

"Mass Impressions"

My professor¹ said people pressed
small clay tokens² to keep accounts
of livestock beyond finger-tallying,
inside a bullae,³ a hollow ball, to keep
everyone honest. Disputes meant
these clay envelopes would break
to settle scores until, after a millennium
or more, the tokens were pressed outside
the bullae to indicate what lay inside.
Just picture the ancient accountant dying
a little, with every hammer fall.
Eventually, someone said: *Enough!*
The tokens fell out of time,
and flat tablets replaced jars
to record these mass impressions.⁴

Plato⁵ once warned that words pressed in clay
would sever memory, but still, we pressed on.
Oral traditions losing their sway,
symbols to script, glyphs to gospel,
ink-stained fingers, imperfect renderings
transcribed by candlelight on stretched skin.
From oracle bones⁶ to palm leaves,⁷
to bamboo slips bound with string,⁸
wax tablets⁹ scraped and rewrit,
animal hides¹⁰ stretched into papyrus.¹¹—

¹ Dr. Dan Martin (Teaching Composition, Fall 2024) recounted this origin story of writing.

² Ancient clay tokens were one of the earliest forms of record-keeping, used in Mesopotamia (c. 8000–3000 BCE) to track goods like livestock and grain. Image by © Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8452539>

³ To prevent fraud, these small, shaped pieces of clay were sealed inside a bullae (much like hollow clay envelopes).

⁴ The tokens evolved into Cuneiform Writing, marking the shift from physical counting to written language.

⁵ Plato (c. 427–347 BCE) warned that writing would weaken memory and distance knowledge from lived experience; ironically, his words would endure only because they were *written*.

⁶ Oracle bones: Ancient China (c. 1200 BCE, earliest writing inscriptions).

⁷ Palm leaves: Original material for sacred texts in India and Southeast Asia.

⁸ Bamboo slips: China's earliest books before paper (Zhou Dynasty, c. 1000 BCE).

⁹ Wax tablets: A reusable writing surface in Ancient Greece & Rome.

¹⁰ Animal hides: (parchment & vellum) used for medieval European & Middle Eastern manuscripts.

¹¹ Papyrus: The earliest form of "paper" (Egypt, Greece, Rome, c. 2500 BCE).

Then, the press¹² pressed further on,
parchment to paper, movable type
loosening the grip of the few on the many.

Bibles left the pulpit and entered hands,
each person a priest of their own mind.
The 95 Theses¹³ nailed to closed doors,
a Bell that Tolls for Thee,¹⁴ a sweet Romeo
serenading balconies,¹⁵ and all our histories,
written in victories, Empires compressing minorities,
propaganda Presses calling war crimes successes.¹⁶
Preaching “War is Peace,”¹⁷ disorder or dissent,
Depends on who’s left holding the pen.

Of course, wealth drove this printing
press. Money lubricates like pressed olives
oiling the machinations from oppression
to suppression to impressment. Impressive,
that a token with a ewe or two expressed,
de-pressed ideas from the human mind.

Now, no human necessary, disconnected,
art, open to interpretation—second-guessing,
without representatives present; from accountants,
to priests, to politicians, to artists seeking natural
ways to unnaturally press themselves onto pages.

¹² The Gutenberg Press: (c. 1440) transformed literacy, making books accessible beyond the elite. <https://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/mcdonald/incunabula/gutenberg/>

¹³ Reverend Father Martin Luther famously nailed his 95 Theses on church reform sparking the protestant reformation in 1517. <https://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>

¹⁴ John Donne (1572–1631) was an English poet and cleric known for his sharp wordplay and reflections on faith and mortality. He penned “For Whom the Bell Tolls” (1624). <https://allpoetry.com/for-whom-the-bell-tolls>

¹⁵ William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was an English playwright and poet whose works shaped the English language and literature. https://shakespeare.mit.edu/romeo_juliet/full.html

¹⁶ Nazis used propaganda to control public perception, justify war, and spread anti-Semitic rhetoric framing their enemies as less than human— fueling World War II and the Holocaust. Today, propaganda still shapes political narratives, distorting truth to serve those in power. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-propaganda>

¹⁷ “War is Peace” is one of the Party slogans in George Orwell’s *1984*—a prime example of doublespeak (language twisted to make contradictions feel true). History is full of similar rhetoric, from imperial conquests to modern politics.

