

Fountain pens.

They are cheap and plastic now, as if to show that hand writing is common. And this is true in the sense that illiteracy is disappearing and becoming somehow exotic. In fact, it is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine the world in which illiterates live, men that communicate through the ancient oral and pictorial channels, now however powerfully restructured by posters, films and the television. To be illiterate now is something totally different from the traditional illiteracy, because it no longer means to be isolated from advanced means of communication. It now means to be unable to use only one of the many existing codes, and a code at that, (the Latin alphabet), that may be in a slow process of decadence, and tending to be substituted by computer code on the one hand, and by audio-visual codes on the other. There is a case for those who advocate in the underdeveloped countries the abandon of alphabetisation in favor of other types of more meaningful communication. (Although, of course, the alphabet will continue to be, for a long time, the main code in which the messages of the élite are communicated.)

But in another sense the cheapness of fountain pens is misleading. It suggests that fountain pens are among the most common tools, and that their manipulation has become an almost automatic gesture. (As is the case of the manipulation of tooth brushes or razors.) This is not so. On the contrary, there is a tendency, most pronounced among the most literate élite, to manipulate the fountain pen only in somewhat exceptional and slightly solemn moments. For instance for the signing of cheques and letters, and for the writing of brief notes to oneself and a few intimate others. The more common means for writing has become the type writer, and many are losing the skill and familiarity of hand writing acquired at school, and their handling of the pen has become clumsy. Now if there is some truth in the saying that the means is the message, that there is a difference between the message typed and the "same" hand written message, then a consideration of the fountain pen may reveal some aspects of our present situation.

Let us look a bit closer at the gesture by which we draw a pen from out of our breast pocket, open it, sign a piece of paper, close it again and put it back into the pocket. It looks very much like an automatic gesture, and this character is proved if we suddenly become aware of it, for instance if we find that the pen is not where it "should be". On the other hand, however, there is something to the gesture that denies automaticity, some ritual flavor. To draw a pen may be the modern equivalent of the drawing of a sword in the Middle Ages, or even more of the drawing of a cylinder seal in Babylonia, (although this is a gesture which we can no longer accompany fully). This ambiguity between automaticity and ritual, which makes of the fountain pen something between tooth brush and sacred mask, seems to be one of the aspects of its essence. It may explain the attraction graphology exerts in a somewhat mythical way on many.

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The gesture by which we handle the pen is, like all gestures of the human body, both a movement against the exterior world, and an articulation of an interiority. In other words: it aims both at changing the world, (for instance: the piece of paper we are signing), and at publishing something private, (for instance: our signature reveals our character). There is a complementarity to these two aspects of gestures: we change the world in a way that shows to others what we are. But these two aspects of gestures are not always equally accentuated. Some gestures, (like the hammering of nails or the knotting of shoe laces), are such that their articulating, publishing aspect is negligible, and very difficult to be discovered. Other gestures, (like those that accompany talking), are such that their world-changing aspect, (for instance the waves they produce in the air), can be neglected. We may say that the first type of gesture is directed primarily to things, and the second type primarily to others. (although, of course, things always stand between ourselves and others, so that all our gestures, in the ultimate analysis, aim at changing things in order to reach others and reveal ourselves to them.) Now the first type of gesture, the one directed primarily to the things, may be called "work" in the broadest sense of the term, and the second type of gesture, the one directed primarily toward others, may be called "communication". (Although, as stated above, all communications imply work, and all work aims ultimately at communications.)

The gesture by which we handle the pen seems to be special in the sense that it accentuates both the "work" and the "communications" aspects inherent in all gestures. It seems to be, so to speak, a very accentuated gesture. But in order to more fully appreciate its character, it is necessary to mention two sorts of gestures that do not seem to fit well the division proposed in work gestures on the one hand, and communication gestures on the other. Namely automatic and ritual gestures. Automatic gestures, (like walking), display, of course, both the work and the communications aspect, (the walker both changes the world and reveals himself in the walking), but they have mechanical quality, reminiscent of "instinctive" gestures of animals, which calls the freedom of human gesture into question. It is not interesting, in the present context, to ask how such gestures come about, (for instance through learning), and how they function, (for instance permitting us to enact other and "freer" gestures the better). What interests here is the fact that what is typical of human gesture, (in opposition to any other movement around us), is its climate of freedom. We move as we will, and it is this that makes of our movements human gestures. It is this that makes us change the world and communicate with others. And in the automatic gestures this typically human character of gestures is diluted. They are, in this sense, sub-human.

Ritual gestures, on the other hand, do not fit well into the proposed division, because they do not seem to aim at either changing the world or at communicating with others, but seem to aim at nothing. They are "actes gra-

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tuits", in the true sense of this term. Of course, they too, like every gesture does, strike against things, because we are surrounded by things in every direction. And, this being so, they change the things they strike, and are "work" in this sense. And of course, they too, like every gesture does, reveal our interiority to others. They are "communications" in this sense. But these two aspects, common to all gestures, are subordinated in ritual gestures to the conscious will to aim at nothing. In this sense it can be said that the ritual gesture aims at aiming at nothing, (at "purity") and cannot achieve this aim, because we are always surrounded by things and others. In this sense they aim at being super-human gestures. The gesture by which we handle the pen accentuates both the "work" and the "communications" aspect inherent in all gestures, but it does so in a way that lies midway between the automatic and the ritual gesture. It is therefore a very typical human gesture, (by accentuating both work and communication), a somewhat sub-human gesture, (by disclosing automatic aspects), and aims at being a super-human gesture, (by disclosing ritual aspects).

Before considering this very special gesture more fully, a word of caution is in order. The term "ritual" does not mean, here, that magic gesture characteristic of many religious beliefs and so-called superstitions, (like crossing oneself or touching wood), which aims at changing the world, although in a way that may be thought, by some, not to be very efficient. It means, here, a gesture which is the exact contrary of magic, therefore "ritual" in the anti-magical sense which the Jewish prophets had in mind, and which is, strictly speaking, a gesture that tries to overcome our surroundings, or at least deny it. It is this unworldly, or anti-worldly aspect of the ritual gesture, (like kneeling in prayer, or like a Gide-like gesture, or like an Camus-like act "quand-même"), that confers to it the "holy", namely transcendent, aspect climate. It is in this sense that the ritual gesture aims at being "pure", namely aimless and empty. This is why it is considered an "alienated" gesture by those who are, or try to be, well integrated in their surroundings, and it accompanies, in fact, many so-called "pathological" situations and is considered to be one of their symptoms. If we sometimes call magic gestures "ritual", we do it, not because they are aimless, but because they seem to us to miss their aim altogether. Therefore: a magician, (and his modern equivalent, a technician), will never agree to calling his gestures "ritual", but a "pure" artist or scientist may very well agree to such a characterisation of his gestures.

Now the way we handle a fountain pen has world-changing, communicating automatic and ritual moments. Let us take the signing of a typed letter as an example. The world-changing moment in this is that the signature changes the letter. The communicating moment is that it reveals some aspect of ourselves to the receiver of the letter. The automatic moment is that it is do.

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in a stereotypical fashion. And the ritual moment is that signing letters serves no purpose. (Of course, it may be said that the purpose of signing letters by hand is to allow the receiver to identify the sender. But surely such an identification is unnecessary in most cases, and where it is necessary signatures do not provide very good identifications. This is a typical case of "rationalisation of ritual gestures".) It may therefore be said that the way we handle fountain pens is a concentrated example of the way we are in the world at present: we try to change it, (we work), we try to express ourselves, (we communicate), we do all this in a somewhat stereotypical fashion and, deep down, we know that it has no purpose. If somebody were to attempt a catalogue of our gestures in order to understand the structure of our being-in-the world, (which, by the way, is not a very bad idea), the gesture by which we handle fountain pens in signing letters could occupy an important position in the catalogue.

Yes, but sometimes we handle the pen not only to sign letters, but to write ^{with} them. Because no typewriter is at hand, or for more complex reasons. It is then that we find out that the pen is not an instrument of the type "typewriter or toothbrush". It is not a mere object out there that stands mutely at our command and that we can therefore dispise even as we use it. It is not at all like the famous Heideggerian slippers, ("Zuhanden"). It is therefore, (inspite of its plastic cheapness), not truly part of our culture, if by "cultural" thing we mean a thing that we can dispise, because it serves us and does not pre-occupy us. We do not "dwell" amidst pens as we dwell amidst typewriters and toothbrushes. It is more like a part of our body, and a part, at that, which we have some difficulty to handle. To be more exact: it is more like our tongue than like a toothbrush. The writing of letters by hand is more akin to speaking than to publishing printed matter. Now here lie several problems, two of which will be mentioned.

Speaking both genetically and structurally, all instruments are, of course, extensions of the body. A phenomenological analysis of looms will reveal fingers that weave, of atomic bombs fists that pound, of telegraph wires nerves, and of computers brain cells. So that culture may be said a humanisation of nature in the sense of embodiment of man in nature. But most of the instruments which ~~does~~ simulate body organs have become autonomous of our bodies in at least two senses: they are far more efficient than the organs they simulate, and very often they do not function for our sake, but we function for theirs. This is, by the way, what is called "alienation in culture", and it explains why, instead of trying to understand the instruments through our body, we try to understand ourselves taking our instrument for models. (For instance: our body is a sort of machine or chemical factory, and our mind is a sort of computer.) But the pen does not permit this type of alienation. It is too close at hand, and it simulates a scraping finger only if we hold it in our fingers. It therefore lies in the diffie

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cult ontological realm between body and culture. It poses, if so considered, both the question "what is culture?" and "what is my body?". In other words: it is neither out there, like culture, nor with me, like my body, and it is in both these exisstantial places.

The second problem the pen poses has to do with style, (as the French word "stylo" implies, if we take recourse to bad etymology). The hand written letter being more akin to the spoken than printed word, it imposes a style which is more dialogical than discursive. (It may be said, without exaggeration, that the reading of a prepared, typed, lecture, is less "spoken word" than a hand written letter.) Now the dialogical style differs from the discursive one in that it is open to replies, to feed-back from the receiver of its message. It does not so much "inform", (as the discursive style does), but it tries to establish communication. Now we know from experience, (especially if we are part of the literate élite), that to type letters is far easier than to write them in longhand. We may give technical reasons for this, for instance by saying that typing is quicker and therefore allows our stream of thoughts to flow easier, or by saying that we need not take care of the clearness of our gestures when typing, because typed letters are more readable than hand written ones. But what we learn in such sorts of explanation is that we can dispise the type writer more than the pen when writing, and this again means that to dialogue is more difficult for us than to discourse. We live in a civilization that is dominated by discourse, (for instance the discourse of the mass media, or of science, or of the arts), and we are losing the capacity to dialogue with each other. This is an important aspect of the so-called "loneliness of man", because where there is no dialogue, there is no other. It is for this reason that hand written letters are like archaeological remnants of a pre-industrial age amid our present situation, an age in which dialogue was the dominant form of communication. And it is also for this reason that, if we write by hand, we do it clumsily and in a way that cannot bear aesthetic comparison with previous ages. If calligraphy has become a "specialized art", and if we no longer have any daily contact with it, this does not bode well for our present situation. (Possibly one method to diagnose our situation would be a graphological analysis of our hand written texts in this sense.)

But on the other hand it may be said that, exactly because hand written letters have become difficult to write and to read, exactly because dialogue has become difficult nowadays, it has become ritual and solemn. To write, and to receive, a hand written letter is like emitting and receiving an aimless gesture, that is a gesture that does not bear very weal rational explanations. It is therefore like an opening in the compact technological surroundings that smather our humanity in the ancient sense of this term. And such an opening can be interpreted in two ways. As an archaeological, and therefore reactionary remnant of a past not fully overcome, or as a more or less conscious effort

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to oppose to the dominant tendency toward technological discourse the human will to dialogue with ~~my~~ other. In other words, it can be seen as pointing to the past, or to a possible future. But if seen as pointing to the future, a curious, and possibly tragical, dialectic must be admitted. Fountain pens, even if used as instruments against technological dominance, are themselves, in their plastic cheapness, results of technological progress.

Thus, if we look a bit closer at fountain pens, we find that they are charged with some of the explosive contradiction that characterizes our crisis. If taken as one of the few ritual instruments that we have left, as one of the few instruments that permit us to execute aimless, and therefore sacrificial gestures, they reveal an automatic character which belies all efforts at sanctifying our being-in-the-world. And if taken as one of the few instruments left us to oppose the totalitarian dominance of technological discourse, as one of the few means left us to communicate dialogically with each other, they reveal a technological character which belies all efforts of overcoming technological progress. In other words: fountain pens are among the most common tools, and their manipulation has become an almost automatic gesture, and the quase-conscious effort of the literate élite to sanctify them and to use them as revolutionary tools is probably a doomed effort. It used to be said that the pen is a more dangerous tool than the sword, but this saying may have lost its meaning. The sword is no longer dangerous, (even if instead of sword we say atomic bomb), in the sense that it does not endanger the establishment, but serves it. (Although, of course, it endangers individual lives, but that is a different matter.) And the pen is no more dangerous than the sword, in that it has become just as falsly ritual as swords are, and in that it is unable to serve as a medium of authentic communication.

But such a view of the pen, (and of the human capacity to resist dominant tendencies), may be too pessimistic. Admittedly, there is little hope in changing a situation that is closing on us from all sides and tending to determine all our gestures. But what hope there is must lie in some of the things th t surround us, and in the way we handle those things with a view to the future. Let us therefore not dispise the pen, but try to handle it in a way that articulates our dignity as human beings. Let us try again, as our forefathers did, to discover a latent force in pens, and let us use this force as best we can in our situation. And as for typewriters, (and even more advanced means of "communication"), let us try and use them as if they were pens and not the other way round, as if pens were a sort of primitive typewriters. Possibly such an attitude is, what may be called "dis-alienation".