

Taking leave of literature.

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Transcription for Dr. Askok Jain.

Literature is, as the name suggests, a set composed mostly of letters. Letters are remarkable cultural objects. If one considers their shape, one can see as if through a looking-glass where our culture comes from. The "A" still shows the horns of a Syriac bull, (in Hebrew "aleph"), the "B" shows that all that three millenia were able to do was to turn the two domes of a Semitic house (in Hebrew "beth"), by 90° to the right, and the "C" shows the curved back of a camel, (in Hebrew "gimul"), as it lived in the fertile crescent. The letters are images of an early stage of our civilisation. But this is not what we mean when we use them. We mean to show visually the first sound of the Semitic word which designates the object shown in the image. We no longer use the letters as pictogram: why don't we? What happened in the middle of the second millenium BC somewhere on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean?

Easy to say what happened: a spoken language was inserted between the writer and his message. But it is not easy to say why it happened. Why take this long detour through language instead of directly writing down one's ideas? Why not write ideograms instead of letters, like we do when we write numbers, or like the Chinese do? Or: like we ourselves are beginning to do when we write computer programs? What was the purpose of the Syriac inventors of letters? Was it to lead us astray? This paper intends to consider that question. Not in an historical, but in an existential spirit. It will not ask: "how did the letters come about through their long evolution from pictograms, rebusses, ideograms and other such sign forms?", but it will ask instead: "why do we commit ourselves to visualise spoken language?"

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There is an obvious answer to this question: we write letters precisely because we want to avoid writing ideograms. But why should we want to avoid them? Because they are images. For example: the cipher "2" is an image of the idea "a pair". It is highly conventional, but it is still an image. The inventors of the alphabet were out to destroy images, theirs was an iconoclastic commitment. They intended to invent a code which would permit to look down on images, and through them. Why should they?

Thought and action informed by images has a circular structure. As the eye circulates over the image surface in order to decipher it, so does thought and action. This is called "magical" thought: it turns in eternal return; and "magical" action: it turns in ritual patterns. The alphabet was invented to break that magical circle. It was to lead thought and action out and on to the straight line. Thought was to become "discursive", and action "progressive". As the eye follows the line of the text, so does thought and action informed by letters. The purpose of the alphabet is to open a new space-time: that of "history" in the proper sense of that term.

How can such a code be invented? By taking advantage of an ancient code which moves in a straight line: spoken language. When we speak, we seem to be talking "about" ideas, about images, we seem to stand somewhere outside and above them. In fact: we seem to be explaining, ("telling"), ideas. If we invented a code which renders spoken language visual, we will have a tool which can visually explain images, which can "criticize" them. And this proved to be extremely successful. Discursive thought and progressive action did indeed supplant magical thought and action, history proper developed. The alphabet resulted in the discourse of the exact sciences and in the action of technology, and this permitted the literate societies to conquer the world. Yet now, that we have reached a dubious stage in that development and conquest, it may be asked whether the invention of the alphabet was indeed such a good idea. It had to abandon ideograms, and it now appears that ideograms may lead thought to a more abstract level than do letters. The few ideograms we still use, (ciphers and logical symbols), suggest this. Did not the alphabet stifle this development toward abstraction, instead of favoring it?

The interposition of spoken language between the writer and his ideas has resulted in a close link between word and idea. The rules of thought became identified with the rules of words, ("logics"), the word was divinized, (It was in the beginning), and some of us even doubt whether wordless thought is possible, (although everybody has to admit that there is such a thing as thoughtless speaking). This close link between word and thought has impoverished every wordless thought, (painting, music, dance), except in mathematics. Should the letters be overcome by an ideographic code, (like digitals), we may expect wordless thought to develop and reach high levels of abstraction. After all: Occidental history may not have been such a success story after all.

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There is a different answer to the question: "why were letters invented?". It may well be that spoken language somehow calls out to be made visual. "True" speech seems to want to be literal, and illiterate speech is somehow muddled. What we learn at school while learning how to spell is true, correct speaking. We learn Oxford English, Dante's Italian, Luther's German, the French of the Encyclopedia: we learn correct language. Before the letters were invented, people did not really speak, they did not open their lips while speaking. They spoke "mythically", and "myth" means dumb, mute, (in Latin "mutus"), incapable of articulation. Of course: Romantics look for wisdom in myth, and since they look for it they find it, but the inventors of the alphabet may not have been Romantics. They may have wanted people to open their mouth while speaking, they may have wanted them to articulate clearly. And this may have been the reason why they invented the letters.

Letters render language articulate because they press against it and force it into the rules of linear writing. For a letter writer language is not a means of expression, (a "medium"), but it is a raw material to be informed by him through the "medium" of letters. He expresses himself through letters up

language. And of course: language become material becomes perfidious like any other material, and it resists being informed by letters. Each language resists in its own way: German is slippery, French is tricky, English is brittle (to quote a few examples). Each language demands of the writer to employ a specific strategy of violation. In the course of that amorous battle between writer and language, (the language resisting and seducing its lover), one finds out what the language is capable of doing. The writer presses his dead letters against the living body of language, and the letter suck life out from the language and become leaving creatures created by the writer. The writer is seized by the vertige of creation. And the language changes under the fingers of its violator, and it assumes improbable forms. This is precisely what "poetry" means: the creation of improbable forms, of "informations".

There is however one point to this amorous battle: no writer can take hold of a virgin. The language he violates has passed through the beds of uncountable previous violators, and the information he creates is not "ex nihilo", but a variation of previously created informations. To write is to receive a language as a gift from previous writers, to change it, and to hand it over to future writers. Through writing language becomes a majestic river which flows from writer to writer, and which changes both structure and words each time it passes through a writer. And every time we open our mouth and speak, it is those writers who speak through us. Letters may have been invented to permit this glorious river to flow from generation to generation, and thus to constitute the most precious heritage of our culture, which we are called upon to enrich and hand over to our children.

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We are facing two different answers to our question: "why letters?". To liberate thought and action from magic, and to substitute myth for creative articulation. Those are complementary answers: magic and myth are the two faces of the same coin. Both answers state that letter were invented, in order to permit historical consciousness, linear, articulate thought and action. Indeed: history proper begins with the letters, not because they record events, but because no event can be perceived as such before letters were invented: before that invention, all events were perceived as revolving cycles. History came about thanks to letters, if "thanks" is the appropriate word where an history such as ours is concerned.

Things no longer look as they did three thousand years ago on the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean. We now dispose of instruments which permit clear and articulate thought without letters, for instance of artificial intelligences. We can now register speech without letters, for instance with tape recorders. We now dispose of codes which express ideas more clearly than do the letters, for instance digital ones. Letters have served their purpose, and they are no longer useful. Only specialists will have to learn them, as is the case with Egyptian hieroglyphs and the knots of the Incas. We are beginning to take leave of literature, and we look forward to an illiterate future. What will it look like?

Spoken language, liberated from letters, will invade the scene day and night, coming from TV screens and radios, and, whether its whispers or shouts, it will proclaim the victory of myth over disciplined articulation. But this will not matter. Although omnipresent, spoken language will no longer be the center of culture, but only its noisy background. Civilized thought will use other codes to create new information. New dimensions of speechless thought will develop, such as we can observe even now in synthetic images and synthetic music. Poetry and mathematics will merge with each other in a way we cannot as yet fully appreciate, although we may observe, even now, the first results of such a merger. This will profoundly change not only our thoughts, but our actions as well. Our children will lead a life as different from ours as ours is different from pre-historical existence.

The loss of literature will probably not be felt by our children's children. But with us, it is a different matter: language, the most precious heritage our elders entrusted us with will lose its splendor and degenerate into chatter. Those of us who are still committed to letters, (in spite of their conviction that such is an unreasonable commitment), will feel that with the loss of literature life will have lost much of its attraction. Our children's children may indeed be glad to have got rid of such cumbersome codes as are letters, as new horizons for creative thought and action open. But for us who feel that "scribere necesse est, vivere non est", most of the values with which we identify ourselves will have been lost, and we may be glad that we shall not be about in that glorious letter-free future.