

**Oracular Fragments:  
Harold Innis, Plato and the Oral Tradition –  
Teaching, Empire and the Canadian Obligation**

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## **Plato, Harold Innis and the Oral Tradition: Teaching and the Canadian Obligation**

Ostrogorski has quoted the remark that God looks after little children, drunken men and the United States. I hope it will not be thought blasphemous if I express the wish that He take an occasional glance in the direction of the rest of us.

Harold Innis<sup>1</sup>

I wish by this essay to draw attention to conjectures made late in life by Harold Innis, a Canadian academic whose early works on the economic history of the country were of unprecedented importance but whose later conjectures on the impact of the technologies of information have seldom been pondered. Perhaps only a teacher of filmmaking like me, born and raised in America but long resident in Canada, can fully appreciate the odd aptness of them, but I hope by this summary to assist readers to comprehend what bothered him when looking toward the south, for I have come to believe that much of what he said is crucial to comprehending how filmmaking could have become an art dominated and then destroyed by Americans.

To begin, however, we must return to Plato – a thinker who, via others, influenced Innis remarkably.

### **Plato's Exclusion of Poets**

Sometime in the first half of the 4th century B.C.E. the birth of western civilization was confirmed in Athens. The confirmation occurred with the publication of Plato's dialogues, among them *The Republic*.

From its name, *The Republic* might seem to be a disquisition on the ideal state and therewith a treatise on politics. So it is, but hardly fundamentally so, for within it Plato reduces the necessary and sufficient conditions for the maintenance of the ideal state to the conditions for the proper selection and training of its leaders, male and female.

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<sup>1</sup> Concluding sentence of "The Military Implications of the American Constitution", Chapter 4 of Chapter 4 of Harold Adams Innis, *Changing Concepts of Time*, forward by James W. Carey (New York, New York: Roman & Littlefield (2004)), page 44.

*THE REPUBLIC* is the first treatise within western civilisation on the scope and limits of *education*.

Implicit within it are epistemological premises that were ever after to delimit the intellectual life of the west.

- A. The centrality of dominant *cities* (note the term: 'citizen') as the foci of economic and political power in the west, whether among nations, empires or the civilization as a whole – a notion that history has amply confirmed.
- B. The notion that we ought to explain whatever happens by reference to *things* rather than processes, concentrating upon refining and discriminating among the nouns by which we refer to them rather than the verbs and adverbs that we use to convey what and how they do.
- C. The suggestion that reality is unapparent and confrontable only by an elite, and conversely that whatever is encounterable by many is unreal; hence
  - 1. The primacy of the abstract over the sensuous and the consequent degradation of the latter.
  - 2. The primacy of knowing over doing and hence the division between intellectuals, who think, and non-intellectuals, who act, and the superiority in their own minds of the former over the latter; and
  - 3. The centrality of education to the philosophical enterprise.

I shall have more to say about these matters momentarily, and the last as I conclude the essay, but I wish firstly to draw your attention to a curious feature of Plato's book as yet unmentioned.

The ideal state, as Plato conceived it, would encompass diverse kinds of people doing diverse things, each contributing to the whole. Not all kinds of people, however, were to secure places within it. Slave holders and their slaves were to be welcomed, criminals to be shunned. Notoriously, however, Plato insisted as well that

Poets were to be excluded!

Until 1962 reactions to this suggestion varied uninterestingly. Some countered that Plato could hardly have meant what he said but had rather meant 'bad poets', others that he had meant it but had misunderstood the demands of his ideal state, still others that he was taking a swipe, understandable if rationally indefensible, against the dramatists who occasionally made fun of him and his academy.

In hindsight, it is wondrous to note how few readers of the dialogue bothered over two millennia to ask whether poets, in the Athens of Plato during the fourth-century B.C., might have served cultural purposes different from those that we now expect of them.

### Havelock's PREFACE

In 1963, however, Eric Havelock, an English classicist who had spent seventeen years at the University of Toronto as a colleague of Harold Innis, the mentor of Marshall McLuhan, published *A Preface to Plato*. Following the lead of Milman Parry, Albert Lord and others, he suggested within it that Plato had meant exactly what he had said.

Plato had been an educational revolutionary attacking the dominant institution of his day, the oral tradition as maintained by the poets, in the name of a new educational paradigm, the literary tradition just coming into being, of which he was to be the champion.<sup>2</sup>

Literacy had begun in Greece only in the 6th century, and only among a select few. Not until Plato's era did literacy become a mass phenomenon among the educated – the first time in western history that this occurred. How then had the culture been maintained and developed during the prior centuries?

To understand the answer, one must imagine oneself to be living long ago within a society, akin to that of the classical Greece of Homer and Hesiod, wherein there was no writing or reading at all.

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963). Milman Parry's works can be found in Adam Parry's edition of his father's papers, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1971), Albert Lord's conclusions in his *A Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960).

For a marvelous summary of the importance of the conjecture in historical context, see 'The Nonliterate World of the Greeks', Chapter 1 of Henry Harris's unpublished manuscript, *The Reign of the Whirlwind*, within the H. S. Harris Collection of York University's YorkSpace. [<https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10315/918/Wind01.pdf?sequence=22&isAllowed=y>]

How, within such a society, could the practices and standards and norms of the culture be remembered and transmitted from one generation to the next?

How, if one achieved an innovation, could it be remembered and transmitted to the other members of one's culture?

Echoing Parry, who first suggested the answer, Havelock insisted that poetry in Plato's time, despite its multifarious rhythmic and structural devices, was hardly a vehicle used primarily for aesthetic enjoyment or even narrative excitement.<sup>3</sup> Rather, its aesthetic and even its narrative qualities were means to another end.

The goal of reciting poetry was to enable the listeners, through identification with the poet-narrator, to immerse themselves within manifestations of the essential norms and practices of their culture.

Homer, in particular, was not primarily a story-teller in verse; rather he was the *educator* of the tribe. Narration and versification were tools of enculturation, the only tools available in a culture without literacy. (Literate cultures store material outside persons. Oral cultures must store material within the memories of its people.)

Plato saw clearly that the oral tradition constrained how people thought. As Walter Ong was to conclude later in summary, oral cultures tend to think:

- i. additively rather than subordinately;
- ii. aggregately rather than analytically;
- iii. redundantly (or copiously) rather than elegantly;
- iv. conservatively (or traditionally) rather than innovatively;
- v humanistically rather than objectively (tying everything thought to human interactions and encounters);

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<sup>3</sup> Parry's first conjectures about the centrality of the oral tradition to the Homeric grounding of Greek thought appeared in his 1923 master's thesis, 'A Comparative Study of Diction as One of the Elements of Style in Early Greek Poetry'. The notion became influential following the publication of his dissertation and a sequel in French in 1928: *L'Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère: Essai sur un problème de style homérique* and *Les Formules et la métrique d'Homère*.

- vi. agonistically toned (competitively and argumentatively with sharp contrasts twixt black and white, good and bad, etc.) rather than tolerantly or by measured steps;
- vii. empathetically and participatorily rather than objectively (or distanced);
- viii. homeostatically rather than historically (within the continuous present, that is, rather than as the momentary culmination of a past leading through change to a different future);
- ix. situationally rather than abstractly.<sup>4</sup>

If one wished, as Plato did, to educate the young to seek a reality removed from the objects and events of everyday life, then the old system of enculturation had to be obliterated rather than blunted. The poets, and therewith their system of human identification and emotional involvement, uncritical in essence, had to be banished from *The Republic*, for they would otherwise continue to corrupt the youth by compelling them to engage in practices of emotional identification at the expense of objective distancing and critical judgment, misleading them into wallowing in appearances (that is, in the direct experience of immediate though vicarious events) rather than provoking them, through critical evaluation and judgment, to an reassessment of those appearances that would permit transcendence of them and registration of the 'real world' to which only careful thought has access.

But what has Plato's argument to do with film, television, Canada and Harold Innis? What has it to do, in short, with the contention repeated so often in our era that the young are being rendered critically inept, historically insensitive and intellectually vacuous through immersion within a pervasive environment that stimulates them sensuously and emotionally but thwarts them intellectually?

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 3, 'Some Psychodynamics of Orality', pages 53 – 75 of *Walter Ong's Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, England: Routledge, 2002 [1982]). [The list is summarised within the Table of Contents, pages [v] and vi.] I have rephrased some adjectives within Ong's list as adverbs and have substituted the word 'aggregately' for Ong's 'aggregatively' – a term unknown to me.]

Plato's argument was at root identical to the one that his literary heirs continue to parrot against the modern media of film and television as if, to the literate minds of our era, they are the technological equivalents of Plato's poets in his era. To literary minds, it is almost as if film and television are the contemporary embodiments of – the oral tradition.

Almost! And that misunderstanding brings me to Harold Innis.

### **Innis's Background**

Innis began as an economic historian, publishing the first major studies of the history of the staples industries of Canada and therewith the history of Canada itself, for in his view, politics and economics are indistinguishable. His studies of the cod fishery, the fur trade, the pulp and paper industries, etc., not only set a standard as yet unsurpassed in their individuality, but served in general to inaugurate a tradition of political-economic historical research and writing in Canada that is an achievement of which many countries are envious.<sup>5</sup>

During the 1940s, however, Innis reconsidered his earlier conclusions, not to change them, but rather to place them in the broadest possible historical context. He consciously placed himself in the company of Spengler, Toynbee, Mumford, Kroeber, Wallas and others – scholars addressing the question of the evolution and destiny of western civilization and its counters.<sup>6</sup>

What did Innis conclude? He never bothered to summarize his conclusions succinctly, so I shall do it for him, advancing them in a dozen numbered theses.

#### **Thesis 1:**

The big question is: what can Canadians do to assist in the evolution and survival of western civilization – the civilization whose roots lie in the European tradition stretching back to Greece?

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<sup>5</sup> For a readable survey, see Mary Q. Innis's edition of his works *Essays in Canadian Economic History: Harold A. Innis* (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 1979 [1956]).

<sup>6</sup> Readers wishing an overview of Innis's life and work should turn to Alexander John Watson's remarkably thorough and insightful *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis* (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

Spengler had suggested that civilizations had a natural life span, like plant or animals. One could do nothing to change their evolution. One could only come to understand where one stood within the life span of one's own civilization by comparing that civilization with others and hence tracing its life-trajectory.

Toynbee, alternatively, had suggested that civilizations rise or fall depending upon their responses to the unique challenges that they face. One could learn from the history of other civilizations how best to meet the challenges faced by one's own.

Innis, however, rejected the notion that one could best learn about our civilization by comparing it to others, for he considered it almost impossible for a member of one civilization to understand another.<sup>7</sup> Rather, one must look within one's own civilization to locate the clues as to how one ought to behave to best assure its survival.

But look where? Upon which objects are we to focus our attention?

## **Thesis 2:**

If we are to understand our history, broadly construed, we must focus neither upon our civilization at large, nor upon the nation-state in the small, but rather upon *empires* - collections of nation-states acting in concert toward a common political and economic goal under the dominant influence of one of them. One must therefore look not at western civilization as a whole, nor at Canada as a part of it, but rather at the North American empire of which it is a part and at the French and British empires of which it was once a part.

## **Thesis 3:**

Empires are systems of political and economic control over spatial territory through time. An empire is more or less successful as its influence extends over greater or lesser space: the larger the territory encompassed by an empire, the greater it is.

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<sup>7</sup> Spengler had insisted upon the same thing, but only by overlooking the blatant inconsistency of his doing so within a book devoted to comparing civilisations with one another!



An empire must be measured not only spatially, however, but temporally as well, for the longer an empire's influence persists, the more successful it is.

Empires, therefore, are to be measured along two dimensions: the spatial and the durational. For maximum success, an empire must sustain its control both spatially and durationally. It must balance its efforts to succeed along both dimensions.

**Thesis 4:**

Empires sustain their control over space and time through the use of the technologies of distribution – technologies by which both goods and ideas distributed (the technologies, that is, of transportation and information.)

(Innis here makes a crucial anti-Marxist insight. Economic control resides not in control over the means of production but rather over the means of distribution. Canadians would do well to note this, especially the film historians among them: during the golden age of Hollywood, 90% of the assets of the controlling companies were devoted to the distribution rather to the making of movies. Americans have learned the lesson well: it makes no difference to them who produces the goods but only who markets them.)

**Thesis 5:**

The technologies that distribute *ideas* – the information technologies – are more important the technologies of transportation, for they constrain how the members of the empire can *think* about the possibilities of the other technologies.

**Thesis 6.**

The dominant nation within an empire will possess and wield its dominant technologies of information distribution.

**Thesis 7.**

Information technologies, unfortunately, are not neutral with respect to their ability to assist an empire in controlling space or time. Rather, they are biased with respect to one or the other.

**Thesis 8.**

For an empire to survive, the dominant information technologies of the dominant nation must be counterbalanced by information technologies of opposite bias within the subordinate nations.

If this does not occur, the bias of the dominant technologies will lead eventually to a "monopoly of knowledge" which, in turn, will lead to a bias of space over duration, or duration over space, that in turn will lead to the collapse of the empire.

**Thesis 9.**

Canada is a member of the North American empire subservient, like it or not, to the dominant political and economic goals of the United States.

The question is: how ought Canada to act to best further the spatial and durational goals of the empire of which it is a part in such a way as to sustain the evolution of western civilization?

**Thesis 10.**

The dominant information technologies of the United States are *spatially* biased. That is, they are conducive only to advancing goals that are essentially political rather than religious (to use Innis's most comprehensive terms), technical rather than cultural.

**Thesis 11.**

If the empire is to flourish, the spatial bias of the United States must be counterbalanced by technologies of *duration*. This cannot occur within the United States itself, for its dominant information technologies blind its members to their limits. Only a subservient member, like Canada, existing on the "margin" of the empire rather than at its "centre", can develop – by choice – counter technologies and thus restore the temporal balance to the empire. Only a nation like Canada can restore the humanizing element to the North American empire and thus put the empire back on the track of the deepest progressive elements of western civilization.

**Thesis 12.**

The dominant information technologies of the United States are the technologies of *literacy*. They reinforce the Platonic biases.

If these biases are to be countered by Canadians, this can only be done by developing technologies that subvert the Platonic biases by reinforcing their contraries: the poetic ones. Canadians must revert to an *oral* tradition, like that of classical Greece, not, as George Grant would have it, because there is something inherently evil about technology and good about its absence, but rather because the presence of the dominant literary technologies in the United States requires the counterbalance of an the *oral* tradition in Canada if the empire – and therewith western civilisation – is to survive.<sup>8</sup>

**Initial Reaction**

What ought we to make of these conjectures? At first glance, I found them perverse for two reasons, as would any careful western thinker: unclarity and untestability. Consider each in turn.

**(A) Unclarity (and hence unexpandibility):**

Innis, like Marx, Spengler, Toynbee, Levi-Strauss and most other global metaphysicians, is a binary thinker. His table of oppositions is simple to list:

spatial	[versus]	temporal
present-minded		historical
secular		religious
political		cultural
military		pacific[?] <sup>9</sup>
material		spiritual
dogmatic		pluralistic
centralized		marginal

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<sup>8</sup> George Grant was a Canadian academic who in 1965 published a tract that became a best-seller in Canada entitled *Lament for a Nation: the Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*, reproduced as pages 271-367 the *Collected Works of George Grant, Volume 3: 1960–1969*, edited by Arthur Davis and Henry Roper (Toronto, Ontario: the University of Toronto Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> The word 'pacific' is my own. Innis gives no evident or exact term with which to counter 'military'.

homogeneous	particular
technical	tied to the land
reasonable	affective
written	oral
prosaic	poetic
transitory	permanent
willful	traditional

Unfortunately, as with all such tables, a method of division is absent. As Gombrich emphasised, anyone obliged to divide the objects of the world twixt two binary terms can easily do so, regardless of the terms (hot or cold, wet or dry, raw or cooked). This is why binary oppositions strike careless readers as so remarkably apt: they fit automatically.<sup>10</sup>

Given a listing of binary oppositions and a pair of binary terms to be added to the list, however, it is unclear – and intrinsically so! – upon which side of the table to place either new term. Indeed, it is in the nature of binary oppositions that either term could go equally well on either side!

Why, for example, did Innis align 'centralization' with 'space', 'secular' and 'material' rather than with 'time', 'religious' and 'spiritual'?

No intrinsic or empirical reason is given, and indeed none could be given, for the term and its converse could as well be listed conversely – and indeed some of Innis's less careful readers have read him that way!

It thus remains remarkably unclear what follows from Innis's binary scheme if applied to situations in the everyday world. How Canadians ought to behave with respect to the choices of technology before them is left unspecified – and indeed unspecifiable.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Ernst Gombrich's remarks on his 'party game' ('ping' and 'pong') on pages 370-371, Section XI. of Part Four: Invention and Discovery of the second revised edition of his *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969 [1961]). For a 'statistical analysis' of the grounding of such 'games', cited by Gombrich, that may well have provoked him into the playing of it (though he cites only results, giving no pages references), see Charles E. Osgood's and his collaborators' *Method and Theory in Experimental Psychology* (New York, New York: 1953).

<sup>11</sup> Innis's only specific suggestion concerning this choice of which I am aware occurs in the final two sentences of his *The Strategy of Culture* (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 1952) where he says that we as Canadians

**(B) Untestability:**

Innis, again in company with Marx, Spengler, and Toynbee, seems remarkably oblivious to the suggestion that he might be wrong. He seems unaware of the possible falsity of his pronouncements, piling up detail after detail again and again in the apparent belief that repetition attests to truth. He thus reads, as do his precursors, as a contemporary, albeit Canadian, pope speaking *ex cathedra*.

**Reconsideration**

The above criticisms would have struck me in the past as decisive. But I am no longer as certain as I was that they cut as deeply as I once thought, and it is Innis, more than anyone else, who has given me pause. How so?

To criticize Innis as I have done would be, in his view, to share the *literary* bias that compelled Plato to condemn the poets and to relegate the oral tradition to the margin of the intellectual life of western civilization.

I shall say nothing in defense of Innis's reliance upon of binary oppositions, for my logical scruples forbid my entertaining them (though I suspect, in Innis's favour, that one could restate his claims without their use with little but propaganda loss, as one could the intriguing speculations of Spengler – but not, I think, those of Toynbee).

But I do wish to note here what Innis might have said in defense of the right of his conjectures to be untestable, for the fancy seems both fascinating and provocative. If so, then not only have most readers misread Innis, but Innis misread himself, for he never acknowledged the more radical consequences of his attack upon the literary tradition, and most readers of him, McLuhan among them, have shied away from them as well.

This is not as arrogant a claim as it may appear. Innis, indeed, might well have approved of it, for he believed that a member of a dominant state could comprehend its cultural

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... can only survive by taking persistent action at strategic points against American imperialism in all its attractive disguises. ... attempting constructive efforts to explore the cultural possibilities of various media of communications and to develop them along lines from commercialism ... .  
[As of 2020 04 2, see <https://www.fadedpage.com/showbook.php?pid=2007120>].

But why, if European and Canadian culture are commercial to their roots, as Innis believes, should 'commercial' be aligned with 'space' rather than with 'time'?

position only with difficulty, for its biases of communication constrain how its members have been trained to think of it. It was therefore easier for a Canadian like Innis than for a citizen of the United States to understand the United States, for he lived apart from its centre on its margin occupying a privileged vantage point any of them.

Conversely, however, though Innis never noted the consequence, only a citizen attending to Canada from a vantage point outside it could hope to understand the country, the distinctive consciousness of its people and therewith the works of Innis himself.

As someone born and raised in America, I suggest that to criticize Innis for being untestable is speak with the bias of the literary mind – the pervasive bias of America. Put another way,

Questions of *testability* are *American* questions central to the dominant member of the dominant empire of contemporary western civilization that believes itself to be pluralistic, tolerant and democratic but which in reality is monolithic, intolerant, and essentially fascistic – motivated uniformly in the interests of the furtherance of its economic empire, and thus the state itself.

Within a pluralistic, tolerant and democratic culture (read: oral society), testing would be of only especial concern to speakers, for every utterance would occur in a context of living human encounters within which *testing occurs automatically*. Every utterance would be heard as an individual expression and as such contested immediately upon being heard. (This is why, or so I have concluded, John Dewey believed that democracy was possible only within an oral environment.)

Canada, unlike the United States, is notoriously not a melting pot. It prides itself upon being as uniquely pluralistic, tolerant, and democratic (read: consensual) as the United States, being at the centre of the empire engulfing it, cannot be – to the continual frustration of immigrant Americans like myself. Unlike the society of America, Canadian society subjects all cultural utterances to a *testing* without need for self-reflection by speakers on the matter.

The cultural 'mosaic' of Canada is vertically formed, of course, as John Porter has insisted: the English and French at the top, Ukrainians somewhere in the middle and West Indians at the bottom.<sup>12</sup> But that, or so I should think Innis would have presumed, is among the prices that Canadians have been obliged to pay for a national identity contra the United States, and so long as those on top are careful of those below, cultural equivalencies can and will – over time – occur with neither revolution, violence, slums or degradation. So far, Canada has done remarkably well.

### **Misconstruals of the Method of Innis by Others and By Himself**

We may now reconsider with some insight the curious method of Innis, for it bears more than a family resemblance to that of the latter Wittgenstein.

Innis was making a first attempt at bringing the methods of the oral tradition into a contemporary anti-oral environment.

His conjectures, and the form they took in pronouncements, were not meant to be testable niches within a literary document but rather jolts within a societal conversation conducted *orally*. Rather than replaying the game of theorising with theories of surpassing oddity, they were intended to divert attention to a game of a different kind with different rules and different consequences using different counters on the board – a game of situational ploys than theoretical conjectures.<sup>13</sup>

Humphrey Jennings, the masterful maker of English propagandist movies, took as his motto the phrase 'only connect'. The goal of a structured presentation within an oral tradition is neither to construct a testable theory nor to be self-critical, but rather to *connect* things previously disconnected in a context of discussion within which testing automatically occurs, for the previous disconnections serve as the counters.

The goal of a speaker within an oral tradition is to lay out an alternative perspective on the world – perhaps narratively, repetitiously, rhythmically or alliteratively – with which a listener can identify by identifying with the speaker. The confrontation of the new viewpoint with the old, within a society in which many viewpoints are not only tolerated

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<sup>12</sup> John Porter, *Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada* (Toronto, Ontario: the University of Toronto Press, 1965).

<sup>13</sup> For an unpacking of this construal and its consequences, see my essay *McLuhan's Method - the Mad Hatter at Tea with Austin and Wittgenstein* available elsewhere within the Evan Wm. Cameron Collection.

by insisted upon, is itself the only *testing* worthy of the name. Testing does not occur within the 'document', for an utterance intended to be registered as if 'oral' is no 'document', but rather within the environment within which the discourse is 'heard'.

But let me go further to suggest a that quite possibly Innis overlooked a major implication of his own work, as his student, Marshall McLuhan, assuredly did after him, pretending the oversight to be an insight without recognising the pretence of it.

Innis wished to preserve within Canada the *culture* of western civilization against the inroads of the dominant imperial pressures of the United States. Culture, as he sensed, rests upon that intimate sense of social place accruing only to oral 'communication'. McLuhan, however, was later to destroy the sense of the conviction by insisting that the dominant mass *media* of the United States – radio, film and television – were themselves modes of oral 'communication', and that we, by subjecting ourselves to them, were becoming members of a 'global village'.

Had Innis foreseen the consequences of McLuhan's contention, as McLuhan would later claim, he would, I should think, have deemed it to be nonsense, for the modern mass media are hardly tools for *communicating* but rather for *informing* (often, indeed, disinforming).

One never communicates with those that one encounters by means of radio, film or television, much less identifying with them by doing so. They inform us but not conversely. No *communing* occurs.

McLuhan misconstrued radio, film and television as manifestations of the oral tradition by failing to notice that its distinguishing event, as Parry insisted on the inauguration of the term, was the listening by auditors to the retelling by a performer of one or another of the Homeric epics, and the concurrent registering by the teller of the silence of the auditors confirming their attention, a communal situation requiring the *co-presence* of its participants. Without co-presence, only *informing* can occur.

The essence of the oral tradition, in others words, rested not upon its 'orality' but rather upon the co-presence of those interacting within it, one by speaking, the others by the silence of their listening. Innis on occasion spoke with less clarity on near matters than he ought to have done, and McLuhan had some excuse, having picked up the ball, for kicking it into another field. Had Innis been historically rigorous in his allegiance to the oral tradition, refusing forthrightly to confuse it with the 'informative' nature of radio, film and television, he might well have realised that in their non-communal nature they are as *literary* as newspapers, magazines and books. He might then have realized as well that his defense of a Canadian identity and therewith the core of western 'civilization'



through a humanization of a small part of the North American empire would require a more radical shift of personal priorities on the part of the committed than even his method might suggest.

How so? Think again of Plato's *Republic*.

### **Conclusion: Teaching in the 'Oral Tradition'**

Within Plato's *Republic*, politicians, merchants, dramatists and slaveholders and therewith, indeed, knaves, charlatans and swindlers were to be free to pronounce upon any matters they wished without regard to truth or sense, much less the absence of it. Only the 'poets' were to be prevented from doing so. Why so?

Because, as Plato recognised, poets were the 'teachers' of the tribe from whom the young would learn how to think and behave, determining in the long run how their society would evolve. As exemplars of the 'oral tradition', they could never work from within it toward the goals of the new 'literary tradition' that he hoped to inaugurate. They had to be silenced.

But what if Canada, as Innis was to hope two thousand years later, should come to exemplify the oral tradition that Plato had hoped to extinguish by excluding the poets? Who within it could serve as 'teachers' of the young, as the poets had done in classical Greece, exemplifying how it ought to be done with excellence?

Who, as teachers within Canadian society, would be obliged therewith to lead the fight against the literary pressures of the United States writ large in the media of information?

Hardly the common run of 'media intellectuals', for, as Plato would have recognised, they are text-mongers one and all, albeit cleverly disguised, for to work within the newer media of radio, film and television one need only learn how to write a new kind of 'text', audiovisual rather than literary but equally noninteractive, to by which to *inform* others.

The only members of Canadian society who find themselves unexceptionally working day-by-day within a communal yet intellectual environment at its highest level – an oral environment in the classical sense but of an uncommonly recognised kind – are its university *teachers*. Upon them, consequently, far more than upon others, rests the burden of sustaining the cultural identity of Canada.

How, then, ought they to approach their work? One learns to do things better only by having learned to *mimic* those whom one recognises as having already excelled at it – and that includes learning how to *think* better by mimicking imaginatively those capable of doing it better than oneself. Who, then, among the university teachers within Canada have by common consent inspired students to think for the better, and how did they do it?

Higher on the list than most others, I should think, would be Northrup Frye, George Grant, Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan.

Without exception, they inspired in larger part by *lecturing* rather than supervising seminars.

They were, in other words, *performers* of excellence of an especial kind within an especial environment, working often before large groups of students yet without loss of personal engagement. How was this possible? Because, in a nutshell, they were actors doing what great actors do when soliloquising on stage.

An actor portraying Hamlet *informs* us by doing so. What engages us, however, is not the information *per se*, but rather the way in which the actor, if accomplished, entices us to entertain it.

As we listen in silence to the actor performing as he does, and as he senses by our silence that we are communing with him as he does it, we are enabled to *identify with* the character that he is enacting (Hamlet), therewith imagining how the world is appearing to Hamlet as the play progresses and thereby learning how better to register the world that we shall again encounter when we emerge afterwards from the theatre.

If university teachers within Canada are to strike at the heart of the Americanised norms of higher education increasingly dominant within our own culture, as Innis would have wished, they must, I suggest, must mimic in method how our greatest teachers have done it. Contrary to the working habits and assumptions deriving from the literary biases of America, they must rethink for the better how they do what they must do.

(a) They must train themselves to become accomplished performers within the dramatic solo art of lecturing, rather than resting at ease within the easy environments of seminars.

(a) They must learn how to direct their researches toward what is required to teach better, working from within it to publication of it. And

(c) They must contrive to do both of the above in defiance of the massive forces impinging upon them and their universities to conform to the 'business model', deriving from the literary tradition, to which all but a few of the colleges and universities in America have already succumbed.

A commitment to teach within the 'oral tradition' is, I suggest, to refuse to be distracted by the temptations of the dominant 'literary' bias of the North American empire – the bias that threatens to destroy not only the empire but therewith our encompassing civilization as well. As I should like to think Innis would have agreed, we who teach within the universities of Canada must continue to work resolutely as 'performers' to the highest standards of the 'oral tradition' – a humbling but fascinating obligation.