

Writing the Earth

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Abstract, or meridian thoughts

This article is an exploratory essay that passes through geopoetic thoughts on the subject of *writing the earth*. I seek out to explore the terrifying possibility that language could be related to passive, non-human entities, such as the vegetative beings of wheat, oat and rice.

Written language is *agrarian*: In order to illuminate this heritage, I introduce the *boustrophedon*, the turning of the ox, as a relation between the page and the field. The boustrophedon is a way of *writing by furrows* that perceives the relation between agriculture and writing as a primordial event in posthuman culture.

Along this line, within this furrow, I show how a concept of literacy as domestication follow from a writing by furrows, vis-à-vis a junction between the field and the house. Literacy is to be understood as domestication, as it co-evolved with the eight Neolithic founder crops (wheat, pea, lentil, flax, etc.) through the sedentarized house as a dwelling place. The gathering, collecting and cultivation of crops constituted a sensitive and spiritual reading of the world, thereby being an exterior source of our literary heritage.

The gathering in the field is to be interpreted orthographically; as the conventions or dispositive of the written page; while the dwelling in the house constitutes the sum of that which lies behind or beneath written language as a mode of agrilogistical existence.

Geophysical species and the advent of agriculture

The phenomenon of “geophysical species” changed before and after the dazzling advent of agriculture: Prior to agriculture, multiple organisms had imprinted themselves on a global scale for millennia, and could be described as species of geophysical impact. Algae was responsible for the phenomenon of photosynthesis; Bees were practicing pollination; and Fungi had lead Oceanic plant life ashore by establishing a symbiotic relationship to the land, allowing plants to obtain nutrients and water from the soil.

Humans entered the category of geophysical species with the announcement of the *Anthropocene*. But what had they done? They had ploughed; with help from the ox, and the wheat.

Daring scholars such as Timothy Morton and Yuval Noah Harari have argued that agriculture is “the slowest and perhaps most effective weapon of mass destruction yet devised” (Morton 2016: 5), and “history’s biggest fraud” (Harari 2014: 152). In their opinion it is culture, not evolution, that fulfils Darwin’s maxim of “the survival of the fittest”. Culture demands an almost militarist appearance of all its fields and sedentisms: uniform and homogenous, fit for fight. Culture is self-preserving in its suspicion that *any* weed: all thorns and thistles ... *any* pest: all moths and fleas ... constitutes an imminent threat to the solitary growth of culture itself.

Humans were indeed not the first geophysical species on this planet, but agriculture changed the phenomenon into a way of life; initiating a culture with the *boustrophedon* as one of its primordial expressions; a type of writing that is based on the bi-directional turning of the ox, from furrow to furrow, line to line, defacing and mirroring the characters of language for every switch and turn: ploughing all weeds and pests aside, while maintaining a link between writing and agriculture.

Yet, we should be aware of boustrophedon writing as a *pharmakon*, as both poison and remedy. As Harari expresses it: “*Writing was born as the maidservant of human consciousness, but is increasingly becoming master*” (Harari 2014: 247). And this mastering is due to what Morton call agrilogistics: “*How we write and what we write and what we think about writing can be found within agrilogistics (...) Writing and the origins of agriculture are deeply intertwined*” (Morton 2016: 44+82). Writing is the cultural expression of agrilogistics, which is the mode of existence based on cultivated land and sedentarized dwelling.

Writing by furrows

Historians Barry Powell and L.H. Jeffreys¹ has with great precision described that when the Archaic Greeks adopted the Phoenician writing system, that was based on the direction from “right to left”, and before they settled on our present system from “left to right”, an almost inadvertent moment in the evolution of literacy occurred: the *boustrophedon*, c. 800-500 BC: Boustrophedon-writing swings in alternating waves from “left to right, right to left, left to right”; following the turns of the plough; the movement of the ox.

The Archaic Greeks had no sense of a “word” or a “sentence”: The sole purpose of Alphabetic writing was to record epic song. The Archaic Greeks intuitively alternated the direction of writing. This intuition is still expressed by the child, ΔΕΜΕΤΕΡΑ², whenever she writes her name. The Greeks were excellent at intuiting the heritage of their culture.

In boustrophedon-writing, every gap between the lines defaces the former, thereby mirroring the characters and focusing the object of literacy

¹ Recommended: Powell, Barry (1991): *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge + Jeffery, L.H (1961): *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece. A study of the Origin of the Greek Alphabet and Its Development from the Eight to the Fifth Centuries B. C.*, Oxford University Press: Oxford

² Demeter was the goddess of agriculture in the ‘infantile archaic’

on movement rather than signs. Boustrophedon-writing carries a resemblance to both the wave-movement of water and the turn of the plough: as an ox turns from furrow to furrow.

And according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his essay *On the origin of language* (1781), writing in the furrow fashion was indeed the most comfortable way to read. He speculated that it only became abandoned as manuscripts multiplied, because it was difficult to write by hand – scrivener’s palsy. The abandonment of boustrophedon writing was thus due to the self-exceeding practicalities of culture, that tend to challenge its aesthetics. Culture find maintaining myth and tradition difficult due to a levelling of expression. Even though the boustrophedon related writing to its agricultural heritage, and is cognitively more comfortable than left-right writing, it crushed the hand due to the exponential rise of manuscripts; just like the plough crushed the spine if it was not pulled by an ox.

Literacy as domestication

What does a focus of literacy contribute to the primordial event of culture; writing as originating within agriculture?

Literacy as domestication.

The traditional reasoning is that writing arose because of an increasing necessity to count one's property. Harari continues to flirt with this conviction in *Sapiens*: “The first texts of history contain no philosophical insights, no poetry, legends, laws, or even royal triumphs. They are humdrum economic documents, recording the payment of taxes, the accumulation of debts and the ownership of property” (Harari 2014: 109-110). While it is true that early writing consisted in accounting, this rancid dualism based on causality undervalues the core phenomenon of

agriculture; the intensified relation between humans and plants, the dawn of a broad literacy through writing.

I rather believe that writing and especially literacy co-evolved with the domestication of plants: the gathering, collecting and cultivation of crops like oat and wheat constituted a sensitive and spiritual reading of the world. There was a certain geopoetical value to the translation of harvest into letters.

Crops were not an occasion for literacy, an object that needed to be accounted for, but a proto-replica of the letter (anachronism intended) that was able to encapsulate the world. Literacy evolved along with domestication: the dwelling and caring for each other within the territory of the house, the domus, intensified the mutual readings of humans and plants.

Literacy as a cognitive architecture

Approximately 5-6000 years ago, a rudimentary form of the phonological Alphabet initiated a colonisation of the cognitive architecture of humanity through the phenomenon of reading, establishing the neural conditions for a programmable mind.

As Merlin Donald has described, reading enacted “a subsystem within the brain that automatically carries out the various complex sub-operations involved in reading” (Donald 2014: 74). In contrast to other domesticated animals, such as the dog, cat, cow or horse, humans have been made able to possess alphabetical language in their cognitive architecture, and are therefore simultaneously subjected to and sovereign of their linguistic existence. Maryanne Wolf argue for the same point in *Proust and the Squid*: “We were never born to read” (Wolf 2008: 3). Reading erected a building within the cognition, namely that of the letter.

Donald’s thesis of literacy constituting a cognitive architecture can be interpreted as a more clinical formulation of Martin Heidegger’s famous

parable: “*Language is the house of being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home.*” (Heidegger 1977: 217).

The parable of ‘*the House*’ is the ‘what’ that constitutes a language within the realm of Being. Furthermore, the house is symbolizing written language as it is guarded by the humanists, meaning those who are literate and create with words. It is important to remember that, for Heidegger, language is not only a literary device, since it always implies an utterance; an ecstatic moment where humans are given the opportunity to survive outside of themselves. This ecstasy is present in the realm of Being, and it commands of our imagination to repeatedly ask the questions of how and from where language manifested itself as a house.

While there have been houses since the dawn of Neolithic agriculture (more precisely, since the eight Neolithic founder crops, wheat, pea, lentil, flax, etc., were domesticated 10.000 years ago), - early writing systems based on phonology, as the Alphabet, is no more than 5-6000 years of age. There has been found mnemonic symbols with an age of 9000 years that can be interpreted through orthographics, but no sign of a writing system predates the one of “the House”. Even in the Greek alphabet, *beta* (house) is the occurrence of *alpha* (beginning). In extension, it must be assumed that humans were in possession of a self-reflective language prior to the advent of writing, and that it involved a literacy through a certain reading of the world.

Did this form of reading bequeath a heritage to the thousands of years of “illiterate” households, and maybe even to our current, voluminous language? Bernard Stiegler has argued in *Anamnesis and Hypomnesis* (2006) that the lithic tool, as a technical object, already acted as a memory support two or three million years ago. But while technics supported the nomadic forms of reading the world, it had not yet begun writing a world. Stiegler hold that “the lithic tool is not however made to

store memory: not until the late paleolithic period do mnemotechniques as such appear” (Stiegler 2006: 1). Hence it is how agriculture formed a peculiar intersection of technics and culture that explain the initiation of literacy as such.

The evolution of crops is as different as Sumerian to Latin

I repeat my proposal: Literacy is to be understood *as* domestication, as it co-evolved with crops through the sedentarized house as a dwelling place. The gathering, collecting and cultivation of crops constituted a sensitive and spiritual reading of the world, thereby being an exterior source of our literary heritage. Whenever we experience the sensation of reading, the remembrance is dawning of the word transitioning from the field to the house.

Variants of these specific fields and houses are plentiful: A post-colonialist enquiry could include a crop like rice. Domesticated independently in Asia, Africa and South America, rice carries a splendid story of non-Eurocentric literacy. Contemplation on the harvest of rice can be traced in the reception of the ancient Chinese *School of Agrarianism*, which has influenced such diverse figures as the founder of Chinese philosophy, Confucius (551-479 B.C.), the modern economist François Quesnay (French Physiocrats) and the poet-scientist-philosopher Henry David Thoreau (American Transcendentalism).

Importantly, these crops are as different as Sumerian to Latin. *Oat* first highlighted in the Paleolithic hunter-gatherers' wildlife kitchen, but was a more troublesome crop to domesticate by the first cultures. Researchers suggest that oat only became domesticated due to it being a stubborn weed (notice spelling difference from wheat) in the cereal fields. This early relation to oat has been forgotten, because – in the words of Ursula K. Le Guin: “*it is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrestled a wild-oat seed from its husk, and then another, and then*

another, and then another, and then another" (Le Guin 1996: 149). How can this story compete with the collective euphoria centered on the image of a hero, who courageously thrust his spear deep into the titanic hairy flank of a mammoth?

Yet, it is our story: the difficulty of the tale lies in the terrifying possibility that language could be related to passive, non-human entities, such as vegetative beings.

The basic phenomenon of culture - namely cultivation, as a way of exteriorizing growth principles to that which is non-human or to be infrahuman - occurred way before agriculture. The preparation of heated meals and the production of lithic tools could properly be called arche-cultural. Yet, without sedentarization and its imbedded consequence, domestication, culture was still existing outside of the junction between the household and the field, hence outside of literacy.

On the contrary to oat, *wheat* carries an epic story: Born as an insignificant grass growing near the Karaca Dağ volcano in south-eastern Turkey, it was destined for greater things. As Yuval Harari provocatively put it in *Sapiens*, the acquaintance between wheat and humans initiated a domestication process that led wheat flourishing on a global scale at grandiose fields, while humans were left living within the confinement of a house as servants to this grass. Wheat had a strong interest in the building of houses. The bestselling work of Harari has demonstrated that the story of wheat-human relations can outmatch the lonely tale of a human farmer counting his crops, and that of the hunter who kills its prey.

As the gathering of wild oats represents language exclusively in the field, the harvesting of wheat leads one to the inside. The gathering of oats in the field is to be interpreted orthographically; as the conventions or dispositive of the written page; while the dwelling in the house next to wheat constitutes the sum of that which lies behind or beneath written language as a mode of agrilogistical existence. The transitory movement

between the field and the house is exercised with a *bag*: a carrier, a medium, that can be brought along the way, collecting the seeds that is to be written language.

This is actually not *that* weird. Try to ask: What is writing made of? Morton says, and I quote: “*Writing depends on paper, which depends on trees and water, which depend on sunlight and comets, which depend on ...*” (Morton 2016: 81).

Papyrus is after all the name of a plant, and hence another being is carried within the realm of scripture. The same can be said for parchments, these stripped skins from calves, cows and goats, that already were common carriers of writing at the time of Herodotus and the beginning of written history.

Never acquiring the status of ‘thinking beings’, plants and animals continue to occupy scripture at varying volumes.

The earth and the sky as a habitus

Establishing a relation between language and vegetative being – where language acts as a receptive channel for naturecultural developments -, return my hermeneutic aim back at Heidegger. In his essay on Johann Peter Hebel's *Reflections on the World-Edifice*, Heidegger ponders *why* – and not for *whom* - the first houses were built, before they became “a mere container for dwelling”. Heidegger asserts that:

It is buildings which first bring the earth as inhabited landscape into the nearness of man, and at the same time place the nearness of neighborly dwelling beneath the expanse of the sky (Heidegger 1957: 93).

What is articulated here? A very concrete domestication event of the celestial bodies that implicates an opening to spiritual matters with

relation to the Earth. Horizontal and vertical lines are interchangeable, since these buildings in a way stand without a roof to disclose the sky. Heidegger intentionally invoke a countrification of the universe, where the settlements around crops manifests itself as humanity entering a habitable relation to the world. The house, Heidegger's parable for written language, places a realm between the earth and the sky, where nature roams at the outskirts of culture. Through the cultivation of its nearest environment, literacy encapsulates the Earth and the sky as a habitus.

It is important to note that literate communities, where the sedentarized house is centered by neolithisation, has continuously been destabilized due to the persistence of nomadic and other transitional dwellers. Literacy promote the earth as being the 'what' that lies behind, or beneath, written language as a mode of agrilogistical existence, but next to, or intermediary of, this existence there are cultures with open fields that can not recognize the earth as a habitable landscape, or territory. There is a history outside of literacy if one does not feel at home, or just plain dyslexic, to this cognitive architecture.

Last turns of the ox

The *boustrophedon* illuminates written language as agrarian; as a simultaneously cultural and technical entanglement with vegetative beings. Writing by furrows, literacy as domestication, explain how crops and letters follow each other for every switch and turn in the history of writing.

The boustrophedon destabilize the view that the history of writing is coincidental with the history of History. There are references to non-human, but yet self-dependent sources in the firmament of writing. By the fact that writing originate in agriculture; that the furrow show the way to the line; that the sedentarized place of dwelling, the house, acts as the

membranous center for culture and nature, the boustrophedon lead the task of understanding history toward a more systematic speculation.

From the view of human cognition, where language is inhabited as a house, the Earth may appear as a field. Yet the Earth is a half-cultivated field. In order to write the earth, to do geopoetics, a grounding of one's cognitive architecture based on the neighbourly presence of other beings of the soil is imminent. Literacy is a half-cultivated exercise since domestication is an interspecies relation. One will always find weed next to wheat.

Writing the Earth is a challenge that, due to its imperceptible cultivations of life, is introspectively manifest in culture - as hawthorn and thistle along the furrow of the line. All that is abstract allude in the concrete. The agrarian characteristics of writing can thus be found by those who gathers and harvest the basis of language.

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