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A Note on 'The Gesture of Writing' by Vilém Flusser and The Gesture of Writing

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Vilém Flusser (1920–1991), known as a philosopher of new media, was perhaps above all a committed writer. 'The Gesture of Writing' was first published as part of a collection of 'gestures,' essays analysing movements that project an internal through outwards, to others, e.g. painting, photographing, etcetera. 'The Gesture of Writing' contains the most complete description of Flusser's unique pattern of translating his own texts into various languages (he wrote in four) in order to derive as much from them as possible.

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I am addicted to alphabetic writing as to a narcotic. I cannot live without writing. And this for a very simple reason: writing forces me to force my thought into languages, and to force these languages in turn to follow alphabetic rules. I write in different languages, in about five [sic]. So it's about fighting against the languages I love ... forcing the languages to bring forth new information.

Vilém Flusser (1920–1991) is currently considerably better-known among German speakers than among Anglophones, and his thoughts on 'new media' are far better recognised than his probing analyses of writing. In publishing 'The Gesture of Writing' for the first time, that is, *New Writing* is showing an admirable resistance to a tendency to frame Flusser somewhat narrowly as a theorist of the 'digital'. 'The Gesture of Writing' gives English speakers access to another Flusser, the highly idiosyncratic and deeply committed writer, perhaps unique is his regular employment of translation as a means of 'mining' his own thought, and at least rare in identifying writing as a technology with a historical beginning and now, in the context of many faster, more flexible communicative possibilities, a foreseeable end.

'The Gesture of Writing' was written in English. The text is reproduced here with very minor changes – spelling, punctuation, and the occasional substitution of a word for clarity and comprehensibility. This is one of seven versions of the essay, in four different languages (Guldin 2005: 280). As such it presents one of the richest examples of Flusser's translation and back-translation process, alluded to in the quotation above (Flusser 1996: 88). It also contains the most complete account of this process that appears anywhere in his work (Guldin 2005: 280).

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Flusser was born and grew up in Prague, speaking both German and Czech, and studying other languages – English and French – in school. Hebrew was also part of his religious education. He was 19 when the Nazis occupied the city. He emigrated, first briefly, to Britain, and then to Brazil. In Brazil he learned Portuguese, became a cultural critic and at length a professor, first in the philosophy of science, and then in communicology, his own name for the theory of communication.

In the early 1970s, he returned to Europe. A decade later, he published *Für eine Philosophie der Photographie* (Flusser 1983), the first of a series of books outlining a theory of communication that won him a degree of fame, primarily in Germany. His pattern of translating his own texts might seem to have been an effort to integrate the various stages or frameworks of a life that was, as the title of his autobiography suggests, *Bodenlos* – without grounding, homeless (Flusser 1992). But his description of the process suggests something quite different, namely an effort to maintain the differences, and use them to stimulate further thought.

The essay under consideration here was first published in the year of Flusser's death in a car accident. It appeared as one essay in a volume of *Gesten*, or *Gestures* (Flusser 1991), each an attempt to analyse, phenomenologically, a specific movement through which an internal thought is projected outward, made manifest to others. Titles of other essays in the same volume include, for example, 'The Gesture of Painting', 'The Gesture of Photographing', 'The Gesture of Filming', and 'The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe'.

Flusser did not usually credit his sources. But he readily acknowledged his engagement with the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and with phenomenology. There is evidence of deep connections with many other thinkers – the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and the theologian Martin Buber (1878–1965) particularly prominent among them. But it is phenomenology that most decisively shaped Flusser's thought overall, and that surely underpins his understanding of media in relation to corresponding forms of consciousness. Elsewhere, notably in the book *Die Schrift: hat Schreiben Zukunft?* (Flusser 1987), Flusser discusses writing as a communication technology and a form of consciousness currently in decline, increasingly dominated by the rising mathematical and visual consciousness supported by 'technical images' (photography, film, video, synthetic imagery, sound reproduction, etcetera). In 'The Gesture of Writing', however, he focuses on what writing is and does, how it supports and circumscribes the form of consciousness he embraces as his own.

The Gesture of Writing

Vilém Flusser

To write means, of course, to perform an action by which a material (for instance chalk, or ink) is put on a surface (for instance a blackboard or a sheet of paper, to form a specific pattern (for instance letters). And the tools used during this action (for instance brushes and typewriters), are instruments that add something to something. Thus one would suppose that the gesture of writing is

a constructive action, if by 'construction' we mean the bringing together of various objects to form a new structure ('con-struction'). But this is misleading. If we want to grasp¹ what the gesture of writing really is about, we have to consider its original form. If we may trust archaeology, writing, at least as far as the Occident is concerned, was originally an act of engraving. The Greek verb '*graphein*' still connotes this. Some place, some time in Mesopotamia, people began to scratch soft clay bricks with sticks, and then to burn them to harden the scratched surfaces. And although we no longer do such a thing very often, it is this half-forgotten gesture of scratching which is the essence ('*eidōs*') of writing. It has nothing to do with constructing. It is, on the contrary, a taking away, a de-structuring. It is, both structurally and historically, closer to sculpture than to architecture. It is a gesture of making holes, of digging, of perforating. A penetrating gesture. To write is to in-scribe, to penetrate a surface, and a written text is an *inscription*, although as a matter of fact it is in the vast majority of cases an *onscription*. Therefore to write is not to form, but to in-form, and a text is not a formation, but an in-formation. I believe that we have to start from this fact if we want to understand the gesture of writing: it is a penetrating gesture that informs a surface.

Of course we are not aware of that fact while performing that gesture. We do not think about the act of writing while writing, but about what we are writing (which is, if you consider it, a dubious statement). Writing has become a habit, and habits are what we do without having to think about it. In fact, writing has become more than a habit. There is, if I am not mistaken, a writing centre in our brain, so that we are somehow born with the capacity for writing, as birds are born with the capacity for nest building, although such a parallel is probably misleading. Writing cannot be in our 'genetic programme' in the same way nest building is in the genetic programme of birds, because it is, after all, a cultural, and not a natural pattern of behaviour. It does not come to us like the behaviour of sucking, for instance. It comes to us rather like the behaviour of walking and speaking: we have to learn it, but we must learn it, if we are to behave according to human nature. But again, writing does not seem to belong to the same level as do walking and speaking. It seems to be more superficial, more recent, and therefore it is learned later in life, and many never learn it.

And although it is difficult to imagine a man of the future who does not walk or speak (such a creature would not be a 'man' according to our present definition of that term), we can very well imagine a man of the future who no longer writes, and in fact there are symptoms even now that point toward such a future, which shows the fluidity of the limit between natural and cultural behaviour and suggests that those two categories should be abandoned. In any case, writing has become for many of us more than a habit, but a sort of second nature. This is the reason we do not think about it while performing the gesture.

But, as always happens with phenomena obscured² by habit and more than habit, writing becomes almost mysterious if we approach it critically. If we draw off the cover of habit and more than habit, which renders writing an obvious gesture taken at face value, it becomes a gesture of such complexity that it defies description. I shall nonetheless attempt such a description. And I

shall restrict it to alphabetical writing as it is being performed at present. To write, we need several things that are supplied by our culture. First, we need a blank surface, for instance a blank sheet of paper. Second, we need an instrument that contains matter that contrasts with the whiteness of the paper and which can put that matter on the paper surface, for instance a typewriter supplied with a ribbon. Third, we need the letters of the alphabet, which is the shape of the contrasting matter we want to put on the blank surface. These letters may be stored in our memory, or, as in the case of the typewriter, in the instrument itself. Fourth, we need to know the convention that gives a meaning to the letters, which is, in the case of our alphabet, a series of sounds of a spoken language. Fifth, we need to know the rules that order the letters into higher structures, what is called 'orthography' = correct writing. Sixth, we need to know a language that can be signified by alphabetic letters. Seventh, we need to know the rules that order that language, what is called 'grammar'. (Premises five, six and seven imply each other and cause theoretical and practical problems). Eighth, we need an idea to be expressed in the language to be expressed in letters to be impressed on the surface. Ninth, we need a motive to express that idea. Now all these premises must be assembled if we are to write, but they are not all of the same ontological order. The typewriter is not the same sort of reality as is a spoken language or a rule of grammar, let alone an idea. Therefore writing is a gesture that occurs³ on several ontological levels. External observation will show only one of those levels. The other levels may be seen only using⁴ different and more dubious methods of observation. Let us begin with external observation.

The structure of writing is linear, which means that one starts it on the upper left corner of the sheet, makes a line of letters until one reaches the upper right corner of the sheet, jumps back to the left and starts again just below the line already written, and repeats that process until one reaches the lower right corner of the sheet of paper. Now this linear structure of writing is more or less firmly established in our memories, we take it more or less for granted. In fact, it is programmed in the typewriter, which is a machine for writing lines from left to right and for jumping back to the left side. Thus the typewriter is, to some extent, how one aspect of our mind works. But only to some extent, because the typewriter is more rigid than is our mental structure. The lines it writes are straighter than are the lines written by longhand, they are spaced more evenly on the sheet, and the letters are more evenly separated from each other and neater. Longhand writing is thus closer to our mental structure, and expresses it more directly. But of course this is an argument that may cut both ways. We may hold that the typewriter is more faithful to our mental processes than is longhand writing, and that the irregularities of handwriting are technical imperfections that have been overcome by the invention of the typewriter. The side of the argument we choose will reveal our attitude toward the gesture of writing.

If we hold that the typewriter is less faithful to the workings of our minds than is longhand, we consider writing to be a gesture related to drawing. A far more rigid drawing, to be sure, than is 'free' drawing, but still a gesture that puts shapes on a surface. The irregularities of handwriting are then considered to be deliberate compositions that are excluded from typed writing. The

typewriter is thus seen to be a 'poorer' instrument than is a pencil. If we hold that the typewriter is more faithful to the workings of our mind than is longhand, we consider writing to be a gesture related to conceptual thinking. A far more 'material' thinking, to be sure, than is 'internal' thinking, but still a gesture which puts concepts or their symbols into an ordered sequence. The irregularities of handwriting are then considered to be unwanted accidents avoided by typed writing. The typewriter is thus seen to be a 'better' instrument than is a pencil.

It is of course possible to combine those two attitudes toward writing. One may hold that it is a gesture which lies somewhere between drawing and conceptual thinking. I believe that Chinese ideograms are the result of such a synthesis of attitudes, but they are not for us. We are programmed for alphabetical writing, and must make do with it. It leaves us far more freedom than we believe in this respect, and what is called 'concrete poetry' is a proof of that freedom. It is a deliberate manipulation of the linear structure of writing. The sheet of paper becomes a surface on which letters may be put according to various patterns. Thus the letter may be seen outside its customary line, not only as a sign, but also as a figure in its own right. But it still preserves its conventional character of a 'musical' notation. But concrete poetry is still, essentially, a linear writing, even if the lines it puts on the surface are not straight lines. It stresses the family resemblance between writing and drawing, but unlike drawing it does not seek, primarily, to project shapes on a surface. What it projects on the surface are conventional signs, which are linear in accordance with their convention, and may become shapes only secondarily in disaccord with their convention. In other words, concrete poetry is not in its essence a gesture of drawing, but an unconventional gesture of writing.

It shows, however, the dialectics inherent in what may be called 'creative' action. Unconventional writing is of course easier for longhand than for typewriting, because the convention is programmed materially within the typewriter structure. But precisely because it is more difficult to impose a non-conventional structure on the typewriter than on the pencil, the typewriter is a more challenging instrument than is the pencil. If one aims at writing non-conventional lines with a typewriter, one must invent new methods of writing (for instance a specific manipulation of the paper). This is characteristic of creation: the more limits are imposed on the act (the more it is 'determined'), the better it can find new ways to change those limiting factors (the 'freer' it is). Unconventional gestures of writing, such as⁵ concrete poetry, suggest that the typewriter is a more challenging instrument than is the pencil.

At this point the initial consideration of writing as a gesture of scratching must be recalled. The pointed pencil (or pen or brush) reminds us of course much more of the original gesture of scratching than does the typewriter, which reminds us of nothing in our tradition except the piano. But if the gesture of typewriting is more like the gesture of a piano playing (which seems to be totally alien to writing), than like scratching, then we should conclude that the original essence of the gesture of writing has been gradually lost and is now replaced by a different essence. It may be held that if we type a text we perform an entirely different gesture from the one the Mesopotamian scribes

used to perform. But such a conclusion is hasty. On the one hand it is evident that to type is still to 'impress', namely a gesture that presses into a surface, although in fact it presses ink onto a surface. Its intention is one of digging. On the other hand the gesture of piano playing is not, in fact, totally alien to writing. It is, like writing, a linear gesture, although the lines it produces are composed of acoustic vibrations, not of letters. It may therefore be held that if we type we still engrave (at least as far as the intention of our gesture is concerned), and that the 'piano quality' of our gesture stresses this fact: we no longer engrave with a stick, but with a series of hammers. Which means that we no longer engrave with one hand only, but with all ten of our fingers. To type is thus a more penetrating gesture than is writing in longhand. We must keep this in mind when continuing our external observation.

Typing is pressing on keys marked with letters and similar signs, and its purpose is to have these letters and signs appear on the surface of a sheet of paper. Handwriting is moving one's hand in the way that results in the appearance of similar letters and signs on that surface. The two are totally different sorts of gestures, if we were to restrict our observations to hand motions only. But if we include the whole gesticulating body in our observations, it becomes obvious that the two are of the same sort: they are writing. Their identity is not only in their result: surfaces covered by letters, but also in the whole attitude of the gesturing body: a kind of listening followed by motion, in which these two alternating phases repeat each other. The listening, motionless, concentrated phase is just as characteristic of writing as is the phase of motion. Had we no direct, inner experience with writing (had we not its praxis), external observation could not account for the meaning of the listening that periodically interrupts the gesture of writing. To say that the writer is listening to an 'inner voice' which tells him what letters to put on the surface would be a mythological way of speaking. Still, external observation will have to admit that it is this listening which distinguishes true writing from a mere pounding upon a typewriter, as is done for instance by chimpanzees or illiterate children. We must therefore conclude that the writer chooses the letters he is going to write during those phases of concentration, although we can say nothing about the criteria according to which he chooses. But if we broaden⁶ our external observation, we may discover something about those criteria, even without any recourse to our own experience with writing.

We may distinguish, in writing, between two situations. In one situation there is a text beside the writer, in the second there is no such text. In the first situation the phase of listening, of concentration, is accompanied by a specific look that the writer gives the text beside him. This specific look is called 'reading', and it consists of a linear motion of the eyes that follow the writing structure. We may therefore conclude that in the second situation, where there is no text beside the writer, the listening, concentrated phases correspond to the phases of reading in the first situation. It is obvious that, in the first situation, the criteria for the choice of letters come from the text that the writer is reading. We may therefore conclude that in the second situation the choice is made by some 'inner reading' of an invisible text seen by the writer. Let us now eliminate the first situation from these considerations by calling it

'copying', and by saying that copying is not a true gesture of writing. The justification for this exclusion is the hypothesis that true writing is characterised by an 'inner' choice of letters. The hypothesis is a good one, because it may be argued that he who copies a text does not write, but transcribes, that he is an instrument for writing, more akin to a typewriter than to a writer.

We have now restricted the meaning of the term 'writing' by having excluded chimpanzees, illiterate children and copyists from it. We did so not for some ideological prejudice of ours, but for reasons imposed on us by observation. Chimpanzees and illiterate children do not write, because here is no observable phase of choice in their gesture. And copyists ('typists' in the strict sense) do not write because their choice of letters is imposed on them from the outside. In the first case the gesture is not writing, because it is an accidental (which means a statistically calculable) gesture. In the second case the gesture is not writing because it is a necessary (which means causally determined) gesture. True writing is neither accidental nor necessary, in the sense in which those two excluded gestures are.⁷ Which means to say, of course, that it is a 'free' gesture. Now let us not exaggerate this statement. Writing is a choice of letters to be inscribed on a surface. This choice, like any other, must either have an explanation or no explanation. If it has an explanation, that explanation is the discovery of the cause that has determined this choice. If it has no explanation or until it has one, the choice must be assumed to have been accidental. Therefore writing, like any choice, is the result of a deliberate decision only in the subjective sense of being experienced as such. But this subjective sense is what counts in phenomena like gestures. And the fact that true writing is a subjectively 'free' gesture can be seen by external observation.

If we describe the gesture of writing as one during which the writer periodically 'reads an invisible text' and then inscribes it on a surface, we have not given a description, but an interpretation of the gesture. But when we are faced with subjective freedom (as we are in this case), not to interpret would be dishonest. The phenomenon of subjective freedom (which is how we experience the presence of others with us) is a phenomenon of '*Sinngebung*,' of proposing a meaning, and this demands interpretation (namely the guessing of the meaning that the phenomenon proposes). If we refused to interpret the gesture of writing, we should not be faithful to what we were observing. But this poses a methodological problem. In observing writing we are observing a 'gesture', which means the presence of somebody who is here with us, therefore like us. In order to understand that gesture, we must put ourselves in the place of the writer. In such cases, external observation is insufficient. But of course it is indispensable, if we are to avoid merely subjective impressions. I shall therefore now shift from external to internal observation, with the intention⁸ to return to external observation later, to check the results of internal observation.

In the effort to describe my own experience with writing, I shall try to advance from the outside toward what may be called the inner core of that gesture. On the outside, there is the blank sheet of paper and the typewriter with its signs and letters. And of course my knowledge of what those signs and letters mean, sounds of a spoken language. I may say that those elements

are 'given,' they are my 'data'. On the other hand, I feel that in a very specific sense those data are there to be used by me for a specific purpose: the 'expression' of something within me. It is only if there is something within me to be expressed that those data become useful. This something within me confers 'value' upon those data. I may call that something a 'fact' because it is of my doing. The gesture of writing is thus a motion that results from the coming together of 'facta' (things to be expressed) and 'data' (writing utensils and my knowledge of how to use them). Without the facts the data is useless, and without the data the facts are ineffective. Writing is a gesture that renders the fact that there is something there to be expressed effective, and that renders the data that there are sheets of paper and typewriters useful.

Now such considerations seem to be extremely banal. Why should one stress such obvious matters? Because, as often happens, the very banality and obviousness of the matter hide its importance. If there is not, in fact, something to express, then the writing utensils are useless, even if they made to perform motions resembling the gesture of writing. And since this happens very often at present, it may explain in part why there is a tendency to abandon literacy. The inflation of useless pseudo-writing renders literacy itself useless (not only because it is a waste of time and effort, but mostly because it is practically impossible to discover the true 'written texts' within the mass of useless pseudo-writing). On the other hand, if no data-like sheets of paper and typewriters are available (for lack of time or other social and economic reasons), the fact that there is something to express becomes ineffective. The result is a frustration (a constant repression of an urge to express), which may destroy a life project and lead, in extreme cases, to suicide. Because if it is a fact that there is something to express, to write becomes the central gesture of living – *'scribere necesse est, vivere non est'* (It is necessary to write, not to live). This drive is totally independent of the previous consideration about the uselessness of writing in our present situation. For those who have something to express it is necessary to write, even if they are aware of the uselessness of their effort. This may be called the 'tragedy of writing'. And it is hidden by the banality and obviousness of the matter.

It may be asked, of course, whether the problem was well stated. Is it not possible, it may be asked, to express the something that is within oneself through gestures other than writing, for instance through speaking, or perforating computer cards, or filmmaking, and thus to accept the fact that alphabetic writing is a 'medium of communication' which is becoming useless? The answer to such a question is revealing of the human situation. There are things within us that can be expressed only through the gesture of writing, because this is the way we have been programmed by our history, by our culture, or whatever one wants to call that influence that programs us. And these things, which can be expressed only through the gesture of writing and through no other gesture, have exactly the same structure as the gesture of writing, which is why they can be expressed by no other gesture. They have been programmed within us for the express purpose of being written. One may call those things 'linear thoughts', and their sum one may call 'historical thinking'. Those things did not exist before the invention of writing, and they will cease to exist after the abandonment of writing. But such considerations

have no existential consolation for writers. They must write, or else lead useless lives, even if they know that theirs is a 'cultural condition' which is becoming useless. Because historical thinking is the way they are in the world, and because the world they are in is expressible only through historical thinking. Thus writing is more than a habit: for writers, it is the only meaningful way to be in the world, quite, or almost quite independent of 'objective' explanations. Such is the human condition: writing is a 'factum', because I do it, but it is also a 'datum,' because I am programmed to do it in spite of external considerations. This dialectic, 'to do what I must do, and therefore to do what I want to do' is the dialectic of freedom.

Thus I write in order to express something that is within me, and which I cannot express in any way other than writing. Now 'to express' is of course a relative term. It means to press from somewhere. It implies a pressing toward somewhere else, to impress upon a sheet of paper, in the case of writing. I write in order to impress something that is within me upon a sheet of paper. The engraving, digging quality is thus inherent in the gesture of writing, even though its present form (pencil writing or typewriting) covers this up. 'Essentially,' everything I write upon becomes a Mesopotamian brick by my very gesture. And this is true not only if I restrict my observation of my gesture to its surface. It is also true with regard to the many invisible layers my gesture has to penetrate before it reaches the visible surface of the sheet of paper. Because there are a number of invisible Mesopotamian bricks between the linear thought I am expressing in writing and the surface I am covering with letters. Each brick has its own 'objective quality', which means that it offers its own specific resistance to my effort to press a form into it. And with each step from brick to brick the form (the linear thought) changes in response to⁹ objective opposition. Thus to write is to change one's thought in consecutive steps under the pressure of the objective resistance of various ontological levels. It is often said that one writes in order to 'clarify one's ideas'. This is a loose way of talking. What happens in fact is that the ideas undergo¹⁰ a series of increasing objectifications of thought as one advances from inarticulate thinking toward the paper surface. The thought as it appears on the paper surface is the result of a series of dialectical processes between my subjective intention and the objective 'brick structures' I go through. Therefore the thought as it appears on the paper surface is not as I intended it to be, and to write is an adventure full of surprises. It may be said, in fact, that a thought is nothing but virtual letters upon a paper surface, and that it becomes more 'real' as I advance toward the paper through the various 'bricks' that stand between it and the paper. To write is thus not a 'clarification,' but a realisation of ideas, and to have ideas means nothing. It is only when writing them down that one may say that one has 'had' them. But then they are no longer similar to those one believed one had before writing. Some philosophies hold that 'thought' is the antithesis of 'matter'. The observation of the gesture of writing shows that such philosophies are based on entirely abstract extrapolations. There is no such thing as a 'pure thought'. There is only an intention toward impressing letters upon a paper surface. And what is called a 'linear, logical, clear and distinct thought,' at least in our tradition, is the ultimate meaning of very material letters upon the surface of a

very material sheet of paper (which is, of course, not necessarily an argument in favour of dialectical materialism).

A careful, introspective description of the gesture of writing would have to take into account all the 'bricks' one passes through before one reaches the paper surface, some of which I mentioned when enumerating the necessary elements for writing. Such a careful description cannot be attempted here, but I shall concentrate my attention upon one such 'brick' only, because it assumes a somewhat unusual complexity in my own praxis of writing. I mean that step in the process of writing by which one tries to express one's intended thought in what may paradoxically be called a 'silent spoken language'. I shall not go into the question of whether I can have a thought, even if only an intended one, before I have expressed it thus, because this seems to be an ontologically irrelevant question after the considerations as to the 'reality' of thought which I just presented. I shall rather consider how such an expression in a 'silent spoken language' works in my praxis of writing. Since my case is exceptionally complex, it may serve as an extreme example for a more 'normal' praxis of writing.

I am programmed for various spoken languages, but this does not mean that I can choose freely in which of them I am going to write the thought that presses to be written. I am not 'free' in this somewhat mercantile sense – freedom of choice – because the languages stored in my memory are not equivalent and exchangeable one for any other. Each has its own function¹¹, although those functions overlap, and their specificity is due both to their 'objective' character and to the place they occupy 'subjectively' within my program. The result of this discrepancy between the languages in my memory is the fact that some of my thoughts are better expressed in one of those languages, and some other thoughts in some other language. Or, to state the same thing the other way around, I tend to think some thoughts in one of those languages and some other thoughts in another.

But this very discrepancy of the languages in my memory suggests a specific strategy for my writing praxis. Let me describe it. There are some thoughts that begin to take a very nebulous shape within me. I shall not go here into the question of why this happens, but into that of the nebulous shape of the thoughts – which do not merit to be called 'thoughts' due to that nebulosity. I can say this: the shape is a tendency toward one of the languages at my disposal. As a rule, that language is German, but very often it may be Portuguese or English. I have learned to distinguish my thoughts according to the language they tend to. Although I cannot state this criterion of distinction, it no doubt has to do with the structure of the language the various proto-thoughts tend to. Therefore I believe that we have to accept the fact that each language is a program for specific types of thoughts, for a specific 'universe of discourse'.

For a start I accept the tendency of the thought that presses toward its specific language to be articulated. I formulate it silently in that language. It then provokes a whole chain of thoughts, as is characteristic of linear thinking. This chain is somewhat under my control, because it must obey the rules of grammar of its language. Again the dialectics of freedom: the chain of thoughts is under my control precisely because it is ordered by rules imposed

upon me. The language thus becomes a 'Mesopotamian brick' in the sense that I can now engrave my chain of thought within it. Of course although the chain is under control, it still tends to branch out into various direction. The process of silent formulation is so quick that it seems that the various branches of the thought tree grow simultaneously within me and within the language. I can no longer distinguish well between the language and myself at this point. The part of me that stands outside the language cannot allow this. An unchecked growth of thought (the Joycean 'river') would defeat my purpose, which is to give a form to what is pressing within me toward articulation. Although I know very well the seduction and beauty of letting myself float within the river of language, I have to resist such a temptation (which is the reason I admire, but also distrust what is called 'automatic writing'). I know that the branching out of the thought is due more to word association than to thought association, although one certainly implies the other. (The writing stick and the Mesopotamian brick imply each other). To stop the tendency toward a tree, I must take a typewriter, which does not permit tree structure, whatever Joyce and his followers might say. I must type my silent formulation if I want to achieve a linear thought sequence. Which is to show that writing is a resolution of the accords of 'silent spoken language', a diachronisation of the synchronicity of tree thought.

As I type the sequence of thoughts in the language 'appropriate' to them, I make a series of negative choices. I eliminate word and thought associations as they press against my surface. Which shows again that writing is more akin to sculpture than to drawing: it consists of constant chopping. The result will be a 'text', namely a thought developed in lines consisting of letters and covering a paper surface. I have now a 'Mesopotamian brick' covered with cuneiform incisions. My original almost shapeless thought has now achieved a recognisable form. And I can recognise in it the fact that the language has taken possession of it. The text I have before me is 'German,' which means that it is valid for one specific universe only. I need not submit to such a limitation. I may translate the text into a different language. I can transcribe the text from one brick into another.

Let us suppose that I take the Portuguese language to be my next brick. It consists of an almost entirely different material from the first one. As I try to reformulate the written German text in the 'silent spoken Portuguese' I find that my thought not only changes, but also that it provokes entirely different associations. Although in a sense it is still the 'same' thought, in a different sense it means a situation within a universe quite unlike the first one. (I am convinced that the problem of translation is the central epistemological problem). As I begin to type my Portuguese text, in order to chop away the new associations which assault me, I find that I must not be content with the German text which now serves me as my system of reference, but that I must also take recourse to the almost shapeless thought which originally provoked my writing. (This is why I believe that the only 'true' translation is the one attempted by the author of the text to be translated.) What happens during this process may be considered to be a reformulation of the original thought in a sense not always duly appreciated. The thought not only assumes a different shape, but it may even take a different direction, because the associations

chopped away during the first writing may now be taken up again in a different context. It is as if the German and the Portuguese associations would now interfere with each other to suggest a quite new, and in this sense richer, discourse. The text that will result from this writing will be Portuguese, to be sure, but the German text and the German associations eliminated from that text will somehow be hidden within it, a sort of palimpsest not readily decipherable, but still in a sense effective.

Now this process of translating from one brick to another can and must be continued, if the original thought is to reveal more than one of its dimensions (which is to show that in a sense thinking is after all meta-linguistic, although in a different sense it is strictly linguistic). But what is even more intriguing is the possibility of re-translation. Let us suppose that I have translated the thought from Portuguese into English, and from English into French, and that I now try to translate it back into German. I shall find that my second German text will differ radically from the first one, although the thought expressed in both texts is still the same thought. The reason of course is the fact that in the second text all the other languages at my disposal are somehow present, and thus confer on it a depth that is lacking in the first text. Now this presents a situation typical of all infinite regression. Theoretically I could go on translating the re-translating 'ad nauseam' or to my exhaustion. But practically I find that the chain of thoughts is exhausted in the process long before I myself am exhausted. Thus the process of translation and re-translation provides a criterion for the wealth of the thought to be written: the sooner the process exhausts the thought (the sooner it falls into repetition), the less worthy the thought is of being written. Which is a somewhat melancholy discovery. If I can stop writing within a reasonable span of time, it is not worthwhile doing it, and if to write is worthwhile, it takes an unreasonably long time to do it. Still, I knew even before I started that to write is not a reasonable endeavour. The process of re-translation only confirms that knowledge.

Once the thought to be expressed is approaching exhaustion through re-translation, I must choose the language in which it is going to be published (that is, if I intend the text to be published, which is, as I shall argue later, not a necessary condition for writing). The choice of the 'last' language is thus not a function of the thought itself, but of what might be called my social condition. Which is of course not to deny that there is a complex feedback between that condition and my thoughts on numerous levels. It is curious, and somehow disappointing, to have to admit that this last formulation of the thought in the language of its publication is strictly speaking 'my gesture of writing.' Because the text that will result from it is that Mesopotamian brick that will go into the oven to form that 'terra cotta' called 'publication'. This is curious – and disappointing, because during the writing of that last text of mine I am no longer really concentrated upon the material resistance to my thought, which I have absorbed and exhausted in the previous texts, but am somewhat distracted by external, publishing considerations. Therefore that last text is not as 'good' as are the previous ones, if by 'good' we mean faithful to the structure of the gesture of writing. Thus, paradoxically, my ultimate gesture of writing is no longer true writing at all – namely the impression of forms upon

a surface, but a kind of editing and revising. But then, the sensation of disappointment accompanies every final stage of every act, and is nothing but a symptom of imperfection. It is a part of the human condition that the gesture of writing should end in defeat, namely in a gesture which is no longer true writing.

If we now return from our excursion into an introspective observation of the gesture of writing, to consider that phenomenon again as observers from the outside, we may re-state our earlier formulation of it. To write is a gesture which consists of motions by which the writer inscribes letters upon a surface so that they form lines, and of interruptions of those motions, during which the writer looks for criteria to choose his letters by looking at an unwritten text within a silent spoken language. The gesture of writing may thus be seen as one of articulation of a previously silent (and in this sense inarticulate) structure. In this, writing is like speaking. And, in fact, we may observe the same interruptions during speaking we observe during writing: moments of 'silent reading'. We may call, if we want, those moments 'the gesture of thinking'. And we may say that writing, like speaking, is a gesture periodically interrupted by thinking. But if we do so, we are led to make two distinctions. One has to do with the difference between writing and speaking with regard to thinking. And the other has to do with the difference between thinking while writing and thinking while speaking. Although it may seem that those two distinctions are one and the same, we shall see that they are, in fact, two different matters altogether.

The difference between writing and speaking with regard to thinking is one of immediacy. If we keep in mind that we have now defined 'thinking' as the reading of an invisible text in a silent spoken language, and not, as we did earlier, as a process which presses toward a language, it is evident that 'to speak' means 'to think aloud', namely to give voice to the silent spoken language one is reading. But 'to write' means precisely the opposite: it means not to give voice to the silent spoken language, but instead to impress it symbolically upon a surface. Writing is thus a repression of the 'natural' tendency to think aloud, it is an effort that does not permit the silent spoken language to be really spoken. It forces the spoken language into the mediation of two-dimensional symbols (letters), which it forces again to form lines upon a surface. Which again means that it forces thinking into specific structures. Writing violates thinking in a way speaking does not. And this is, I believe, is the essential difference between writing and speaking with regard to thinking.

Now this statement seems to contradict the earlier one, in which I argued that some of our thoughts, namely the linear, historical ones, have been programmed precisely for writing and cannot, therefore, be articulated except through writing. The contradiction is, however, only apparent. In reality we have the following situation: some of our thoughts have been programmed to be articulated through writing. In order to be written, they have to be formulated first in silent spoken language, which thus assumes the structure of writing. But since language is more 'natural' than is writing (or, if you prefer, since it is an earlier stage in human development), the thoughts programmed to be written become confused if formulated in the silent spoken

language. They lose the structure they have been programmed for, and they regain it only if the silent spoken language is articulated in writing. Those thoughts must be violated if they are to become themselves, namely linear historical thinking. If those thoughts are spoken instead of written, they lose their 'true' form, namely the form for which they have been programmed. Thus we find that historical thinking, in order to be 'true,' must be violated by the rules of writing.

Such a discovery (if it is one) is of course disturbing. It poses several problems. One has to do with the fact that writing is, in our tradition, a sort of musical notation of a spoken language. This is why thoughts have to be formulated first in a silent spoken language before they can be written. In other traditions this is not so. Chinese ideograms, for instance, are not a notation of a spoken language. They are notations of 'ideas' more or less like our numbers. To write in Chinese is therefore not to 'violate' a language. But if it is true that historical thinking is the result of a specific violation of language, we have to conclude that historical thinking is not in the program of Chinese thinking. It seems to be, in fact, a typically Occidental program. The difference between writing and speaking with regard to thinking must thus be of a different order in China than it is with us. With us, it is the difference between historical and unhistorical – including confused historical – thinking. And we cannot say what it is for other traditions. Another problem has to do with the fact that the gesture of writing, being a violation of thinking, is a 'technique', and 'artifice' and in this sense a falsification. Every written text is thus seen to be a work of art, a fiction, and the distinction between fictional and non-fictional writing is thus seen to be one of a secondary ontological order. On a primary ontological order – on the level of writing itself – scientific and philosophical writing is seen to be just as fictional as is poetry and the novel. This is so because historical (linear, logical, diachronic) thinking is seen to be the result of the technique, the artifice of writing. A third problem has to do with the fact that the gesture of writing, which violates thinking by imposing a linear structure upon it, 'creates' a specific universe for thought that would not exist without it, namely the universe of process. It is important to note that the linearity of spoken language cannot be reduced to a process, since it has extrinsic elements such as accent and intonation. Now if the gesture of writing is responsible for the universe of process, for the universe of cause and effect (for what the Arabs call 'maqtab' = what is written), it is licit to expect that this universe, which is the world of science, may disappear if the art of writing loses its predominant position in our culture, as it now seems to be doing. And there are other, and equally disturbing problems related to the discovery that the gesture of writing is a violation of thinking.

The difference between thinking while writing and thinking while speaking is one of intention. It shows that to think is not, as Descartes and idealistic philosophy in general seems to suppose, only an effort to 'grasp' an object of the world. It is at least as much an effort to 'find' the right word to represent an object that has already been grasped somehow. Now it cannot be said that those are two different stages in the process of thinking, as if we first thought of an object and then looked for a word to articulate the object thought of. The observation of the difference between thinking while speaking and thinking

while writing shows that this is not so. The situation seems to be this: We have a number of words at our disposal, of which we know the meaning. We also know some rules of the game that orders those words into meaningful structures. On the other hand we have what might be called 'problems', namely a world we live in, and within which we have to make decisions. The words and the rules that order them can be used as maps of the world and thus help us to make the decisions. Such a use of the words and the rules is called 'thinking'. And there is no sense in saying that the problems come first and the words come later, or vice versa. The two imply each other. We have problems because we have the words, and we have words because we have the problems. Still, although the two sides imply each other, they do not fit well. To think is to make them fit somehow, by forcing the problems into the words, and the words upon the problems. To think is a praxis which changes the words to fit problems, and the problems to fit words, and the distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' thinking is one of degree, not of essence. This is what an observation of thinking while speaking and while writing suggests, as opposed to an abstract speculation about 'the process of thinking'.

Now if thinking is a praxis, if it is a technique of fitting words with problems, it is obvious that it depends upon the tools it is using. In speaking the tools of thinking are different from the tools in writing. In the first case they are sounds, in the second case letters. In the first case thinking 'intends' sounds, in the second case it 'intends' letters. Therefore not only are the words and the rules looked for during thinking different for the two cases, but so are the problems. If we write we think about different problems from the ones we think about while speaking. And even if this difference might not be obvious as the two gestures begin¹² (since writing, in our tradition, is a notation of speaking), it becomes obvious as the gestures develop. The problems we think about while writing become ever more 'literate' as we write, because they assume ever more the structure of writing, because our intention in writing, whether we are aware of it or not, is to make the 'literate'. In fact, we write in order to force our problems into 'literate form'. To think while writing is thus an effort entirely different from thinking while speaking: it is the effort to force our problems into the structure of writing. Again, this seems to be a very banal statement. But if we stop to consider it, there is nothing banal about it. It suggests, on the contrary, that writing is a 'creative' gesture: it creates specific problems in the world.

We thus find that although the gesture of writing is a motion interrupted by thinking, just like the gesture of speaking, the two interruptions have different functions in the two gestures. Writing violates thinking in a way speaking does not, for writing, the interruption is a pause for the choice of forms through which to violate thinking. And thinking interrupts writing in a way different from the one by which it interrupts speaking, because in writing it thinks about a different type of problem. Thus, although writing is, in our tradition, a musical notation of spoken language, it has become a gesture largely independent of speaking. In other words, written texts are not meant, essentially, to be read aloud, but looked at in silent reading. They are surfaces, not sound tracks. And if the texts are written for the purpose of 'loud reading', like manuscripts for lectures or 'dramatic texts', they show their

purpose more or less clearly to the reader, even if they do not state it themselves expressly. This is so, because to write texts for loud reading, one's own or somebody else's, is a gesture different from writing for silent reading. It is a sort of ping-pong between spoken languages and alphabetic notation, in which the writer first articulates the silent spoken language into letters, and then back from letters into language spoken out loud. I am not sure whether this type of writing, which no doubt is how the scribes wrote for centuries before literacy became more or less general, is on the same ontological level as is writing for silent reading, because it does not achieve the same autonomy from spoken speech, although it is structurally less complex. This is why I distrust books that are collections of lectures. The very fact that they articulate a more 'natural' thought than do books written for silent reading suggests that the gesture of writing does not work autonomously through them.

Now these considerations lead us finally to the apparently obvious fact that the gesture of writing aims at texts to be read by others. That it is a gesture of 'communication'. That the surface it impresses the letters upon is not the final aim of the gesture, but only a medium through which the gesture aims at readers. That to write is not to dig, to engrave, in order to 'inform' a surface, but that it is a gesture that 'informs' a surface for the sake of informing others. This fact seems to be so obvious that any consideration of writing should take it as its point of departure. I did not take it as my point of departure, because I believe that an observation of the gesture of writing should begin with the phenomenon itself, and not with an 'obvious' presupposition. And, in fact, such an observation does not show clearly that writing and reading are necessarily connected with each other like act and purpose. Such an observation shows, on the contrary, that the relation between writing and reading is a very complex one, and that the gesture of reading poses problems, some of which are entirely independent of the problems of writing. Therefore reading cannot be dealt with in this paper. But what such an observation shows in this matter is the fact that if the gesture of writing aims clearly at a text to be read by somebody else, it is no longer writing in a radical sense of that term. To write is a gesture in which the entire attention is absorbed by the effort to force thought into a series of shapes (of Mesopotamian bricks), and to force those shapes to change in accordance with the thought that presses upon them. If part of that attention is distracted toward a future reading of those shapes, the gesture becomes less concentrated. Therefore the observation shows that writing does not aim, as a gesture, at communicating with others, but at informing a surface.

This does not imply, of course, a Romantic interpretation of writing as a sort of noble solitary endeavour. Such an interpretation would be nonsense. To write is to have been programmed by others, and cannot be a solitary action, but is always 'social'. And since that program (the alphabet, etcetera), is a social convention, to write means always to make a gesture that may be deciphered by others. Thus to write is to act in a way determined by society, an act within a society, and an act for it. But the observation shows that writing is an act that informs a surface; it does not necessarily inform some other person through the medium of that surface. This does imply that publication need not be the aim of the gesture. The aim of the gesture is to give a specific form to thought, namely

the form of letters, and to put specific – namely literate – thought into a material form, a surface. This is the purpose of writing, and the observation of the gesture shows it. If the literate thought thus materialised, and the letters thus articulating a specific kind of thought are subsequently absorbed into the memory of somebody else or not, is not, strictly speaking, a problem for the writer. It is, of course, a social problem, a problem of ‘commitment’, and in this sense it concerns the writer, who is not only a writer, but also a socially conscious being. But I believe that one must distinguish between a social commitment and a commitment to writing, between two dimensions of human existence that imply each other but do not coincide with each other. This is why I believe that a ‘committed writer’, one who makes the two dimensions coincide, is a bad writer. Just as bad, in fact, as is a writer who becomes a victim of the ideology of noble, solitary – namely irresponsible – writing. But these two beliefs of mine, which are in reality one and the same, may be the result of a prejudice coming from my own, subjective experience with writing. There may be as many experiences of the praxis of writing as there are writers. We cannot know it, either from written texts or from ‘confessions’ writers make about their writing, because it is a characteristic of the concrete experience that it cannot be communicated.

In this essay I have attempted an observation of the gesture of writing. First, as an external observer, then my own gesture through introspection, and finally I have returned to external observation. I have concentrated my attention on very few aspects of that extremely complex gesture. In fact I have considered practically only two aspects: the articulation of thought in language, and the articulation of language in letters. Thus I have left out all aesthetic aspects, on the level of sound, rhythm, visible form, etcetera, all ‘orthographical’ aspects, on the level of choice of letters, of punctuation, or paragraphing, etcetera, all ‘rhetorical’ aspects, on the level of choice of a style, of metaphors, or explicit and implicit connotations, etcetera. Some may hold that I have left out in fact all the characteristic aspects of writing. I have done so on purpose. The gesture of writing is one that demands a careful technical description, if one is to penetrate its meaning. Such a description cannot be attempted here. It would explode the limits imposed on a collection of essays concerning various types of gesture. I thought it therefore best not even to begin going into those aspects. Because I believe that what was said here suffices to state very generally the overall character of the gesture of writing.

It is a gesture by which surfaces are covered with letters, so that they form a linear structure. Those letters represent sounds of a spoken language, but by representing them thus, change the structure, and thus the meaning of that language. The letters mean thoughts that have been articulated in a language in order to assume, finally, the structure of writing. The surface is thus the articulation of very specific thoughts, namely ‘literate’ thinking, and they mean situations in a specific universe, namely the universe of history and of science. Thus to write is a gesture which impresses forms upon surfaces in order to have them represent situations of the historical and scientific universe, even if those surfaces be texts which do not seem at all to be historical or scientific. This is so, because to write is structurally the gesture of a historical and scientific being-in-the-world. Should this gesture fall into

disuse, and there are many symptoms at present that seem to suggest this, the universe of history and science will fall into oblivion, or at least it will cease to be the universe we live in, because that universe is a 'fiction', the result of the technique of writing, and materialises only in the form of surfaces covered by letters. Thus if the art of writing is lost, it will not be missed by future generations. But for us, who are programmed by it and for it, not to be able to write means that life is not worth living.

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Notes

1. 'seize' in original.
2. 'covered' in original.
3. 'goes on' in original.
4. 'under' in original.
5. 'like' in original.
6. 'multiply' in original.
7. 'it' concludes the sentence in the original.
8. 'purpose' in original.
9. 'under the reaction of' in original.
10. 'that the ideas undergo' added to original.
11. 'They have, each, their own function' in original.
12. 'in the beginning of the two gestures' in original.

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