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THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK? HAVELOCK'S PLEA FOR SPACE

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It is perhaps fitting that this essay should begin with the remnants of the oral tradition. In particular, with reference to October 14, 1978 when Eric Havelock delivered a paper on Harold Innis at Innis College in the University of Toronto.[1] The commentator on the paper was Marshall McLuhan who, although in ill health, nevertheless, still represented the figure of the author of such books as *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, or *Understanding Media.* For Havelock, who had left Canada many years earlier for the larger empire of the United States, it was a return to recognize the similar solitudes of his own career, in particular to that of Harold Innis', but also to mark their differences. He shared the late Innis' thesis of the bias of communication, having arrived at the same conclusions through the study of classics. But to the message of this bias they differed in the end. Innis, for Havelock, looking backwards to the oral culture that began Western European civilization finally entered a plea for the values of the classical European past: epitomized by Innis' essay "A Plea for Time".[2] Havelock, as I shall argue, entered a plea for space: a plea for empire.

Havelock's case begins with his examination of the foundation of Western culture. His most celebrated achievement, and what links him most directly to McLuhan, is tracing the change which occurs with the introduction of written language in ancient Greece. In general terms, this is the replacement of Homer by Plato, a drama that today for Havelock is still being played out between Plato and the giants of the twentieth-century. The change from the oral to written, from the ear to the eye, influenced the social and political structures of the classical world, and quite appropriately raised the question of the effect of such changes in technology on contemporary life. For Havelock this question was answered by understanding its

roots of technology in the classical culture and, as I will argue, its application in North America.

To Havelock the classics establish human ontology as technique; thereby creating a tension in Western culture. The main elements of the tradition surround the myths of the closed society and of the decentralized political organization; the 'polis' bound by the timeless predicates of being. According to Havelock, this has led on the one hand, to the abandonment of the ethical values Innis sought, and, on the other hand, to the dominance in modern thought of the will to power. Against this stands the tradition with which Havelock identifies the open society of empire, scientific, progressive and utilitarian, with the technological "individual" becoming in Havelock's view the true individual.

In this theory, space conquers time in the reality of the New World. This vision, from a form of overseas Karl Popper, rests on the revision of the Western tradition through North American experience. It is curiously more "Canadian" in an odd way then Innis' final resting place as one who looked back to Europe. Havelock is, from my viewpoint, the theorist of technological humanism; the defender of the 'liberal democratic tradition overseas'; the promoter of the empire; and the rationalizer of the information society.

I turn to the presuppositions of Havelock's case, or what Northrop Frye refers to as the mythological background upon which the questions of the social and political rest.[3] Havelock called for such a preface, a preface if you will to his well known *Preface to Plato*.[4] Though lacking the detail of the latter work, Havelock provided this ground in his commentary on Aeschelyus' *Prometheus*.[5] For Havelock, myths are technologies which order a society by encoding its rules and procedures. It is clear in Havelock's writing that rules and procedure as customs are the foundation not only for order, but for justice.[6] In that sense they have a priority in advancing an understanding of a culture. There is nothing 'natural' about these myths nor is there a transcendental claim in the philosophical sense, yet there is the prior claim in memory as the primary storehouse of culture. This will reappear in modern societies in the form of the centrality of information storage.[7]

In this sense for Havelock, Western culture has two primary myths which have similar structures, but radically different conclusions. They are familiar myths. The first is the Christian myth of the fall, and the second is the Promethean myth.[8] Each myth has the same structure in relating the subjugation of humans at the hands of the gods. Each predict a form of persecution that Havelock sees repeated throughout Western culture, and in that sense gives rise to Havelock's view of the centrality of conflict or war to the Western identity. Thus Western society is formed by the interaction of technology and violence. This problem underlies Havelock's view of *The*

Iliad, as we shall see. But more directly the two myths pose the master-slave relation as the central political concern to be overcome in order to set the individual on course as free and equal.

Within mythic consciousness itself rebellious action is not in question for it is precisely a sign of an oral culture, for Havelock, that it has yet to invent the concepts of space and time necessary to the creation of the Western political actor. The sense of being beyond space and time makes all oral societies static; the process of overcoming the master-slave relation requires something like the Hegelian individuation occasioned by the struggle for consciousness. In each myth the struggle is depicted socially. In Christianity for Havelock it is 'resolved' unsatisfactorily, yet powerfully, in the creation of religious consciousness characterized primarily by the postulation of ideas that are timeless. Hence there is a link for Havelock with philosophies of being that are not Christian, such as Platonism or Marxism but which show a similar structure. In fact, it is Plato who symbolizes this for Havelock through the attack on the poets and the creation of being-itself captured in the verb 'to be' as that of the logic of identity. The timeless nature of this solution ultimately reinforces for Havelock the anti-democratic character of politics as his critique of Plato and Aristotle show.[9]

Against this Havelock holds that Prometheus' revolt against the gods, while engendering persecution, is fundamentally better directed. Rather than knowledge being at the root, the 'thief of fire' Prometheus, here viewed as symbolic of technology,[10] provides the individual as tool-maker the wherewithal to fight the 'good fight.' This fight is one fought in the arena of space, or what might be called under the 'architectural eye'[11] for Havelock where being is "prescenced" as becoming. Individuals 'appear' in a space with the view that through technology they will add to their human nature. It is apparent that Havelock's reading of the problem of being ascribe to technology the revelation or unveiling of being. This becomes what Havelock calls the myth of the 'science of man'.[12]

The question of technology represents the first engagement in the battle, expressed in Havelock's terms, of democracy against the totalitarian rule of oligarchy. As we shall see, these myths pitted Ionian science of the pre-Socratics, or its descendant, according to Havelock, the liberal democracy of today, against Platonic sophistry whether it be from Plato, Aristotle or the modern inheritors, particularly the idealist elements of Kant and Hegel's thought. The result, historically, was a split decision. In the material world, a world of utilitarian calculus and science gained the ascendancy. In the political world, or more notably that of the world of power itself, philosophy triumphed in the form of nihilism with the attendant destruction of the gains of science. This tension between democracy and oligarchy also illustrates the danger inherent in technology when the poetic and the practical, or

language and tools, are severed as they are for Havelock's Plato, and as they become for Havelock himself. Democracy is then left dangling in the worst fashion dependent on 'common sense'; that is entrapped within the economic calculus of the market. To cite an example, Athens with an empire, even without the help of Plato, ends in defeat, and by extension the same fate is being played out in Havelock's North America.

It is this 'confused' result that restrains Havelock from pursuing the source of a revitalized form of oral culture which Havelock rather spitefully attributed to Innis.[13] This is the Innis whose early farm life was structured by the predominance of oral stories over written. On the other hand, the glitter of McLuhan's global village sent Havelock back to the safety of the 'storeroom' of dead ideas, most notably and ironically Kant's scheme for a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose as the basis of his liberalism. I now turn to establishing this case.

Havelock's analysis of the problems of the modern period stem from his adherence to the liberal myth of freedom and equality which demands that space and time be conceptualized in a particular 'scientific' fashion. This is precisely the point at issue with McLuhan and Innis, and especially with Innis who saw the "bias of communication" as upsetting the balance of space and time — hence Innis' pessimism and McLuhan's guarded optimism. Havelock is also aware in seeking out these myths that twentieth-century physics has altered the concept of space and time by conflating space/time; thereby provoking an attendant identity crisis for the Western individual. For Havelock, the answer as to the origin of this crisis of space and time will be found in the changes in communication which gave rise originally to space and time. For space and time, as is science itself, are inventions. Thus the formation of each concept becomes linked to the change in oral culture that prompted these inventions on way to the written world. I would like to highlight three aspects of the change according to Havelock:

1) the nature of oral society according to Homer;
2) the invention of time by Plato; and
3) the invention of space and democracy by Euclid and the pre-Socratics.

For Havelock, the Homeric poems represent in the most fundamental sense constitutional documents of a society.[14] By encoding the practice of that society they are political in their regulation of social relations. As Marshall McLuhan noted in his comments on Havelock's case, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are in a sense the ancient Greek equivalent of Ann Landers.[15] Strictly mimetic in character they supply, in digestible form, examples of appropriate conduct taken from the past of the society. Their appeal is to memory not vision, they hold the past not the future, but are able to order

the present.[16] The "storing" of the past legitimizes the exercise of political control which, by being rooted in the practice of the society, is non-repressive for Havelock. Disputes, at least internal to the society, are regulated by appeals to this customary practice. These are usually made as is known, in the agora, or assembly of citizens.[17]

Much of Havelock's later work, *The Greek Concept of Justice*, concentrates on showing the agora model of association as being inherently fair and as setting the conditions for a transition to democratic forms — albeit ones which are predicated on a class basis. An example, amongst many given by Havelock, is the opening of the *Iliad* where questions of what to do with Agamemnon's claims are resolved in the assembly of the Acheans. This is a form of 'justice' devoid of the concept of the "Just". It is predicated on the exchange of opinions, and not on the contest of ideas.[18] It is also the prevalent form in oral societies (which is, of course, Havelock's point). The fact that the process is given poetic form again reflects the absence of written cultures. The contrast of this type of poetry to the visionary aspects of a William Blake is complete. In Homer's case, the imagination serves merely to recall from memory what has been done; this in sharp contrast to the creative utopian elements of Blake.[19] This distinction, which I will return to later, was well known in the Enlightenment period — witness Kant's *Critique of Judgement* which distinguishes the creative genius from the judging spectator precisely on the grounds of the use of the imagination.

Havelock, in his exposition, takes great pains to stress that the Homeric world is dominated by "appearances", either through the 'reappearing' of the imagination in poetry, or before the assembly, or, if you are a god, from the wings. These appearances are locative — that is, spatial — and provide a 'de-powered' site for the creation of the will which informs action. This model is fine if the community either is all-encompassing, an end Havelock himself finally admits, or if it is self-contained, that is a polis — and end that Havelock vociferously rejects.[20] It is apparent that part of his rejection of the decentralized political model rests with the Homeric poems themselves; for even a random opening of Homer yields a story of war or of travel outside the polis itself. This leads Havelock to two conclusions:

1) that war is endemic in Western culture because of the polis which creates differences amongst individuals, hence creating strangers.
2) the overcoming of war resides in the friendly reception of the stranger,[21] which is the prerequisite for trade and economic relations.

Again returning to Homer but this time in the *Odyssey* many of the encounters, including the reception of Odysseus when he returns home, are incidents surrounding reception of the 'unknown' guest. Unlike Camus' *The*

Stranger where the existential is developed *with* the social differences, Havelock interprets the *Odyssey* strictly in social terms as the story of the adverse effects of not granting the Xenos, the stranger, the 'amity' of the social 'good will.' Havelock's dependence on Aristotle's ethics is clear. That friendship conquers war may be, for Havelock, Homer's message, despite the rather bad time of it had by the Trojans accepting gifts.

I believe there are three critical points here:

First, the usual sense of the localized nature of oral societies is directly challenged by Havelock in his assertion that the Homeric poems transcend the polis; thereby linking all parts of the Athenian empire. That is, oral cultures are spatially expansive.

Second, the chief vehicle calling for friendly reception is that of economic relations. Trade, even with the enemy, as our own history of war with the Americans suggests, can be more powerful than war. And it is powerful because it operates in the guise of the free market, of mutual interest and hence desirable relations, as well as sharing a similarity in structure to the exchange of the 'assembly'.

Third, the chief attitude of the trading individual — practical and utilitarian — is precisely that of the technological individual. I will not describe the details of Havelock's analysis of the *Iliad* from this viewpoint but much of the text, including the war sections, deals with the technological requirements of outfitting the invasion or of seamanship.[22] Seamanship is, of course, crucial to the political and economic future of Athens as an empire.

Thus, we have a view of oral society painted by Havelock essentially as spatial-oriented in its practical, utilitarian economics which accords with a sense of justice as custom law. For Havelock, it is this society that comes under attack by Plato in the famous rejection of the poets in *The Republic* and this attack is continued, in his view, in Aristotle's *Politics*. In Havelock's perspective, the defense of oral society is found in the pre-Socratics. I will take each in turn.

The outlines of the case against Plato as a supporter of authoritarian anti-democratic political structures is well-known. Havelock's contribution to this position, and its importance here, resides primarily in his claim that the political organization favoured by Plato is linked with the replacement of oral cultures with the written word.[23] The chief elements of this switch reside in what is called, by Havelock, Plato's invention of time. This creates in Havelock's mind the individual against the society through an appeal either inwardly to the soul or outwardly to the Forms.[24] In each case, this is predicated on the existence of concepts beyond the Homeric world. Havelock demonstrates this through his analysis in *The Greek Concept of Justice* in terms of the change in the use of the verb 'to be' from its

measuring of 'presence' in Homer to the sense of 'absence' according to Plato in which the Forms may exist, though in no specific place.[25] A similar analysis is given to the term justice; moving from the sense of a decision from the assembly to an appeal to everlasting principles. The political repercussions are straightforward. The polis is protected and becomes a closed society even by those whose souls are best suited to be governed. Common opinion is relegated to the common man. Techne, or one's virtues, are arranged hierarchically, thereby reinforcing the master-slave relationship. Aristotle adds to this in the opening chapter of the *Politics* reinforcing the 'naturalness' of hierarchy, denying the political use of friendship, and denigrating economic activity by consigning it to an ethically inferior level.

In contrast to this indictment of the founders of Western thought, Havelock attempts, through a reconstruction of the fragments left to us from the pre-Socratics, a case for the liberal, democratic society. This case rests on the view expressed in a middle work of Havelock's entitled *The Liberal Temper of Greek Politics*. Here, Havelock argues there was a significant group of early Ionian thinkers who supported a concept of the individual which was based on equality and rooted in a view that the individual developed in a natural and evolutionary way.[26] That is, the individual could be seen as the tool-maker, or technologist, who progressed through the application of science. Havelock paints the contrast between this view of the individual as progressive, and the sense of human history as regressive, and hence as nostalgic for a golden age. This view is expressed not only by Plato, but is also found, for example, in Hesiod, and most powerfully expressed in the Eden myth. The science of the human rejects the religious-metaphysical basis of these myths for the biological-historical view found in Havelock's Prometheus, and perhaps more significantly, in writers like Democritus. Democritus becomes a model of the 'anthropological' thinkers who see the fight for survival being resolved in a form of modern liberal contract theory.[27] Havelock draws explicit comparisons to Hobbes and Bentham, linking the view of the individual as a technologist directly to the calculus of pleasure-pain.[28] Similar conjectures are made in reference to the known fragments of Protagoras and Thyrsmachus, the elder Sophist.

One must add to this the group the influence of Euclid. Perhaps one of the most influential single articles on Havelock's and, to some extent, Innis' thought was F.M. Cornford's the 'Invention of Space', written in 1936 in a collection for Gilbert Murray.[29] Here, Cornford sketched the change in Greek science affected by Euclid's concept of the infinity of space. This underlies the atomists' view of the physical world which Havelock described as Hobbesian, and which he related to their politics. And, as one would expect, Cornford identifies the opposition to the 'science' coming from

Plato, and, in particular, from Aristotle. When combined with Havelock's position against Plato and Aristotle we have a very strong counter-theory to the Platonic emphasis on philosophic reason being in time. This theory rejects the hierarchical anti-economic society for a technological science, being as 'being in space', and a liberal-democratic society.

And thus my opening position. I perceive Havelock and Innis as occupying polar positions. Innis, the political economist, moves towards redress of what he sees as a dangerous overbalance, in North America, of space over time. The politics of space has ended in an empire where culture has been, or is on the verge of destruction. This analysis rests on Innis' important studies of political economy, but ends in his turning, as Havelock indicates, towards the moral science of the empire. Innis' "Plea for Time" signals the moral bankruptcy, from Havelock's position, of Innis' return to the Kantean metaphysics of morals.

Havelock, on the other hand, having left England as an emigrant to the New World, experienced the influence of North America on exploding the closed society. For him the vehicle all along has been the view of the individual as a technologist whose industry creates both the "empire" and the "good will". A return to oral culture is rejected by Havelock. The very nature of technology is, for Havelock, history as progress. The very message of oral society was to encourage the expansion into space to overcome oral culture. This is the legacy and task of economics. This is strikingly illustrated in Havelock's *Prometheus*.

> As the time range extends, so does the orbit of persons and interests. The mind enters into a calculation. What will this momentary utility mean to my further utility, the day after tomorrow? Then if necessary the first utility is remodeled to suit the second, but the second meanwhile is remodeled to suit the third, till the process is pushed to the point where 'utility' takes on the meaning of a common denominator between 'myself' and an expanding range of men's interest. This common denominator automatically involves a harmonization of interests, because the task of predicting what 'I' will need, at a further and further stage of foresight, can be carried out only by trying to imagine a hundred other relationships in which 'I' will be involved and in predicting a thousand action in which 'my' needs, in turn, depend. This perspective extends, if pushed far enough in time's length, to the point where it takes in city and state and family of states, and the estate of the unborn.
>
> The conclusion would seem to be that if man cares to prethink far enough, his forethought becomes increasingly moral and philanthropic in its direction. Man cannot prethink evil, but only good.[30]

We are now back at classical utilitarian liberalism. The maximization of each interest leads to the harmonization of all interests. The 'orbit' of this harmony expands through both time and space swallowing up the Burkean contract of all generations in the sweep of the 'family of states.' The future, then, extends from the old world to the new through the imperialism of economic activity.

Havelock's defense of the empire is, at this point, complete. Liberal democracy based on the technological individual assures in the long run, if we only think scientifically about it, the harmony of wills. The individual in the dramatic reversal of the Hegelian retrospective rejects the past and turns towards the future where only the 'good' can be thought. That is, Havelock's case rests on the claim that ethics can be established through the progress of science which controls the will: science as technology, as craft knowledge, as the way to do things, as the way to act. This completes the Promethean myth. Havelock has refounded the liberal democratic tradition from a North American perspective, however, much the origins of that myth are found in the pre-Socratics' view of science as technology.

This vision underscores much of the commitment to technology in North American society as it is articulated in liberal thought. Havelock's use of the technological has it roots, as I have argued, in the understanding of the poetry of oral societies as technology. In each case the techne of the poet is for Havelock purely mimetic, re-creating the status quo. This might be called the shopkeeper mentality. The poet keeps the store. This function is at the root of communication for Havelock, and it is one with the 'progress' of Western culture to literacy. Havelock sees "an improvement in storage method' as the centre of culture control. I quote from the Epilogue of the *Greek Concept of Justice.*

> In the developing story of human culture, speech, on the one hand, and the invention of tools, on the other, have played central roles. In estimating their relative importance it is now commonly agreed that speech has priority. My own reconstruction of the Greek experience has been guided by a further assumption: the significance of speech which is placed in storage for reuse has priority over its employment in day-to-day communication. The control of culture has lies in information that is accumulated and recalled, and language used for this purpose exhibits certain important differences from what is casually spoken in interpersonal relations ...[31]

I draw two conclusions from this quotation. First, the removal of culture from the life world of each individual to that of the information society strikes me as logical to Havelock's case. The storage capacity of modern society through computers is after all immense, and it reflects the direction

certainly of the modern office where word processing and the use of macro and micro computers has become commonplace. This is the 'information science' society.

Second, the context of the above quotation was a reference to McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* whose basic theme has essentially been reversed by Havelock. The 'sensorium' of the individual outside the person has been turned inward. The soul of the individual, in storage, truly becomes technocratic. This surely must confirm McLuhan's worst fears. The image of the poet, and of culture, is rendered profoundly uncreative. Creativity is given only to the scientist whose domain extends into the moral realm. The sense of techne as art both in the creative imagination of the poet and of the toolmaker is surrendered by Havelock. Memory is set over vision.

> But the poetic management of speech is prompted in the first instance not by exotic inspiration or by individual genius but by the functional need of human beings to cope with the stable preservation of a social organism. Poetry viewed in the overall context of the history of human culture is a mechanism for oral storage.[32]

The transmutation of liberal democracy by technology into information storage "expels the eccentric act and the imaginative question."[33] It is hard not to conclude that at the core of Havelock's thought is the privileging of dead power.

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Notes

1. The exchange between Marshall McLuhan and Eric Havelock was taped under the title of "Harold Innis: The Philosophical Historian". It may be found in the Sigmund Samuel Library of the University of Toronto.
2. H. Innis, "A Plea for Time" in *The Bias of Communication*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951.
3. See N. Frye, *The Critical Path*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971. See also D. Cook, *Northrop Frye: A Vision of the New World*, Montreal and New York: New World Perspectives and Saint Martin's Press, 1985.
4. E. Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963. Havelock notes at the end of this work that it leads to a demand for a preface to the pre-Socratics, p. 305.
5. E. Havelock, *Prometheus*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968. The book was originally titled *The Crucifixion of Intellectual Man* published in 1951. The reader might keep both titles in mind for they bear clear evidence that Havelock saw a distinct connection between classical texts and his own times.
6. Havelock's most sustained presentation of this view is his. *The Greek Concept of Justice*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.

7. The first two chapters of *Prometheus* set out each myth. Havelock will on occasion substitute the Hesiod myth of the golden age for the Christian myth of "the bitter fruit of the tree of knowledge", p. 2.
8. *Ibid.*
9. See in particular chapters XI and XII of Havelock's *The Liberal Temper of Greek Politics*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1957 for the attack on Aristotle, and the *Preface to Plato*.
10. *Prometheus*, p. 14.
11. *The Greek Concept of Justice*, p. 225.
12. *The Liberal Temper of Greek Politics*, prefatory.
13. Cf: Havelock's remarks at the Innis College debate.
14. See *The Greek Concept of Justice* for Havelock's extended commentary on the poems.
15. M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Toronto: Signet Books, 1964, p. viii.
16. "The plot of each epic can be seen as indirectly didactic, insofar as it proceeds in a way which has the effect of illustrating and implementing dike as a regulative principle legally in the *Iliad* and morally in the *Odyssey* ..." *The Greek Concept of Justice*, p. 13.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
18. "Justice, whatever it is, can be seen as something exchanged between two parties, or added to both, on the course of a settlement, or alternatively, as symbolizing the process of exchange itself. It is certainly not a principle which when applied excludes its opposite." *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133. This is an especially revealing quotation for it establishes clearly the relation justice has to economic activity over and above a determination of 'right and wrong'.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
20. See the conclusion to *Prometheus* and below.
21. See in particular chapter 9 "The Moralities of the Odyssey," *The Greek Concept of Justice*.
22. See chapter 4 "The Society Reported by Homer." *Ibid.*
23. See *Preface to Plato*. Havelock's support of the poet Homer as the preserver and recaller of morals and justice leads him quite easily to the rejection of Plato on the ground of Plato's attack on Homer. Poetry passes from 'preserved communication' into 'opinion' at the hands of Plato for Havelock with the consequent destruction of the community.
24. "To this fundamental tract of the Homeric mind Plato and also the pre-Platonic philosophers address themselves, demanding that a discourse of 'becoming,' that is of endless doings and of events, be replaced by a discourse of 'being,' that is of statements which are in modern jargon 'analytic,' are free from time-conditioning." *Ibid.*, p. 182.
25. *The Greek Concept of Justice*, p. 240.
26. *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics*, p. 5.
27. "The contract theory thus stated had in various versions a long history after Democritus' day. It may be doubted whether it was ever stated so succinctly or with such satisfaction to the competing claims of authority and liberty." *Ibid.*, p. 150.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
29. F.M. Cornford, "The Invention of Space," in *Essays in Honour of Gilbert Murray*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1936.
30. *Prometheus*, p. 93.
31. *The Greek Concept of Justice*, p. 335.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 35.