization (in fact, at first it tends to preserve and reify them in fundamentalist formulae), gradually the powerful storage function of writing, and later of print, provides means by which more idiosyncratic and “original” (reversing the primordial meaning of the word) forms of expression can be preserved. Eventually, the cultural values of traditional and unique expressions become switched, so that today we unconsciously project onto Homer the traits of “creation” that only centuries of internalizing the values of writing and print could make us take for granted.
Parry sought to test his theory by investigating a modern-day case of the oralist tradition surviving in Serbia and Croatia, where he went in 1934 and 1935 to record epic and lyric songs and interviews with the singers about their lives and art. There he discovered, as he had observed about Homer’s compositions, that the oral mindset is entirely different from that fostered by writing, and that it takes only a little familiarity with writing for the mind to begin engaging in quite different constructs. This effort resulted in the transcription of over 12,500 texts and live recordings of the singers in performance, contained in over 3500 twelve-inch aluminum phonograph discs, comprising the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at the Harvard Library. Upon his return, Parry began writing a book with the prospective title *The Singer of Tales*, but he was unable to complete more than a few pages before meeting an untimely death in an automobile accident at the age of 33. His work was taken up by one of his students, Albert B. Lord, who published a revision of his own PhD dissertation under the same title as Parry’s intended volume. From hence, the thesis that the predominant texture of thought in a culture is conditioned by the means that the culture has at its disposal to record and transmit its most precious resources has been identified as the Parry-Lord thesis. Subsequently, in writing *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan appropriately began his Prologue with a testimonial to the seminal work of Parry and Lord:

> The present volume is in many respects complementary to *The Singer of Tales* by Albert B. Lord. Professor Lord has continued the work of Milman Parry, whose Homeric studies had led him to consider how oral and written poetry naturally followed diverse patterns and functions....Professor Lord’s book, like the studies of Milman Parry, is quite natural and appropriate to our electric age, as *The Gutenberg Galaxy* may help to explain.24

In the same year that the *Galaxy* was published, an equally notable extension of the Parry-Lord thesis appeared in the form of Jack Goody and Ian Watt’s extended article, “The Consequences of Literacy.”25 Both authors had had personal experience with conditions of almost total nonliteracy, Watt being forced to survive without reading materials as a prisoner of the Japanese in Malaysia during WWII, and Goody working as an ethnographer in Africa observing nonliterate tribes that had had only limited contacts with a writing culture, Islam. The essay, as well as the volume which it heads, deals with not only the persistence of orality in modern culture but, more to the point, the cultural transformations that take place when an oral culture comes in contact with literacy. For Havelock, the most direct significance of the piece lay in

> a possible model for orality in its relationship to literacy in the experience of ancient Greece. In this area Watt called attention to perhaps three crucial factors: the essential role of personal memory in maintaining the continuity of an oral culture; the formal distinction to be drawn even if tentatively between the Greek alphabet and its immediate predecessors, the Semitic scripts from which it had borrowed; [and] the qualitative difference of the literature and philosophy written in the Greek alphabet when compared with previous so-called literatures (Watt 1962, pp. 319-32).26

Such an approach would naturally resonate with Havelock, since his *Preface to Plato* explored in detail the connection between lexical and conceptual changes in Greek language and thought that took place between the time of Homer and Hesiod on the one hand and that of Plato on the other. Havelock saw Plato’s exclusion of the poets from his Republic as a rejection of their mimetic techniques and their didactic role in Greek education, in favor of new forms of abstract, conceptual thinking that had been made possible by the impact of writing upon philosophical inquiry. Oral, rhythmic narrative was no longer necessary for storing and transmitting the encyclopedia of the tribe, constituted by the Homeric epics, since it could be embodied now in a text. This freed the mind for dealing in speculative, idiosyncratic, and more abstract thinking, which the necessity of memorization in formulas, proverbial expressions, and typical situations had discouraged. Platonism, based on the abstract Forms, was the natural consequence of this revolution in storage technology for language, which Havelock saw as the basis for the creation of philosophy as a whole, as well as of extended systems of abstract mathematics and geometry.
Havelock sees McLuhan, in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, dealing with primary orality only indirectly, as he focuses on the cultural impacts of the invention of movable type on medieval scribal culture. According to Havelock, McLuhan asserts that this new technology “fastened on the (presumably) European mind a print mode of consciousness which by implication he saw as constricted and (though he is ambiguous here) regressive.” However, “behind the ‘linear’ consciousness of modernity, derived from the linearity of typography, could be discerned an oral consciousness which follows its own distinct rules of thinking and feeling [...] now being revived through modern technology [...]”.

But Havelock’s understanding of McLuhan is far from complete, as he seems not to have fully grasped the distinction McLuhan makes between the “content” of a medium (always another, obsolesced medium) and its “message” (the unconscious cognitive bias it fosters in its users), as well as his observation that the manifest content of any communication (its data or ideas) is always less important than the cognitive impact. Thus, Havelock claims, “[*The Gutenberg Galaxy*] asserted, and largely demonstrated from examples, the fact that technologies of communication exercise a large measure of control over the content of what is communicated (‘The medium is the message’).” This perception falls short of what McLuhan meant by his famous aphorism, but Havelock is certainly not alone in this regard.

In sum, McLuhan’s extension of the research conducted in the relationships between orality and literacy may provide some reasonable explanations for many of the cultural changes taking place that give many contemporary observers alarm: the erosion of “canons” of literature, the apparent decline in literacy among college students, and the creation of an arid postmodernism that denies the existence of intrinsic meaning in texts, to name but a few. Even one, as depressed about this state of affairs as Sven Birkerts, shows, in *The Gutenberg Elegies*, that he knows the key to understanding why the “achieved values” of “Gutenberg mechanical culture” are today being undermined lies in “the [...] ways in which our various technologies condition our senses and sensibilities.” But perhaps reluctance on the part of others to take such a matter seriously is tied to their reluctance to recognize and admit that technologies, and even powerful, hybrid combinations of technologies (of which the book is a supreme example), are fundamentally extensions and expressions of our deepest humanity.

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**ENDNOTES**


10 Eisenstein has actually gone to great lengths to dissociate herself from McLuhan’s methods and to minimize the significance of McLuhan’s pronouncements about the changing relationships between orality and literacy in Western culture. This despite the fact that her inquiries were inspired by The Gutenberg Galaxy, to which she was led by a review [see Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) x]. But her quarrel with McLuhan lies not in the notion that Gutenberg technology was a profoundly catalytic agent in early modern Europe. Rather, she objects to his methods and to his lack of historiographical precision in specifying differential effects of printing in varying locales and periods (129 ff.). Hence, in the very process of wondering what sort of figure McLuhan is positing as “typographical man,” [Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983) 91], she reveals herself as a prime example of the species (if not the gender), as much as any of the other investigators mentioned here, despite her attempts to distance herself from the views of as many of them as possible. By mentioning the embarrassment she has experienced in being associated with McLuhanism by her colleagues (Agent xvii), she becomes emblematic of McLuhan’s difficulties in the academy.


17 Havelock, Muse ix.

18 Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: Technologizing the Word (London and New York: Routledge, 1982).


21 Havelock, *Muse* 78.


27 Havelock, *Muse* 27.


29 Havelock, *Muse* 27.
