

An improbable story
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Namely literature, a term that means "set of letters". The story begins about 3500 years ago and it looks as if it were approaching its term. This is why we must hurry if we want to tell the story. Once literature is over, nothing at all can be told not even the story of literature. Once there are no more letters left people will only either illustrate or reckon the world but certainly not describe it. But even before the disappearance of letters, to tell the story of literature poses a problem. The description of the story of literature is itself part of literature and a text which tells about the end of the story is a tale which devours its own body. It is the counterpart to Uroboros that tail devouring serpent. About 3500 years ago some people on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean made the following proposal: Beginning from now certain signs which so far meant words shall mean the sound with which those words begin. Thus: The sign "aleph" which so far meant the word bull shall now mean the semitic sound "a" with which the word "aleph" (bull) begins. Or: The sign "beth" which so far meant the word house shall now mean the sound "b" with which the word "beth" (house) begins. That proposal was accepted by a few merchants and priests who began to process the newly convened letters and therefore maybe called "litterati" or "hommes de lettres". Occidental culture has contented itself with 26 letters which is a modest set and does not seem to pose difficult problems of processing. But beware: letters are types not characters and although there are only 26 prototypes of letters, countless stereotypes inundate the lands and demand constant processing. Those stereotypes are unevenly distributed: "e"s and "a"s can be found allover but there are regions where the "x"s and "w"s are rarer. The frequency of letters in specific regions may be calculated and this constitutes a quantified critique of literature. However this sort of critique has its limits. Usually literature is not produced by the method of random letter distribution.

Those who process letters do so in an orderly fashion. Their purpose is to visualize the sounds of a spoken language, to transcode language from sound into image. By doing so the litterati introduced a barrier between the text and its writer. The writer can no longer write his thoughts down directly but has to pass through a language. This complication became unavoidable if one wanted to preserve oral communication (in the time of the invention of letters, records and tapes had not yet been invented).

He who processes letters has to adhere to rules of language. It soon appeared that those rules when applied consciously reformulated the very language from which they were abstracted. The result was literally language. In addition it appeared that further rules are necessary for an orderly language transcription. Those overlapping sets of rules of which the grammatical and

orthographical ones are only examples, will result, when applied in a disciplined way, in a type of set of letters called "text" which means the fabric of letters.

The sources of literature are meagre and the texts that stem there from are few and precious. But as the story goes on, the texts multiply thanks to mutually reinforcing methods. Each text may produce several new ones, the new text may cross and fertilize each other. Each text can split, divide and lead its own life. Each divided text can unit with any other. Each text can incorporate any other, and each text can disintegrate, reintegrate and disintegrate into numerous others. This web of letters grew like an avalanche in the cause of time and expanded into every direction. It broadend as it visualized one language after another. It widend as it submitted successively ever new regions of thought and experience to the code of letters. It grew upward as it advanced into an evermore refined articulation of thought, of feeling and of decision. It grew deeper as it advanced, thanks to the invention of the printing press, into ever more private corners of the daily life of common people. This high tide of letters began to inundate all the continents mostly in the form of printed matter. It devoured an immense amount of paper. It devastated forests and nobody could protect himself from its mind poluting effects. An uninterrupted flood of sperm flows from the male organs of humanity into the female organs to there produce future processors and consumers of letters. Billions of people are now immersed in trillions of letters and they are about to drown there.

But this is not yet a full evaluation of the catastrophe the letters have provoked. The fact is that the texts which multiply, which cross, which overlap and which mutually devour each other are equipped with sticky threads and thus cling to each other. Those threads wind letters to form lumps on various levels. For instance on the level of grammar, on the level of linguistic rhythm, on the level of design of lines and pages. Other sticky filaments link various texts on various levels to each other. These are conscious, semiconscious, unconscious and unsuspected connection between texts which seem to lay far a field. And these connections conserve the meaning of words, the vibration of sentences and they concern style. This stickyness of literature is the cause of our incapacity to think for ourselves, to formulate a thought of our own. Every time we believe that we have a thought of our own we find out that we have read it somewhere. The thousands and thousands of sticky threads that connect the texts with each other reach out beyond our memory into texts we have never read and which still influence us. We must admit to our despair that we are prisoners of the web of texts like flies in a spider web. And that like flies we struggle in vain to get free from the sticky filaments that bind us.

This improbable letter flood came over us in the cause of centuries as if a sort of spell had been cast by some maligner spirit to destroy us. In the beginning of the story, texts were weak and they had to overcome the images that had been the bearers of communication before the invention of letters. Later on in the renaissance when the texts seem to be victorious it was found that numbers are better suited to formulate the discoveries in the natural sciences and that the code of letters is in comparison to numbers a very unprecise one. In the 19th century photograph and other technical images were invented and those images, especially tv became ever more important as bearers of communications. Lately records, tapes and other technical methods were invented to transcode and to store oral communication and letters became obsolete as a method to visualize language. Thus apparently for a critic of culture, this is the actual situation of letters.

On the level of mass communication moving and talking images are far more efficient than are letters. On the level of scientific communication algorithms are far more precise than are letters. On the level of decision making and of programming computer codes are far more efficient than are letters. As a method of storing and visualizing spoken languages, letters have been long ago superceded by far more advanced technical apparatus like records or tapes. For all these complementary and convergent reasons letters should be abandoned and literature should be over and done with.

What we observe is a quite different situation. Text continue to multiply and to devaluate in an inflation which knows no parallel elsewhere. No sooner do we throw unopened mail away and our mail box is again filled with this rubbish. How can this been explained, this letter catastrophe which undermines the very foundations of civilization? What is it that attached us to this unreasonable mass of letters? Why do we prefer to drown in letters instead of liberating ourselves from them? Here is one explanation: There must be a book somewhere, on some shelf in some library, which contains everything we look for. All the wisdom, all the beauty, all the godd we have ever dreamed of must be contained in that book if only we could find it. That book must be there, somewhere. Because after all if you processead6 letters for 3500 years somebody must come up with it. Maybe its an Armenian book written in the 13th century and hidden in the Caucasus. Or maybe its a book in a not yet spoken language written in the 45th century to be hidden somewhere in the Antarctic. In the enormous letter flood such a book, such a stone of wisdom, must be hidden somewhere for the same reason for which a million chimpanzees must write of necessity the Divine Comedy if they type for a million years. It is this hope against hope; this reason against all reason which has us believe in literature as the preferential method to reach wisdom which explains why we continue to write and read although we should know better.