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The gesture of the scribe is distinct from that of the letter on its page. To be sure: the scribe, hunched over in the fading glow of an evening sun or dying phone screen, carefully imprinting ink onto the page, is the condition of possibility of the letter's existence on the page. Yet once there, the letter unfolds in ways unknown to the scribe. Indeed, it unfolds in ways unrelated even to the page's subsequent readers. Between being written and being read, a letter assumes a third kind of existence, grey and diminutive, archival and silent – yet unfolding in a distinct way. It is its pure being on a page that is at stake in this interval without human scribes or readers: the letter's unfolding in, through, and as page space.

That a letter should have such an independent existence is not self-evident. As the ancient scribes exert themselves laboring over pages, their letters became their legacy on parchment; when their medieval colleagues took over, they became transcriptions of wisdom, prayers on pages. Handwriting seems to leave no space to the letter's own existence. The act of writing is intimately tied to the muscle memory of the scribe, and in some cases the act of reading is, too – everyday history is littered with complaints about unreadable handwriting. Everywhere the scribe's personality overcomes that of the letter. Even in the scribe's absence, indeed even after the scribe's death, the handwritten letter seems to speak not of itself on the page, but of the scribe: whence graphological analysis.

No wonder, then, that a monumental philosophical tradition regards the letter as – at best – a derivative of the scribe's presence in speech. “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken

words," declares Aristotle,<sup>1</sup> inaugurating this tradition alongside Plato's *Cratylus*. Hugh of St. Victor, whose *Didascalion* or 'Guide to the Arts' "aims to select and define all the areas of knowledge" of the twelfth century,<sup>2</sup> acknowledges the existence of the letter which is "properly speaking...a written figure," but immediately subordinates it to "a larger sense" where the term 'letter' means "both the spoken and the written symbol, for they both belong to grammar."<sup>3</sup> Hegel, likewise encyclopedic in aiming to sum up all knowledge of his time, finds that the letter's outward shape is arbitrary, unlike that of the symbol: "the natural attributes of the intuition, and the connotation of which it is a sign, have nothing to do with each other."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the signs of writing are, to Hegel, only a "further development in the particular sphere of language which borrows the help of an externally practical activity,"<sup>5</sup> an outward tool whose manifestation on the page assists the constitution of memory. Contemporary philosophy of language concurs: neither Austin nor Searle, to mention just these two, grant the letter an independent existence within speech acts.

Yet a counter-current persists, less monumental perhaps, but just as pervasive. Isidore Isou's letterism is a substantial re-inscription of this older tradition, which recognizes that between writing and reading, between scribe and editor, stands an independent existence of the letter on the page. To us contemporaries, who inhabit a world of printed signs, this may seem self-evident: no authorial spirituality presides over the pale bureaucratic language of everyday street, airport, or train station signage. It would seem, however, that this is a recent development; that we ride the crest of a wave of independent letters whose foundations began with Gutenberg's movable type. This wave of an exteriorization of writing would have its foremost manifestation - and this is now almost canonical - in Nietzsche's UNSER SCHREIBZEUG ARBEITET MIT AN UNSEREN GEDANKEN, shakily typed on

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1 Peri Hermenias, 16a1-3 (tr. Edghill).

2 Didascalion, 3.

3 Ibid, 80.

4 Encyclopedica par 458 comment (tr. Wallace).

5 Ibid, par 459 comment (tr. Wallace).

a Malling-Hansen typewriter in 1882.<sup>6</sup>

Yet graphematic exteriorization is as old as the development of the human hand.<sup>7</sup> The letter has always had an independent existence; carefully hidden though it may have been in the monumental tradition of philosophical thought. For Chrysipp, the Stoic philosopher a few decades Aristotle's younger, the letter was an independent part of the syllable, that which has no further parts of its own.<sup>8</sup> For Chrysipp, then, letters are worth analyzing in themselves, although his vowelistic prejudice subordinates their existence on the page to their sounds.<sup>9</sup> (The sophist Gorgias, whose writings are sadly lost, may have had an even more radical theory, arguing – potentially – that each text changes the shapes of its letters when written down, and thus becomes a different text!<sup>10</sup>) We recall Hugh's insistence above, too, that letters are technically written on a page, although like Chrysipp, he subordinates their written being to their spoken being. And of course the modern printing press everywhere deploys irreducible evidence of the independent existence of letters between reading and writing: of "hides and hints and misses in prints," each "bound over to carry three score and ten toptypical readings."<sup>11</sup>

## 2

The essence of this second tradition, however, is encapsulated in a text much older than the typewriter, and indeed older than the printing press. Long before Isidore Isou, another Isidor developed a theory of the letter's existence on a page firmly rooted in the second tradition. This Isidor is Isidor of Seville (560-636 AD), whose work *Etymologies*, much like Hugh's *Didascalion* and Hegel's *Encyclopedia*,

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6 Quoted after the facsimile in Stephan Gunzel, "Nietzsches Schreibmaschinentexte – Interpretationsansätze und Vorstellung der Edition," in Kopyj and Kunicki (eds), *Nietzsche und Schopenhauer*, Leipzig 2006, p. 419.

7 Andre Leroi-Gourhan, *Hand und Wort*, Frankfurt 1988, pp. 237/238.

8 Diogenes Laertios, 7.56.

9 Andreas Schmidhauser, "The Birth of Grammar in Greece," in Egbert Bakker (ed.), *A Companion to Ancient Greek Languages*, Malden, Mass. 2014, p. 503.

10 James Porter, "Language in Ancient Rhetoric and Grammar," in *ibid.*, p. 521.

11 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, London 2012, p. 20.

encompassed all knowledge of his time. The value of the etymological work on which it is based may be questionable, but nonetheless, Isidor presents two distinct theories of the function of letters. The first belongs to philosophy's monumental tradition, subordinating the letter to voice and memory: "letters are tokens of things, the signs of words, and they have so much force that the utterances of those who are absent speak to us without a voice...The use of letters was invented for the sake of remembering things..."<sup>12</sup>

Yet it is the second theory which Isidor presents - immediately after this first one - that embraces the tradition ascribing an independent existence to letters on the page. On the surface, it reads like a description of the act of reading: "Letters (*littera*) are so called as if the term were *legitera*, because they provide a road (*iter*) for those who are reading (*legere*), or because they are repeated (*iterare*) in reading."<sup>13</sup> Yet a closer look reveals that neither of the gestures Isidor describes here are gestures made by a reader.

First, the letters of Isidor provide a road - and the road precedes the reader. The reader may use it at will, to be sure. But the reader must also use the road as laid out by the letters, not vice versa. The letters form a pathway imprinted onto parchment or paper, or indeed any other surface, and the reader follows along the pathway. We encounter this in everyday situations of travel: Western signage is readable from the left to the right, while other signs are readable from the right to the left, or from the top to the bottom. (Antique texts, particularly from the time of the adaptation of the Greek and Etruscan alphabets, were sometimes written in *boustrophedon*, alternating between left-to-right and right-to-left orientation!) Nor is this function of letters as roads restricted to individual lines of text. Jewish commentary on the Tanakh is an example of text guiding the reader through layers like the rings of a tree, while every academic reader knows that a footnote is a treacherous path laid out to make the reader stumble across pages and books in a delirious swagger. And what is asemic writing

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<sup>12</sup> Isidor, *Etymologiae*, I.3.1-2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, I.3.3.

but the absence of a road of lettering, leaving the reader to struggle on their own?

Repetition, too, is not a gesture performed by the reader, but by the letter. That this 'x' looks like that 'x' and like this 'x' is a phenomenon which the reader primarily encounters. To be sure, an 'x' or any other letter might just constitute a blot of ink on a page at first - or a flickering abstraction thereof on a screen - and a reader might be said to recognize it as an 'x' and thus to read it. Yet on what is this recognition based? Empirically, the existence of an 'x' as a recognizable letter precedes my first encounter with it. Does this not mean that, structurally, the 'x' must be legible as an 'x' before I first encounter it? And thus before any such first encounter? In other words, must the 'x' not remain readable as an 'x' even when any reader who might recognize it is absent - when the book carrying the 'x' rests on its shelf, or when its readers are all dead? Is this not the secret of deciphering long-gone scripts: they remain readable, which is to say, their letters remain recognizable? Readability of letters cannot reside, then, in its readers. It is a function of their unfolding on the page, of their diminutive gesture preceding the act of being read. The 'x' is an 'x' because the 'x' iterates as an 'x' in every text I encounter. This is why there is a variability to reading scripts: the 'x' remains an 'x' no matter how much a handwritten script may distort its shape. Iteration precedes reading. The letter is not repeated by my reading it, but *through* my reading it. I, the reader, am the letter's dependent variable: it implements me.

Which is to say that the letter implements itself: as road and repetition. Its being on a page unfolds in a space that is neither the space of reading nor the space of writing. Rather, it is the space of pure guidance: before the eye glides from one letter to another, constructing syllables, words, and sentences, the letter already implements cohesion and adhesion, already demarcating spaces of transmission and paths to traverse. The letter as road unfolds as page space: pure horizontality, each letter gestures beyond itself into its companions inhabiting

the page.

Likewise, the letter's being on a page unfolds in a time that is neither the time of reading nor the time of writing. Rather, it is the time of pure repetition: before the eye recognizes one letter or another, analyzing them from syllables, words, and sentences, the letter already implements itself as repetition from a past and iteration into a future, already demarcating the extent to which a script may deviate from the shape of a printed 'x' to still be recognizable as an 'x'. The letter as repetition unfolds as page time: pure verticality, each letter gestures beyond itself towards its past and future iterations.

Nor can the aspects of letters - road and repetition - be separated. It is because of letters being roads that they can be repeated. Beckoning the reader's eye to glide from this 'x' to this 'x' to this 'x', letters entice the reader to recognize each as iteration of its predecessor, and to anticipate each as precognition of its successor. It is because of letters being repetitions that they can serve as roads. Enticing the reader to recognize iterations of this 'x' and this 'x' and this 'x', letters beckon the reader to recognize each as an entity different from the other, separate from the other, and yet in order and succession, forming syllables and words and sentences, and ultimately forming the page space they inhabit.

3

For it is not only the reader who is preceded and constituted by the letter. The page itself, too, is preceded and constituted by the letter. An unmarked piece of paper is not a page. Only when letters manifest does it become a page space.

This appears not to be the case. The letter iterates, this 'x' morphing into this 'x' becoming this 'x', thus forming a road. Yet this road, and hence this repetition, can only unfold because a spatial plane unfolds with them. Seemingly trivially, this spatial plane - the page - implements the second 'x' as different from the first, and again the third 'x' from the second, thus allowing each of them

to dwell as repetition. Without the spatial plane, their difference would disappear, and thus their existence as repetitive iterations of one another: neither road nor repetition can unfold within a point.

Indeed, and again seemingly trivially, the very existence of a letter as such is the existence of a spatial expanse in which it can unfold. The letter's shape may not, as Hegel suggested, be directly related to the 'content' to which its word-assemblage alludes – yet it is nonetheless the condition of possibility of just that word-assemblage, and hence of whichever 'content' arises from it. A letter must exist – which is to say, a letter must spread out over a space.

Yet, much less trivially, *Espace blanc* shows that it is not the page space which implements the letter's unfolding, but the letter's unfolding which implements page space.<sup>14</sup> Filling the space which is blank on the present page, while leaving blank the space filled on the present page, exposes not only that letters on any given page are surrounded by what Norling calls 'the erratic march of negative space', which may thus be regarded as an otherwise silent condition for the letter to appear. It vividly shows that this 'erratic march' is much more than a topological container. The absence of letters in negative space is constituted as such – as an absence – only because of the presence of letters in (as it were) 'positive' space. Because letters dwell in the center of Georges Perec's pages, the absence of letters dwells in their margins. This absence is a meaningful absence, rendered such by the presence which it surrounds. Before inserting the presence of letters, their absence was not manifest, but merely one of many possibilities. After all, the page could have been used in any way not involving letters, including being discarded without anything on it at all.

Negative space is thus not older than the space of letters: the page is a page because of letters, not vice versa. And not just that: the very taxonomy of the page itself – center and margin – is constituted by the presence of letters. Before inserting letters, and thus constituting the center of a page, no margins existed.

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<sup>14</sup> Petra Schulze-Wollgast, *Espace blanc*, Malmo 2019.

Again the page could have been filled with any constellation of signs, including none at all. By itself, it has neither center nor margin. Indeed, the page by itself is not a page at all, but merely a piece of paper – or the flickering abstraction thereof on a screen.

Not only is negative space therefore not older than the space of letters: the page, too, is not older than the presence of letters on it. When replacing blank space with letters and letters with blank space, PSW not only makes evident that the space of letters is surrounded by the space of a page. It is also evident that the negative space of a page is constituted by its positive space by the very same token that the positive space of a page is constituted by its negative space. As soon as a letter intervenes into an otherwise empty piece of paper (or abstraction thereof on a screen), it constitutes – simultaneously – itself, positive space, and negative space. Which is to say, it constitutes, firstly, itself as road and repetition; secondly, the piece of paper as a page with positive space containing the letter; and thirdly, the piece of paper as a page with negative space surrounding the letter. *Espace blanc* shows this triple movement.

1) Firstly, a letter intervenes into an empty space to constitute itself as a letter, that is, as road and repetition. As soon as it persists on the page, its being independent of being written and being read unfolds. It gestures towards other letters – after all, even a single letter is a single letter merely because of the absence of other letters – and thus gestures towards its being a road. It gestures towards previous iterations of itself, and anticipates future iterations of itself, and thus gestures towards its being repetition. In *Espace blanc*, this – as it were – ‘ordinary’ unfolding of letters is performed not just by the title page and Norling’s introductory essay, but also on the bottom of each page. After all, the identification of PSW’s typed blocks as so many treatments of Perec’s original letters must be implemented by letters: ‘Espace blanc’, ‘White space’, ‘Weissraum’...

2) Yet we observe here not just the unfolding of ‘meaningful’ letters as road

and repetition. We also – and primarily – observe here the unfolding of page space. Secondly, a letter intervenes into an empty piece of paper (or screen-based reconstruction thereof) to constitute the piece of paper as a page, containing a center and a margin: as ‘positive’ space. *Espace blanc* demonstrates this just as clearly: removing the letters originally situated on their pages by Perec, it fills what had originally been their negative space with the iterated letter ‘x’. This inversion shows that Perec’s original lettering had constituted, alongside themselves, a negative space surrounding them. It also shows that the negative space surrounding them had been – and always will be – their condition of possibility. Letters are not accidentally surrounded by page space, they constitute page space as their boundary and margin to constitute themselves in its center, to seduce the reader to observe them exclusively, to entice the reader to follow their road and repetition. Letters function as roads in the center of the page, constituting themselves as zones of importance. PSW’s reversal makes this evident – here, Perec’s letters are themselves made marginal, rendered an ‘outside’ to the letters that matter: the positive space of PSW’s iterations of ‘x’. Which shows that Perec’s original letters had been their positive space, and had constituted their page as *their* page space.

Yet in exposing this, *Espace blanc* also constitutes itself as a new center. Its iterations of ‘x’ filling its pages constitute its pages in the same way Perec’s letters had done. The reversal is reversed. The white space filling what Perec’s letters had originally occupied is implemented here ostensibly as a new marginal space relative to the iterations of ‘x’ surrounding it, thus exposing that it had originally been otherwise. Yet is this the case? The iterations of ‘x’ certainly draw attention to what had originally been marginal blank space. And they now draw attention to what had originally been central letter space. By removing the letters originally inhabiting the center of Perec’s page, the iterations of ‘x’ do not re-constitute this previous center as a new marginal space. The white space within them remains just as central as it had been before – indeed, Norling’s

introductory words make this abundantly clear. It is not a reversal that takes place here. Rather, the white space in the center of the iterations of 'x' now constitutes a third kind of page space. Its emptiness is not the emptiness of the space previously surrounding Perec's original letters. It is not marginal emptiness. Rather, the white spaces – devoid of letters though they may be – nonetheless now serve as roads and repetitions in their own right. They are implemented as continuations of their surrounding 'x's. That is, the white spaces in the centers of PSW's pages render their surrounding iterations of 'x' meaningful not by their absence *as such* – as the space originally surrounding Perec's letters did – but by their *structured* absence. The letters remain, in spite of themselves. They are not voided. Obliquely, they shine through the page.

Thus *Espace blanc* doesn't show us a reversal of conventional page space and its conventional center-margin relation. Its iterations of 'x' are implemented as 'positive' page space: road and repetition each of them. But the white spaces within them are not thereby constituted as negative space. Rather they too constitute page space in the way letters do: white space as road and repetition in its own right. Gesturing to its surrounding 'x's, each structured section of white space constitutes a road towards them: not as its negative, but as its continuation. Likewise gesturing to its iterations on the pages preceding and succeeding it, each structured section of white space constitutes a repetition: on 'Espace blanc', 'White space' is just about present, just about visible, just as 'White space' is on 'Weissraum' and 'Weissraum' on 'White space'.

3) Which is to say, *Espace blanc* shows that positive letter space can be empty, too. It does not so much reverse Perec's original 'positive' page space, and its attendant center-margin relation, as re-inscribe it. Yet by the same token, while it may appear that *Espace blanc* generates its own negative space, we must ask to what extent this can really be negative space.

Thirdly, a letter intervenes into a blank piece of paper to constitute negative space as foil and demarcation of its positive space. The letter itself, as

road and repetition, is a spatialization and, as such, constitutes its presence on the page as 'positive' space. But just as roads beyond the page are demarcated by their boundaries - ditches, footwalks, trees, hedges - so the road on the page can only persist as such because it is surrounded by its negative: by anything that is not road. Thus white paper surrounds letters as its negation: where it is not, there are letters, and where there are letters, there is not white paper. By filling Perec's white space with iterations of 'x', *Espace blanc* exposes the unfolding of this negation.

Yet by removing the lettering where it had originally been on Perec's pages, *Espace blanc* also shows that negative space surrounding letters is co-originary with these letters. Letters are not just the positive to which their surrounding white space is a negative. They are also a negative to which their surrounding white space is a positive. And it is by this gesture that letters constitute a page as their page. Letters are negations of their negation, returning to themselves through a detour by which they constitute the piece of paper as their page. In themselves, letters are road and repetition, spatializing only themselves. To do so, they must spatialize their surroundings, constitute what is not road in order to constitute what is road. Which is to say that the page, while it is a necessary negation of letters so they may spatialize themselves, also constitutes letters as its negations. Page and letters are locked in this endless constitutive circle. Each constitutes the other by negating it.

Is the blank space surrounding PSW's iterations of 'x', therefore, merely negative space? Each of the pages of *Espace blanc* contains, after all, not only blocks of typed 'x's surrounding the white spaces where Perec's original letters had been. Each page also constitutes blank space surrounding those blocks of typed 'x's. Are these surroundings again mere margins to the blocks of 'x's? Or does PSW not rather show that these surrounding spaces, too, are constitutive of the blocks of typed 'x's, and therefore also the white spaces where Perec's letters had been? Such that, what PSW shows is not that the blocks of 'x's are surrounded by merely

negative space, but also that this negative space constitutes the blocks of 'x's as its negative space? And that, therefore, not only the white space where Perec's letters used to be is a continuation of its surrounding 'x's - consists of structured white spaces constituted as road and repetition - but also the blank space surrounding the blocks of 'x's? The white space in the center of the blocks of 'x's is constituted as neither negative nor positive - and so is the white space surrounding the blocks of 'x's.

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On their surface, the 'x's in *Espace blanc* demonstrate that Perec's 'positive' space is constituted in and through its surrounding negative space. Likewise, removing Perec's original letters demonstrates that letters implement space and cannot but constitute themselves as a 'positive' space, to which they oppose a negation. Yet by inverting this relation, PSW's blocks of 'x's re-constitute the white space originally occupied by Perec's letters as structured white space, allowing it to serve as road and repetition in spite of its absence. They thus constitute it as a third type of page space: neither in the center nor in the margin. And this in turn allows PSW to show that letters and page space are locked not in a dual movement of center/margin or positive/negative constitution, but in a triple movement, where the center constitutes the margin which in turn constitutes the center, and where 'positive' page space constitutes negative space which in turn constitutes 'positive' space. Without letters, there cannot be a page. Without a page, there cannot be letters. Both are endlessly negating each other, and it is this movement which constitutes them. *Espace blanc*, then, belongs to the tradition inaugurated by Chrysipp and magisterially defined by Isidor of Seville. The 'x's gracing PSW's pages are there as though they were *legitera*: *legere*, for they read themselves, the space they surround, and the space that surrounds them; *iterare*, for they endlessly constitute and reconstitute themselves and their surrounding space in, through, and as negations of negations.