

David Abram, from *The Spell of the Sensuous*

Writing like human language, is engendered not only within the human community but between the human community and the animate landscape, born of the interplay and contact between the human and the more-than-human world. The earthly terrain in which we find ourselves, and upon which we depend for all our nourishment, is shot through with suggestive scrawls and traces, from the sinuous calligraphy of rivers winding across the land, inscribing arroyos and canyons into the parched earth of the desert, to the black slash burned by lightning into the trunk of an old elm. The swooping flight of birds is a kind of cursive script written on the wind; it is this script that was studied by the ancient “augurs,” who could read therein the course of the future. Leaf-miner insects make strange hieroglyphic tabloids of the leaves they consume. Wolves urinate on specific stumps and stones to mark off their territory. And today you read these printed words as tribal hunters once read the tracks of deer, moose, and bear printed in the soil of the forest floor. Archaeological evidence suggests that for more than a million years the subsistence of humankind has depended upon the acuity of such hunters, upon their ability to read the traces—a bit of scat here, a broken twig there—of these animal Others. These letters I print across the page, the scratches and scrawls you now focus upon, trailing off across the white surface, are hardly different from the footprints of prey left in the snow. We read these traces with organs honed over millennia by our tribal ancestors, moving instinctively from one track to the next, picking up the trail afresh whenever it leaves off, hunting the *meaning*, which would be the *meeting* with the Other.²

The multiform meanings of the Chinese word for writing, *wen*, illustrate well this interpenetration of human and nonhuman scripts:

The word *wen* signifies a conglomeration of marks, the simple symbol in writing. It applies to the veins in stones and wood, to constellations, represented by the strokes connecting the stars, to the tracks of birds and quadrupeds on the ground (Chinese tradition would have it that the observation of these tracks suggested the invention of writing), to tattoos and even, for example, to the designs that decorate the turtle's shell ("The turtle is wise," an ancient text says—gifted with magico-religious powers—"for it carries designs on its back"). The term *wen* has designated, by extension, literature. . . .3

Our first writing, clearly, was our own tracks, our footprints, our handprints in mud or ash pressed upon the rock. Later, perhaps, we found that by copying the distinctive prints and scratches made by other animals we could gain a new power; here was a method of identifying with the other animal, taking on its expressive magic in order to learn of its whereabouts, to draw it near, to make it appear. Tracing the impression left by a deer's body in the snow, or transferring that outline onto the wall of the cave: these are ways of placing oneself in distant contact with the Other, whether to invoke its influence or to exert one's own. Perhaps by multiplying its images on the cavern wall we sought to ensure that the deer itself would multiply, be bountiful in the coming season. . . .

All of the early writing systems of our species remain tied to the mysteries of a more-than-human world. The petroglyphs of pre-Columbian North America abound with images of prey animals, of rain clouds and lightning, of eagle and snake, of the paw prints of bear. On rocks, canyon walls, and caves these figures mingle with human shapes, or shapes part human and part Other (part insect, or owl, or elk.)

Some researchers assert that the picture writing of native North America is not yet “true” writing, even where the pictures are strung together sequentially—as they are, obviously, in many of the rock inscriptions (as well as in the calendrical “winter counts” of the Plains tribes). For there seems, as yet, no strict relation between image and utterance.

In a much more conventionalized pictographic system, like the Egyptian hieroglyphics (which first appeared during the First Dynasty, around 3000 B.C.E. and remained in use until the second century C.E.),⁴ stylized images of humans and human implements are still interspersed with those of plants, of various kinds of birds, as well as of serpents, felines, and other animals. Such pictographic systems, which were to be found as well in China as early as the fifteenth century B.C.E., and in Mesoamerica by the middle of the sixth century B.C.E., typically include characters that scholars have come to call “ideograms.” An ideogram is often a pictorial character that refers not to the visible entity that it explicitly pictures but to some quality or other phenomenon readily associated with that entity. Thus—to invent a simple example—a stylized image of a jaguar with its feet off the ground might come to signify “speed.” For the Chinese, even today, a stylized image of the sun and moon together signifies “brightness”; similarly, the word for “east” is invoked by a stylized image of the sun rising behind a tree.⁵

The efficacy of these pictorially derived systems necessarily entails a shift of sensory participation away from the voices and gestures of the surrounding landscape toward our own human-made images. However, the glyphs which constitute the bulk of these ancient scripts continually remind the reading body of its inherence in a more-than-human field of meanings. As signatures not only of the human form but of other animals, trees, sun, moon, and landforms, they continually refer our senses beyond the strictly human sphere.⁶

Yet even a host of pictograms and related ideograms will not suffice for certain terms that exist in the local discourse. Such terms may refer to phenomena that lack any precise visual association. Consider, for example, the English word “belief.” How might we signify this term in a pictographic, or ideographic, manner? An image of a phantasmagorical monster, perhaps, or one of a person in prayer. Yet no such ideogram would communicate the term as readily and precisely as the simple image of a bumblebee, followed by the figure of a leaf. We could, that is, resort to a visual pun, to images of things that have nothing overtly to do with belief but which, when named in sequence, carry the same *sound* as the spoken term “belief” (“bee-leaf”). And indeed, such pictographic puns, or *rebuses*, came to be employed early on by scribes in ancient China and in Mesoamerica as well as in the Middle East, to record certain terms that were especially amorphous or resistant to visual representation. Thus, for instance, the Sumerian word *ti*, which means “life,” was written in cuneiform with the pictorial sign for “arrow,” which in Sumerian is also called *ti*.⁷

An important step has been taken here. With the rebus, a pictorial sign is used to directly invoke a particular sound of the human voice, rather than the outward reference of that sound. The rebus, with its focus upon the sound of a name rather than the thing named, inaugurated the distant possibility of a *phonetic* script (from the Greek *phonein*: “to sound”), one that would directly transcribe the sound of the speaking voice rather than its outward intent or meaning.⁸

However, many factors impeded the generalization of the rebus principle, and thus prevented the development of a fully phonetic writing system. For example, a largely pictographic script can easily be utilized, for communicative purposes, by persons who speak very different dialects (and hence cannot understand one another’s speech). The same image or

ideogram, readily understood, would simply invoke a different sound in each dialect. Thus a pictographic script allows for commerce between neighboring and even distant linguistic communities—an advance that would be lost if rebuslike signs alone were employed to transcribe the spoken sounds of one community. (This factor helps explain why China, a vast society comprised of a multitude of distinct dialects, has never developed a fully phonetic script.)⁹

Another factor inhibiting the development of a fully phonetic script was the often elite status of the scribes. Ideographic scripts must make use of a vast number of stylized glyphs or characters, since every term in the language must, at least in principle, have its own written character. (In 1716 a dictionary of Chinese—admittedly an extreme example—listed 40,545 written characters! Today a mere 8,000 characters are in use.)¹⁰ Complete knowledge of the pictographic system, therefore, could only be the province of a few highly trained individuals. Literacy, within such cultures, was in fact the literacy of a caste, or cult, whose sacred knowledge was often held in great esteem by the rest of society. It is unlikely that the scribes would willingly develop innovations that could simplify the new technology and so render literacy more accessible to the rest of the society, for this would surely lessen their own importance and status.

. . . it is clear that ancient writing was in the hands of a small literate elite, the scribes, who manifested great conservatism in the practice of their craft, and, so far from being interested in its simplification, often chose to demonstrate their virtuosity by a proliferation of signs and values. . . .¹¹

Nevertheless, in the ancient Middle East the rebus principle was eventually generalized—probably by scribes working at a distance from the affluent and established centers of civilization—to cover all the common sounds of a given language. Thus, “syllabaries” appeared, wherein every basic sound-syllable of the language had its own conventional notation or written character (often rebuslike in origin). Such writing systems employed far fewer signs than the pictographic scripts from which they were derived, although the number of signs was still very much larger than the alphabetic script we now take for granted.

The innovation which gave rise to the alphabet was itself developed by Semitic scribes around 1500 B.C.E.¹² It consisted in recognizing that almost every syllable of their language was composed of one or more silent consonantal elements plus an element of sounded breath—that which we would today call a vowel. The silent consonants provided, as it were, the bodily framework or shape through which the sounded breath must flow. The original Semitic *aleph-beth*, then, established a character, or letter, for each of the consonants of the language. The vowels, the sounded breath that must be added to the written consonants in order to make them come alive and to speak, had to be chosen by the reader, who would vary the sounded breath according to the written context.




By this innovation, the *aleph-beth* was able to greatly reduce the necessary number of characters for a written script to just twenty-two—a simple set of signs that could be readily practiced and learned in a brief period by anyone who had the chance, even by a young child. The utter simplicity of this technical innovation was such that the early Semitic *aleph-beth*, in which were written down the various stories and histories that were later gathered into the Hebrew Bible, was adopted not only by the Hebrews but by the Phoenicians (who presumably

carried the new technology across the Mediterranean to Greece), the Aramaeans, the Greeks, the Romans, and indeed eventually gave rise (directly or indirectly) to virtually every alphabet known, including that which I am currently using to scribe these words.

With the advent of the *aleph-beth*, a new distance opens between human culture and the rest of nature. To be sure, pictographic and ideographic writing already involved a displacement of our sensory participation from the depths of the animate environment to the flat surface of our walls, of clay tablets, of the sheet of papyrus. However, as we noted above, the written images themselves often related us back to the other animals and the environing earth. The pictographic glyph or character still referred, implicitly, to the animate phenomenon of which it was the static image; it was that worldly phenomenon, in turn, that provoked from us the sound of its name.

The sensible phenomenon and its spoken name were, in a sense, still participant with one another—the name a sort of emanation of the sensible entity. With the phonetic aleph-beth, however, the written character no longer refers us to any sensible phenomenon out in the world, or even to the name of such a phenomenon (as with the rebus), but solely to a gesture to be made by the human mouth. There is a concerted shift of attention away from any outward or worldly reference of the pictorial image, away from the sensible phenomenon that had previously called forth the spoken utterance, to the shape of the utterance itself, now invoked directly by the written character. A direct association is established between the pictorial sign and the vocal gesture, for the first time completely bypassing the thing pictured. The evocative phenomena—the entities imaged—are no longer a necessary part of the equation. Human utterances are now elicited, directly, by human-made signs; the larger, more-than-human life-world is no longer a part of the semiotic, no longer a necessary part of the system.

Or is it? When we ponder the early Semitic *aleph-beth*, we readily recognize its

pictographic inheritance. *Aleph*, the first letter, is written thus:  *Aleph* is also the ancient Hebrew word for “ox.” The shape of the letter, we can see, was that of an ox’s head with horns; turned over, it became our own letter A.¹³ The name of the Semitic letter *mem* is also the Hebrew word for “water”; the letter, which later became our own letter *M*, was drawn as a series of waves:  . The letter *ayin*, which also means “eye” in Hebrew, was drawn as a simple circle, the picture of an eye; it is this letter, made over into a vowel by the Greek scribes, that eventually became our letter *O*. The Hebrew letter *qoph*, which is also the Hebrew term for “monkey,” was drawn as a circle intersected by a long, dangling, tail  . Our letter *Q* retains a sense of this simple picture.¹⁴

These are a few examples. By thus comparing the names of the letters with their various shapes, we discern that the letters of the early *aleph-beth* are still implicitly tied to the more-than-human field of phenomena. But these ties to other animals, to natural elements like water and waves, and even to the body itself, are far more tenuous than in the earlier, predominantly nonphonetic scripts. These traces of sensible nature linger in the new script only as vestigial holdovers from the old—they are no longer necessary participants in the transfer of linguistic knowledge. The other animals, the plants, and the natural elements—sun, moon, stars, waves—are beginning to lose their own voices. In the Hebrew Genesis, the animals do not speak their own names to Adam; rather, they are *given* their names by this first man. Language, for the Hebrews, was becoming a purely *human* gift, a human power.

It was only, however, with the transfer of phonetic writing to Greece, and the consequent transformation of the Semitic *aleph-beth* into the Greek “alphabet,” that the progressive abstraction of linguistic meaning from the enveloping life-world reached a type of completion. The Greek scribes took on, with slight modifications, both the shapes of the Semitic letters and their Semitic names. Thus *aleph*—the name of the first letter, and the Hebrew word for “ox”—became *alpha*; *beth*—the name of the second letter, as well as the word for “house”—became *beta*; *gimel*—the third letter, and the word for “camel,” became *gamma*, etc. But while the Semitic names had older, nongrammatological meanings for those who spoke a Semitic tongue, the Greek versions of those names had no nongrammatological meaning whatsoever for the Greeks. That is, while the Semitic name for the letter was also the name of the sensorial entity commonly imaged by or associated with the letter, the Greek name had no sensorial reference at all.¹⁵ While the Semitic name had served as a reminder of the worldly [sic?] origin of the letter, the Greek name served only to designate the human-made letter itself. The pictorial (or iconic) significance of many of the Semitic letters, which was memorialized in their spoken names, was now readily lost. The indebtedness of human language to the more-than-human perceptual field, an indebtedness preserved in the names and shapes of the Semitic letters, could now be entirely forgotten.