Adding or Removing Clarity? Hegel, Hassan Massoudy and the Reason of Arabic Script and Calligraphy

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In the third part of his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Hegel famously claims that "alphabetic writing is in and for itself the more intelligent form" (*Philosophy of Mind*, 197), as it directs "the mind's attention … to the spoken word and its abstract elements," allowing meaning to express itself "immediately and unconditionally" (198). There, Hegel is advocating primarily against Chinese ideograms, but as it will be shown in this paper his views entail also the superiority of alphabetic scripts over abjad writing systems, such as that of the Arabic language (1). The paper thus contrasts Hegel's ideal of written signs as transparent conveyors of meaning with the inherent logic of the Arabic script as it emerges in the calligraphic tradition, suggesting that, from another perspective, a certain interruption of immediate intelligibility can in fact intensify meaning and clarity. In particular, the works by the Iraqi calligrapher Hassan Massoudy are taken as examples of such intensifications and somehow as practical meta-reflections on the peculiar "reason" operating in Arabic script (2). Finally, Hegel's remarks on the graphic signs will be reconsidered to ascertain why this kind of reason is rejected (although partially glimpsed) by him and what limits it can highlight as to his way of thinking the relation between writing and language (3).

Hegel, the Alphabetic Writing and the Arabic Abjad

At least since Plato's criticism of writing, Western philosophy has often argued—or at least assumed—that writing is subsidiary to oral speech. Notoriously, Derrida commented at length on this (1978, 1982, 1997, 2004), specifically identifying Hegel as a prominent figure of this "phonocentric" tradition (*Of Grammatology*, 97–8; *Speech and Writing* 123–4). For the philosopher of German Idealism, reason is expressed more adequately in speaking than in writing, since the written language relies more heavily on sensibility and thus tends much more than voice to "sterilise or immobilise spiritual creation" (*Of Grammatology*, 25). As a matter of fact, "the objects perceived by the eye … persist beyond the perception of their sensible, exterior, stubborn existence; they resist the *Aufhebung* and do not let themselves as such be relevés by temporal interiority" (*The Pit and the Pyramid*, 92).

Quite interestingly, the idea of the "privilege of sound in idealization," as Derrida puts it (*Of Grammatology*, 98), leads Hegel to even sketch a comparison between writing systems, based on how closely each of them is connected to the phonetic *logos*. In §459 of the third part of his *Encyclopaedia*, in particular, he contrasts "alphabetic writing" with what he calls the "hieroglyphic script," whereby the latter does not refer to the Egyptian hieroglyphs (a form of writing combining pictographic and phonetic elements, as Hegel knew [see *The Philosophy of History*, 219; Stewart 185–9]), but to the (to his knowledge) purely pictographic system of Chinese writing.1

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Expectedly, Hegel declares a univocal preference for the former over the latter: "*hieroglyphic script* designates *representations* with spatial figures, whereas *alphabetic script* designates *sounds* which are themselves already signs" (*Philosophy of Mind*, 196).

Hegel's argument against hieroglyphs is based on a fundamental idea of his philosophy: *concepts are superior to images in capturing reality*. It is not that images cannot convey any rationality at all, but conceptually articulated rationality has a higher degree of mediation and therefore greater completeness than visually articulated rationality. The relative inadequacy of images compared to concepts also entails that graphic signs used in writing are less adequate whenever they draw attention to themselves rather than to the concepts they convey: the more transitive a sign is—i.e., the more its sensible appearance disappears while performing its function—the more adequate it is. Hieroglyphs are considered defective semiotic devices precisely for these reasons: instead of univocally referring to the constitutive elements of spoken words—which are in turn signs of concepts—, as the alphabetic script does, they translate with their own visual bodies the relations of the world into images (so that the meaning of a series of pictograms can be well understood without knowing the spoken word to which they correspond).2 In so doing—Hegel argues—they do not provide any significant rational articulation, but offer themselves as sensible representations that must themselves be rationally deciphered. This greatly limits their potential complexity and effectiveness in grasping reality.

Within this framework, it could be legitimately wondered how Hegel would judge an abjad script such as that of Arabic and Hebrew, that is indeed phonetic but does not write all its sounds—indeed, only consonants and long vowels. This question remains unanswered in his texts, and yet it is interesting to speculate on it for at least two reasons: first, because it helps us understand better Hegel's point on writing, which risks being to some extent oversimplified within the limits of this binary opposition between alphabetic and pictographic signs; second because, even setting aside Hegel's critical horizon, it paves the way for a philosophical understanding of the peculiar rationality connected to this form of writing—a topic that is currently addressed only in the context of cognitive sciences (see Al-Hamouri, Xuehu et al.).3

To start—quite obviously—the phonemic character of abjad script already places it one step above the pictographic logic of hieroglyphs. An abjad written sign indeed involves the mediation of voice to reach its intended meaning, and its semiotic chain thus articulates itself in two steps and three stages, just like that of any sign e.g., in the German language: (1) the written sign "علم" refers to (2) a sound, /ʕilm/, which then refers to (3) a meaning, "science." Differently from what happens with German or Greek, however, not all of the read sounds have their 1:1 counterpart in the written form of the word—notably, the "i," being a short vowel, needs in this case to be integrated by the reader. What makes the semiotics of abjad signs distinct from that of alphabetic signs is this non-automatic passage from 1 to 2.

One could easily object that this is often the case with English as well. Indeed, I maintain that from a genuine Hegelian point of view, languages such as English display a "less pure" alphabet-language systems than languages, such as German, Latin or Greek, that render their phonemes unambiguously and exhaustively (on this, see e.g., Kittler 109). Arabic language, nonetheless, poses at least one additional problem that arises only to a lesser extent in English. In Arabic, different readings of the same written word quite often lead to different meanings, so that "علم", for instance, can be read as well as /ʕalima/ ("he knew"), /ʕallama/ ("he taught"), or /ʕalam/ ("sign, flag"). Only the context decides on how the word is actually to be read,4 and such decisions must implicitly be taken for a good part of the words in the sentence, given that e.g. conjugations and declesions largely rely on unwritten phonemes ("كتبت" potentially being /katabtu/, "I wrote," /katabta/, "you [m.] wrote,"/katabti/, "you [f.] wrote," /katabat/, "she wrote," /kutibat/ "it was written,"….). Of course, English as well as has cases such as "read" (/ɹiːd/ [present tense] and /ɹɛd/ [past tense/past participle]) or "close" (/kləʊz/ "to close", and

/kləʊs/ "close" [= near]), yet they are statistically so few as to hardly affect the experience of reading English as a whole.

The process of comprehension taking place in languages like Arabic thus involves a constant back-and-forth between the level of the written sign (1) and that of the meaning (3). The written sign (1) often opens up different reading options (2a, 2b, 2c….) referring to at least as many meanings (3a, 3b, 3c…), and it is only the whole meaning of the relevant context that definitely binds the sign to its actual reading (e.g., 2a). Whereas German *always* and English *nearly always* have one and only one reading for each of their written signs, in Arabic there is very often no automatic coincidence between script and reading: reading itself poses an interpretation problem.5

As the media theorist Friedrich Kittler observes in a text that deeply engages with §459 of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia*, the intrinsic interpretability of abjad script opens the doors to misunderstandings and, what's more, to potentially deceitful usage of the written language (107-9). From Hegel's standpoint, this feature of course makes abjad script less perfect than Latin-based alphabets—which, historically speaking, evolved as an integration of it (speficically, of the Phoenician abjad, see Crystal 202). If the best script is supposed to represent a clear sequence of sounds according to a fixed pairing between graphemes and phonemes, then abjad is just a partially satisfying device, as it allows for multiple and phonetically equally legimate readings. Like hieroglyphs, though obviously not to the same extent, "the analysis" of abjad written signs "appears to be possible in the most various and divergent ways" (Hegel 2007, 197). The material, visual elements of the abjad, much more so than those of German letters, resist full permeation by reason and force the reader to engage with the very *Daseyn* of the written word.

Hegel's framework apparently leads us to consider the necessity of this engagement negatively as the imperfection of a system that has not attained the clarity of European alphabets. In what follows, however, it is precisely this idea that will be challenged, by trying to consider the peculiarity of Arabic writing starting from some other basis than conceptual transparency, and specifically trying to pay heed to the eminent valorisation of the virtues of this script allowed by the tradition of Arabic calligraphy.

A Way of Making Truth Clearer: Arabic Calligraphy

Everything that has been said so far in Hegel's terms about Arabic abjad writing system could be said a fortiori for that particular configuration thereof which is calligraphy (*al-khaṭ*). If the abjad sign is itself opaque and does not immediately refer to a sound, calligraphy goes even further in this direction: instead of valuing the mere transitivity and instrumentality of the written word, it turns the latter into an artistic object; calli-graphy (καλῶς γράφειν) is *beautiful* writing as much as it is *meaningful* writing. Examining the exact relation between these two dimensions—the aesthetic and the semiotic one—iuxta propria principia, that is, from within the categories and the perception of the world where these calligraphic practices arose, can thus be interesting to assess whether Hegel's ideal of a purely semiotic sign can be contrasted to another point of view on writing—a point of view that maybe does not consider the image-quality of script as a mere obstacle or source of ambiguities in the transmission of meaning.

Notoriously, the importance of calligraphy in the Arab-Islamic context could hardly be underestimated. Whereas figurative arts traditionally popular in the West such as painting and sculpture have largely been banned on religious grounds, calligraphy has always been promoted as a noble art, and its history has to some extent woven with that of Islamic devotion itself. If "Allah is beautiful and loves beauty," as a well-known hadith reads, for sure calligraphy, together with poetry, is the cultivation of beauty *par excellence* (Safavi 34–5; Puerta-Vilchez 88-91). As a matter of fact, calligraphers often gained recognition in the courts and were granted a special social and economic status, for dignifying "writing"—and most notably, the writing of the

Holy Qur'an—was regarded as an extremely prestigious task;6 sometimes, they were also part of Sufi confraternites, as the world of letters was recognised—much like in Jewish Kabbalah—a profound mystical meaning (see Schimmel 77–114). What this all makes clear is that calligraphy has never been perceived as a purely decorative art, that is, as a practice that employed words to produce mere aesthetic effects. The teaching of calligraphy has constantly been guided by strict ethical principles connecting the "purity (*ṭahārah*) of writing" with the "purity of the soul;"7 moreover, the visual effect of calligraphic works has always been supposed to also serve the meaning, and not to be an end itself. A fundamental aesthetic principle throughout the history of calligraphy has been that, however complex, the calligraphy must preserve all the elements of the words and therefore remain potentially readable (see Puerta-Vilchez 222-3). After all, apparently not so differently from Hegel's ideal written sign, calligraphy is in Ibn Khaldūn's definition "a drawing and design of letters that represent the spoken words." (Ibn Khaldūn 487)

Nonetheless—and here lies perhaps its most interesting side—, the beauty of calligraphy is not just supposed to serve the meaning, but to exalt it and let it shine more than clear writing allows to. This is where Hegel's discourse is no longer compatible with the world and claims of the Arabic calligraphers. One of the most prominent of all times among them, Ibn Muqla (ca. 885–940), despite adopting a very terse writing style, explicitly states that the criterion of beauty is superior to that of clarity (see Murād).8 An even more authoritative source, none other than the Prophet's cousin Alī ibn ʾAbī Ṭālib, implicitly subverts Hegel's ideal by stating that "beautiful writing makes the truth clearer" (Atiyeh 142). It is not that the meaning elevates, and ultimately overcomes, the sensible appearance of the sign, which in turn ought to be as plain and inconspicuous as possible in order to simply release its meaning; rather, the sensible appearance of the sign is thought of as something that can make its meaning clearer. Concretely, the sign contributes to the clarity of the truth not only in its being meaningful but also in its being beautiful.

The relation between script and reason or truth thus works quite differently in the Arabic calligraphy and in Hegel's view: the latter regards the written sign as a device to codify the spoken words—in which truth first delivers itself—and hence has a purely instrumental criterion to judge it ("is the sign able to univocally evoke a distinct sound?"); in contrast, the former considers the articulation of the written word as part and parcel of the disclosure of truth, which is supposed to be tied to writing no less than to voice. But how does this participation occur? And what has this discourse about calligraphy to do with the abjad script in general? Answering the first question will hopefully bring out the answer to the second question too. Yet, Arab calligraphers and calligraphy theorists are seldom explicit as to how "beautiful writing" actually "makes the truth clearer." This is where briefly considering a case study may actually help.

The choice of taking into account the contemporary artist Hassan Massoudy (1944–), born in Najaf (Iraq) and working in Paris since 1969, is—like any choice—of course to some extent arbitrary. Yet, I think, it finds more than one plausible justification. Firstly, and most trivially, he is widely recognized as one of the most prominent heirs alive of the millennial calligraphic tradition; secondly, he has commented himself on his artistic practice in aesthetic terms, which is relatively uncommon among calligraphers but extremely precious for our inquiry; thirdly, having lived in France for quite a long time has allowed him to formulate these reflections with an unprecedented sensibility to the specifically Western aesthetic lexicon, which again is welcome in an attempt to sketch a comparison between Hegel and the "reason" of calligraphy; fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, his works display in a just particularly vivid way virtues and features of the calligraphic act that can be than recognised in the repertory of the calligraphic tradition as a whole.

When we look at Massoudy's works as well as to his own remarks (many publications have integrated selections of both, see e.g. Massoudy 1986, 2002, 2017, 2020), we realise that the first

way in which calligraphy establishes a privileged relation with truth is through what I would call an "aesthetic intensification." The calligrapher's endeavour may be seen as that of making the written words he/she is portraying more resonating and aesthetically powerful, that is, more capable of immediately touching upon our senses than they are in their ordinary vocal or written expressions.9 Massoudy loves putting this in terms of energy (*Calligraphe*, 121) or breathing (46). The calligrapher "inspirates" from the outside the emotional vibrations of the meaning that he is going to write, lets this energy mature and expand inside himself ("concentration" is, not by chance, another key word of Massoudy's art, see 81), and then unleashes it together with the ink on the paper. Such a way of proceeding borders on the experiences of Islamic mystic, as Massoudy himself repeatedly admits in commenting his series of calligraphies on Ibn 'Arabī (*Perfect Harmony*): both involve the transfiguration of ordinary experience into the infinite realm of imagination, as well as the effort to bring back this vision—or just a fragment thereof—and let it appear. "In the calligrapher's eyes, in the depths of his head," he writes, "all kinds of calligraphic signs and shapes float. With his hand and inked reed, he tries to deliver his images on paper" (Calligraphe, 84).

Such a detour—from the meaning to its imaginal transfiguration, and from there back into the matter of writing—allows the meaning hidden in the writing to somehow become sensorially visible in the matter and shapes of writing itself.10 This visibilisation, of course, neither is nor can be "neutral" in any sense of the word, but is always coloured by the emotional *Stimmung* of the artist, who accesses the meaning with his/her own eyes. Somehow, the intensification realised by the calligraphy grants precisely the possibility of interacting with a meaning that is no longer just entrusted to the silent universality of interwoven concepts, but has become a "seen image." As spectators, we are touched by the vividness of a meaning embodied in one of its thousand possible bodies (91), and we feel invited to share this interplay of transfigurations first-hand.

Like any calligrapher, Massoudy achieves this visibilisation by working on the disposition (that is, on the rhythm of full and empty spaces), the cut of letters (which involves a certain material craftmanship of the calamus) and, not least, the colour(s) of his calligraphy. More specifically, however, his calligraphic poetic, so to speak, is characterised by an extensive use of focalisations. Notwithstanding other deep stylistic variations between his earlier (1986) and later (2002, 2017, 2020) works, Massoudy always shows a peculiar tendency to highlight certain characters—often a single word—more than others. That word often takes on a special role in the aesthetic balance of the composition, for it becomes the "focal point" or the "dominant note" from which the emotional and imaginal charge of the calligraphy springs forth. In his most recent pieces in particular (but there are also earlier examples, see *Calligraphe*, 62–3), Massoudy has consolidated a scheme that puts a sentence, mostly a quotation, on the bottom of the paper, with a single word from it in the middle of the composition as the largest and most elaborated part of the work. Interestingly, the word is usually not easily readable by itself, with the result that in the aesthetic experience of the calligraphy one gets *first* a generic attunement thorugh this (still meaningless) set of lines and void, *then* moves to the quotation and relates this tune to a linguistic meaning, and *finally* sees the meaning fade again into the lines. The endless circularity between meaning and forms works like a resonance box for the aesthetic vibrations of the former, that allows us to delve deeper and deeper into its imaginal potential and opens it up to inexhaustibly new shades. Thereby, meaning is unfolded—continually made more "unclear" but, indeed, in a way that "makes it clearer."

The De-coincidence and the "Sign as Sign"

Performatively as well as theoretically, Massoudy offers an alternative way of thinking about the relation between writing and meaning, that does not start from the Hegelian premise that the former is a mere "ladder" to the latter. To finally address the second of the two fundamental

questions, however, it can be asked whether and to what extent this artistic dynamics of calligraphy can be extended to the Arabic script as a whole. Is it not just Arabic calligraphy, after all, that transforms the attention drawn to the written sign into such a powerful intensification of meaning? The pervasiveness of Arabic calligraphy in Arab culture and even in Arab everyday life—from newspapers to shop signs, from book titles to building decorations—as well as the particular suitability of the Arabic script to the calligraphic practice—its characters remaining recognizable even after significant deformations—, are naturally aspects that very well indicate a continuity between the discourse on calligraphy and that on writing, but they do not yet capture the essential point: whether what makes the Arabic calligraphic resistent and potentially alternative to Hegel's paradigm of the alphabetic script has some root in the very form of the Arabic abjad. My contention is that indeed the "aesthetic intensification" of Arabic calligraphic art as we have just described it is allowed precisely by that feature of the latter that would be despised by a genuinely Hegelian gaze: its relative in-dependence from (or, as I will prefer, de-coincidence with) voice.

As mentioned, whereas in (purely) alphabetic languages the relation between graphemes and phonemes is immediate, and so the problem of meaning never affects the dimension of writing, Arabic written words often need a preliminary assessment of meaning in order to be voiced. Consequently, much more often than their alphabetic counterparts, abjad words end up being perceived explicitly as "signs" and produce an interruption—however short—of immediate intelligibility (the brain dynamic of this process is well described by Al-Hamouri et al.). The German speaker can easily forget that he/she is dealing with graphic lines and dots, and never actually raises the question of their relation to spoken words; the Arabic reader, on the contrary, is quite familiar with the effort of making sense of writing. Such a "de-coincidence"—as I would like to call it11— between writing and voice in Arabic qualifies as hermeneutic, i.e. as requiring a collaboration of understanding, the very act of reading: voice springs only as the result of a projection of meaning, and not as a given datum; or to put it more even more clearly, reading without comprehension is necessarily impossible.

The main consequence of this hermeneutic character of reading abjad is a peculiar insistence both on the materiality of the graphic sign—which is not reduced to a mere encryption, but must be interpreted—, and on voice—which is not simply there, but must be *voiced*. In a way, voice transcends the sign, yet the sign—clearly appearing as such—cannot be definitively obliterated by voice.12 This irreducibly problematic relation between the two terms is arguably one of the decisive factors behind the flourishing of calligraphy. If this art has thrived so well in the Arabic world—I believe—it is because it does not create anything foreign to the semiotic logic of abjad writing, but "simply" dwells in the margin of de-coincidence that the language itself opens up. The calligrapher ultimately shows more conspicuously than the ordinary writer what Arabic constantly puts before the eyes of its reader, namely the "matter that constitutes" the written sign, its "birth under the pressure of the calamus" (*Calligraphe*, 109), and the laborious emergence of the voice that strives to speak it. Of course, Massoudy—for instance—practices with particular intensity this "exercise of death and life on the sentence" (7): he brings the word back to its ink materiality, kills it in its immediate intelligibility and so makes it vibrate as *the sign of a voice that is not yet there*; yet, this aesthetic operation is ultimately allowed by the original vibration of a writing that is *always* calling for a voice. Such a vibration—the outcome of de-coincidence between voice and writing—is the innermost proprium of the Arabic abjad script.

Needless to say, Hegel is completely deaf to the reasons of this material writing. The possibility of maintaining some sort of divarication between the sign and *its* voice is so far from what he considers a successful form of script that, quite to the contrary, he wants the graphic sing to abandon its character of conscious representation (*Vorstellung*) in order to become a transparent presentation (*Darstellung*) of its vocal reference—that is to say, he wants the sign to lose as much

as possible its opacity. To be clear, this ideal does not entail any preference for icons, indexes, or symbols, i.e. for signs that are more naturally connected to what they are supposed to stand for. Signs that are unrelated to (that is, *free from*) any natural connection to their reference are considered more spiritually elevated by Hegel; and yet, these signs can advance even further in their spiritual development if they cease to explicitly appear for what they are. The sign must fade into its signifying; even more, signifying must fade into the clear exposition of the signified itself.

In §458 of *Encyclopaedia*, which immediately precedes the paragraph on the alphabet, Hegel speaks of the (dead) body of the graphic sign as animated by the (living and) foreign soul (*fremde Seele*) of the meaning. Crucially, this body and this soul are not involved in an "exercise of life and death" that leaves both in their mutual de-coincidence; rather—to counter Massoudy's image with the words of Sarah Horton, a scholar who in a recent article has taken up and valorised Derrida's critique of the Hegelian philosophy of writing—, "the body must die and become a tomb in order to fix spirit's attention on the soul or, in other terms, on the ideality that, crucially, is not present" (101). The body must paradoxically be sacrificed to the spirit in order to make room for life, and Hegel believes—perhaps not without reasons, given what has been discussed so far—that the alphabetic body lends itself particularly well to this sacrifice.

What Hegel never takes into account is the possibility of a reason *of* the body, i.e. *of* script, as such—a reason that does not reach the material, the ink, from the outside, but comes from its very depths. The reason *in* writing is never a reason *of* writing, for Hegel, since the body of script must ultimately coincide with—and fulfill itself in—the original reason of the soul/voice: "Though the *Aufhebung* is both a cancellation and a preservation," as Horton notes, "the body must still be subordinated to ideality. The *Aufhebung* is supposed to unite the intelligible and the sensible in some higher unity while preserving their differences, yet this unification still presupposes an original ideality" (99).

There is, in fact, one point in §459 where Hegel seems to momentarily consent to the logic of de-coincidence; at a closer look, however, this is actually the passage that distances Hegel most radically from any form of (calli)graphic reason:

> [L]earning to read and write an alphabetic script is to be regarded as an inestimable and not sufficiently appreciated educational instrument, in that it diverts the mind's attention from the sensorily concrete to the more formal aspect, the spoken word and its abstract elements, and makes an essential contribution to laying and clearing the ground for the subject's inwardness. Later too, ingrained habit effaces the peculiarity of alphabetic writing, that it appears to take, in the interest of vision, a roundabout route to representations by way of audibility; habit makes it a hieroglyphic script for us, so that in using it we need not have the mediation of the sounds before our consciousness, whereas people who are little accustomed to reading speak aloud what they read in order to understand it in its sound. (198)

Hegel acknowledges that learning to read and write the alphabetic script has inherent pedagogical value, to the extent that it teaches us how to grasp the spiritual content of the corporeal—how to abstract, as he states shortly after. As our acquaintance with the script improves, he observes, we no longer see graphemes as signs of sounds, and so we lose this "roundabout route to representations by way of audibility:" the alphabetic signs becomes hieroglyphs. *Prima facie*, it might seem that Hegel considers this new stage a regression compared to the one in which we see the graphic signs as a signs—and hence that the de-coincidence of the sign with its content is indeed spiritually fruitful—but it is precisely the opposite:

> Besides the fact that with the facility that transforms alphabetic script into hieroglyphics the ability in abstraction gained by the initial practice remains, hieroglyphic reading is for itself a deaf reading and a dumb writing; it is true that the audible or temporal and the visible or spatial each has its own foundation, initially of equal validity with the other; but in the case of alphabetic script there is only one foundation, and in fact it stands in the correct relationship: the visible language is related

> to the audible only as a sign; the intelligence expresses itself immediately and unconditionally by speaking. (198)

As a matter of fact, the "hieroglyph" into which the alphabetic sign *turns* with habituation is entirely different from the "hieroglyph" that the Chinese character *is*: the former is such due to the full-fledged coincidence between the audible and the visible ("there is only one foundation"), the latter, due to the complete lack of any relation between these two dimensions ("each has its own foundation"). Hence, the phase of de-coincidence in which the learner of the alphabetic script momentarily finds him/herself can certainly be regarded as an advancement compared to the latter, but is just as certainly a step back compared to the full, immediate and unconditional intermingling of writing and voice corresponding to the former—where by "full intermingling," as seen, we must obviously mean "full animation of script by voice." Hegel aims to separate the problem of meaning from the issue of writing, in the sense that he wants writing to be a mere codification of a thought unfolding as voice. That's why the hieroglyph of the alphabet is the highest form of script in his ranking: it is so coincident with its sound to no longer be perceived in its materiality.

Compared to this scheme, the reason of Arabic script and calligraphy, insisting so much on the written sign as a sign, and considering its materiality as productively unavoidable, represents an extremely compelling objection, which forces us to ponder whether the relationship between writing and voice is "susceptible of being thought also in reverse (*à rebours*)" (Caramelli 82). Viewed from the perspective of calligraphy, in fact, the alphabetic hieroglyph does not seem very different from its pictogrammatic equivalent: both are evasions from the game of de-coincidence; both refuse to see the spoken language emerge from the written sign and establish itself precisely in the effort of being read.

If Hegel seeks to deliberately conceal the fact of linguisticity and confine us in the *natura naturata* of a language that we never truly see *emerging* from letters, the calligraphy of the Arab masters and the script from which it draws its strength bring us to the *natura naturans* of a language that suddenly gives voice to still silent signs. The clarity of the alphabetic character, so coincident with the voice as to eclipse itself in its reason, is obtained at the price of sacrificing the sign-being of the sign and with it the privilege of us as readers to take a step back and wonder at what precedes and exceeds spoken linguisticity. In contrast, the vowel-less, readable but not yet read writing of Arabic claims its peculiar clarity in making itself seen, and thus resisting the *Aufhebung* that wants the body reduced to the law of the soul: in the abjad, the voice arises and resonates as the miraculous articulation of a meaning that was not there before. Its de-coincident reason is less infallibly logical, and therefore also less anthropological than that of the alphabetic script, and the open game of its yet unfulfilled readability can lead us to where every (alphabetic) dialectic, without acknowledging it, begins: in the human endeavor of creating signs, in the im-possible—indeed, imaginal—proximity of voice and things.

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Notes

[1] Accordingly, the Egyptian civilization is reserved a more advanced position in the history of philosophy than the Chinese one in Hegel's lectures on the history of philosophy (see *The Philosophy of History*).

[2] At least in this regard, Hegel was objectively right, see Swanson 2020. Oddly enough, as Swanson points out, this possibility of understanding the script without being able to actually read it aloud curiously holds for Chinese written language as a whole, even though Chinese has in fact some phonetics components, i.e. characters representing syllables or sounds (55).

[3] Interestingly, these studies suggest both elements of strong discontinuity (see Al-Hamouri) and of substantial continuity (see Xuehu et al.) between Arabic and Latin-alphabetic languages in terms of the neural processes involved both in learning and reading them, which confirms that the question of the cognitive equivalence between abjad and alphabetic scripts is presently far from any univocal solution.

[4] Arabic can actually disambiguate such cases by intregating special diactric signs: for example, /ʕilm/ can be written as "عِلْم" and thereby be univocally distinguished from /ʕallama/ "عَلَّم". However, this integration, called تشكيل (*tashkīl*, lit. "formation"), is concretely adopted only in very specific contexts, i.e. in writing the Qur'ān (where ambiguity can not be admitted), dictionaries (that specifically need to clarify ambiguous cases) and in didactic texts (conceived for readers that are not familiar enough with the language). For the scope of this paper, I am thus considering Arabic abjad script as it is adopted in standard communicative situations. By the way, the very fact that standard language renounces this *tashkīl*, which could very much make Arabic work the same way as a Latin or Greek alphabetic language, witnesses that Arabic language practices are not bothered by the process of meaning disambiguation as much as a Hegel's understanding of script would assume them to.

[5] Recent cognitive studies have indeed observed different patterns of brain activation connected to the act of reading resp. Arabic and Latin-alphabetic languages, notably with reference to a higher involvement among Arabic speakers of the right side of the brain, which is capable of holding different meanings for the same word during a wider range of time (see Al-Hamouri).

[6] Together with Schimmel's work—focusing more on the intersections between (1) calligraphy and mysticism and (2) calligraphy and poetry—the most important studies on the history of Arab calligraphy in its social, material and stylistic aspects remain those by Sheila Blaire (2006) and Martin Lings (1976). These shall be supplemented by the book by José Miguel Puerta-Vilchez (2017) for an overview of Arab-Islamic aesthetics.

[7] On this, see for instance the interesting considerations by a prominent theorist of the Middle Age such as Abū Ḥayyān Al-Tawḥīdi (ca. 922–1023; Puerta-Vilchez 223–8).

[8] Also the contemporary calligrapher Hassan Massoudy, with whom I will soon deal, is clear in this regard, as he states that "whoever looks at a calligraphy perceives first the plastic aspect, and only then the meaning," adding that "often the information is confused by aesthetic effects" (see *Calligraphe*, 27; see also H. Massoudy/I. Massoudy 40).

[9] Massoudy—and he is not alone (see Schimmel 120; Blair 600)—often draws a more or less explicit parallel between calligraphy and music from this point of view, in that both these arts involve the extraordinary rendition of the ordinary (the written word, the spoken word) and obtain their "aesthetic intensification" through a peculiar mastery of rhythm and proportions.

[10] After all, the "realm of imagination (*mundus imaginalis*)," as Corbin very well shows, is conceived in Islamic mystics precisely as the junction point between the sensible and the super-sensible world, being the place where the supersensible can become a "sensible perception" (9).

[11] I take "de-coincidence" as an intermediate concept between coincidence and disconnection, and I freely borrow it from François Jullien (2017, 2020), who, however, mostly employs it in a more dynamical sense to designate the intentional act of de-coinciding. De-coincidence refers in my usage to a relationship based on a non-absolute, and therefore fruitful gap, which allows to put the related terms in perspective: to recognize them as distinct and for what they are, and yet not abandon them to the solitude of their ipseity. Abjad writing is de-coincident in the sense that at every moment it *is* and *is not* the voice that animates it, or in other terms, the voice that animates it always remains perceivable as something that "inhabits" it. It is precisely the fruitfulness of de-coincidence—I argue—that allows the creative gesture of the calligraper: the latter does not reopen an otherwise static, immediate identity, but opens up and makes more conspicuous (indeed, intensifies) the non-absolute distance between script and voice.

[12] This double, asymmetrical relation of course lends itself particularly well to be charged—and has in fact been charged—with religious parallels (see Schimmel 78–81).

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