

Remarks on the Humanities at Carnegie Mellon University

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I begin with a parable.

Ancient Greek culture until the late 5th century B.C. was an almost entirely oral culture. By that I mean what we call literature, history, philosophy, drama, science, almost all knowledge, was transmitted orally. There were no books. No reading public. Many Athenians could read and write, but writing and reading were mostly confined to public documents set in stone by the Athenian democracy.

What was it like to live in an almost purely oral culture? First and foremost, literature of all kinds was composed in poetic form. Starting with Homer and epic poetry, the Greeks *performed* their literature, whether it was epic, lyric, philosophical, or dramatic: try to imagine a *performance culture*, one in which you the citizen are regularly, repeatedly exposed to publicly-performed poetry, whether by individual poets, actors in plays, or choruses of men and boys singing choral lyrics. No solitary reading of books, like us, but group events, civic events, in which the citizenry watched poetry performed for the public.

Imagine, then, that your way of learning about the past, about history, about your ancestors, about the difference between right and wrong, about what is politically correct and what is not, is entirely oral: oral tradition, oral memory ruled the culture. And all the oral material was poetic. Why? Clearly because rhythm is crucial to remembrance: it is exceedingly difficult to remember prose, it is far easier to remember poetry. Many Greeks could recite from memory lengthy passages from the Iliad or the Odyssey or other poems, and even larger numbers were closely familiar with a vast corpus of poems of all sorts, epic, lyric, choral.

Into this essentially oral society, in the late 5th century B.C., the first written books began to make an appearance, mostly written in prose. This was initially the rise of “rhetoric,” the art of persuasion so crucial to democratic Athens. For a while, the oral and written forms of literature co-existed, with oral holding its own because it was public and civic in nature, while books tended to be elite products “read” by an elite audience. But gradually over the centuries the old oral culture waned, and the book culture won out, not only in Greece, but in Rome as well, and then throughout the Mediterranean and Western world. This was a paradigm shift of tremendous importance to Western civilization and its development.

Plato was a young Athenian when “books” started to arrive on the scene, when the shift was just beginning. He thought deeply about this phenomenon, as he did about all cultural and intellectual matters. He asked himself how the book differed from oral communication, and he recognized immediately its advantage: it could fix a text permanently, it could “guarantee” accuracy in transmission, whereas oral transmission always suffered from some alteration of the text, even of a poem, as memory failed to retain precisely the words the author originally chose. So Plato saw that significant benefit to books: they preserved language reliably much better than speech.

But Plato also saw two significant disadvantages in books: first, he predicted that Greeks would gradually suffer a deterioration in their memories, in their ability to remember poetry, and for that matter anything passed on to them orally. If books became common, brains would stop exercising memory, and it would weaken. Plato was, of course, correct in his prediction.

The second problem Plato saw in books was much more serious: for a philosopher like him, who saw philosophical discussion as crucial to learning and to critical debate that could lead to philosophic truth, books were a disaster. The reason: when you read a book, and question or confront what it says, it cannot talk back. It is mute. It just sits there, unable to engage in dialogue, or, as Plato put it, in dialectic, the rigorous method of conducting philosophical analysis.

The result is that Plato believed books were a seriously deficient “medium.” The only way to effectively pursue the truth is through engaged dialectic: careful definition of terms and concepts, cross

examination of one's interlocutor, rigorous questioning of intellectual assumptions, the refutation of weak arguments, the gradual development of stronger arguments, and eventual arrival at the clearest possible understanding. That is what Plato and his students did in his Academy, the West's first institution of higher learning, if I could put it that way.

Books were, then, to Plato, an inferior mode of developing knowledge, painfully lacking in what he called "seriousness." He called books, even his own, "playthings." And yet Plato wrote books. Many books. How could someone so dismissive of books spend so much time writing them? Well, the answer is that Plato wrote only a certain kind of book: dialogues, quasi fictional dialogues among real historical people. He solved the problem of the mute book: he wrote books that could and did talk back and forth, that exhibited the way philosophical dialectic is supposed to transpire. Plato's dialogues are models of behavior for philosophers to follow, not textbooks explaining ethics, analytics, metaphysics, etc. The reader does not get answers, but rather methods for pursuing answers. That is true Platonic learning, it is learning for one's self, not being "taught."

I draw two primary conclusions from this parable: first, real education, of the kind worth pursuing, is not getting information or even knowledge from a textbook, or from a professor. It is something you do yourself, with help from books or professors. This is true for all domains of knowledge, but particularly for the humanities, which do not pursue one particular, replicable "truth" about the world, but rather seek means of understanding human beings, their loves, their wishes, their thoughts, their feelings, their fears, their insights. The way you learn about human beings is through reading literature, seeing drama, performing poetry, debating philosophy, learning other languages and cultures.

Second, we should use this story of how Plato looked at books to think about our own dramatic paradigm shift: the digital one now underway. How should we treat the internet? (the book that can talk back, *really* talk back, even more than a Platonic dialogue)? We know some of its advantages: it is fast, interactive, and highly democratic. What are its disadvantages? It is fast, interactive, and highly democratic. It bombs you with data all day long. It destroys privacy. It aids surveillance, by

governments and corporations. It is relentlessly *there*, it won't go away, it won't leave us alone. It replicates error, and shallow opinion of all sorts, intrusively, surreptitiously, often disastrously.

Educationally, it has led to everything from carefully constructed seminars and blended learning to MOOC's, the good, the bad and the ugly.

How should we use it? How can we optimize its advantages and minimize its disadvantages? What would Plato have said? What would Plato have done? Those are questions worth pondering, particularly by humanists in increasingly rigorous ways.