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Et Verbum caro factum est:

Contra spiritual (t)extraction

Foreword

The primary purpose of this paper is to explore the world-historical impact of the printed word, but before we focus on the *printed* word in particular, we ought to look carefully at the word “word” as well as the cultural phenomenon of language and the changes in human thinking that have occurred because of the various transformations of language, i.e., its oral, written, and printed forms. The printed form, whether on paper or on screen, remains the most prevalent and influential today, but two post-printed-word (or concurrent) topics are also worth brief consideration: namely, Walter Ong’s observation of a “second orality” (i.e., technologies such as the telephone, TV or YouTube moving us away from writing/printing), and twenty-first century digital technologies such as Twitter that are rapidly reinventing (printed) language.

Word and Language

“In the beginning was the Word....” The word is a good place to start. God speaks and order is brought to the *tohu wabohu*.¹ Ants leave chemical trails, blackbirds have different chirps for

¹ Jacques Ellul writes, “The Hebrew phrase, *tohu wabohu*, has no meaning.... These two Hebrew words have no linguistic roots.... [B]efore and beyond *tohu wabohu* there was nothing expressible by words or language.” Genesis chapter one takes us from the inexpressible to the expressible, the perfect linguistic analogy for an origins story. Jacques Ellul, *On Freedom, Love, and Power*, compiled, ed., and trans. Willem H. Vanderburg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 20.

different situations, and whales sing a different song each season; but when a human speaks, something qualitatively different is created. Listen to these words about words:

Jacques Ellul: “Bees communicate pieces of information to each other, but do not produce anything like history.”²

Willem H. Vanderburg: human “language cannot...be reduced to the communication of information....”³

Herman Dooyeweerd says such a reduction is tempting especially considering “the linguistic ambiguity of words.... This is the reason why...the idea of a scientific alphabet of thought in the form of a symbolic logic has won so many adherents.”⁴

Parker Palmer: “true knowing involves more than a disembodied intellect computing data.”⁵

Kieran Egan: “There is no knowledge in the library, nor on a computer’s hard drive.... Knowledge exists only in living tissue in bodies; what exists in libraries and computers are codes.”⁶

² Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 20.

³ Willem H. Vanderburg, *The Growth of Minds and Cultures: A Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Experience* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 140.

⁴ Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. 2, *The General Theory of Modal Spheres*, trans. David H. Freeman and H. De Jongste (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 59. Cf. 61 and 225n3.

⁵ Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education As a Spiritual Journey* (1983; repr., New York: HarperOne, 1993), 64.

⁶ Kieran Egan, *The Future of Education: Reimagining Our Schools from the Ground Up* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 69.

Ellul again: “human spoken language cannot be reduced to any coherent collection of signs made understandable through use of a code.”⁷ He continues: “the mentality of scientism has pounced upon language and has involved us in reducing the word to the state of an object: a scientific object. Now we have semantics, semiology, semiotics, and semasiology.”⁸

In the face of such a *reductio ad infinitum* one can hardly blame the postmodernists for their *reductio ad absurdum*. When the word is absurd—and meaningless—we reach the nadir from which we can build again, from which we once again attempt to use language to define language (or does language defy definition?). But wait! Before we wind up discussing language as “a set of arbitrary but conventionally agreed upon words, or ‘signs,’ linked by a purely formal system of syntactic and grammatical rules,”⁹ David Abram would have us question our anthropocentric presupposition that language is exclusively human. Before we exalt our meaningful words above an animal’s mere “communication of information”—a further separation between humans and nature (as if we weren’t natural)—we should take into account “that communicative meaning is first incarnate in the gestures by which the body spontaneously expresses feelings and responds to changes in its affective environment.”¹⁰ Abram makes his point with the example of two friends “unexpectedly meeting for the first time in many months.”¹¹ They exchange the expected pleasantries, their voices rising and falling together in a duet, their bodies attuning to one another, the “melodic singing [of their voices] is carrying the bulk of communication in this

⁷ Ellul, *Humiliation*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁹ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

encounter, and...the explicit meanings of the actual words ride on the surface of this depth like waves on the surface of the sea.”¹² This is a familiar analogy from psychological literature—conscious thought on the surface of the subconscious—but it illustrates a missing component in both humanistic and Christian philosophies.

In *Roots of Western Culture*, Dooyeweerd defines modern humanism in terms of its dialectic between nature and freedom: nature as in reducing everything to the laws of physics, and freedom as in human mastery over nature.¹³ This frames the debate within, e.g., child psychology between nature and nurture, within philosophy between determinism and free will (a secular version of the Christian debate between predestination and free will), and, regarding our topic at hand, within the debate between language as a mere code (including animals) or something more (exclusively human). Obviously, for each of these debates—and many more—one might say it all depends on how one defines the terms. But then using words to define words—*ad infinitum ad absurdum*—we might follow Derrida down the rabbit hole. Of course, Derrida’s emphasis on the free use of language merely typifies the freedom side of the humanist dialectic. Of greater concern to Abram is the practical outcome of severing human culture from “more-than-human” nature. In order to reverse the denigration of the natural world in the name of human technological progress, Abram would have us remember that we *are* nature, we are dependent on nature, and our culture (including language) is a progressive unfolding of nature itself. But does this solve the underlying nature versus freedom conflict?

¹² *Ibid.*, 80-81.

¹³ Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, trans. John Kraay, ed. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra, newly ed. D. F. M. Strauss (1979; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Paideia Press, 2012), ch. 6, esp. 149-54.

Dooyeweerd would have us avoid the horns of this dilemma by exchanging it for the Christian metanarrative of creation, fall, and redemption. In other words, with regard to our discussion on language, all possibilities of animal communication and human language are part of God's good creation (either manifested in reality or potentially waiting to be revealed), are perverted inasmuch as humans interfere with their proper functioning, and yet we remain part of the reclamation project. Instead of a struggle between physical nature and human freedom (culture), Dooyeweerd offers a totalizing perspective on each created thing. For example, a *word* as an individual entity (spoken or written), is not only a cultural invention and made possible because of the laws of physics (nature), it also includes a *biological* dimension, i.e., a *living* speaker or author, who speaks/writes in the context of a *social* community, who speaks/writes a *loving* word (or not), and so on. In today's predominately humanistic culture, we tend to reduce all these other dimensions (biological, social, etc.) to the physical. At the physical level—the interactions of subatomic particles/waves—it is impossible to distinguish between a bee's waggle dance and the waggery of a reductionist lecture. Such physicalism (naturalism) is still a banner of culture's domination over nature; and those with faith in physicalism believe we can technologize our way out of our ecological crisis.

Unfortunately, in spite of Dooyeweerd's proposal, Christians have done no better. The creation-fall-redemption paradigm all too easily turns into a "Christian" humanism when the creation = nature, and redemption = culture (for the socially engaged)—or a "Christian" asceticism when redemption = desertion (for those fleeing to heaven). Either way, similar to secular humanism, creation/nature is reduced to a mere physical resource, a theoretically endless supply of raw materials for the inevitable march of human (cultural) progress. How do we properly reemphasize (celebrate!) creation/nature without falling into naturalism (physicalism,

materialism) and without trying to control it to the point where we are destroying it (and ourselves)? And how does the word/Word—not just printed but also spoken, written, and digitized—help us to achieve that goal? That is the prolix peregrination before us.

The Oral Word

Walter Ong offers us a written warning: “a literate person cannot fully recover a sense of what the word is to purely oral people,”¹⁴ and yet we (with his aid) will venture forth into that unlettered realm. Ong’s classic, *Orality and Literacy*, classifies those persons who are unfamiliar with writing as examples of “primary orality.” Of course, such orality offers no trace of its existence—once spoken, a word is irretrievable—so researchers like Ong must rely on visits to (and recordings of) the few remaining oral cultures in existence today as well as extrapolations from textual studies of cultures in transition from orality to literacy. Neither offers a pristine (i.e., unaffected by observers) or insider view of the oral mind. And yet, because we all started out as oral creatures, we certainly had a pre-literate experience of the world—if only we could remember.

Before we too quickly label orality as primitive or immature and move to the written and printed word, we ought to consider its gifts. Ong writes,

Orality is not an ideal, and never was. To approach it positively is not to advocate it as a permanent state for any culture. Literacy opens possibilities to the world and to human existence unimaginable without writing.... Yet orality is not despicable. It can produce creations beyond the reach of literates, for example, the *Odyssey*. Nor is orality ever completely eradicable: reading a text oralizes it. Both orality and the growth of literacy out of orality are necessary for the evolution of consciousness.¹⁵

¹⁴ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982; repr., London: Routledge, 2012), 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 171-2.

Kieran Egan, an educator who celebrates all the unfolding stages of human cognition, reminds us that individual (and cultural) development is a matter of trade-offs. For example, “One area of children’s cognition that seems clearly superior to adults’ has been investigated. Metaphor... seems much more readily generated and recognized by the average five-year-old than the average adult.”¹⁶ Despite Ong’s warning that we literates cannot return to an oral point of view, what other qualities might we rediscover with orality?

“Human beings in primary oral cultures...,” Ong writes, “do not ‘study.’”¹⁷ It may seem obvious, but without writings to study, learning must occur through apprenticeship, listening and repeating what you hear. The sum of your knowledge is what you can recall (both individually and communally); there are no other places to “look up” the information. Effective storage of knowledge means “you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns.”¹⁸ Anything more complex or nonformulaic (e.g., theoretical thought) would be a waste of time, for how would you remember all the intricate steps? Often superhuman memory abilities are attributed to the ancient bards, but we must be more precise in our understanding of what exactly is being memorized. Recent anthropological studies and textual criticism both agree that what is *not* happening in a poetic recitation (e.g., Homer singing the *Odyssey*) is an identical, verbatim, plot line being retold over and over again. In fact, Ong references various studies to show that although the poets attempt repeat performances (and often believe they have accomplished it),

¹⁶ Kieran Egan, *Getting It Wrong from the Beginning* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 93. Egan cites Ellen Winner, *The Point of Words: Children’s Understanding of Metaphor and Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 103. He paraphrases Winner: “Metaphor generation seems to go into decline with the onset of schooling and literacy” (93).

¹⁷ Ong, *Orality*, 8-9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

they are only about 60% accurate—something that would earn them an unfavorable grade in an academic setting. What *is* happening in any given retelling is a poet’s drawing on his or her “massive vocabulary of [rhythmic] phrases....that could fit into his varying metrical needs almost any situation, person, thing, or action.”¹⁹ Abram uses Homer as an example of an oral bard who “improvised the precise form of the poems by ‘stitching together’ an oral tapestry from a vast fund of memorized epithets and formulaic phrases, embellishing and elaborating a cycle of stories that had already been variously improvised or ‘stitched together’ by earlier bards since the Trojan War itself.”²⁰ Such stories (1) are usually dynamic and violent, not causal;²¹ (2) include larger-than-life heroes who are “flat” (two-dimensional), not “round”;²² and (3) often disregard temporal sequence by diving straight into the action²³ (which is reminiscent of today’s action films).

When language is not objectified, not set down in writing or “dispirited” (lit. without breath), then our human expressive consciousness is “simply one form of awareness among many others.”²⁴ A snake, a bush, or a donkey may indeed have something to tell us.²⁵ In an oral culture, the human body is not a mechanized object, but truly of the earth (“dust to dust”) and enlivened (inspired) by the power of the wind (the breath of God). Upon death, Abram tells us,

¹⁹ Ibid., 58.

²⁰ Abram, *Spell*, 105. Abram earlier explains that another name for a Greek bard was a rhapsode, “from the Greek *rhapsodein*, which meant to ‘to stitch together’” (105).

²¹ Ibid., 120-1.

²² Ong, *Orality*, 69 and 148.

²³ Ibid., 139.

²⁴ Abram, *Spell*, 9.

²⁵ Cf. Gen. 3:1ff.; Exod. 3:4ff.; and Num. 22:28ff.

the person's presence does not "vanish" from the sensible world (where would it go?) but rather remains as an animating force within the vastness of the landscape, whether subtly, in the wind, or more visibly, in animal form, or even as the eruptive, ever to be appeased, wrath of the volcano. "Ancestor worship," in its myriad forms, then, is ultimately another mode of attentiveness to nonhuman nature....²⁶

The sophisticated literate might scoff at such primitive notions as ancestor worship, but it must be admitted that such a worldview offers a greater awareness of one's local ecosystem than we often see today.

The oral connection between language and land is perhaps best illustrated by the Australian Aborigines. With a cultural history of at least 40,000 years, "language here is inseparable from song and story, and the songs and stories, in turn are inseparable from the shapes and features of the land."²⁷ Australia is crisscrossed by thousands of "songlines," and, at birth, every Aboriginal person is given a stretch of that land/song; "his essence, his deepest self, is indistinguishable from that terrain."²⁸ Those songs are sung as the lines are walked, providing practical knowledge (e.g., where to find water, the etiquette while passing through another tribe's lands, etc.) and mythical legends connected to this boulder or that tree. Abram tells the story of an Aboriginal elder who, while being driven across the land in a pickup truck, begin to sing his song at an impossibly fast pace. Another passenger—an American who relayed the experience to Abram—realized that what was meant to be sung at a walking speed was being sung several times faster.²⁹ When you see that a people's very consciousness (worldview, language, understanding and connection to reality) can be so intertwined with their land, you can do

²⁶ Ibid., 16.

²⁷ Ibid., 172.

²⁸ Ibid., 167.

²⁹ Ibid., 173.

nothing but weep at the “cultural genocide”³⁰ committed whenever any native people are forcibly removed from their home. Abram concludes, “Only when we slip beneath the exclusively human logic continually imposed upon the earth do we catch sight of this other, older logic at work in the world....the subtle logos of the land.”³¹

It is common knowledge that oral cultures have a sense of time that is cyclical and not linear, but this is not simply a matter of choice; without writing, without clocks or calendars or record-keeping, there is no vantage point from which to measure. The sun and moon are circles that cycle through the sky each day and night; the moon’s shape changes in a cycle; the seasons cycle; life and death and new life follow each other endlessly through the generations. What about those generations? Don’t they create a (linear) list of individuals? Not necessarily. First of all, oral cultures have no lists.³² How could they? As we learned above, there are no verbatim recitations, only the remixes of a vast pool of stock phrases. Metrically sung genealogies would change with each performance. The ancestors—or mythically “flat” characterizations of them, at any rate—need not be locked into a *literal* order, for that has no value. More importantly, they represent archetypes “enacted by ancestral or totemic powers in the mythic times.”³³ Rather than being a mere descendant of that great Warrior or Mother, “one actually becomes the ancestral being.”³⁴ We get an inkling of this thinking when we remark that a child has “her grandmother’s eyes.” As Ong concludes, “oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in

³⁰ Ibid., 178.

³¹ Ibid., 268.

³² Ong, *Orality*, 42 and 97f.

³³ Abram, *Spell*, 186.

³⁴ Ibid., 187.

equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance.”³⁵

Have you ever noticed how Native Americans are typically portrayed in movies as being rather laconic? For us loquacious westerners, their slowness of speech may even be interpreted as dullness of mind. That would be a gross misinterpretation. Oral cultures have not objectified the word; that is, they have neither seen nor experienced it as something that can sit there, on a page, separate from the mouth that spoke it.³⁶ “You can’t stop sound or freeze it in flight,” Ong reminds us. “If you do stop sound, you have silence....”³⁷ To the oral mind, the spoken word is truly alive, riding on the unseen, powerful wind/spirit/godbreath which inspires us—and which we expire. “The individual,” Abram tells us, “is not passive with respect to the Holy Wind; rather she participates *in* it, as one of its organs.”³⁸ This is not to say that oral cultures don’t have their gossipy individuals, but for such cultures names (nouns) are power: “without learning a vast store of names, one is simply powerless to understand.”³⁹ Be careful what you say; words are not empty air; they are effectual. We see (hear!) a remnant of this mindset in the Hebrew word *dabar*, which means word-event—not in the (empty, “hot air”) sense of a speech-act but in the potent sense of changing the fabric of reality. To the literate ear this sounds like so much magical mumbo-jumbo, but perhaps we underestimate the power of the word/Word. “Be careful little tongue what you say....” Remember the childhood chant: “Sticks and stones may break my

³⁵ Ong, *Orality*, 46.

³⁶ Abram, *Spell*, 139.

³⁷ Walter J. Ong, *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, ed. Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002), 82.

³⁸ Abram, *Spell*, 235; emphasis in original.

³⁹ Ong, *Orality*, 33.

bones, but words will never hurt me”? As all of us who have been the victims of name-calling know, words really do hurt.

Interlude #1: A Bible Story Retold As Though Sung by a Bard

Our limited exploration of orality brings to mind the oral traditions that lie behind the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. What Walter Brueggemann calls “imaginative remembering” is an apt description of the bardic remixes and retellings of the most important stories. The debates over biblical inerrancy/infallibility and so-called “literal” versus figurative interpretations take the focus off of the real purpose of any truly holy writ: to inspire and challenge the reader/hearer to mirror the abundant grace and love of God by extravagantly pouring that grace and love on others—and in so doing, to find meaning and comfort. As Brueggemann and Linafelt say, “the traditioning process of retelling does not intend to linger over old happenings, but intends to recreate a rooted, lively world of meaning that is marked by both coherence and surprise in which the listening generation, time after time, can situate its *own* life, rather than gaining direct access to a world long past.”⁴⁰ The elements of orality outlined above echo throughout the Scriptures. *Metaphors* abound in the Psalms and prophets; *mnemonic patterns* are heard ending each day in Genesis 1; *bardic remixes* are evidenced in the varying histories of the books of Kings and Samuel as well as the genealogies in Matthew and Luke; “*flat*” *characters* like Samson or Jezebel as well as extreme *violence* and the long lives of *heroes* are ubiquitous; the *land/people/culture connection* is prevalent throughout Israel’s history (to the present day); and *cyclical time* is alluded to in the

⁴⁰ Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 10; emphasis in original.

opening verses of Genesis 1 as well as the archetypal Elijah reappearing as John the baptizer (Matt. 11:14).

Before we move on to the written word (literacy), let's take a poetic break and listen to Genesis 1 as a bard might sing it. Even though "ancient Hebrew verse is not metrical,"⁴¹ I will retell it using rhyme and rhythm for the simple fact that those elements identify it as a poem to the modern western ear. I choose this passage because, as mentioned above, it contains several lingering elements of orality. (To be read or sung aloud. The stressed syllables are underlined.)

It was upon a time,⁴² they say,
 The Artist shaped from primal clay⁴³
 The bounteous earth and skies above,
 The Godbreath hov'ring like a dove.⁴⁴

(For you, in exile, do not fear:)⁴⁵
 The Poet's words are bright and clear.
 They push back darkness, chaos flees,
 The first day ends with Godbreath's breeze.

The sky the Poet called to be,
 It has three lay'rs.⁴⁶ It's plain to see

⁴¹ Ibid., 27.

⁴² Some commentators suggest that *bereshit* is a common literary device marking the beginning of a story.

⁴³ "The idea of *creatio ex nihilo*...is dependent on the later [Hellenistic period] rendering. In the original grammar, creation is a process of ordering and separation that begins with preexisting chaotic matter" (*The Harper Collins Study Bible* (NRSV), rev. ed., gen. ed. Harold W. Attridge (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 5n1.1). Also, Brueggemann and Linfelt, *Introduction*, 54.

⁴⁴ The Hebrew verb for "swept" (over the waters) is an avian allusion. Cf. Deut 32:11 wherein an eagle "hovers" over its young. My use of a dove here is a further allusion to Matt. 3:16 et al.

⁴⁵ John Caputo suggests that the opening Genesis account was proclaimed as a message of hope for a people in exile (*The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), ch. 3).

⁴⁶ An extrapolation from a common view in antiquity. Cf. Paul's description in 2 Cor. 12:2 ("third heaven").

The lowest holding up a cloud
Until the pouring rain's allowed.

So that's day two and now for three:
The parting of the land and sea.
The seeds were sown and plants appeared;
“It sure is good!” the Poet cheered.⁴⁷

Day four the morning sun arose,
And at day's end it did repose.
The moon and stars and signs appeared;
“It sure is good!” the Poet cheered.

Day five the air and watertide,
They teemed with creatures multiplied.
The monsters, fish, and birds appeared;
“It sure is good!” the Poet cheered.

Day six stampeding cows and bulls
Rushed past the hiding miracles
Of lion cub with camo fur
And rattlesnake the slitherer.

To care for all these precious things,
Of gard'ners two the Poet sings:
The imaged humans soon appeared;
“It's very good!” the Poet cheered.

Day seven saw the working cease,
The Poet quiet, all in peace;
And on his face a smile appeared;
“It sure is good!” the Poet cheered.

⁴⁷ The “appeared/cheered” lines will become a repeated trope.

The Written Word

Is it not a little ironic that it is written (using letters) in the Bible that “The letter kills, the spirit [breath, on which rides the spoken word] gives life”?⁴⁸ After all, the original letters (of the law) were “written with the finger of God.”⁴⁹ And what about the Word that was (with) God in the beginning?⁵⁰ Is that Word spoken or written? For us literates today, we encounter this Word (i.e., the John 1:1 reference to Jesus) as written—either in print in a Bible before our eyes or being read to us from a Bible. As we have already seen, oral cultures imagine a “word” differently from literate cultures. The difference is significant. We can safely say that most second-century hearers of the opening words of John were illiterate, yet they were living in a literate society (i.e., not what Ong would call primary orality). The word had been objectified; you could see it there on the page even if you couldn’t decipher it. And yet the use of the Greek word *logos* here seems to indicate a blend of the Jewish tradition of divine Wisdom (cf. Prov 8:22) and the Greek “divine principle of reason that gives order to the universe and links the human mind to the mind of God.”⁵¹ Not only does this parallel the creative-effective spoken word (*dabar*) of God in Genesis 1,⁵² but it suggests the residue of orality: namely, that words *are* power and meaning (God’s Spirit/Breath/Wind inspired and expired) as opposed to our literate conception that words (as separate, objective entities there on the page) *have* power and meaning.

⁴⁸ 2 Cor. 3:6 with Ong’s bracketed words in Ong, *Orality*, 74.

⁴⁹ Exod. 31:18 (NRSV).

⁵⁰ John 1:1.

⁵¹ *Harper Collins Study Bible*, 1816n1.1.

⁵² Ellul, *Freedom*, 214.

Literacy may be a radically different mindset from orality but that does not preclude them from coexisting in the same person or community. Loathe as we are to admit it, each of us holds contradictory opinions in his or her head—and, frustratingly, can act in contradictory ways from one day to the next. John Hartley, in his response to Ong, reminds us that “writing does not supplant orality,” that the “great leap” theory (held by Ong et al.) is a bit overstated, and that it is more of “an interactive process where oral and literate modes co-exist.”⁵³ Still, Ong acknowledges, “oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche. Nevertheless, without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations.”⁵⁴ Abram, referencing Albert Lord’s research, states “that learning to read and write thoroughly disabled the oral poet, ruining his capacity for oral improvisation.”⁵⁵ Contemporary rap artists might disagree, but we have yet to see the likes of Homer emerge from the Hip-Hop scene.

The combination of language and imagination differentiates us, as far as we know, from all other creatures because it breaks us free from the tyranny of the present; it allows us to reflect on the past, consider the future, and make plans accordingly. It opens us up to meaning, purpose, and God. And because human language allows us to pass along our stories—full of valuable information, opinions, and beliefs—to others, it acts as a “gateway” to the cultural world.⁵⁶ However, it also moves us away from a constant awareness of our surroundings. Instead of

⁵³ John Hartley, “After Ongism,” in Ong, *Orality*, 216.

⁵⁴ Ong, *Orality*, 14.

⁵⁵ Abram, *Spell*, 107.

⁵⁶ Vanderburg, *Growth*, 144.

speaking *to* nature, now we speak *about* it. The spoken word is a trade-off. So is the written word—and even more so. Abram warns us, “Once the stories are written down..., *the visible text becomes the primary mnemonic activator of the spoken stories*—the inked traces left by the pen as it traverses the page replacing the earthly traces left by the animals, and by one’s ancestors, in their interactions with the local land.”⁵⁷ This is not a call for a return to primary orality, but rather a recognition of the root of our erroneous belief that we are different or separate from nature, and of our commodification of nature, of our forgetting that our health is one and the same as nature’s health. All of human technology, beginning with language, is reflexive, i.e., it reflects us back to ourselves and, like Narcissus, tempts us to forget all else, including the “more-than-human-matrix” from which we come.⁵⁸

Abram gives us a glimpse of the change of consciousness from orality to literacy by taking us back to ancient Greece. The pre-Socratic philosophers “are still under the sway of the oral-poetic mode of discourse—their teachings are commonly couched in an aphoristic or poetic form....”⁵⁹ This brings to mind the biblical book of Proverbs and also Q (Quelle), the proposed source of Jesus’ sayings. And, similar to Jesus, Socrates moves beyond aphorisms to challenge his listeners to transcend their normal way of relating to reality. He does so by “forc[ing] his interlocutors to separate themselves, for the first time, from their own words—to separate themselves, that is, from the phrases and formulas that had become habitual through the constant repetition of traditional teaching stories.”⁶⁰ This is not merely an encouragement to think

⁵⁷ Abram, *Spell*, 183; emphasis in original.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

“outside the box”; this is thinking outside the accepted limits of sanity. Is it any wonder Socrates was sentenced to death for corrupting the youth? Plato goes further (than either Socrates or Jesus—but perhaps not Paul) by positing a realm of abstractions. “Prior to the spread of writing, ethical qualities like ‘virtue,’ ‘justice,’ and ‘temperance’ were thoroughly entwined with the specific situations in which those qualities were exhibited.”⁶¹ As difficult as it is for us to conceive, there was no concept of a generic “river” (like a dictionary definition), only *this* river or *that* river. For Jesus, love is visiting a specific person in prison (Matt. 25:36), whereas for Paul, love is eternal (1 Cor. 13:8). I am not suggesting we position Socrates and Jesus as semi-literate against Plato and Paul as literate intellectuals (using pure Ideas (*eidoi*)), but there does seem to be an evolution of thought, a change of emphasis.

Interlude #2: Blowin’ in the Wind: A Midrash on Jesus’ Only Writing

Not unlike God writing the tablets of stone *with his finger* (Exod. 31:18), Jesus “bent down and wrote *with his finger* on the [stone] ground” (John 8:6, emphasis and brackets added). This is repeated (for emphasis?) two verses later. These are the only writings of Jesus that we know of. Unlike Elohim’s durable inscription “set in stone,” and unlike the Rosetta Stone, cuneiform clay tablets, or even sheepskin scrolls, Jesus’ writings blew away in the wind. He wrote on the temple grounds, in the dust covering either the laid stones or the well-trampled earth. Whatever he wrote would have been difficult to see and surely did not last long. The only thing we know for sure is that we are not told what he wrote. It is also interesting that this is the only time in the book of John where the scribes (writers) are mentioned. The scribes are not writing but speaking the God-

⁶¹ Ibid., 110.

inspired law/teachings, while the Logos/Teacher is dismissing the written law with his spoken word and inscribing unknown, transient words. What are we to make of this? Perhaps they're just incidental details in an already contested passage, but they might also point to something else—not necessarily something written, but about writing itself, about returning words to the wind/breath/spirit from whence they came. Be careful what you put down in print (or inscribe in stone) for you will be stuck with it for a long time; it might even become an idol (cf. bibliolatry). Writing objectifies things and distances us from them. Set the words and things free. Breathe life into them. Listen up, scribes: don't get lost in the words, follow the Holy Wind that whisks them away (and the holy feet that walk over Jesus' words and carry them home).

The Printed Word

Language allows us to stand back from the natural world, as it were, inasmuch as we talk *about* our environment and not *to* it, and pass along intergenerational wisdom. With writing, nature is symbolized, and recesses further. With “the dissemination of printed texts...into the wider community,...[it] effectively sealed the ascendancy of alphabetic modes of thought over the oral, participatory experience of nature.”⁶² With the advent of the printing press, the literary (literal?) mindset of scribes and scholars became the mindset of the many. As Ong has already reminded us, this is not a wholesale trade of worldviews, like flipping a switch, but a slow, overlapping process that has had a profound impact on the direction of western culture. “The printing press,” Abram tells us, “...ushered in the Enlightenment and the profoundly detached view of ‘nature’

⁶² Ibid., 199.

that was to prevail in the modern period.”⁶³ Yet thanks to the monks, handwritten copies of manuscripts and books had been available for over a millennium. Why would a few more copies bring about something as significant as the Enlightenment, a whole new era in western culture?

First, consider the fact that it was not just books that were being replicated but tracts and pamphlets. This enabled people like Martin Luther to disseminate short, important ideas to a large audience over wide geographic areas. He did this, of course, not in Latin, the language of the learned elite, but in the vernacular, which had the unexpected side-effect of standardizing the local variants of a language (in Luther’s case, German). Such standards led to the creation of dictionaries to adjudicate spellings and meanings.⁶⁴

Second, hand-written copies of a given text were sure to vary widely in calligraphic style, margins, pagination, etc., depending on the materials used and the copyist(s) involved—not to mention scribal errors and/or emendations (e.g., marginal notes in one copy included in the main text in the next copy.) This made it difficult for scholars to reference the same material in different copies. Printed copies solved this problem by providing large numbers of identical products. Scholarly cross-referencing became far more efficient and accurate. This also led to the invention of the index, an all-important tool in scholarly research.⁶⁵

Third, print is both easier and faster to read as well as to publish, so the sharing of exactly worded technical writing led to a rapid cross-pollination of scientific ideas throughout Europe (and into the New World).⁶⁶ This, of course, led to the creation of copyright laws to protect

⁶³ Ibid., 138.

⁶⁴ Ong, *Orality*, 128.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 125.

against plagiarism.⁶⁷ Scientific books were not the only ones requiring exact wording; theology and other disciplines also benefited from standardizing their ideas into textbooks and catechisms.⁶⁸

All of this standardization and distribution of ideas was part of the social energy that had already given rise to Renaissance humanism and, eventually, the Enlightenment's faith in reason, technology, and progress. But these are the obvious facts, the standard fare of a historical overview. What we are after is more subtle.

Ong is concerned with what he calls spatial reductionism, i.e., mistaking the printed word on a page for a real (thought or spoken) word. The visual representation of words may release "unheard-of potentials" of those words, but they remain "coded symbols whereby a properly informed human being can evoke in his or her consciousness real words, in actual or imagined sound."⁶⁹ This was Egan's point, quoted above, that libraries and hard drives hold no knowledge, only code. Abram offers another angle captured in the double-entendre of his book title, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, i.e., we attempt to "spell" the (sensuous) sound of speech and, in so doing, magically animate the symbols so they seem to have a life of their own as they cast their "spell" on us.⁷⁰ Dooyeweerd will have none of this magical reductionism. Printed materials like literature may be symbolically qualified, but "They can only *signify* the aesthetic structure of a work of art in an *objective* way and cannot *actualize* it."⁷¹ In other words, George Orwell's *1984* sitting on the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 129.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁰ Abram, *Spell*, 133.

⁷¹ Dooyeweerd, *New Critique*, vol. 3, 110; emphasis in original.

shelf is merely a collection of symbols until it is picked up, read, and understood, at which time it is an *actualized* work of artistic literature. In a sense, you could say it is *activated*, like a soldier waiting to be deployed or a seed waiting for the moisture. Creation is full of such things, particularly waiting to emerge by and from the creativity of humans. This “godlike” power (imaging the Creator) can—like all things human—be used for good or for ill. We must tread carefully.

Finally, Vanderburg brings up a point that pertains to language more generally, yet furthers this discussion. Ironically, reducing language to code (e.g., with animals or computers) makes it more precise (i.e., there is less equivocation about meaning), but human language requires less precision and more nuance (flexibility, allusivity) to express “the mystery of our being and that of others.”⁷² To illustrate, he uses the example of artists in a language community. “Being aesthetically very sensitive... [they] may begin to see things differently,” to notice subtle shifts in meaning and express this in artistic ways before others can express it in everyday language.⁷³ For Vanderburg, meaning is the center of human existence and the “meaning of meaning becomes transformed into an absolute by the system of myths.”⁷⁴ In a typographic (print) culture, these absolute (fundamental, sacred, religious) myths are set down in an objective, widely dispersed manner—and such holy books, creeds, confessions etc. themselves can become idols. They can also offer reliable truths for the stability of society, a collection of wisdom to conserve even while the next generation tests the boundaries.

⁷² Vanderburg, *Growth*, 146.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 179-180.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 240.

Interlude #3: A Peek at Theopoetics

If the Word was in the beginning, so was hermeneutics. There is no God’s-eye view of things available to us. For we are not God, and history tells us that attempts to become so lead to intellectual and political catastrophe. Hermeneutics is a lesson in humility (we all speak from finite situations) as well as imagination (we fill gaps between available and ulterior meanings). Hermeneutics reminds us that the holiest of books are works of interpretation—for authors no less than readers.⁷⁵

And if a holy text, like the Bible, is open to interpretation—and it obviously is—then infallibility/inerrancy is meaningless. Even if, somehow, the printed words on the page of Scripture were pristine (perfect in and of themselves) and unambiguous (like symbolic logic), which one of us readers/interpreters is without sin? Or without a log blocking our vision? We have already established that human language (not reduced to code or logic) as cultural symbolification is not knowledge until opened up by the receiver (hearer, reader)—with all of his or her wonderfully human mix of emotions, personal history, intuition, imagination, biases, and immediate context. Thank God the process isn’t pristine, clinical, sterile! How lifeless that would be. No, the reading of a text, the hearing of the Word, is necessarily messy as are all of our bodily functions.

Catholics, as Protestants are wont to disparage, have traditionally found hermeneutical unity in the teaching magisterium and, more recently, papal infallibility. However, the Reformers created their own de facto magisterium by publishing creeds, catechisms, and commentaries. The very proliferation of Protestant sects is a testament to people reading the same (literal) text differently. Unwittingly, Protestantism has mirrored the messiness of life. Christian postmodernists like Robert M. Price suggest we “invent a new game,” one without doctrinal

⁷⁵ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), xv.

winners and losers (a moment of silence for Michael Servetus), one where “The Bible can be only the peculiar sort of authority a written text *can* be: one that raises questions, that brings truth out of the being of the one who reads it—truth that may not be the same for any two readers.”⁷⁶ No singular, transcendent Truth? Or at least not One that is knowable?

Postmodernism is usually characterized as an extension of humanism, i.e., an anthropocentric naturalism with no need for a transcendent anything (Truth, reality, beings, etc.). However, Richard Kearney describes Derrida’s “religion beyond religion” as “a purely transcendental move.”⁷⁷ By reducing and limiting language to its bare symbols and thereby emptying it of meaning, and similarly, by removing “any historical instantiation of the divine, no epiphanies, songs, testimonies, no sacred embodiments or liturgies,” Derrida’s (non)religion has “no embodied presence in space and time,” and his “faith becomes an empty waiting.”⁷⁸ With the *Götterdämmerung* of Modernism and its promise of pristine access to the Beyond, are we then left with a meager choice between textual ambiguity or transcendental emptiness?

Kearney suggests another way: poetics. Language, as we have seen, is so terribly limited—and limiting—yet we have no other choice but to use it to communicate our experiences of the divine. Symbolic logic and the “language” of mathematics may be precise in their own domains but, paradoxically, are ineffective (and imprecise) when it comes to describing emotional, artistic, and religious experiences. We are not left empty-handed however. On the other end of the language spectrum from logic, passing through technical writing and prose, is the delightfully elusive realm of poetry. For Kearney, “any religious hermeneutics worth its salt needs art if it is to

⁷⁶ Robert M. Price, “Kettle Logic: A Deconstructive Sermon,” *The Fourth R* 27, no. 6 (November-December 2014): 8.

⁷⁷ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 64.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

be true to faith.... [R]eligions are imaginary works, even if what they witness to may be transcendent and true.”⁷⁹ Indeed, it could be argued that the *only* way to symbolify/linguify transcendent truth is via the imagination. Any attempt to literalize the divine runs the risk of “fetishism and idolatry.” Who would dare to say that we can capture God in a word? Certainly not the Hebrews with their ineffable tetragrammaton. Kearney is emphatic: poetics is not a reduction of religion to fiction. Fiction uses “as if” to engage the imagination: Act *as if* you are an angel. Poetics uses “as”: Treat the stranger *as* Jesus. We conclude with Kearney’s poetics of faith: “the metaphorical *as* contains within itself a mixed copula of *is/is not*. The stranger before me both *is* God (as transcendent Guest) and *is not* God (as screen of my projections and presumptions). Out of this tension faith leaps.”⁸⁰

The Electronic/Digital/Visual Word

Earlier we saw how Ong defines “primary orality” as “a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print”; now we turn to what he calls “the secondary orality” of present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print.”⁸¹ Even though he wrote this in 1982, before the advent of the internet and the cellphone, our more recent technologies fall easily within secondary orality. In a postscript to the 30th anniversary (2012) of Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*, John Hartley says Ong’s approach continues to be

⁷⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 15; emphasis in original. A proper explanation of a poetics of religion, or theopoetics (in contradistinction from theology), would take us too far afield. It is deserving of its own exposition.

⁸¹ Ong, *Orality*, 11.

relevant “in the era of the internet, digital media, mobile devices and social networks....”⁸² Specifically, Hartley draws upon Tom Pettitt, someone who has “reinvigorated the Ong line of thought,” and his proposal of the “Gutenberg parenthesis”: that is, the 500-year stretch of modernity that interrupts and divides orality into its primary and secondary phases.⁸³ This is a break from and critique of Ong’s progressivist ethnocentrism, his view of humanity’s heightened consciousness from “primitive” to modern times. “The ‘Gutenberg parenthesis’ idea suggests that despite its dominance, prestige and ubiquity, print-literacy is an exception in a much longer trajectory of human thought....”⁸⁴ Whether secondary orality is a progressive stage of consciousness (Ong) or a post-parenthetical return to something fundamental in human thought (Hartley and Pettitt), we find ourselves in an unprecedented time of worldwide, self-published self-expressions via a mix of written/printed (email, texting, ebooks, blogs), oral (cellphone), and visual (websites, Skype, YouTube) communication. Bypassing editors and publishers, people in both rich and poor nations are increasingly able to address the “global village.” This makes for a democratization of communication; it also means less of the logically-planned, print-literacy type of thinking and communicating, and a more spontaneous orality.

Compare, if you will, the historic Lincoln-Douglas debates (1858) with today’s political soundbite contests. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas met seven times to address audiences of thousands (without a microphone) and offer rebuttals for hours on end. It was the “kind of oratory that may be described as literary”; “[n]ot only did Lincoln and Douglas write all

⁸² John Hartley, “After Ongism,” in Ong, *Orality*, 207.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

their speeches in advance, but they also planned their rebuttals in writing.”⁸⁵ Neil Postman reminds us of the kind of thing (Ong: consciousness) required to “engage the written word”: “to follow a line of thought which requires considerable powers of classifying, inference-making and reasoning. . . .to uncover lies, confusions, and overgeneralizations, to detect abuses of logic and common sense,” etc.⁸⁶ All of this requires the distance of analytical thought. Now think of the last televised political debate you saw. What kind of reasoning can be communicated in a five-minute address or a two-minute rebuttal? Overgeneralizations and abuses of logic are now the norm. Viewing audiences shrink each election cycle (as are those going to the polls) and decisions are based on television commercials, soundbites on the evening news, and the video clips that go viral on YouTube—all of which are primarily visual. To sum, “cosmetics has replaced ideology.”⁸⁷

In a recent documentary, *Out of Print*,⁸⁸ high school and college students were interviewed regarding their reading habits. The first question, the students suggested, should be What format do you read in: tablet, iPad, laptop, Kindle, Nook? Books—*real* books—and libraries are, for them, an unnecessary obstruction to learning. Even substituting the movie for a literature assignment takes too long; besides, twentieth-century films are boring. Just go to SparkNotes.com or CliffNotes.com. Why read the chapter in the history text when you can Google the answers to the end-of-chapter questions? It’s more efficient and resourceful; it prepares them for the real (i.e.,

⁸⁵ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 48, 49. Also Ong, *Orality*, 134f.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 4. Postman writes, “Although the Constitution makes no mention of it, it would appear that fat people are now effectively excluded from running for high political office. Probably bald people as well” (4).

⁸⁸ *Out of Print*, a documentary directed by Vivienne Roumani, co-produced with Morton Denn, and narrated by Meryl Streep, aired December 13, 2014, on KCET (VR Films, 2012).

high-tech, high-speed) world. Living amidst this “avalanche of gadgets” means being adaptive, flexible, and those who succeed will excel in “short form” reading and writing: texting, blogs, news posts. Of course, the students unanimously admit, it wreaks havoc with any sort of sustained off-screen attention. “I have to, like, check FaceBook every five minutes.” “I feel anxious if I don’t, like, have the internet at hand.” Perhaps the fragmentation of attention and information is, like, the fragmentation of humanity.

It is difficult to see how this secondary orality growing out of wide-spread visual saturation is a good thing. In *The Humiliation of the Word*, Ellul takes a hard line against what he sees as a hegemony of the image. He delineates “two orders of knowledge, two kinds of references we use as human beings”: truth and reality. Reality is known/referenced in our concrete, obvious experiences. Truth comes from the spoken universe, language, that “permits us to go beyond the reality of our lives to enter another universe....which you can call surreal, meta-real, or metaphysical.”⁸⁹ Words convey truth (or lies) the way images cannot; words, though fragile, are more adept at dealing with ambiguity, metaphor, and myth—all important aspects of truth—than images. “Sight always pulls us away from the relationship of faith, because it draws us toward a reality we want to grasp, and because it necessarily directs us toward evidence.”⁹⁰ “Faith,” says the apostle Paul, “comes from hearing” (Rom. 10:17), Ellul reminds us. Images, whether Old Testament idols of false gods or today’s status symbols, are spectacles, distractions from the Truth that cannot be seen. We are consumers of images instead of hearers-in-relation. You can stand alone looking out into the world, but you cannot hear someone’s words without being in a relationship with the speaker. Ellul is concerned that we will confuse

⁸⁹ Ellul, *Humiliation*, 22.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

reality with truth, that we will reduce “all there is” to simply what we can see around us: “through the eruption of unlimited artificial images, we have reduced truth to the order of reality and banished the shy and fleeting expression of truth.”⁹¹

Conclusion

Who can blame Ellul or Postman for decrying visual saturation?⁹² Yet for Ellul to say, “To see truth is impossible,”⁹³ is to go too far. He may very well mean, “To see truth *in its fullness*...,” but even so, the thrust of his main argument—*contra* empiricism (“Evidence is absolute evil”⁹⁴)—eclipses the partial yet significant meaning (truth) found within creation. Creation is not neutral. Ellul himself uses the creational evidence of pitting seeing (reality) against hearing (truth)—as “two orders of knowledge”—to persuade us to seek the absolute, eternal truth of which “There is never any direct experience....”⁹⁵ This sounds, to my ears, like asceticism (or Platonism): Go beyond reality to find the truth.

It is tempting to make human language, with its uniquely flexible and transcendental abilities, the wedge that separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom. What other creature can philosophize and contemplate the divine? And yet my question is Why are we so desperate to transcend created reality? Genesis 1 tells the story that we are a *part* of creation, not above it.

⁹¹ Ibid., 228.

⁹² What they wrote in the 1980s is just as, if not more, applicable today.

⁹³ Ibid., 229; emphasis added.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 97. To put this audacious statement in context, here is how he continues: “The evidence of reality is quite useful for action, but can in no way help us to understand the meaning of our lives” (97). No way? Is empirical reality that empty?

⁹⁵ Ibid., 34. He continues, “Reality can be obvious, but truth never is” (34).

Maybe we are the crowning piece, like the snow on the mountaintop, but if the environment is not healthy, even the snowpack can melt away. And John 1 speaks of the transcendental Truth/Word coming here, becoming enfleshed. This is the opposite of asceticism; this is chthonicism. This is God desiring blood, sweat, tears, spittle, and urine. Why are we so eager to go the other way? Oral language may gift us with the ability to use our tongues and minds in new ways, but, as the Australian Aborigines have shown us, it need not separate us from the land; indeed, it might draw us closer. The written word may objectify the oral word and therefore make it forever inaccessible,⁹⁶ but that does not necessitate a further separation from creation. The written word, and the printing technologies that standardize and democratize it, can be pressed into service of sustained theoretical thought about our interconnectedness with all of reality. Our strain against the reins of our creatureliness has become increasingly evident over the past half-century with the ubiquity of the visual screen, from televisions to tablets. *Contra* Ellul, I believe our images of reality contain powerful, visceral portals to truth, including the unfortunate truth that most humans seem to desire a quick dose of entertainment over the hard work of analytical thinking and, when needed, changed habits. It is much easier to check your FaceBook account (or stock investments) every five minutes than face the sacrifices of whole-bodied relationships with *all* levels of creation. I am neither advocating naturalism nor empiricism, but the recognition that the divine is found here in creation with us as well as beyond our measurements and theories. The structure of the word—spoken, written, printed, visualized—is inherently relational. It is our God-imaged, human responsibility to aim our words in the direction of healing relationships, of

⁹⁶ Which I contest. For example, even prelingual abilities can be retained. My synaesthetic experience is that I can readily shift between the meaningful/communicative level of the written word and its underlying symbol-forms (e.g., font details) and spatial layout. This also occurs in oral (spoken or sung) language. I often—to my dismay—find myself more fascinated by the accent, tonality, and timbre of someone’s voice than the meaning/content of her speech. Needless to say, this can impede my comprehension (and isn’t helpful on first dates either). I’ve never read a study on these phenomena, but feel sure I’m not alone.

the messy, incarnational offer of divine love (*agape*) to the Other, whether human, animal, or mountain.

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