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Curies' Children Vilem Flusser on Communication

After centuries of accepting the alphabet as a given, the question of why and how to visualize language is of renewed validity today. It's an obvious response to say that we write in letters precisely so as to avoid writing in ideograms, but why should anyone want to avoid them in the first place? Why take this long detour through language instead of describing ideas directly through images, as the pictographic origins of the alphabet suggest that we once did? Why not write with ideograms instead of letters, as the Chinese do, and as we are beginning to do when we use computer codes, and when we write numbers?

The Semitic inventors of the alphabet had an iconoclastic commitment. For thoughts and actions informed by images have a circular structure: as one's eyes circulate over the image surface in order to decipher its messages, so circulate one's thoughts and actions, in a model we might call "magical." The alphabet was to be an instrument to break this magic circle of eternal return and ritual pattern. It was to lead thought and action out and onto a linear track. Thought was to become discursive and abstract, and action to become progressive, as the eye follows the line of a written text. The invention of the alphabet was to open up a new space-time, that of history.

Now how could such a new code be invented? By taking advantage of an ancient code in which thought seems to move in a straight line—the code of spoken language. When we speak, we seem to be somehow outside and above what we are talking about. We seem to be explaining and criticizing ideas. Alphabetical writing renders visual the linear structure of speech, and in the end it resulted in the discourse of the exact sciences and in technology, which permitted literate societies the idea of conquering the world. Discursive thought and progressive action supplanted magical thought and ritual action, and we began to think in terms of history proper. In the current stage of that development, we may wonder whether the invention of the al-

phabet was indeed such a good thing.

The role of spoken language in writing and in the conception of ideas has resulted in a close link between word and idea. So close is the link that we call the rules of thought "logic," which to the Greeks meant both reason and word. Some even doubt whether wordless thoughts are possible (though everyone admits that there are such things as thoughtless words). The link between word and thought has impoverished almost every sort of wordless thought—with the exception of mathematics, which functions through ideograms. (A numeral is a direct image of an idea, even if a highly abstract one; the figure "2," for example, stands for a pair, the idea of a group of two, while a letter stands for a sound.) Accordingly, we might wonder whether ideograms may lead thought to even more abstract levels than letters (although in a different direction of abstraction), and whether, if letters are overcome in the future by some ideogrammatic code, we might expect new levels of abstract thought to develop.

But perhaps, after all, the true reason for the invention of letters was not solely iconoclasm. Perhaps they were invented because spoken language somehow called out for them. Before letters were invented, people thought and spoke in terms of myth. The word "myth" is related to the Latin *mutus*, meaning mute, incapable of correct articulation. (Perhaps speech in those days was a mumble.) Letters render language more articulate, for they press against it and force it to submit to the rules of linear writing. The medium of a writer, before it is language, is the alphabet. The writer expresses him- or herself through letters upon language. Of course, as marble resists the chisel, so language resists the impression of letters. But the battle is essentially an amorous one. The language seduces at the same time that it resists, and as the writer finds out what it can do. And it can do astonishing, marvelous things.

Moreover, through writing, the

achievements of language can endure. To write is to receive a language as a gift of previous writers, to change that language, and to hand it over to future writers. Through writing, then, language flows from writer to writer, and is changed, both in its structure and in its vocabulary, each time it is passed on. Perhaps letters were invented precisely to permit this flow of language from generation to generation, and thus to constitute a precious heritage of our culture, which we are called upon to preserve and to hand on, enriched by our own endeavor.

These are two different answers to the question, "Why letters?" The one says that they were invented to liberate thought and action from pre-historical magical models, the other that they were invented as substitutes for mythical ways of speaking and thinking, thus enabling a clear and progressively refined articulation. These responses are complementary (magic and myth being two faces of the same coin). Both answers affirm that the purpose of letters is to bring about historical consciousness. And, in fact, the invention of alphabetical writing initiated history proper, not only because writing records events, but also for the more radical reason that it permits events to be perceived as historical ones, and not as phases of an ever revolving cycle. Western history, then, came about thanks to the writing of letters (if "thanks" is the appropriate word).

Today things are no longer as they were three thousand years ago on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. We now have instruments that allow us to register speech without using letters, for instance through tapes or records. And we use instruments, for example computers, that permit us thought without the use of letters. These instruments may be programmed by new types of codes that express ideas without having to pass through letters. Perhaps only specialists will have to learn letters in the future, as today only specialists learn Egyptian hieroglyphs or Incan knots. People have been saying for some time that we may be beginning to

take leave of literature and to anticipate an illiterate culture.

What will that culture look like? Spoken language will invade the scene day and night from speakers, TV screens, and computer terminals. In this it probably won't be very different from what it was before the invention of letters. This won't matter, however, for language, although omnipresent, will no longer be at the center of culture, but will form a sort of noisy background. New dimensions of thought will develop, profoundly changing not only ideas but action. Poetic thought and mathematics will merge in a way that we are as yet unable fully to appreciate, although we can already observe the first results of the merger in synthetic imagery and music. Our children's lives will be as different from ours as ours is different from pre-historical life. And our children's children probably won't feel the absence of literature as a great loss. It's different for us, who fear that the letter, this most precious heritage entrusted to us by our ancestors, will lose its splendor. Those still committed to the writing of letters, despite their belief in the futility of that commitment, may feel that with the loss of this remarkable cultural object life will lose much of its attraction. For them, *scribere necesse est, vivere non est*. Our children's children may think that with the defeat of the cumbersome code of the letter, new horizons of thought were opened. Many of us will feel that in taking leave of literature, we are taking leave of many of the most noble values with which we identify ourselves. □

Clockwise from top left: Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. Perspective Italic E, England, 1869. Punic letters, Sweden, n.d. Hebrew letter *sadfa*, from colophon to Carver Bible, late 14th century, in the Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, Lisbon; from Joseph Gutmann, *Hebrew Manuscript Painting*, New York: George Braziller, 1978. Japanese calligraphy Letter from anthropomorphic alphabet by G. Franco, Italy, late 16th century; courtesy St. Bride Printing Library, London. Letter from arboriform alphabet, Italy, mid 18th century; courtesy Marlborough Rare Books, London. The Rosetta Stone, Egypt, second century a.c. Graffiti, New York, 1984. Initial from the Drogo Sacramentary, France, ninth century, in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; from J. J. G. Alexander, *The Decorated Letter*, New York: George Braziller, 1978.

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