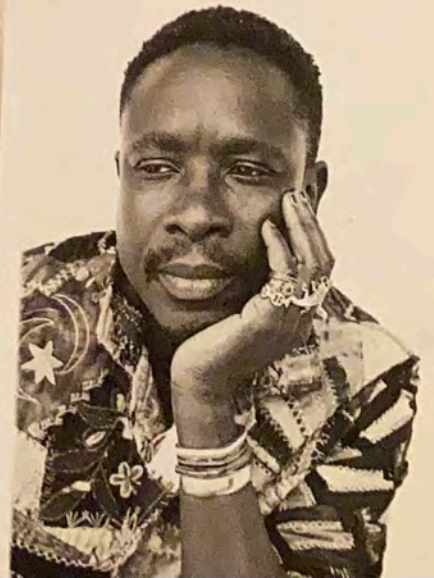
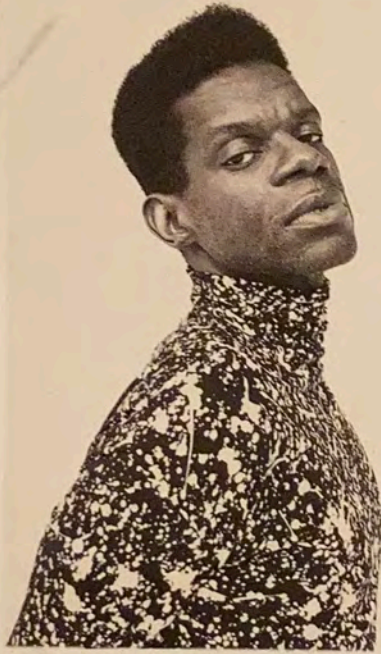
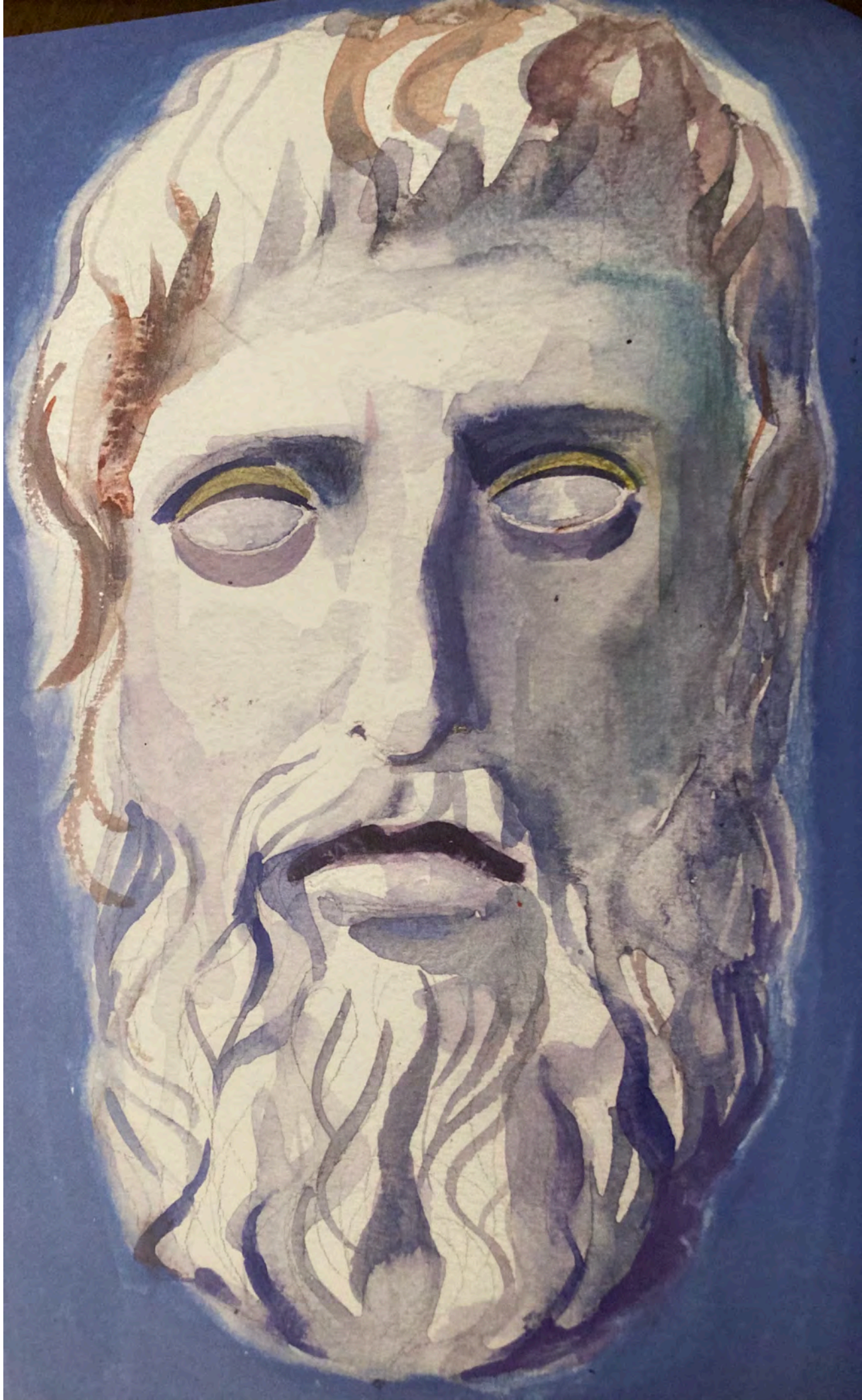


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# THE NOW

CULTURAL ALMANAC





# new ABCs

text:

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a) Our 45th President of the United States delivers his most frequent and most impactful statements to his domestic and global publics on Twitter, in 280 characters or less.

b) It's speculated that Kim Kardashian charges up to \$500,000 per single image to sponsor a brand on her Instagram profile, which 105 million other accounts subscribe to. (For context, seven-in-ten people globally live on under \$10 USD per day.)

c) There's consensus in the scientific community that autonomous cars, run by cyber-technology responsible for deciphering both moral and logistical dilemmas on the road, are set to outnumber human-driven cars in the United States by the year 2040.

Should these few, but telling, statistics leave us scared? Unsettled? As citizens of a world beholden to its technologic communication state, should we share Plato's way-back-when concerns about the "moral danger" of the disciplines of communication we're allowing govern us?

The Hellenic culture in which Plato lived and operated was one unquestionably subject to Homeric methods of communication. Homer's epic poetry—which Plato believed to be confusing, bastardizing, and hypnotizing its audiences—was the reigning method for sharing news, educating, and socializing. These poets were skilled rhetoricians, dexterously weaving familiar tales of the gods into parables on human nature and ideals. They were highly regarded civic servants, newsboys of the pulpit. Audiences were reported to have responded to these orators trance-like, as uncritical receptors to an oral culture feeding them realities easily digestible in a characteristic mnemonic, repetitive, rhythmic style.

Imagine the A-B-Cs, taught to American children in pre-Kindergarten as a song, rhyming and with meter and put to music. Most American adults can recite the A-B-Cs without thinking, to this day, in the prosodic format in which they were originally taught it. It was a similar way of remembering for Homer's audiences, hypnotized by the singsong nature of their education.

Plato expresses deep concern for the ways in which educational, social, moral, political, and military life were all entwined, and were all blindly receptive to the same oration of mystical poetic performance that was hosted in open forums for the education of the general populace. Framed by the high stakes implications of political and military hypnotism-by-poetry, his anxiety is understandable. Proposing his solutions to the style of education he lambasts throughout Republic, Plato offers that Hellenic audiences self-identify as separate from content and from other subjects. He proposes an escape from the perils, so to speak, of mimesis, to the liberated waters of independent cognition.

Endeavoring to implement these alternative ways of thought was Plato's way of aggressively advocating for autonomous thinking through social and curriculum-based structures of learning. Plato was pushing Hellenic peoples and pupils to think beyond what they were hearing and reiterating orally, and into the realm of the abstract or theoretical, which preceded the literate culture to come.

This was a radical posture. Plato was antiestablishment, a disruptor. He made strong waves, and their wake rippled through three or so centuries—literacy was relatively slow, in retrospect, in taking its hold on a world now so dependent on it.

To think about a slow impact of communications technologies feels unfamiliar in an era in which, in the lifespan of a young adult, methods of message transmission have evolved in monumental ways. I am 27-years old. My family got a big, boxy grey computer with a clunky keyboard when I was seven, in 1998. All I remember is, when I was allowed to, playing some Mickey Mouse grocery shopping "game". My dad got a pager, like I'd sometimes seen on the doctor's belt, when I was about the same age. I do not remember thinking these markers of digitization meant anything. When I entered middle school, my father got a cell phone about the size of a stapler (a comparison in itself that'll likely someday be outdated). Three or so years later, it felt like every single one of my friends had gotten a cell phone, too. I argued with my mother that I should have one. "It's so unfair!" I wailed. "I mean, what age were you when you got your first cell phone!?" She rolled her eyes: "I've never had one, Emily." Touché.

Only three or so years after that, I knew few people over the age of 12 without a cell phone. And already, cellular devices, including tablets, had begun to mean so much more than they had when they first circulated to the layperson less than a decade prior. These were no longer apparatuses whose sole purpose was getting in touch with people verbally through a sound transmitter; these were now cameras, voice and video recorders, carriers of Internet (a concomitant technology and miraculous disruptor in its own right). By the time I entered the university system in 2009, most students were required to buy their own laptop computer, which they were expected to carry around with them each school day, and which were assumed to host a range of applications (bought separately) serving all sorts of creative and logistic purposes.

This past Thanksgiving, 2017, I showed my mother and my aunt a meme series on Instagram that I've spent way too much time poring over and laughing through. They didn't think the first meme was humorous. I went to the second; they shrugged it off. It took me till the third meme in the never-ending series to realize these women, a generation older than I, did not think the meme was funny because they did not understand how to "read" it. I was struck with this idea of a new literacy, a literacy based on the cell phone screen, based in the image and corresponding with a new audience versed in its visual-textual vernacular. (Once I explained how the context of the image was rendered ironic because the text, which is customarily read before the image behind it is viewed, and which transposes new meaning onto the "meme" as a holistic message, both women were in tears laughing alongside me.)

Plato, deviating from the repetitive style of communication by which information was consumed in his day (which, again, he deemed dangerous), proposed arithmetical curriculum as the basis of a new model of learning. In necessitating critical thinking, this strategy would stir people from their hypnotic practice of information consumption. This was an incredibly foresighted push in the direction of today's data-driven society. Nearly everything we're guided by in our contemporary metropolitan day-to-day is digital or technological in nature, it is "on" or "off", a 1 or a zero—and, more recently, "for" or "against", deterministically "straight" or "gay", "male" or "female", "Democrat" or "Republican". In a mimicking procedure, real life, inevitably occupied by the in-betweens and the gray areas, has positioned itself on an ersatz binary. Our social scaffolding, the ways in which we relate to and empathize with each other, has become dependent on a dyadic false premise of understanding.

When Plato laid out his hierarchy of intellect and placed the philosopher kings, or literate high thinkers, on the most "intellectual" side of things, it was these men—and these men, only—who were viewed as capable of grasping abstract ideas, priming them for political and social leadership. Today, in an American social apparatus consumed and, thus, disabled by a holistic socialization and indoctrination to a system of understanding situated within a binary of yeses and nos, our own political leadership reflects our handicap. In presidential office is a ruler who does not convey any sort of capacity to think or understand things critically or with thoughtful digestion; he surrounds himself with cronies, themselves just as unthinking about (or at least unresponsive to) their surrounding realities and "broader pictures" beyond what's fed to them by their immediate peers and direct circumstances.

To put it simply, we have returned to the sort of imagistic society that preceded even Homer's times, a lame populace susceptible to the prestidigitation of orality. As millennials—or the peoples rubbing shoulders with and commercially affected by millennials,

collectively a society susceptible to their market influences and consumer behaviors—we are beholden to the digitized image. We are made lazy by it, supplanting a critical textual language with a shortcut visual language.

In 2015, Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year was the pictograph 🗨️. The message this encapsulates takes the place of a succession of words, combined intentionally in a particular formation, to convey a specific meaning. Ambiguity exists in the emoji that does not exist in alphabetical language; in using these "characters", we are losing something not only in the precision of our communication, but also in the personal vulnerability of communication. Like the false binary on which we now base many understandings, the emoji and other image-based message carriers have the potential to faultily universalize meaning. In this, clarity is lost, traditional forms of retention are left unpracticed, and the bases of literacy—reading and writing—are altered. In the way that Homer's audiences were entranced by his poeticism, we too have become entranced by, lost in, and preoccupied with our language of digital communication emanating from the many devices around us.

And so I return to the question: should we be scared? What does it mean that my mother cannot "read" a meme without being walked through it like a child new to the alphabet? Like Plato speculated of his own era, are the contemporary shifts we're witnessing in communication technologies and forms of literacy threatening our ways of being, our ways of governance and sociality? Are we in an era of moral danger?

#### Author's Note

In crafting my own thoughts in this piece, I'm indebted to Eric A. Havelock's "Preface to Plato", first published in 1963 by Harvard University Press in London, and of course to Plato's "Republic". Likewise, I'm thankful to my millennial upbringing and to the women in my family who were so vulnerably open to learning a new visual alphabet over the Thanksgiving holiday.