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Lecture 1 - Alphabetic Culture

The alphanumeric code, which dominated Western communication until our fathers' generation, is currently threatened by new and partly ill assimilated codes. The problem that this cultural transition posits is not only a formal one, but it also provokes emotions, mobilises prejudices, and may contribute towards a deepening of current socio-political tensions. Example: campaigns to teach literacy right at the instant when the alphabet is in decadence. The fact is that many are existentially engaged in the alphanumeric code, and are prepared to defend it, even if they admit the inadequacy of such a code to the recently elaborated communication media. The four lectures that I propose to deliver seek to discuss the passionate climate that surrounds the subject. And in this first lecture I shall seek to elucidate the fascination that emanates from the alphabet.

The alphanumeric code consists of letters, of ciphers, and of some auxiliary symbols. The code's repertoire is exposed on the keys of a typewriter, however there it is stored according to a different order to that which orders the alphanumeric store within the human memory. The ciphers, of Hindu origin, and transmitted to the West by Arabs during the high Middle Ages, symbolise the concept of sets. Thus, the cipher "2" symbolises the concept of a set of "pairs" and the cipher "0" the concept of an empty set. The letters, of Semitic origin, probably from the Sinai in the fourth millennium, acquired their current form and approximately their current meaning, in the Syrian region during the first half of the second millennium bC. They signify the initial sound of the Semitic word that designates the object represented by the form of the letter. Therefore, the letter "A" symbolises the initial sound of the word Aleph, which means "bull", represented by the form of the letter, and the letter "B" symbolises the initial sound of the word Beth, which means "house", represented by the form of the two domes of the letter. Hence the ciphers are "ideograms" (symbols of concepts), and the letters are transcoded "pictograms" (originally pictorial symbols that have come to signify the sounds of spoken language). Whoever writes alphanumerically mobilises two incongruent mental processes: symbolically manipulates concepts and symbolically manipulates spoken language. This hybrid nature of the code is partially responsible for the fertility of thought articulated through it. There are texts in which ciphers dominate (the ones of the so called exact sciences), and others dominated by letters (the ones of "literature *sensu stricto*"). I throw the problem of the hybridity of the code in your faces, without commenting on it, in order to suggest to you its radical nature. But I cannot leave this without saying that, once the alphanumeric code has been overcome, mental processes will undoubtedly develop, that were up until now repressed by letters. Processes which are more familiar to mathematical thinking than to literal thinking, but different from the

mathematical thought because they will not be quantifying. This is because letters incarcerate thought as they chain it to spoken language. Now, let's consider this submission of thought to language because of letters:

As we write alphanumerically, we are making visual an auditory message. We are visually notating thoughts, feelings, desires and commands that are linguistically articulated. We are not codifying, but transcoding. Spoken language intrudes between our text and us. We then tend to confuse thinking with speaking, and mind with language. For example: we refer to the rules of thought as "logical" (that is: linguistic), we make the Verb divine, and we have constructed ideological linguistic edifices such as the Hegelian and the Heideggerian ones. This ontological confusion between mind and language (of which I myself fell victim of when I wrote "Language and Reality"), which characterises our culture since the prophets and the pre-Socratics, passing through Christianity and Islam all the way until the frustrated attempts of Russell and Whitehead, to reduce linguistic propositions down to mathematical ones, demands of us, the partially post-alphabetic, that we face the following question: what were the motives of the Syrian inventors of the alphabet for proposing such a doubtful code? For what end did these forefathers of Western thought impose on us this unnecessary diversion of thought through spoken language? Why can we not write directly, as we do with ciphers, or as the Chinese do, and as our children do with digital computers? Why letters?

I shall suggest two answers, the first being this: the code that was dominant before the invention of the alphabet was that of images, be they two- or three-dimensional, be they very elaborate or conventionally simplified as in the case of pictograms. Well, images, as mediations between man, who produces them, and the concrete world in which he lives, are subjected to the dialectic that is proper to every mediation: they tend to substitute that which is to be mediated. From maps of the world, they become screens that conceal the world, and man, instead of using the images in order to orientate himself in the world, starts to act in the world in function of the images. This inversion of the function of images: 'man acts in the world in function of images' is called idolatry, and human action in the world in function of images is called magic. The alphabetic code was invented as a weapon against idolatry and magic. Its purpose was to "explain" images, to turn them transparent for the concrete world, and thus to liberate humanity from the oppression exerted by them. Therefore, to de-alienate humanity from their own product: from images. Well then, there is a code (and it exists since time immemorial) apt to explain images: spoken language. Spoken language speaks "about" [*sobre*¹] images, it flows over them. Here is why the inventors of the alphabet resorted to spoken language in their iconoclastic engagement, an engagement that is clear in the prophets: God is unimaginable but He is perfectly audible, He speaks and speaks (omer veomer JHVH).

However, this first answer to the question "why letters?" is not enough. Because letters, as they make visible the sounds of spoken language, modify the structure of language. They force spoken language to adapt to the unidimensionality of the line, and they abstract from spoken language a whole set of

¹ The Portuguese preposition *sobre* means both "over" and "about", much in the same way as the German *über*.

parameters, such as voice intonation and sound modulation. Effectively: the language written in letters is a new type of language, a type invented by the inventors of the alphabet. So that a second answer to the question “why letters?” offers itself spontaneously: to discipline spoken language and to purify it. Before the invention of the alphabet speaking was indistinct, as if with a closed mouth, badly articulated, stammered, and the term “myth” has the same etymological root as the term “mute”. To be sure: the Romantics and their successors seek wisdom in myths, and for seeking them, they fatally find them. But the inventors of the alphabet were not Romantics, and they invented letters in order to combat against mythical thought articulated by spoken language.

Both answers to the question “why letters?” are complementary. Letters combat magic as they explain images, and combat myths as they discipline spoken language. And, considered thus in their whole, both answers delineate the “*forma mentis*” articulated by letters. This is the mentality of someone who is engaged in progressive explanations, and in the demythologising of thought. The inventors of the alphabet created a code for this type of mentality, and it formulated itself ever more perfectly with the increased and continuous use of the alphabet. We are accustomed to refer to this type of mentality as “historical” consciousness. So that the last answer to the question “why letters?” is this: to serve as the code for historical consciousness, and thus turn viable the history of the West (which is the only type of history *sensu stricto*). Certainly: the inventors of the alphabet were not aware of this, since in them, historical consciousness was still under-developed. We, the ones who are living the crisis of historical consciousness, are the ones that can affirm this.

Consider for an instant our letters, these articulations of historical consciousness, these springs of Western history. They are windows through which we glimpse the initial scene from which our culture emerged: the “A” shows us the sacred bull, the “B” the house of God, the “C” the camel’s curvature laden with delicacies from the far East. But through the power of our consciousness we transcoding the letters from images into instruments in order to dominate language and through it our own mind. We impose dead letters over the live body of language, so that like vampires, they may suck the life that pulsates in language and come to live a new type of life. From under the fingers of he who writes alphabetically, a new life seems to want to be born, and the amorous fight, the body wrestling between writer and spoken language, during which language is violated but also seduces its aggressor, is the climate in which poetry emerges. Our letters are the preferential weapons of the Western mind on the conquest for beauty, and it is because of this that they are called “beautiful”.²

But our engagement in letters is not only because of the poetic power built into them. As we impose letters upon live language in order to suck out of it new life, we will never find virgin language. The language that reaches us has already passed through the bed of several aggressors. Literature is a tide that comes to us from the depths of our history, a chiselled product of generations of manipulators of letters, and we are in our turn, challenged to impose on it our own mark and to transmit it, thus enriched, onto subsequent generations. The language that flows through literature towards the future purifies itself and becomes always more elegant and refined, an instrument always more exact and

² A reference to the *beaux arts*.

precious for the articulation of the mind. Effectively: literary language (any literary language), is indescribably beautiful, wise and good, since they store so much search for the true, good and beautiful. Every literary language of the West is a heritage that has been entrusted to us so that we may keep, preserve and enrich it. We are engaged in letters because they are the strong safe and the keys of this treasure.

The considerations that I have just proposed to you seek to transmit to you the fascination that emanates from the alphabet. And it is not necessary for us to be poets, not even to be modest writers (as in my case), in order for us to experience this fascination: it is enough to have been pupils of a primary school before the introduction of word processors. What the children learnt in the not so distant past, when spelling preceded the handling of digital keyboards, was to speak correctly. Children no longer learnt to speak their native language, but literary language: Oxford English, the French of the Encyclopaedists, Luther's German, Dante's Italian, and the Portuguese of the songs. The children learnt, as they did spelling, how to assume responsibility for the history that nurtured them. An ontological abyss separated these children from the illiterate: they were initiated in the secrets of historical consciousness whilst the illiterate lived in the pre-historic regions of magic and myth. Letters are fascinating because they are symbols for an initiation into the history of the West.

Our Syrian elders, these proto-Jews from the second millennium bC. Imposed onto our minds an uncomfortable straitjacket when they invented the alphabet. This not so rational code, which obliges us to make a long journey through language on our way from thought towards the page. It is an inconvenient code, as it demands the knowledge of several languages from anyone who wishes to communicate with the whole of Western society. Inconvenient, above all, because it is ill adapted for the artificial intelligences that are soon to be installed. For all these reasons the alphabet is on its way to being abandoned as the dominant code of our culture. Within the current information revolution (which is an anti-Semitic revolution in the deepest meaning of this term, as it substitutes texts by images), the Syrian code is being substituted for more performatic codes. And this revolution is the consequence of a crisis in alphabetic culture that was being prepared for a long time. The next lecture will deal with this crisis. However, I cannot end this lecture without confessing the melancholia that takes hold of me when I contemplate the case of the alphabet.