

Preface

IN HOMMAGE TO THE LETTER

THE ALPHABET provides the most practical of all modes of writing. Its advantage over syllabaries, ideograms and hieroglyphs is evident: it lets one note the word with a small number of signs. About three hundred alphabets are known, and most serve only one or a group of kindred languages. The most widely used contemporary alphabet, capable of transcribing the most diverse languages, is the Latin alphabet.

In common with other alphabets, it manifests a remarkable combinatory facility. Taken together as an alphabet, the letters seem inert, almost lifeless, incapable of suggesting image or sound, but one against the other they create the world. The ancient Germans referred to their alphabet as runes, a word which is cognate with the verb ‘*raunen*,’ meaning to murmur, to speak a secret language. Clearly, for the unlettered they possessed power and magic. For St. Paul, it is sufficient for God to say: “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” the beginning and end of the Greek alphabet and, hence, of everything. These letters are now illuminated in countless church windows and embroidered on banners, their presence alone sufficient to declare the presence of a divine universe. We continue to use letters in a similar way today in our inordinate fondness for acronyms, a word that in itself means the tip of a name, that is composed of letters, each of which represents a whole word, that form a new word of multiple dimensions.

If, however, the convenience of letters is generally recognized, their beauty is rarely noticed. The Latin alphabet is often posed against oriental ideograms and the Arabic abjad, which lend themselves to calligraphy. Yet the Latin alphabet has its own beauty, which its instrumental character and the ease with which it is acquired hide. The tendency is to move past its form to reach meaning just as the eye flies toward the landscape through the transparency of a window. This is

wrong: an *i*, an *o*, a *u* – a candle and its flame, a mouth and an eye, a vase – each possess a wonderful shape in which Claudel did not hesitate to look for occidental ideograms.

Furthermore, because we *look* at letters so often, we forget they are transcriptions of sounds. Moreover, it is with letters that musicians talk about notes. French tablature for the lute is written with letters to show exactly where string and fret coincide on the fingerboard. Thus letters, as soon as they are seen, become music.

Without letters, then, there would be no word-painting either for the ear or the eye. For the eye, poems in the shape of what they express or calligrams are as old as the *Greek Anthology* and they continued to attract interest during the Middle Ages as *carmina figurata*, flowering again in the metaphysical poetry of George Herbert, only to return again in Apollinaire and the work of the Futurists. Its more recent manifestations are in the concrete poems that arose in the 1950s. Of course, Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés* and Christian Dotremont’s *Logogrammes* have become classics. All of these poets have seen the advantages of the aesthetic possibilities of the letter, and medieval illuminators ornamented their initial capital letters with a variety of animals and plants. Braque and Picasso, not to speak of Jasper Johns, Jiří Kolář, and the Russian Futurist Iliazd all saw the possibilities with which the letter could be shaped.

Lucie Lambert, in drawing the alphabet, invites us to look at the twenty-six Latin letters, indeed to *read* them if we really want to give this word its full range of meaning, that is, to give thought to their shape as well as to their use as phonetic signs. In this sense, the sequence of her works – at once miniatures and illuminated initials, drawing upon the resources of ink, gouache, and gold – contains a whole universe (creation from alpha to omega) inasmuch as everything that can be said or thought stands in the infinite permutations of the twenty-six signs that they offer: the book, said Mallarmé, is an extension of the letter.

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