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Symbol and Symptom. The Gender of the Alphabet

A long tradition characterizes religious and scientific thought in the West, in which the dichotomy mind and nature is superimposed with the dichotomy masculinity and femininity. To put this another way: the notion, that mind and matter are opposites and that the mind is to rule the body was linked to and found its expression in the visible reality of sexual difference. Masculinity became the symbolic form for the mind, femininity for the body, matter, and mortal flesh. Many other dichotomies derive from this difference, like rational and irrational, healthy and sick, and pure and impure. This structure of thought extended from Greek Antiquity through Christianity into the modern period -- and in the course of this history it took on different forms, in ecclesiastical as well as in political, artistic and scientific contexts. But while the idea that made masculinity equivalent to intellect and femininity equivalent to embodiment was at first understood as a symbolic order (which did not lessen its social and political effectiveness), over the course of the centuries this gradually transformed into a "natural law". Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century, those opposed to admitting women to higher education or academic careers would argue that the female *body* was not designed for mental work. As Rudolf Virchow wrote, "Everything feminine that we admire and honor in the true woman is but an extension of the ovaries", ¹and similar arguments can still be heard even today.

How can we explain the power of this symbolic order, that it could have such a grip on thought and perception, so much so that it would be eventually held to be "nature" itself? The basis can be located in the phonetic alphabet, which led to a radical social

transformation.² There is now a certain consensus that the establishment of the phonetic Greek alphabet was accompanied by a transformation in the gender order. This is usually only intended to account for the historic effectivity of literacy: literacy created a new code of laws with its own characteristics, on the one hand entailing equality before the written word, while on the other enabling the idea of logos to emerge, the fantasy of thought freed of the body and the spoken word. Already in the Jewish community, the easy masterability of the letters of the alphabet led to the removal of the holy word from the guardianship of the priestly caste to become the property of the whole people. But the Hebrew alphabet, in which only consonants are written, can only be read by someone who can also speak the language. Thus, orality and literacy remained closely associated. In contrast, with the Greek alphabet, in which the vowels are also written, the notion developed that thought can free itself from the body. Thus culture and nature, or mind and nature, increasingly came to be seen as opposites -- and their opposition was reflected in the symbolic roles of masculinity and femininity, whereby masculinity would be associated with mind and femininity with embodiment. These symbolic associations became themselves realities, creating a physical reality that would one day be confused with nature itself.

Long before writing would have this effect, this process was revealed in the history of the letters themselves. Since Saussure, we have become accustomed to the idea that letters are arbitrary signs. Whole intellectual edifices are based on this premise, like structuralism or Freud's theory of the unconscious which appears so profoundly ahistorical, although, at the same time, Freud compares banal creations of the mind -- like the plow -- to the male genitals. As he writes in the *Interpretation of Dreams*: "It is unmistakable that all weapons and tools are used as symbols for the male member: plow, hammer, rifle, revolver, dagger, sword, etc." What a strange

combination! It seems arbitrary to compare the plow, a life or nutrition-giving tool, with instruments of death, and simultaneously to associate both with the male member, all in the same breath. However, if we consider the history of letters, as it is told by Alfred Kallir in his book, *Sign and Design. The Psychogenetic Source of the Alphabet*, this combination seems in fact not quite as accidental and arbitrary as on first sight. Kallir wrote:

„To those who claim that Freud ‘has gone too far’ in his conclusions, my answer is that, in certain respects, he seems rather not to have gone far enough; he left unexplored what lies behind the sexual impacts -the fields of magic interaction, which comes to light by the deeper study of the alphabet.“ (S. 6)

In 1942, Kallir -- in exile in Oxford, where he had fled from the National Socialists-- began by chance to develop an interest for the history of the alphabet. He soon discovered, however, that although there was a extensive literature on the history of writing, no academic discipline concerned itself with the history of the letters. For scholars, the letters seemed either arbitrary or "natural"-- without a history, and thus without any stories to tell. There are good reasons for this kind of strategic amnesia. A science that has forgotten -- or which actively obliterates -- the history of its own notational system does not need to think about the structures of knowledge that this notational system produced. It can view the findings that were coded by these structures as Knowledge with a capital K, or even as the mirror image of nature.

The reception of Kallir's history of letters was consequently rather cool. His book, already begun in the 1940s, only first appeared in 1961 in English. Surprised by the rapid spread and acceptance of the "V for Victory" campaign, he had published a short text about the letter V in 1944; this text as well only found recognition much later .

Startled by the immediate success of the V-sign a the crucial turning point of the war, I had suddenly come to apprehend that letter V must have crystallized from man's praying gesture, that it symbolizes our suppressed spiritual striving

the release of which was the much discussed and searched for aim of the war - for all nations. (S.2)

In his book, *Sign and Deign*, Kallir speculates that all languages could have derived from one single language. This speculation finds increasingly attention in recent research into the history of language. On first look, his interrogation of the history of the letters themselves also seems speculative, since he does not primarily base his arguments on historically traceable links -- like that between Egypt and Greece, linked to one another, among others, by the Creto-Minoic civilization. Instead, his interest was directed towards psychological patterns which he attributed to the collective unconscious, a line of inquiry much more difficult to support with evidence. The letters, he argues, represent ideograms that were derived from images; further, Kallir writes, because they are inscribed in the collective unconscious, the symbolic meaning of the letters can still be "read" or "deciphered" today. Quoting the myth that links the consumption of raw beef to virility and that was, no doubt, influential on the creation of the national name of „John Bull“, he continues

A business concern styling itself and its product (beef soup) „Bovril“ and which displays within that name, brightly lit, the almost exact outlines of the Cretan ox-head, right in the heart of London, must have at least a shrewd inkling on the firm grip of the ancient symbol on the subconscious of the public, considering that advertising space in Picadilly Circus is not at all cheap to buy.*

Kallir bases his argument on the assumption that during the emergence of the alphabet, a "progressive assimilation" of different meanings in the letters took place. Thus, on the one hand, the letter A or "alpha" represents the bull, which embodies masculinity, and on the other the head or crown (often represented as horns), that is, it stands for mental power as well as all meanings associated with the idea of striving "forwards" or "upwards". He also points out that the A-L-PH in the letter "alpha" represents a metathetical reversal of the PH-A-L in phallus. All these meanings, he argues, are inscribed in the collective unconscious. However, Kallir sees this inscription as "archetypal", that is ahistorical -- and here his argument appears

problematic. A historical development took place in the history of the letters which was brought about by writing itself. The fact that the letters could remain inscribed in the collective imaginary until the present points to the power of memory in the history of these letters -- a memory that might be linked to its central importance for the body and for gender.

This history -- and its significance for gender -- becomes especially clear if we consider the example of A, or alpha. In all Semitic languages around the Mediterranean the word "Aleph" or "Alpha" means "bull" or "ox". We can thus see that the first and most important letter of the alphabet -- the ordering of the letters is not arbitrary, but rather corresponds to a hierarchy of letters, the so-called acrocracy -- refers to the most important of the sacrificial animals, which at the same time served as a symbol for fertility and masculinity. The representation of the animal -- the letter -- went through many phases, and in the course of its increasing abstraction took on the form of three lines. At first, these lines represented the horns of the bull; the slanted lines originally pointed upwards and on the right and left sides two dots marked the eyes. In the course of its history (over two thousand years), the letter was turned on its side for a period, and in the end it came to be turned over on its head and completed with a cross line. This third line symbolizes a yoke. That means that the history of the letter 'alpha' narrates a process in which the bull, symbol of masculinity, becomes the castrated, tamed ox, which at the same time represents -- with its yoke -- a vital pillar of agriculture.

Cows, not oxen are seen in the early Egyptian representations of ploughing. The taming of the bull is the great achievement of the developing agricultural civilization and, like the invention of the alphabet, a milestone in the progress of man. The two events seem to be contemporaneous; they presumably occurred early in the second pre-Christian millennium.

Kallir further argues that all letters were probably at first symbols of fertility.

If one compares the history of the alpha sign with the history of bull sacrifice, then interesting parallels make themselves evident. These parallels point to a radical

transformation in religious and social thought, as well as in the gender order. The cult of the *mater magna*, which included blood sacrifices meant to fertilize the earth, can be traced (as in Anatolia) back to the Neolithic epoch. In Greece the *mater magna* was called by her Phrygian name, Matar Kubilyea, later Kybele. The natural laws of destruction and creation, death and procreation were celebrated and represented in worship. With the development of writing, bull sacrifice became more and more the center point of the *mater magna* cult. Walter Burkert writes:

The form of worship in the old priest state Pessinus drew the most attention : here, the *Galloi*, or eunuch priests, honored the mother god by emasculating themselves. The myth of Attis, the lover of Meter, who was castrated and died under a pine tree, but remained the *parhedros* of the goddess, is associated with this.

Bull sacrifice was thus marked by a sexual symbolism, which -- corresponding to the Demeter cult and the cult of the *mater magna* -- also signified fertility. In its early form, the bull sacrifice needed to be repeated every twenty years, that is, for every generation. It was not a sacrifice that was meant "for eternity", but rather was subject to a cyclical conception of time, a conception based in generations and regenerations.

It is as if the blood of the bull served as a protective skin that was eventually used up and thus needed to be renewed after a certain time. Thus, the perspective of a votive religion comes into play: through Taurobolium, the initiate "takes upon himself the vow of a twenty year cycle" , *bis denie vota suscipit orbis...*The cycle of repetitions was to lend duration to his well-being in this life. Thus, the Taurobolium is a "sign of fortuitous success", *symbolon etuychies*, an insurance against all the adverse circumstances that can threaten life.

In the course of the centuries, the sacrifice of bulls, which was originally dedicated to a *mater magna*, spread to other cultures-- the bull surfaces in numerous myths of the Creto-Minoic culture. The bull becomes the symbolic animal of Dionysos, who emerged in eighth century Greece--contemporaneous with the establishment of the full phonetic alphabet, and finally, the bull sacrifice also comes to play an important

role in the Mithras cult. Here it takes center stage in the worship proceedings. We know relatively little about the origins of the Mithras cult. It first spread quite late. The bull-killer Mithras was intimately related to the sun god, as *soli invicto*. Both of these facts, the cult's late spread and its connection to the sun god, who stands for a linear conception of time and a departure from the moon calendar, suggest an intimate relationship to alphabetic writing, which also led to the development of historic thinking, that is, thinking organized by a progressive conception of time. Already the Greeks themselves made a connection between alphabetic writing and agriculture; this can be seen not only in the symbolism of the bull sacrifice, but also in the fact that linear writing itself was compared to the plowing of a field. This connection becomes even more clear when we consider that the English and French word for page derives from the Latin 'pagus,' the field, the land. Burkert sees a connection to classical Greek philosophy in the fact that in the Mithras cult, both the slaughtering of the bull and the initiation of cult members took place in a cave. "A resonance with Plato's cave allegory cannot be misheard", he writes. Thus, he argues, it remains "unclear, to what extent the Mithras promised the initiates a redemption from the world, the cave, or rather guaranteed a heroic, victorious existence in precisely this world."

In ancient Rome, the Mithras cult was widespread among soldiers, and in this context the blood sacrifice took on new forms. There is evidence reaching back to the second century of a ritual in which "the initiate squats in a pit beneath an arch of beams, over which the bull is slaughtered, so that the outpouring blood flows down upon him -- a blood baptism in the full sense," writes Burkert. Here as well, the sexual element plays an important role, but now in a transformed way. Burkert argues that in the Mithras mysteries it seems that

warrior-like masculinity suppresses all sexuality and femininity. It was said that 'Mithras hates women'. None the less, in the known cult reliefs, remarkable attention was paid to the genitals of the dying bull -- the semen

that bursts out is collected in a crater, a scorpion reaches towards the testicles, the penis transforms into an ear of corn -- the metamorphosis of procreation, even in death. But we have no text about this. In the Meter mysteries, castration becomes a central *fascinosum*; one has the impression of finding an obsession with sexuality in a negative image.

That is, the Mithras cult reaches back to a central image of the pre-literary religions-- the blood sacrifice referring to destruction and procreation -- but gives it a new meaning. In place of the *mater magna* cult we now have the cult of masculinity, accompanied -- and this is crucial -- by a new cult of fertility, in which the death of the masculine as a sexual symbol of fertility is accompanied by the creation of a mental fertility seen as equivalent to masculinity.

This interpretation of the history of blood sacrifice also suggests itself, if this fertility is seen in relation to the contemporaneous development of the Aristotelian theory of "animate semen". In his theory of the generation of the genders, Aristotle proposes that semen "comes from above.". Although it is not the soul itself, the "seed of man" is "animated through a reason that penetrates from the outside" which represents an immaterial "originary material of the heavenly bodies" and is divine. That women are at all born, was attributed by Aristotle to the fact, that the "animate semen" in many cases could not sufficiently hold their own against "matter", that is, the earthly, and, as he says, the "source of life must admit defeat, before he can promote the development of his own kind." Aristotle's teaching emerged only a few decades after the new Ionic alphabet had become the one and only official form of writing in the Athenian government - a process which was accompanied by the creation of schools and the general dissemination of the ability to read and write among the citizens. This act completed the transformation that had begun with the introduction of the phonetic alphabet and which led to the establishment of the city state, Greek democracy, and radically new forms of religious, philosophical, and scientific thought.

With this shift from sexual to mental fertility a transformation in the dynamic relationship between the symbolic and the "real" or (social) order took place: while the cult of the mother gods represented an attempt to *reflect* the laws of nature on a mental, symbolic level, the Mithras cult reveals a kind of "projective" thought, through which the world is to be *formed*. The different relationship between symbol and world (or culture and nature) is again especially legible in the relationship between religion and gender. The cult of the "great goddess" gives little insight into the social order of the societies in which mother gods are worshipped -- they can be matrilineal or patrilineal, matrilocal or patrilocal, and have a social order in which the female gender plays an important or a subordinate role. In the written religions, in contrast, the privileging of the "mind", which is seen as equivalent to masculinity, does have an effect on the gender order. In all cultures of writing, but especially in three 'religions of the book', the masculine is declared to be the legislative and executing authority. The logos, the mind, which is regarded as superior to everything embodied, determines the social order, and the social order assigns the male gender to incarnate the symbol itself. This also holds true even when the symbolic bearer himself cannot "read" the symbol.

As we know, the Mithras Cult was widely spread among soldiers who could not read or write. We can, however, still explain their attraction to a cult which featured animal sacrifice, and thus the Alpha, at its center. The Mithras cult could be described as a cult of literacy without writing. It was concerned primarily with the dominance of the mind or the symbolic, and this dominance then found its expression in the symbolic assignment to one gender. The attraction of this symbolic order for those, from whom the symbol -- or the domesticating power of writing -- might have seemed threatening, lied precisely in this concreteness. That means that the Mithras cult -- with its central ritual of bull sacrifice -- can be understood as a culture of writing for "illiterates". Of course, it stood under the symbol of writing, but its main message was that the mind was embodied in the male body. Here I would like to

propose the hypothesis, that groups, in which the cult of literacy (and that means the equation of mind with masculinity) is coupled with "illiteracy" (in the sense of the incapability to understand a symbol as a symbol) -- as in the Mithras cult and many fundamentalist movements -- share a marked tendency towards the use of violence against women and all others that do not belong to the group. If the establishment of writing is experienced as a destructive power, the experience of writing as a creative power is lacking here. In this context, it is worth considering the Jewish law, which - - unique among world religions -- stipulates that all male members of the religious community must learn to read and write. This duty, it seems to me, is to be understood in connection with the symbolic wound of circumcision. At the same time, circumcision is a symbol for the wound which the letter inflicts on the male body.

In its later development, the Mithras cult underwent a decisive transformation, and came more and more to resemble the Christian doctrine of sacrifice as an eternal redemption: this transformation also shows how much this sacrificial ritual had become an expression of a new religious thought.

'A famous, often cited taurobolium inscription, written by Aedesius, insures that he who is consecrated in this manner is born again to eternity, *in aeternum renatus*. This is hardly compatible with the repeatedly and already earlier documented rule which required that the Taurobolium be repeated every 20 years. The Aedesius inscription is dated 376, during the last pagan reaction, two generations subsequent to the victory of Christianity. The suspicion that this was a borrowing from Christianity is unavoidable.

The history of the alpha is the story of the transformed bull sacrifice. Not only because the sacrifice, at first dedicated to the great goddess, was later offered up to a male god, the *soli invicto*; nor because this transformation was accompanied by a transformation in the gender order, or even because the sacrifice, which had needed to be repeated in order to correspond with cyclical return, became, after the introduction of writing -- , that which remains , an eternal sacrifice. Above all, the story of the letter "A" bears witness to the domestication of sexuality, the transformation of sex

into gender by the symbol itself. While the Priest is castrated in the cult of the *magna maeter*, in the Mithras cult the bull is castrated. Now transformed into an ox, the bull is subjected to the yoke, and in this function he becomes the symbolic form of a domesticated fertility, that is, fertility in the service of agriculture. In many depictions of the Mithras cult, the penis of the bull is transformed in an ear of corn. "In that the penis of the bull becomes an ear of corn, agriculture is grounded in sacrifice." Seen in this way, Freud's linkage between the plough, instruments of death and the masculine genitals is not so arbitrary as it might first seem.

By way of conclusion I would like to pose one final question: if knowledge about the history of the letters is by and large lost, that is withdrawn or effaced from memory and consciousness, how can its effect on the social order be so profound as to allow it to be mistaken for nature itself? Lacan offers one possible answer by saying that the „amnesia of repression is one of the most effective forms of memory“. But there is, beyond this, also the possibility of a historical interpretation of Freud's Oedipal complex, which, as we know, is based on the threat of castration by the father. From the beginning, the development of this theory has referred to the male gender; the transfer of this model to the female gender never quite succeeded. Jacques Lacan reinterpreted this castrating father as language or the capacity to symbolize (Symbolisierungsfähigkeit); he argued that language, represented by the father, is the Law that brings about the separation from the early symbiosis with the mother and „the world“ and represents the entrance into the symbolic order. By this, Lacan means the entry into the community, the consensus of which is based on symbols, signs, rituals etc. Now, if we read the figure of the father not as the actual father but as language, and language in turn not as spoken but as written language, and written language in turn as the signs of the alphabet, the Oedipal triangle appears as a representation of the history of the letter „Alpha“ with both its aspects: symbolic castration of the bull on one side and the creation of a concept of „mental fertility“

symbolized in masculinity on the other. It might be that this symbolism, passed from generation to generation, contributed to the fact the „secretum“ of the alphabet remained in the collective imaginary until today.

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