Writing as a Problem for Literary Criticism and Philosophical Hermeneutics

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WRITING AS A PROBLEM FOR LITERARY CRITICISM AND PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

by

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To the extent that hermeneutics is a text-oriented interpretation, and that texts are among other things instances of written language, no interpretation theory is possible that does not come to grips with the problem of writing. Therefore the purpose of this essay is twofold. I want first to show that the transition from speaking to writing has its conditions of possibility in the structures of discourse itself, then to connect the kind of intentional exteriorization which writing exhibits to a central problem of hermeneutics, that of distanciation. This same concept of exteriority, which in the first part of this paper will be more used than criticized, will become problematic in the second part. Plato's critique of writing as a kind of alienation will provide the turning point from the descriptive to the critical treatment of the exteriorization of discourse proper to writing.

1. From Speaking to Writing

What happens in writing is the full manifestation of something which is in a virtual state, something naissant and inchoate in living speech, namely the detachment of the "said" from the "saying."

This seclusion of the said from the saying is implied by the dialectical structure of discourse which may be described as the dialectic of event (the "saying") and meaning (the "said").

The event-character of discourse may be emphasized by a simple comparison between the stable structure of the codes which constitute the rules of the game for any given language and the vanishing existence of the message. This vanishing status is the counterpart of the fact that the message alone is actual, the code being merely virtual. Only the discreet and each time unique acts of discourse actualize the code.

But this first criterion alone would be more misleading than illuminating if the "instance of discourse," as Benveniste calls it, was merely this vanishing event. Then science would be justified in discarding it and the ontological priority of discourse would remain vain and without consequence. An act of discourse is not merely transitory and vanishing, however. It can be identified and reidentified as the same, so that we may say it again or in other words. We may even say it in another language or translate it from one language into another. Through all these transformations it preserves an identity of its own which can be called the propositional content, the "said as such."

We have therefore to reformulate our first criterion--discourse as event--in a more dialectical way in order to take into account the relation which constitutes discourse as such, the relation between event and meaning.

This is not the place to elucidate in detail the inner constitution of the "said as such," the role of the predicate as the kernel and the criterion on the minimal unit of discourse, the sentence, the combination between singular identification and universal predication within one and the same propositional act, etc. We must limit ourselves to saying that this inner constitution testified that discourse is not merely
a vanishing event, it has a structure of its own based on its predicative form. Discourse therefore is the dialectical unity of event and meaning in the sentence. The event character has to be stressed over against all attempts to reduce the message to the code. Every apology for speech as an event is significant if it makes visible the necessary actualization of our linguistic competence in performance. But the same apology becomes abusive when this event character of discourse is extended from the problematic of actualization where it is valid to another problematic, that of understanding. If all discourse is effectuated as an event, it is understood as meaning, that is, as the propositional content which can be described as the synthesis of two functions, the identification and the predication.

It is this dialectic of event and meaning which makes possible the detachment of meaning from the event in writing. But this detachment is not such as to cancel the fundamental structure of discourse. The semantic autonomy of the text which now appears is still governed by the dialectic of event and meaning. Moreover, we may say that this dialectic is made obvious and explicit in writing. Writing is the full manifestation of discourse.

I propose that we begin from the schema of communication described by Roman Jakobson in his article, “Linguistics and Poetics.” To the six main “factors” of communicative discourse—the speaker, hearer, medium or channel, code, situation, and message—Jakobson relates six “functions,” each function correlating with one of the factors: these functions are called the emotive, conative, phatic, metalinguistic, referential, and poetic functions. Using this terminology; our questions about writing can be raised as an inquiry into what alterations, transformations, or deformations affect the interplay of factors and functions when discourse is inscribed in writing.

A. Message and Medium: Fixation

The most obvious change from speaking to writing concerns the relation between the message and its medium or channel. At first glance, it concerns only this relation, but upon closer examination, this first alteration irradiates in every direction, affecting in a decisive manner all the factors and functions. Our task therefore will be to proceed from this central change toward its various peripheral effects.

As a simple change in the nature of the medium, the problem of writing is identical to that of the fixation of discourse in some exterior bearer, whether it be stone, papyrus, or paper, which is other than the human voice. This inscription, substituted for the immediate vocal, physiognomic, or gestural expression is in itself a tremendous cultural achievement. The human face disappears. Now material “marks” convey the message. This cultural achievement concerns the event character of discourse first and subsequently the meaning as well. It is because discourse only exists in a temporal and present instance of discourse that it may flee as speech or be fixed as writing. Because the event appears and disappears, there is a problem of fixation, of inscription. What we want to fix is discourse, not language as langue. It is only by extension that we fix by inscription the alphabet, lexicon, and grammar, all of which serve that which alone is to be fixed, discourse. The atemporal system neither appears nor disappears, it simply does not happen. Only discourse is
to be fixed, because discourse as event disappears.

But this nondialectical description of the phenomenon of fixation does not reach the core of the process of inscription. Writing may rescue the instance of discourse because what writing does actually fix is not the event of speaking, but the "said" of speaking, i.e., the intentional exteriorization constitutive of the couple event-meaning. What we write, what we inscribe, is the noema of the speaking act, the meaning of the speech event, not the event as event. This inscription, in spite of the perils that we shall later evoke following Plato in the second part of this essay, is discourse's destination. Only when the sagen--the "saying"--has become Aus-sage, e-nundation, only then, is discourse accomplished as discourse in the full expression of its nuclear dialectic.

Now, does the problematics of fixation and inscription exhaust the problem of writing?

In other words, is writing only a question of a change of medium, where the human voice, face and gesture are replaced by material marks other than the speaker's own body?

When we consider the range of social and political changes which can be related to the invention of writing, we may surmise that writing is much more than mere material fixation. We need only to remind ourselves of some of these tremendous achievements. To the possibility of transferring orders over long distances without serious distortions may be connected the birth of political rule exercised by a distant state. This political implication of writing is just one of its consequences. To the fixation of rules for reckoning may be correlated the birth of market relationships, therefore the birth of economics. To the constitution of archives, that of history. To the fixation of law as a standard for decisions, independent from the opinion of the concrete judge, the birth of justice and of juridical codes, etc. Such an immense range of effects suggests that human discourse is not merely preserved from destruction by being fixed in writing, but that it is deeply affected in its communicative function.

We are encouraged to pursue this new thought by a second consideration. Writing raises a specific problem as soon as it is not merely the fixation of a previous oral discourse, the inscription of spoken language, but is human thought directly brought to writing without the intermediary stage of spoken language. Then writing takes the place of speaking. A kind of short-cut occurs between the meaning of discourse and the material medium. Then we have to do with literature in the original sense of the word. The fate of discourse is delivered over to littera, not to vox.

The best way to measure the extent of this substitution is to look at the range of changes which occur among the other components of the communication process.

B. Message and Speaker

The first connection to be altered is that of the message to the speaker. This change indeed is itself one of two symmetrical changes which effect the interlocutionary situation as a whole. The relation between message and speaker at one end of the communication chain and the relation between message and hearer at the other are together deeply transformed when the face-to-face relation is replaced by the more complex relation of reading to writing, resulting from the direct inscription of discourse in littera. The dialogical situation has been exploded. The relation writing-reading is no longer a particular case of the relation speaking-hearing.

If we consider these changes in more detail we see that the reference of the discourse back to its speaker is affected in the following way. In discourse the sen-
tence designates its speaker by diverse indicators of subjectivity and personality: personal pronouns centered around the “I,” adverbs of space and time centered around the “here” and “now,” tenses of the verbs centered around the “present indicative,” etc. But in spoken discourse this ability of discourse to refer back to the speaking subject presents a character of immediacy because the speaker belongs to the situation of interlocution. He is there, in the genuine sense of being-there, of Da-sein. Consequently the subjective intention of the speaker and the discourse’s meaning overlap each other in such a way that it is the same thing to understand what the speaker means and what his discourse means.

The ambiguity of the German meinen and the English “to mean” attests to this overlapping in the dialogical situation. With written discourse, however, the author’s intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide. This dissociation of the verbal meaning of the text and the mental intention of the author gives to the concept of inscription its decisive significance, beyond the mere fixation of previous oral discourse. Inscription becomes synonymous with the semantic autonomy of the text which results from the disconnection of the mental intention of the author from the verbal meaning of the text, of what the author meant and what the text means. The text’s career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it.

This concept of semantic autonomy is of tremendous importance for hermeneutics. Exegesis begins with it, i.e., it unfolds its procedures within the circumscription of a set of meanings that have broken their moorings to the psychology of the author. But this de-psychologizing of interpretation does not imply that the notion of authorial meaning has lost all significance. Here again a non-dialectical conception of the relation between event and meaning would tend to oppose one alternative to the other. On the one hand, we would have what W.K. Wimsatt calls the intentional fallacy which holds the author’s intention as the criterion for any valid interpretation of the text, and, on the other hand, what I would call in a symmetrical way the fallacy of the absolute text, the fallacy of hypostasizing the text as an authorless entity. If the intentional fallacy overlooks the semantic autonomy of the text, the opposite fallacy forgets that a text remains a discourse told by somebody, said by someone to someone about something. It is impossible to cancel out this main characteristic of discourse without reducing texts to natural objects, i.e., to things which are not man-made, but which are like pebbles found in the sand.

The semantic autonomy of the text makes the relation of event and meaning more complex and in this sense reveals it as a dialectical relation. The authorial meaning becomes properly a dimension of the text to the extent that the author is not available to questioning. When the text no longer answers, then it has an author and no longer a speaker. The authorial meaning is the dialectical counterpart of the verbal meaning and they have to be construed in terms of each other. The concepts of author and authorial meaning raise a hermeneutical problem contemporaneous with that of semantic autonomy.

C. Message and Hearer

At the opposite end of the communication chain the relation of the textual message to the reader is no less complex than is the relation to the author. Whereas spoken discourse is addressed to someone who is determined in advance by the dialogical situation—i.e., addressed to you, the second person—a written text is addressed to an unknown reader and potentially to whoever knows how to read. This
universalization of the audience is one of the more striking effects of writing and may be expressed in terms of a paradox. Because discourse is now linked to a material support, it becomes more spiritual in the sense that it is liberated from the narrowness of the face-to-face situation.

Of course this universality is only potential. In fact, a book is addressed to only a section of the public and reaches its appropriate readers through media which are themselves submitted to social rules of exclusion and admission. In other words, reading is a social phenomenon which obeys certain patterns and therefore suffers from specific limitations. Nevertheless, the proposition which says that a text is potentially addressed to whoever knows how to read must be retained as a limit on any sociology of reading. A work also creates its public. In this way it enlarges the circle of communication and properly initiates new modes of communication. To that extent, recognition of the work by the audience created by the work is an unpredictable event.

Once again the dialectic of meaning and event is exhibited in its fullness by writing. Discourse is revealed as discourse by the dialectic of the address which is both universal and contingent. On the one hand, it is the semantic autonomy of the text which opens up the range of potential readers and so to speak creates the audience of the text. On the other hand, it is the response of the audience which makes the text important and therefore significant. This is why authors who do not worry about their readers and despise their present public keep speaking to their readers as a secret community, sometimes projected into a cloudy future. It is part of the meaning of a text to be open to an indefinite number of readers and therefore of interpretations. This opportunity for multiple readings is the dialectical counterpart of the semantic autonomy of the text.

It follows that the problem of the appropriation of the meaning of the text becomes as paradoxical as that of the authorship. The right of the reader and the right of the text converge in an important struggle which generates the whole dynamic of interpretation. Hermeneutics begins where dialogue ends.

D. Message and Code

The relation between message and code is so fundamental to the production of language as discourse that it may be said that it defines discourse as such, either oral or written. The code, or rather the codes (phonological, lexical, and syntactical), provide the speaker with the set of discrete units and the combinatory rules with which he produces the most elementary unit of discourse, the sentence. Writing changes nothing with regard to this fundamental polarity message-code. If it alters it, it does so only in a somewhat indirect way. What I have in mind here concerns the function of literary genres in the production of discourse as such and such a mode of discourse, whether poem, narrative, or essay. This function undoubtedly concerns the relation between message and code since genres are generative devices to produce discourse as... Before being classificatory devices used by literary critics to orient themselves in the profusion of literary works, therefore before being artefacts of criticism, they are to discourse what generative grammar is to the grammaticality of individual sentences. In this sense these discursive codes may be joined to those phonological, lexical, and syntactical codes which rule the units of discourse, sentences. Now the question is to what extent literary genres are genuinely codes of writing? Only in an indirect, but nevertheless decisive way.

Literary genres display some conditions which theoretically could be described without considering writing. The function of these generative devices is to produce
new entities of language longer than the sentence, organic wholes irreducible to a mere addition of sentences. A poem, narrative, or essay relies on laws of composition which in principle are indifferent to the opposition between speaking and writing. They proceed from the application of dynamic forms to sets of sentences for which the difference between oral and written language is unessential. Instead, the specificity of these dynamic forms seems to proceed from another dichotomy than that of speaking and hearing: for the application to discourse of categories borrowed from another field, that of practice and work. Language is submitted to the rules of a kind of craftsmanship which allow us to speak of production and of works of art, and by extension of works of discourse. The generative devices which we call literary genres are the technical rules presiding over their production. And the style of a work is nothing else than the individual configuration of a singular product or work. The author here is not only the speaker, but also the maker of this work which is his work.

But, if the dichotomy between theory and practice is irreducible to the pair speaking-writing, writing plays a decisive role precisely in the application of the categories of practice, technique, and work to discourse. There is production when a form is applied to some matter in order to shape it. When discourse is transferred to the field of production it is also treated as a stuff to be shaped. It is here that writing interferes. Inscription as a material support, the semantic autonomy of the text as regards both the speaker and the hearer, and all the related traits of exteriority characteristic of writing help to make language the matter of a specific craftsmanship. Thanks to writing, the works of language become as self-contained as sculptures. It is not by chance that literature designates both the status of language as written (littera) and as embodied in works according to literary genres. With literature the problem of inscription and that of production tend to overlap. The same may be said for the concept of text, which combines the condition of inscription with the texture proper to the works generated by the productive rules of literary composition. Text means discourse both as inscribed and wrought.

Such is the specific affinity that reigns between writing and specific codes which generate the works of discourse. This affinity is so close that we might be tempted to say that even oral expressions of poetic or narrative composition rely on processes equivalent to writing. The memorization of epic poems, lyrical songs, parables and proverbs, and their ritual recitation tend to fix and even to freeze the form of the work in such a way that memory appears as the support of an inscription similar to that provided by external marks. In this extended sense of inscription, writing and the production of works of discourse according to the rules of literary composition tend to coincide without being identical processes.

E. Message and Reference

We have postponed considering the most complex changes which occur in the functioning of discourse which may be ascribed to writing until the end of this inquiry. They concern the referential function of discourse in the schema of communication proposed by Roman Jakobson, which are the most complex effects of all for two reasons. On the one hand, the distinction between sense and reference introduces in discourse a more complex dialectic than that of event and meaning which provides us with the model of exteriorization which makes writing possible. It is so to speak, a dialectic of the second order where the meaning itself, as immanent "sense," is externalized as transcendent reference, in the sense that thought is directed through
the sense toward different kinds of extralinguistic entities such as objects, states of affairs, things, facts, etc. On the other hand, most of the alterations of reference which will be considered are not to be ascribed to writing as such but to writing as the ordinary mediation of the modes of discourse which constitute literature. Some of these alterations are even directly produced by the strategy proper to specific literary genres such as poetry. Inscription, then, is only indirectly responsible for the new fate of reference.

Yet despite these reservations, the following may be said. In spoken discourse the ultimate criterion for the referential scope of what we say is the possibility of showing the thing referred to as a member of the situation common to both speaker and hearer. This situation surrounds the dialogue and its landmarks can all be shown by a gesture or by pointing a finger. Or it can be designated in an ostensive manner by the discourse itself through the oblique reference of those indicators which include the demonstratives, the adverbs of time and place, and the tenses of the verb. Or finally they can be described in such a definite way that one and only one thing may be identified within the common framework of reference. Indeed, the ostensive indicators and still more the definite descriptions work in the same way in both oral and written discourse. They provide singular identifications and singular identifications need not rely on showing in the sense of a gestural indication of the thing referred to. Nevertheless singular identifications ultimately refer to the here and now determined by the interlocutionary situation. There is no identification which does not relate that about which we speak to a unique position in the spatio-temporal network and there is no network of places in time and space without a final reference to the situational here and now. In this ultimate sense, all references of oral language rely on monstrations which depend on the situation perceived as common by the members of the dialogue. All the references in the dialogical situation are consequently situational.

It is this grounding of reference in the dialogical situation which is shattered by writing. Ostensive indicators and definite descriptions continue to identify singular entities, but a gap appears between identification and monstration. The absence of a common situation generated by the spatial and the temporal distance between writer and reader, the cancellation of the absolute here and now by the substitution of material external marks for the voice, face, and body of the speaker as the absolute origin of all the places in space and time, and the semantic autonomy of the text which severs it from the present of the writer and opens it to an indefinite range of potential readers in an indeterminate time, all these alterations of the temporal constitution of discourse are reflected in parallel alterations of the ostensive character of the reference.

Some texts merely restructure for their readers the conditions of ostensive reference. Letters, travel reports, geographical descriptions, diaries, historical monographs, and in general all descriptive accounts of reality may provide the reader with an equivalent of ostensive reference in the mode of "as if..." ("as if you were there"), thanks to the ordinary procedures of singular identification. The heres and theres of the text may be tactily referred to the absolute here and there of the reader thanks to the unique spatio-temporal network to which both writer and reader ultimately belong and which they both acknowledge.

This first extension of the scope of reference beyond the narrow boundaries of the dialogical situation is of tremendous consequence. Thanks to writing, man and only man has a world and not just a situation. This extension is one more example of the spiritual implications of the substitution of material marks for the bodily support of oral discourse. In the same manner that the text frees its meaning from
the tutelage of the mental intention, it frees its reference from the limits of situational reference. For us, the world is the ensemble of references opened up by the texts, or, at least, for the moment, by descriptive texts. It is in this way that we may speak of the Greek "world," which is not to imagine anymore what were the situations for those who lived there, but to designate the nonsituational references displayed by the descriptive accounts of reality.

A second extension of the scope of reference is much more difficult to interpret. It proceeds less from writing as such than from the open (or sometimes overt) strategy of certain modes of discourse. Therefore it concerns literature more than writing, or writing as the channel of literature. In the construction of his scheme of communication, Roman Jakobson relates the poetic function—which is to be understood in a broader sense than just poetry—to the emphasis of the message for its own sake at the expense of the reference. We have already anticipated this eclipsing of the reference by comparing poetic discourse to a self-contained sculptural work. The gap between situational and non-situational reference, implied in the "as if" reference of descriptive accounts, is now unbridgeable. This can be seen in fictional narratives, i.e., in narratives that are not descriptive reports. A narrative time, expressed by specific tenses of the verbs, is displayed by and within the narrative without any connection to the unique space-time network common to ostensive and non-ostensive description.

Does this mean that this eclipse of reference, in either the ostensive or descriptive sense, amounts to a sheer abolition of all reference? No. My contention is that discourse cannot fail to be about something. In saying this, I am denying the ideology of absolute texts. Only a few sophisticated texts, along the line of Mallarme's poetry, satisfy this ideal of a text without reference. But this modern kind of literature stands as a limiting case and an exception. It cannot give the key to all other texts, even poetic texts, in Jakobson's sense, which includes all fictional literature whether lyric or narrative. In one manner or another poetic texts speak about the world. But not in a descriptive way. As Jakobson himself suggests, the reference here is not abolished, but doubled.** The effacement of the ostensive and descriptive reference liberates a power of reference to aspects of our being in the world which cannot be said in a direct descriptive way, but only alluded to, thanks to the referential values of metaphoric and, in general, symbolic expression.

We ought therefore to enlarge our concept of the world not only to allow for non-ostensive but still descriptive references, but also non-ostensive and non-descriptive references, those of poetic diction. The term world then has the meaning that we all understand when we say of a new-born child that he has come into the world. For me, the world is the ensemble of references opened up by every kind of text, descriptive or poetic, that we have read, understood, and loved. And to understand a text is to interpolate among the predicates of our situation all the significations which make a Welt out of our Unwelt. It is this enlarging of our horizon of existence which permits us to speak of the references opened up by the text or of the world opened up by the referential claims of most texts.

**"La suprématie de la fonction poétique sur la fonction référentielle n'oblige pas la référence (la dénotation), mais la rend ambiguë. A un message à double sens correspondent un destinataire dédouble, un destinataire dédouble et, de plus, une référence dédouble."
In this sense, Heidegger rightly says, in his analysis of Verstehen in \textit{Being and Time}, that what we understand first in a discourse is not another person, but a “pro-ject,” that is, the outline of a new way of being in the world. Only writing—given the two reservations made at the beginning of this section—in freeing itself, not only from its author and from its originary audience, but from the narrowness of the dialogical situation, reveals this destination of discourse as projecting a world.

2. A Plea for Writing

The preceding analysis has reached its goal. It has shown the full manifestation of the nuclear dialectic of event and meaning and of the intentional externalization already at work in oral discourse, although in an inchoative way. But by pushing it to the forefront it has made problematic what could be taken for granted as long as it remained implicit. Is not this intentional externalization delivered over to material marks a kind of alienation?

This question is so radical that it requires that we assume in the most positive way the condition of exteriority, not only as a cultural accident, as a contingent condition for discourse and thought, but as a necessary condition of the hermeneutical process. Only a hermeneutic using distanciation in a productive way may solve the paradox of the intentional externalization of discourse.

A. Against Writing

The attack against writing comes from afar. It is linked to a certain model of knowledge, science, and wisdom used by Plato to condemn exteriority as being contrary to genuine reminiscence. (\textit{Phaedrus 274e-277a}) He presents it in the form of a myth because philosophy here has to do with the coming to being of an institution, a skill, and a power, lost in the dark past of culture and connected with Egypt, the cradle of religious wisdom. The king of Thebes receives in his city the god Theuth, who has invented numbers, geometry, astronomy, games of chance, and grammata or written characters. Questioned about the powers and possible benefits of his invention, Theuth claims that the knowledge of written characters would make Egyptians wiser and more capable of preserving the memory of things. No, replies the king, souls will become more forgetful once they have put their confidence in external marks instead of relying on themselves from within. This “remedy” (\textit{pharmakon}) is not reminiscence, but sheer rememoration. As to instruction, what this invention brings is not the reality, but the resemblance of it; not wisdom but its appearance.

Socrates' commentary is no less interesting. Writing is like painting which generates non-living being, which in turn keeps silent when asked to answer. Writings, too, if one questions them in order to learn from them, “signify a unique thing always the same.” Besides this sterile sameness, writings are indifferent to their addressees. Wandering here and there, they are heedless of whom they reach. And if a dispute arises, or if they are unjustly despised, they still need the help of their father. By themselves they are unable to rescue themselves.

According to this harsh critique, as the apology for true reminiscence, the principle and soul of right and genuine discourse, discourse accompanied with wisdom (or science), is written in the soul of the one who knows his subject, how to define and divide it, and how to address it to the soul whom he is addressing.

This Platonic attack against writing is not an isolated example in the history of
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our culture. Rousseau and Bergson, for different reasons, link the main evils which
plague civilization to writing. For Rousseau, as long as language relied only on the
voice, it preserved the presence of oneself to oneself and others. Language was still
the expression of passion. It was eloquence, not yet exegesis. With writing began
separation, tyranny, and inequality. Writing ignores its addressee just as it conceals
its author. It separates men just as property separates owners. The tyranny of the
lexicon and grammar is equal to that of the laws of exchange, crystallized in money.
Instead of the word of God, we have the rule of the learned and the domination of
the priesthood. The break up of the speaking community, the partition of the
soil, the analycity of thought, and the reign of dogmatism were all born with writ­ing.
An echo of Platonic reminiscence may therefore still be heard in this apology
for the voice as the bearer of one's presence to oneself and as the inner link of a
community without distance.

Bergson directly questions the principle of exteriority, which witnesses to the
infiltration of space into the temporality of sound and its continuity. The genuine
word emerges from the "intellectual effort" to fulfill a previous intention of saying,
in the search for the appropriate expression. The written word, as the deposit of
this search, has severed its ties with the feeling, effort, and dynamism of thought.
The breath, song, and rhythm are over and the figure takes their place. It captures
and fascinates. It scatters and isolates. This is why authentic creators such as Socra­
etes and Jesus have left no writings, and why the genuine mystics renounce state­
ments and articulated thought.

Once more the interiority of the phonic effort is opposed to the exteriority of
dead imprints which are unable to "rescue" themselves.

B. Writing and Iconicity

The rejoinder to such critiques must be as radical as the challenge. It is no longer
possible to rely on just a description of the movement from speaking to writing.
The critique summons us to legitimate what has been hitherto simply taken for
granted.

A remark made in passing in the Phaedrus provides us with an important clue.
Writing is compared to painting, the images of which are said to be weaker and less
real than living beings. The question here is whether the theory of the eikon, which
is held to be a mere shadow of reality, is not the presupposition of every critique
addressed to any mediation through exterior marks.

If it could be shown that painting is not this shadowy reduplication of reality,
then it would be possible to return to the problem of writing as a chapter in a gen­
eral theory of iconicity such as Dagognet elaborates in his recent book, Ecriture et
Iconicité.

Far from yielding less than the original, pictorial activity may be characterized
in terms of an "iconic argumentation," where the strategy of painting, for example,
is to reconstruct reality on the basis of a limited optic alphabet. This strategy of
contraction and miniaturization yields more, so to speak, by handling less. In this
way, the main effect of painting is to resist the entropic tendency of ordinary vision
--the shadow image of Plato--and to increase the meaning of the universe by cap­
turing it in the network of its abbreviated signs. This effect of saturation and cul­
mination, within the tiny space of the frame and on the surface of a two-dimen­sional canvas, in opposition to the optical erosion proper to ordinary vision,
what is meant by iconic argumentation. Whereas in ordinary perception qualities tend to neutralize one another, to blur their edges, to shade off their contrast, painting—at least since the invention of oil-painting by Dutch artists—enhances the contrasts, gives colors back their resonance, and lets appear the luminosity within which things shine. The history of the techniques of painting teaches us that these meaningful effects followed the material invention of pigments made active by being mixed with oil. This selection of what we just called the optic alphabet of the painter allowed him to preserve the colors from diluting and tarnishing and to incorporate the deep refraction of light beneath the mere reflective effect of surface luminosity into his pictures.

Because the painter could master a new alphabetic material—because he was a chemist, distillator, varnisher, and glazer—he was able to write a new text of reality. Painting for the Dutch masters was neither the reproduction nor the production of the universe, but its metamorphosis.

In this respect, the techniques of engraving and etching are equally instructive. Whereas photography—at least unskilled photography—grasps everything, but holds nothing, the magic of engraving, celebrated by Beaudelaire, may exhibit the essential because, as with painting, although with other means, it relies on the invention of an alphabet, i.e., a set of minimal signs, made up of syncope points, strokes, and white patches, which enhance the trait and surround it with absence. Impressionism, and abstract art as well, proceed more and more boldly to the abolition of natural forms for the sake of a merely constructed range of elementary signs whose combinatorial forms will rival ordinary vision. With abstract art painting is close to science in that it challenges perceptual forms by relating them to non-perceptual structures. The graphic capture of the universe, here too, is served by a radical denial of the immediate. Painting seems to only "produce," no longer to "reproduce." But it catches up with reality at the level of its elements, as does the god of the Timeaus. Constructivism is only the boundary case of a process of augmentation where the apparent denial of reality is the condition for the glorification of the non-figurative essence of things. Iconicity, then, means the revelation of a real more real than ordinary reality.

This theory of iconicity as esthetic augmentation of reality gives us the key to a decisive answer to Plato's critique of writing. Iconicity is the re-writing of reality. Writing, in the limited sense of the word, is a particular case of iconicity. The inscription of discourse is the transcription of the world, and transcription is not reduplication, but metamorphosis.

This positive value of the material mediation by written signs may be ascribed in writing as in painting to the invention of notational systems presenting analytical properties: discreetness, finite number, combinatorial power. The triumph of the phonetic alphabet in Western cultures and the apparent subordination of writing to speaking stemming from the dependence of letters on sounds, however, must not let us forget the other possibilities of inscription expressed by pictograms, hieroglyphs, and above all by ideograms, which represent a direct inscription of thought meanings and which can be read differently in different idioms. These other kinds of inscription exhibit a universal character of writing, equally present in phonetic writing, but which the dependence on sounds there tends to dissimulate: the space-structure not only of the bearer of the marks, but of the marks themselves, of their forms, position, mutual distance, order, and linear disposition. The transfer from hearing to reading is fundamentally linked to this transfer from the temporal properties of the voice to the spatial properties of the inscribed marks. This general
spatialization of language is complete with the appearance of printing. The visual­ization of culture begins with the dispossession of the power of the voice in the proximity of mutual presence. Printed texts reach man in solitude, far from the ceremonies which gather the community. Abstract relations, telecommunications in the proper sense of the word, connect the scattered members of an invisible public.

Such are the material instruments of the iconicity of writing and the transcription of reality through the external inscription of discourse.

3. Inscription and Productive Distanciation

We are now prepared for a final step. It will lead us to find in the process of interpretation itself the ultimate justification of the externalization of discourse. The problem of writing becomes a hermeneutical problem when it is referred to its complementary pole which is reading. A new dialectic then emerges, that of distanciation and appropriation. By appropriation I mean the counterpart of the semantic autonomy which detached the text from its writer. To appropriate is to make "one's own" what was "alien." Because there is a general need for making our own what was foreign to us, there is a general problem of distanciation. Distance, then, is not simply a fact, a given, just the actual spatial and temporal gap between us and the appearance of such and such work of art or of discourse. It is a dialectical trait, the principle of a struggle between the otherness which transforms all spatial and temporal distance into cultural estrangement and the ownness by which all understanding aims at the extension of self-understanding. Distanciation is not a quantitative phenomenon; it is the dynamic counterpart of our need, our interest, and our effort to overcome cultural estrangement. Writing and reading take place in this culture struggle. Reading is the pharmakon, the "remedy," by which the meaning of the text is "rescued" from the estrangement of distanciation and put in a new proximity, a proximity which suppresses and preserves the cultural distance and includes the otherness within the ownness.

This general problematic is deeply rooted both in the history of thought and in our ontological situation.

Historically speaking the problem which we are elaborating is the reformulation of a problem to which the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment gave its first modern formulation for the sake of classical philology: how to make once more present the culture of antiquity in spite of the intervening cultural distance? German Romanticism gave a dramatic turn to this problem by asking how we can become contemporaneous with past geniuses? More generally, how to use the expressions of life fixed by writing in order to transfer oneself into a foreign psychic life? The problem returns again after the collapse of the Hegelian claim to overcome historicism in the logic of the Absolute Spirit. If there is no recapitulation of past cultural heritages in an all encompassing whole delivered from the one-sidedness of its partial components, then the historicity of the transmission and reception of these heritages cannot be overcome. Then the dialectic of distanciation and appropriation is the last word in the absence of absolute knowledge.

This dialectic may also be expressed as that of the tradition as such, understood as the reception of historically transmitted cultural heritages. A tradition raises no philosophical problem as long as we live and dwell within it in the naivete of the first certainty. Tradition only becomes problematic when this first naivete is lost. Then we have to retrieve its meaning through and beyond estrangement. Henceforth the appropriation of the past proceeds along an endless struggle with distan-
ciation. Interpretation, philosophically understood, is nothing else than an attempt to make estrangement and distanciation productive.

Placed against the background of the dialectic of distanciation and appropriation, the relation between writing and reading accedes to its most fundamental meaning. At the same time, the partial dialectical processes, separately described in the opening section of this essay, following Jakobson's model of communication, make sense as a whole.