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The first page

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The page is defined as a textual *support*, whether the text be present or virtual. This phenomenon is not specific to our book- and alphabet-based civilization. The very invention of writing rests on an original means of exploiting the space inaugurated by the image, and on the questions raised by that particular kind of space. By calibrating and structuring this space, soothsayers established the laws of a system of signs specific to visual communication – divine visual communication – which was also capable of transcribing human language. Far from being the origin of writing, counting, on the other hand, was only developed and refined by being integrated into the page's space.

Figure 1. Sumerian pictographic tablet. End of Fourth Millennium BCE (Paris: Musée du Louvre, AO 19936). Photograph by Réunion des musées nationaux.

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Given that writing draws on both image and language, its domain is fundamentally heterogeneous and secondary and the question of its origin is highly ambiguous[1]. Whatever the case may be, I am personally convinced that there are constitutive ties between what we have come to call, in our book-based culture, 'the page' (which corresponds, in fact, to the initial support of writing in any civilization) and writing itself. I further think that this 'page,' whatever we call it, determined the appearance of writing. This is in opposition to what is still far too frequently said, namely, that writing resulted from counting or from the new-born economic needs of the first urban societies[2].

A poet will serve me as guide in initiating this demonstration. Paul Eluard illustrates admirably, in a well-known poem, 'Liberté,' what a page truly is, or, more exactly, which imaginary view of writing it testifies to. The first stanzas read:

Sur mes cahiers d'écolier
Sur mon pupitre et les arbres
Sur le sable et sur la neige
J'écris ton nom

Sur toutes les pages lues
Sur toutes les pages blanches
Pierres sang papier ou cendre
J'écris ton nom

Sur les images dorées
Sur les armes des guerriers
Sur la couronne des rois
J'écris ton nom

Sur la jungle et le désert
Sur les nids sur les genêts
Sur l'écho de mon enfance
J'écris ton nom [...][3]

The remarkable thing about this poem, from my perspective, is that 'page' is only mentioned in the second stanza. Its absence in the rest of the poem does not inhibit our understanding; paradoxically, it only heightens the reader's enchantment. 'Image,' 'jungle' or, later, the 'clouds' 'foam,' 'lamplight,' 'my *gourmand* and tender dog' – all become pages as credible as real pages. These are instructive metamorphoses, they prove that the notion of 'page' is not primarily linked to the material support medium, but instead to its function, which consists above all in 'supporting' that which is written.

However, this poem reveals even more about the page. It teaches us that to 'support' writing does not necessarily mean being able to write on that support. After all, who would write on a lamp's light? What defines writing's 'support' is that *text can be read there*. Mentioning the page in the beginning of the poem serves in part to establish this distinction. On clouds and images, one could read all sorts of messages, divine messages, for instance. On pages, however, we can read only human text, human writing, as is the case with the clouds, images, and lamplight of 'Liberté.'

Ultimately, that which is specific to a page, and the origin of the strange charm cast by Eluard's invented (and thereby all the more troubling) substitutes, is that the page, as a support for human writing, is necessarily defined as a space – or more precisely a surface –

of equally human format. This surface can be easily handled, and always remains within eyesight.

An entirely blank page could therefore be a sufficient page in the full sense of the term, i.e. *a surface replete with writing*. This hypothesis is far from gratuitous or fanciful, since the first civilizations to invent writing shared this very opinion. Witness two blank tablets found in Mari, in Mesopotamia, dated to 2600 BCE – over 500 years after the invention of writing. These tablets were called 'foundation tablets,' because they were buried within the walls of a temple under construction, for the purpose of giving divine protection to the temple and the city being built[4].

These precious tablets, one of alabaster, one of lapis lazuli (instead of the usual clay), bear no trace of inscription. We can infer that messages 'of human hand' (and their being read) were infinitely less precious to the Mari divinities than the support on to which human messages *could* have been engraved. For the individuals who originated this initiative and this supposition about divine reading (humans are necessarily at the origin of this endeavour and this supposition about divine reading), what this means above all is: the memory of absent writing, whose text implicitly remained identifiable via a certain type of support and determined ritual location, was enough to guarantee its efficiency, absolutely vital to the social group as a whole.

How can we explain that writing can act in its very absence? That it is able to communicate while remaining invisible? The little Mari tablets also suggest three answers.

These tablets force us, first of all, to recognize that, for those who invented writing (or, in this case, for its oldest users), it was not an 'innocent,' 'naïve' or plainly 'coded' practice. Writing's origin is particular in that it gives something to see, or read, only in as much as it equally, and fundamentally, participates in the realm of the invisible.

Secondly, and this is also a consequence of the first answer, such writing could never be related to counting notations. The absence of a number on a document can never replace the number, or any other number for that matter, a number is either present or absent from the place we expect to see it. That is its exclusive, limited and specific function. It is no coincidence that the invention of 'zero' originated in Mesopotamia[5], but we may equally understand why it was relatively late in coming (it took 15 centuries to be invented), it was not in the initial numerical mode. The invention of zero first consisted of creating a blank or empty space within a continuous alignment of digits. The counting system specific to Sumer, which only proceeds by distinctive units, or 'calculi', could not lead to the creation of such a meaningful blank. Only serious reflection on the potentialities of *written space*, which itself would have required a very mature ideographic system, could suggest the idea, not only of varying the value of digits in function of their position, but also of utilizing a totally vacant interval as a *sign*.

There is a last lesson to be learned from our two tablets. In this archaic period, which witnessed the origin of the first 'page,' writing cannot be defined as a 'representation of speech'. If this were true, as is held by certain proponents of the theory that writing is 'the name of two absences' (absence of the speaker, absence of the referent[6]), what is left for a page from which writing is absent? If giving the gods a blank page is sufficient to court their favour, it is because these gods were not expected to *hear* – even fictively – a spoken word. The nature and scope of writing was of another order than speech from the very beginning.

What accounts for the complicity between writing and the page, what makes them accomplices in the invisible? Champollion's deciphering of hieroglyphs, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, leads us to a first hypothesis. Champollion's essential discovery was that hieroglyphs have a phonetic value, and this discovery finally enabled Western societies to access certain texts whose legibility had been unavailable up until then. But this discovery also conjured away, and in a certain sense rendered invisible, the 'realistic' appearance of these signs. Hieroglyphic 'figures' no longer served only to 'say' what they represented in all sorts of 'cyriological,' 'tropical,' 'symbolic' forms, according to Clement of Alexandria's imagined categories[7]. These figures were now pure verbal tools, phonetic instruments. No sleight-of-hand, no magic was at the origin of this mutation. A given 'figure' was simply conceived by ancient Egyptians as capable, in certain cases, of signifying a word corresponding to what it represented (and not, as is often said, the thing itself) and, in other cases, a totally different word, or even a group of consonants, because the context in which this 'figure' found itself offered the reader various ways of being read.

Can we say that, for the 'objective' conception of writing, to which the alphabet and the rigour of its binary system (vowel/consonant) has accustomed us, the hieroglyphic system substituted a 'quantic' model of writing? I think that this analogy, borrowed from the physical sciences, is pertinent, and that it could be fruitful for the new adventure in writing upon which we have embarked with new technologies (however hesitantly for the time being). This analogy, however, leads us to suppose that the hieroglyph's mutability is only due to its own nature as an object-sign. This is not exactly the case. The functional variability of the hieroglyph is the direct consequence of its inscription on a physical support. This is the reason why a given hieroglyphic sign can act as either 'logogram' or 'phonogram,' depending on its context, and why it can also have a third function (at least for some of these signs), that of a 'determinative' or 'key'[8]. This function is justified by the fact that, at its very core, its operating principle has *integrated* the support on which a sign is inscribed. This principle consists of giving a logogram (that is, a sign functioning as a word) the value of a visual clue about this word (i.e. by making it mute and impossible to pronounce), when it is placed next to another sign. The determinative's role is therefore to help the reader decide which meaning and which pronunciation to adopt, not about the clue-sign itself, but about the word-sign it accompanies.

Only by taking into account hieroglyphic writing's visual support can we understand the similar expansion undergone by the written sign's functions. In fact, two purely iconic processes operate here. The first is that of combining heterogeneous values that co-exist on a given physical support (determinative and phonogram). The second is the process that follows, the creation of a complex writing sign (determinative *plus* phonogram), whose creation results from 'contamination'[9].

This writing system, in which a given sign can assume three different verbal functions, is not specific to Egypt alone. We find this same principle in the three other civilizations that invented the ideogram – Mesopotamia, China and Maya. The 'key' (or determinative function) is the formative basis of the largest lexical group in Chinese writing, that of 'ideophonograms'.

Thus, writing, intimately and necessarily, partakes of the page. Could we say that writing is the product of the page? This would, in fact, be going too far, since they appeared at the

same time. However, what made a given manipulable surface become a support for a written message, and the factor that could intervene in the structure of these messages (or even replace messages), is *writing's iconic origin*. Not only is this iconic origin common to both the conception of such a surface and writing itself, it also complements both surface and writing. Page and writing are both the result of a mutation that certain societies subjected the image to, when they needed to combine their internal mode of communication (namely, verbal communication) with what they believed to be their connection with the divine realm. This was an image and dream-based communication, since all but Greek gods were believed to speak a different language than mortal men.

The walls of grottoes and cliffs chosen by prehistoric painters for producing 'figures' are, in fact, the tens of thousands years-old ancestor of the page. The revolutionary and essential intuition of Paleolithic painters consisted of *conceiving a material surface as continuous*. That is, they isolated a surface from the incoherent reality of the world and saw this surface as nothing more than an *appearance*. Cleared and visually isolated from what surrounds it, a prepared surface – such as the pumiced part of a rock (or, in the case of the Lascaux caves, a surface painted white) – offers itself to being seen as a page. It is no longer an object defined solely by its materiality; it is a territory that heralds creation. Certain irregularities in the rock surface could be used by painters to accentuate a motif, but this choice was never less than an intellectual decision, or an imagined coincidence, that the artist took care to exploit knowingly. What this surface testifies to, is not the 'idea of support,' such as Plato's allegory of the cave suggests, i.e. the idea according to which a surface can only serve as a secondary place to deposit figures projected from an exterior and supposedly 'real' world. Instead, this surface testifies to the *idea of the screen*, as in our modern cinema, from which unexpected revelations surge forth[10]. From mural art to the works of Paul Klee, an image's impact on the imagination fulfils a single purpose, to offer to the human gaze marvels it could never expect. 'Art does not reproduce the visible, it makes visible,' said Klee. In the twelfth century of our era, Chinese painters taught their disciples to paint landscapes by recommending lengthy contemplation of a wall in ruins, after having covered it with a piece of white silk. The landscape they would see emerge in the cloth's folds and shadows would be the best gauge of their ability to paint[11].

The invention of the image, as inherited from prehistoric painters, also consists of the coexistence, on the rock's screen/support, of figures independent from each other in type or style: realistic representations, symbols, or even repeated graphic markings – rhythmic marks, which are what prehistorians call 'signs.'

The heterogeneous nature of such iconography confirms the determinant role of the support in the invention of the image. If these figures 'hold together', it cannot be by virtue of what each individual figure refers to – animal, symbol, stylistic code – since the reference is different in each case. Their cohesion is ensured solely by the surface that assembles them. They make sense (or aim for a certain 'effect of sense'), not by themselves, but through, and by being juxtaposed with, each other. In ideographic writing, the determinative (or key) causes spatial contamination, which was already put to use in prehistoric times, or rather was discovered then for the first time. The space separating figures from each other and/or the space that allows them to overlap was never considered neutral or inactive by prehistoric painters. On the contrary, conceiving of such a space allowed them

to make what could have been a simple decorative creation into a crucial place for an *encounter*. In fact, the intervals are what allow the spectator's gaze, passing from one figure to another, to sound out and interrogate the reciprocal relations between these figures. The intervals enable the spectator to understand the scope of their association. This is not to say that the spectator attains no precise 'meaning': all visual revelation is an enigma, and one that must remain indecipherable. Once again, our alphabet, the alphabet we owe to the Greeks, is responsible for the illusion that we should decipher, or even decode, a spectacle.

Such is not the case with images. In this regard, nothing has changed since prehistoric times. The small temple, transformed into a church, where on a wall we find Giotto's Assisi frescoes representing a simple man paying homage to Saint Francis, is not mere decor. The wall intervenes directly and participates in the encounter. Like an enigmatic presence, both physical and abstract, the wall participates in unutterable and absolute ways, like the divine itself. The equally central landscape in Giorgione's *Tempest* is the painting's real topic, and not the presence of two persons in the painting's foreground. These figures play the purely aleatory and anecdotal role of accessories in the composition and are incapable of sketching anything but an aberrant form of narration together.

All contemporary artists insist on the role of the *interval* in the image. Some, like Dubuffet, even give the interval priority over the figure[12]. Figures do not carry the painter's most fundamental intentions, the will or desire to 'make visible'. The intervals separating figures do, because they call forth and provoke the spectator's interrogations. They make the spectator *participate* in the image, they make him marvel about or apprehend the revelation born of a surface from which the image must remain indefinitely inseparable for the iconic magic to continue having its effect.

All spectators are readers. Or rather, they are almost, but not quite, readers. It is by *becoming a reader* that the spectator extracts the page from the image's original screen. With the page, he extracted writing.

Whatever fragmentary sketches of writing we continue to discover through archaeological digs, such a mutation could only operate in civilizations that wanted and knew how to combine the lessons of the image with the concerns of another order, namely, that of being not only troubled or impressed by visions (as one can be by dreams), but also of being able to read intentional, structured messages in these visions.

The appearance of 'soothsayers' played an essential role in this mutation. A kind of civil servant of vision, the soothsayer was neither a magician (who acts on matter and modifies its nature), nor a prophet (who communicates with the group through speech, through his own words and observations). The soothsayer not only questions oracular surfaces that images (or dreams) offer, he also culls texts from them. Because of the soothsayer, the visible could no longer be a mere medium capable of hosting certain supposed or aleatory intentions of the invisible. Instead, the visible could itself harbour a veritable *system of signs*.

Observing the starry sky came to enrich and complete the image in this manner, probably in addition to inspiring the image's very inception. What more obvious continuous surface, and what surface more replete with meaning, is there in man's daily life, than the canopy of heaven? The invention of the image was one of the first attempts at symbolizing space,

with the aim of controlling it and making it socially productive as an avowed intermediary between men and gods. The starry sky offered something more: a rational model uniting figures in a given space, not as heterogeneous signs mysteriously accorded with each other, but as signs forming a system together. What was to remain of the image in the empirical progression of writing was its support, henceforth valued for itself. It had initially been valued because of its *frame*. The first act of a soothsayer has always been to delineate the space within which the divine message was to appear. But the frame also became the internal structuring principle of the revelation's surface.

No writing is possible (and certainly no divine writing) without partitioned, marked space that not only holds the figures together, but applies a common measure to them, a measure issued from the space itself. The imaginative force of divination is no longer exactly that of the screen (even if it borrows its value as an intermediary surface). It stems instead from compartmentalization, as in the case of the manipulable support that prefigures the page, on a different level. In Mesopotamia (and later, in the Etruscan world), animal livers were believed to reveal divine intentions to humans, and these livers were thought to be compartmentalized according to the structure of the sky. The same was true for the shell of the tortoise in China[13]. This compartmentalization, whose initial value is symbolic, paradoxically contributed to liberating figures from their ties with the 'beyond' (whether actually metaphysical or some other external reality such as the object/words that these figures designated). Instead, these figures became anchored solely in their support, each in its specific manner. In Egypt and China, calibrating the *written sign* was indispensable to determining it and opposing it to the *figure*. This was to constitute the written sign's ultimate avatar. When men continued to retrieve the treasures they believed belonged to gods – as they had for fire – and translated their own language into *human visual signs* (writing in the literal sense), it was not by hearing each other speak. Men introduced phrasal elements (that they deemed pertinent) into the spatial code conceived of by soothsayers. They did so, moreover, by using and exploiting all the image-resources of that spatial code: contamination, contextual visual exploration, symbolic valorization of iconic matter, etc. Is it not significant that Chinese writing, which appeared along oracular cracks in tortoise shells, modelled both its style and graphism on those very cracks?

For writing, the page is primary because it transforms the screen and the surface of the image into an actual page, a *coded space*, and one thereby susceptible of integrating verbal messages (or messages of verbal origin) into graphic space. Graphic space also imposes on its messages the paradoxical law of an incredibly free syntax. It holds messages together with indefinitely floating intervals and ever-hazy juxtapositions. Writing did not appear sign by sign. It put the image's initial and heterogeneous givens to use by turning them into an *a priori* system of verbal–visual communication. In this system, the ideogram could only emerge slowly by harnessing the medium-based intuitions that had remained dispersed around the ideogram. The ideogram harnessed these varied intuitions for its own purposes, and by means of its own functional variability. Pictographic tablets dated from the fourth millennium before our era prove just this. It is impossible to decipher their meaning definitively, their signs are still too fraught with the local graphic culture from which they issued. These signs do not possess the functional autonomy that would allow them later to be articulated into sentences, or 'pseudo-sentences' (since they were written phrases). These tablets, however, clearly show the

grid of an iconic surface that would lead, shortly thereafter, to the formation of writing *per se*[14].

This is also why it is impossible to agree that Mesopotamian writing was derived from counting. On the contrary, writing, which was already underway, benefited counting. Writing made counting useable and, as I have mentioned, enabled counting to take the abstract road of mathematical reasoning. Writing forced digit notation to associate with elements of an altogether different category, capable of bringing the image-based information necessary to understand and exploit things like the nature of objects or animals being counted, their owner's name or function. In the almost-a-page image, Mesopotamians found an appropriate host-surface, in that it characterized itself as a composite structure from the beginning. Because of the image-as-page, counting would benefit from that mode of approach, which it so desperately needed, and so fundamentally lacked, i.e. reading.

Not Mesopotamian counting, but Mesopotamian seals constitute the intermediary step between divine writing, born of the image, and human writing. Mesopotamians stamped clay well before the idea occurred to use clay to model digits, and their motivations were then far from just counting. It is upon clay that they then rolled their cylinder-seals, whose figure-messages symbolized their name or title – as would emblems, millennia later, following a visually heterogeneous mode of composition, a mode both figurative and spatial, directly inherited from the image. It is noteworthy that the rolling of the cylinder-seal on the tablet was the formal (and premonitory) equivalent of the cartouche on which writing would be inscribed. If counting played a role in the genesis of writing, it was only indirectly, moving from the clay-ball to the tablet. This move was not caused by internal necessity, but rather because the new support endowed it with more space to associate with a complement, a seal's formula and the pictographic information that were already the first sketch of a text. Far from being the origin of the written message, the numbered part of a tablet is in fact its annexe.

By playing off subtly divergent colours, Incan quipos gave information not only about quantities or numbers, but also about the nature of the merchandise being counted. This solution enlightens us *a contrario* as to the originality of what happened in Mesopotamia. Incan counting could not result in writing, not because it was imperfect, but because accompanying knots in small ropes provided complementary information on the nature of the counted objects. This was too close and too homogenous a relation to the nature of the counted objects. Thus, this system was internally closed off to being used for different ends, such as narrating the world's genesis, or transmitting the story of the flood to future generations (oral transmission was enough), or to foreign peoples, who spoke other languages.

The *mixing* inherited by the page from the image, and from the communication men thought they had established with the gods, is also precisely what makes the page a wholly new type of support. By the same token, it makes the page completely *useful*, it allows the page to become a medium, an instrument of communication between peoples of different language. Such is the case, to this day: the entire Asian sphere shares a common ideogram foundation.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1. See a summary of this topic in A.-M. Christin (1999) 'Les Origines de l'écriture: image, signe, trace,' *Le Débat*, 106, September–October, pp. 28–36.
2. See, for example, P. Amiet (1982) 'La Naissance de l'écriture en Sumer et en Elam,' *Naissance de l'écriture, cunéiformes et hiéroglyphes*, Exhibition Catalogue (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux) pp. 46–48.
3. 'Liberté,' in *Poésie et vérité*, 1942; reprinted in P. Eluard, *Œuvres complètes*, I, Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1968, pp. 1105–1107.
4. See *Syrie, mémoire et civilisation*, Exhibition Catalogue, Paris: IMA-Flammarion, 1993, pp. 130–131. For more general commentary, see A.-M. Christin (2000) *Poétique du blanc, vide et intervalle dans la civilisation de l'alphabet* (Leuven: Peeters) and 'La Mémoire blanche,' pp. 141–164, in particular.
5. G. Ifra (1981) *Histoire universelle des chiffres* (Paris: Seghers), pp. 397–402.
6. Jacques Derrida argues, for instance, that psychology 'could never encounter in its space that by which is constituted the absence of its signatory, not to mention the absence of the referent. But writing is the name of these two absences,' translation ours; original *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), p. 60.
7. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromates*, V, 4, 20–21; cited in T. Todorov (1977) *Théories du symbole* (Paris: Seuil), pp. 31–32.
8. See P. Vernus (1977) 'L'Ecriture de l'Egypte ancienne'. In *L'Espace et la lettre*, A.-M. Christin (ed) Cahiers Jussieu, 3 (Paris: UGE), pp. 63–64.
9. By stating the law of the *simultaneous contrast of colours*, Chevreul revealed the mechanism by which visual elements contaminate each other, a law that reigns over the whole of iconic communication. On this topic, see G. Roque (1977) *Art et science de la couleur, Chevreul et la peinture* (Nîmes: Jacqueline Chambon).
10. For a definition of 'idea of the screen' ('pensée de l'écran'), and its implications, see A.-M. Christin (1995) *L'Image écrite ou la déraison graphique* (Paris: Flammarion) 'Idées et recherches'.
11. N. Vandier-Nicolas (1982) *Esthétique et peinture de paysage en Chine* (Paris: Klincksieck), pp. 126–127.
12. J. Dubuffet (1986) *Bâtons rompus* (Paris: Editions de Minuit), pp. 26–27.
13. J.-M. Durand (1994) 'Les Cieux, premier livre de lecture,' *Astrologie en Mésopotamie, Dossiers d'Archéologie*, **191**, 3; and L. Vandermeersch (1974) 'De la tortue à l'achillée,' *Divination et rationalité* (Paris: Seuil), pp. 40–41.
14. Such is the case with the calcareous tablet inscribed with Sumerian pictographic writing dating to the end of the fourth millennium BCE (Paris: Musée du Louvre) AO 19936, reproduced and commented on in *Naissance de l'écriture, cunéiformes et hiéroglyphes*, *op. cit.*, p. 52 (no. 7). See Fig. 1.

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