

Paleopoetics: The Evolution of the Preliterate Imagination
Christopher Collins
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Christopher Collins, a professor of American Poetry and Poetics in New York University's English Department, has had a long-term interest in the cognitive sciences where they pertain to the ancient roots of literacy. Like archaeologists who are trying to decipher the symbolism and cultural significance of ancient rock art, Collins and the scholars to whom he refers dream of discovering the route by which Homo sapiens began to speak comprehensibly to each other. The author of *The Poetics of the Mind's Eye: Literature and the Psychology of Imagination* (1991), he begins his latest book by asking, "What do we mean by poetry? After all, we have to know what we are looking for." (1)

As a scholar, he naturally first turns to Plato, who banned poets from his ideal republic because, "poetic utterances are the words of beings outside the human world that speak within the bodies of humans, making poiêsis---verbal creation---both otherworldly *and* innerworldly." (2,3) Collins follows this up by referring to a few modern canonical poets, including Emily Dickenson, whose standard for a good poem is: "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off." To the more cerebral, though not more intelligent, Ezra Pound, a poem is "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." (5)

Collins' core interest is in poetics, which he defines as "the study of the principles of techniques of making things (from the Greek verb *poiein*, 'to make'). (10) More concisely, he sets out to explore "the principles that govern the making of a wide range of verbal artifacts," which include "verse forms generally classified as 'poetry.'" (11) He later qualifies this by stating that he is not referring "restrictively to what we literates now call 'poetry,' i.e., compositions in verse." On the contrary, he's pursuing what he calls "paleopoetics," which includes

"the skills that prelinguistic humans practiced, skills that, when language evolved, were expressed in verbal structures. It is this repertoire of techniques that, having formed the preliterate imagination, first emerged a mere five thousand years ago." (26)

To many, five thousand years may seem too recent for such a monumental emergence. Some scientists have proposed that around 50,000 years ago in Southern Africa there was a sudden cultural "leap" in which tools made from stone and bone were "suddenly" being made. There were also signs of long distance trade. All this, the majority of scientists opine, must have had something to do with language, as such a material culture would have called for rather advanced means of communication.

In 1968, the eminent linguist Noam Chomsky proposed that this ability was caused by a slight mutation that rewired individual brain, giving that person a superior intellect. This cognitive ability was then passed on to the next generations. Chomsky's single-person theory is reminiscent of the famous Mitochondrial Eve, who was theorized to be the common ancestor of all Homo sapiens. Of course Chomsky doesn't deny Darwin, so that this mutation was successfully carried forth because it enhanced the chances of the species to survive. Unfortunately, Chomsky's reputation was such that for many years after research into alternative probabilities was stymied.

In 1991, in a book titled *Origins of the Modern Mind*, Merlin Donald, a neuroscientist nee philosopher, upon whose work Christopher Collins heavily relies, places "the origin of language in cognitive communities; in the interconnected and distributed activity of many brains . . ." (218.n.2) That is, he believed that the event of advanced human cognitive abilities was not due to the birth of a superior individual mind, but to what Donald calls a "hybrid mind." (Collins uses the term "dyadic.")

Collins follows Donald's outline of "four stages of consciousness," beginning with the ability of primate apes to perceive and store whole events. Next came "the communication of thoughts through action." (59) This innovation, occurring between one million to 300 thousand years ago, is very important, because, as Collins points out, "If, as many (neuroscientists) suppose, visual gestures provided early humans with the means to communicate their knowledge, wishes, and plans, we may suppose that vocal sounds were also significant." (134) This leads to the third stage of linguistic communication (telling, as distinct from showing), and the last stage of "inscription and external storage of symbolic signs – writing – [which appeared] some 5,000 years ago, [and which] led to the development of literate cultures and what we customarily refer to as 'civilizations'." (60)

Although Collins presents a neat evolutionary trajectory, the thousands to millions of years his vision spans are unimaginable, especially during an era in which new scientific theories and technological advances are reported almost daily. Remember that it was only twenty years ago that the Internet, which most of us take for granted and indeed is re-programming how we read and perceive texts, became widely available. We can never know what actually happened in distant times, or whether Chomsky or Donald is correct, but Collins does perform a service in laying out some of the problems toward ascertaining "the evolution of the preliterate imagination," which is the book's enchanting subtitle, and whose original sources one can find in his nineteen pages of bibliography.

Paleopoetics is an important book for anyone interested in language, linguistics, discourse, or humanities, but seems especially timely in today's poetic culture, where so many poets these days are honed purely in creative writing workshops. Collins doesn't

ask the question, but we might as we read him: what does it mean for our collective sense of literacy if our poets remain ignorant of the sciences, including neuroscience, even as the sciences drive our culture?