The Fine Scratching of the Reed Pen and the Mason’s Script.
On Calligraphy and Islamic Architecture

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When I was finishing my studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, the past master Johannes Itten held a series of lectures at a summer academy in the course of which just one of his questions triggered a rethinking on my part: “What can a pencil do?” Fundamental insights about drawing can, I believe, also be applied to the craft of writing, where the audible become visible. Antiqua script, for example, could only have developed from working with stone and chisel. Anyone who has worked with both is familiar with the chipping at the ends of the notches. There is much reason to believe that the stone masons of antiquity added flared projections at the tops and bottoms of letters known as serifs (from the Arabic serif: “fine”). I consider these lines not only a purely technical device but also a subtle refinement of the Antiqua script which has been retained to this day. Although the Romans were familiar with the metal nib, the Fraktur (a type of blackletter script) and cursive scripts only developed in the Middle Ages when a goose quill was used for writing – an original and simple writing tool whose very characteristics inevitably led to a rapid script with marked thick lines and hairlines.

Lines of Arabic script, however, differed. This resulted from the particular qualities of the implement used for writing: a dry, obliquely cut and split reed pen (Arabic qalam, in Persian qalam, which also means “chisel”) (fig. 46). Since it is inflexible, the script had to develop from the wrist. The thick and thin writing in calligraphy requires continual adjustment of the direction of the pen and the hand – a synchronized interplay of movements demanding extraordinary sensitivity and dexterity. The wrist, led by the hand which can rotate in all directions, transfers its energy to the fingers which can only raise or lower themselves. However, when the calligrapher applies the pen with three fingers, he can reduce the ‘gear ratio’ of the circular movement.

The writing instrument and the precise utilization of the circular movements of the hand are the prerequisites for the physical-spatial character of the cursive script used in everyday life, which finds its supreme expression in the Arabic art of writing known as calligraphy. The movements of the hand flow into the script, thus
CALLIGRAPHERS' UTENSILS

Ottoman Empire, 18th/19th century

The four finely ornamented ivory plates called makas in Turkish serve to position the reed pens, which are placed in the tray and fixed for sharpening. Next to three reed pens (Turkish kalum, Persian ghafam) and a small knife (valammyan) to cut the reeds of the pens. The paper scissors, partly gilded, have a typical elongated form; the brass handle of the middle speciman is formed in mirror script as the name of God Al Fasah ("The Opener") and thus suggests the function of the scissors.

Every style of writing has its own laws about the proportion of the width and size of the script as well as about the surface and its ornamentation. The binding unit of measure here is the dot. Depending on the style of writing, the first letter of the alphabet, alf, can consist of several rhomboid dots, placed obliquely above each other. The remaining letters are also measured in dots in the same manner (fig. 47). For all these steps in writing, the calligrapher needs the appropriate tools, but obtaining information about them is difficult, as each one assembles his own set of instruments (fig. 48). Calligraphers tend to guard their secret recipes, especially those for making ink. How smooth, rough or absorbent must or may the paper be? How fluid must the ink be? What shape must the inkwell, the pen or the knife have? Should the calligrapher write on his right knee or on a flat pad?

Normally, calligraphers do not divulge the secret of their ink. However, my friend Reza Mali, a brilliant calligrapher, showed me how he composes his. From a receptacle he took a heaped teaspoon of soot made from burnt lamb bones. He mixed the greasy black powder in a small cast-iron pan which stood firmly over charcoal embers, with about four teaspoons of hot water and vinegar and a spoonful of oxen bile to remove the grease from the soot. Constantly stirred, the mixture became a smooth mass to which, after cooling, a teaspoon of gum arabic was added to ensure a smooth flow as well as a good dose of powdered saffron to tint the ink jet black. Finally, the fluid was tested for consistency, colouring, fluidity, adhesiveness and smear-resistance, and poured into the inkwell. In the inkwell lay a strange utensil, a small tuft of silk threads called ligh. It serves to wipe the tip of the pen and symbolizes what the master accords the pupil as the amount of knowledge imparted to the pupil by the master.

In addition to receiving instruction from the teacher, the pupil takes his teacher altogether as an example. He strives to emulate and imitate him. Within this master-pupil relationship, imitation has nothing suspicious about it, but rather forms part of the artistic path which stands for modesty and reduction of one's self as an individual.

From the above, it follows that a calligrapher can only understand the execution of his art as a ritual. In the Orient he is held in high esteem, practises daily and purifies himself through fasting, praying and meditating. He tunes his breath and begins by first writing all over the remaining strips of paper. His breathing is "transported" by the hand into the script just as, when a reed flute is played, the tone is transported directly by the breath. The reed pen is called ghalam-ney in Persian and the reed flute ney.

The exercise sheets for calligraphy (sijuy mashah) are considered precious by experts - presumably from the understanding that here in the temporariness, incompleteness and sketchiness the complex transfer of the idea to the execution, from head to hand, to the fingers, thus to the work of the hand is apparent (fig. 49). Until 'agreement' is reached between what the head demands and the hand replies, one can only learn from the fingers what is concealed and what only they can reveal. In reference to Arabic calligraphy, these interrelationships could be described with the words of the Shi'ite scholar Haydar Amuli (d. after 1895):

Letters written with ink do not really exist as letters. Letters are only different shapes to which conventions have ascribed certain meanings. What really and concretely exists is nothing but the ink. The existence of the letters is actually nothing but the existence of the ink which is the sole reality expressed in many forms of self-modifications. The observer must first develop an eye for seeing the same reality of the ink in all letters, and then recognize the letters as just so many modifications of the ink.

In contrast to our manner of writing, in which the pen draws the ink after it from left to right, Arabic script pushes the ink from right to left. Because it only suffices for a limited number of letters, particularly because of the width of the letters, the pen must be dipped frequently in the inkwell. I have always felt it was a special occasion when I was allowed to watch and listen to a calligrapher at work.
The formation of the black characters is accompanied by noises as if the pen were taking to itself. Certain letters audibly accompany the act with a fine scratching, as if their emergence was fraught with pain. Combined with the hummimg of the calligrapher, withdrawn into himself, it is a decidedly bizarre listening experience.

When applying the pen, at the moment when the heavy ink is transferred to the page, absorbed by it and has penetrated it, the deep black colour of the ink appears in full strength. In the process of writing, its intensity is dissipated, and now and then breaks off or petera out as if in sand, an extremely fine glaze. This dark-light shading enlivens the appearance of the script; it embodies those places at which the pen 'catches its breath', because the calligrapher and the pen - just like the singer - must 'pause for breath' after a phrase.

In connection with these practical observations about the implements for writing and the execution of calligraphy, a fable by the Persian mystic and theologian al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) is particularly illuminating:

An enlightened man discovered a paper covered with black ink and asked it: "How can you, whose surface was just dazzlingly white, now be covered with black letters?" "You are unfair to me," replied the paper, "because I did not blacken my surface myself. But ask the ink, which left the inkwell for no reason and spread itself over me." The man then questioned the ink in the hope of an explanation, but the ink referred him to the pen which had torn it from its peaceful home and forced it onto the paper. The pen, questioned in turn, referred him to the hand which had dipped the pen into the ink after having cut it to size and cruelly split the nib in two parts. The hand, which asserted that it was nothing but flesh and pitiful bones, told him to ask the ability that had moved it: the ability referred him to his will, and the will referred him to his knowledge and reason, until the enlightened man, proceeding from reference to reference, finally reached the impenetrable veil of the highest Omnipotence, where a terrible voice called out: "No one demands that God explains what he does, so why are you asking?"

FIG. 46 (left)

PEN CASE WITH INK WELL
Ottoman Empire; 19th century

This typical late Ottoman writing utensils for a belt with an elongated container for the pens and attached inkwell is completely covered with Arabic inscriptions worked with the technique of 'positive' metal-cutting.

FIG. 47 (above)

CALLIGRAPHIC EXERCISE PAGE
Turkey; dated 1295 H/1879-80 CE

The page shows Arabic words, letter combinations and individual letters in Arabic with the respective dot proportions in naskh liq' eursive script. According to the caption, this exercise or practice page (naskh liq' meşh) is 'Husayn known as the son of the spoon-maker'. The calligraphy sample framed in marbled paper probably hung originally in a dervish lodge.
CALLIGRAPHIC EXERCISE PAGE

The šīnak script, which is difficult to read, was developed in the 7th century in Iran. It is often combined with a more refined, unadorned script with a more personal character, such as a muqadda (literally 'practiced', 'exercise') calligraphy, as seen in the Arabic calligraphy 'al-šināʾi'. Repetitions of these scripts and the changing directions create a rhythm similar to that of the ritual remembrance of God (dhikr) in the composition of the narrow page depicted.

Leaving aside the theological background of the fable here, we see for our practical observations that questioning the paper produced no answer. The question turns to who moves the writer's hand to actually write, or according to which principles the transition from the possible to the real occurs remains unanswered.

From these considerations as well, it is unlikely that calligraphy is engendered simply by the application of rules. What is called for here is not only the written word: in fact what must be dealt with is the surface itself. In other words, the empty spaces, the shapes, the gestures, and the act of writing should be considered more carefully. The appearance of the script is enhanced by shadows, yet the script remains legible and can be read as a flushly laid wall.

At the end of the 1960s in north-western Iran, I made an astounding observation in a small village near Urmia Lake: on a hill at a slight distance from the settlement, a few men were squating in front of air-dried mud bricks which had been embowed upright in the ground. A remained standing at an appropriate distance and had the impression that something like a labyrinth was appearing. When the men finished with their work, they signalled to me that I should come closer. As far as I understood, they were arranging the burial site of a relative and, like a musical arrangement of the bricks turned out to be angular letters forming the word bi'milāh - 'In the name of Allah' - in the stone-mason's script. Here was a line of writing made of earth and below it a corpus solidum which would become earth. In the slanted rays of the afternoon sunshine, the script cast long shadows which would lean in the opposite direction in the morning light. Exposed to the vicissitudes of the four seasons, the quadrangular plot would be demolished by wind and rain in the foreseeable future, the script would no longer cast shadows and slowly disintegrate until the original form of this plot of earth would reveal itself again.

As the "Religion of the Script and the Book" it stands to reason that the word of the Qur'an is the very foundation of sacred Islamic buildings. From their inception, inscriptions were a component of this architecture, in interior and exterior areas as well as on minarets. Before a glass was applied, this script was created from the same natural-coloured bricks as the building itself, hence the term khat-e barnāšt. Considering that this script was both the supporting element and the same time the transmitter of the message, one can say that the script constructs the building or the building in itself is the word. This script, known as Kufic, is considered the oldest type of script.

On the Ali Minares, erected in the Mongolian era, the call of the muezzin is contained in a large Kufic band of script with blue ceramic tiles mounted in the naturally-coloured brickwork. It is here that the direct relationship between the word and the structure is most graphically expressed. At the same time, attention is called to the recitation, which is an indispensable feature of Islamic ritual. It represents the unity of the written word, its tone of voice and the recited word. As if to protect the facade from its base upward, the words "God Himself is witness that there is no one but Him" are written in Kufic script at the foot of this minaret.

In mosques, religious texts - both in Persian and in Arabic - are incorporated in the architecture along with geometric and floral motifs. Words are always linked harmoniously with the architecture or even become architectural elements themselves, for example in the Friday Mosque in Isfahan in the Safavid façade of the western iwan, which is a vaulted hall, open on its narrow side (cf. fig. 58b). It can be seen clearly on the portal of this iwan that apart from the panels, the calligraphy on the façade is a reflection along the vertical axis. In fact, the left side is illegible and thus we must speak of a borderline area where script and ornament meet and merge.

Through inversion, rotation, overlapping and penetration as well as by the omission of diacritical marks, calligraphy can strongly distort individual letters that the origin of the text frequently cannot any longer be recognized. The individual word becomes 'olişaya', in other words it is removed from its original 'landscape' and acquires a different significance in its new environment. In deciphering such spiritual labyrinths, even initiates can only venture educated guesses. I have concluded that such patterns of words were not created to be read. Rather, they transcend the word of the Qur'an at a higher level of perception in which the pluralism of a message is
'Ali Minaret with bands of script in Isfahan (17th century)

The minaret, 55 m high, in the old quarter of the city has five Kufic inscriptions in two bands which encircle the minaret and three bands with abstract geometrical patterns.

Calligraphy on the Friday Mosque of Torbat-e Haidariyah

(Chorasan, Iran; around 17th century)

The glazed turquoise band of inscriptions on the minaret on the right-hand side of the two which flank the entrance to the mosque contains the creed in angular Kufic.
compressed as if in a seal. On this subject, the author and philos-opher of religion Navid Kermani wrote to me:

With calligraphy, the musical principle which is negated by the inscription of the original recitation returns to the Qur'an. When the text is recited, the Qur'an communicates its messages not only as discourse, but as a sound, a rhythm, a melody. When the Qur'an is treated as a written text, it loses fundamental qualities. As a presentation, it becomes a document, a score becomes something definite. But of all things, in the extreme case of inscribing, in calligraphy, the message emerges again in naked form. It is of no importance that the text of a calligraphy be readily legible, that the meaning be immediately apparent. The form itself is the meaning.

To the extent that the message of calligraphy finds expression in the form itself, a high-quality alloy emerges in the physical merging of script and ornamentation. These images of script and geometric structures justify the fundamental decision in favour of non-figura-tive depiction in Islamic art. The result is a veritably dematerialized, transparent union of calligraphy and ornamentation. The façades, open spaces and domes create the appearance of an integrated whole through the overall 'covering' with falence. The sunlight reflects and dematerializes, it makes them weightless and unreal.

In the autumn of 1977 I stood early one morning with the phil-osopher Henry Corbin in front of the west iwan of Masjid-e Shah (built from 1652 to 1658) in Isfahan. The sun shone with all its force, transforming the building into a glowing edifice. We both stood there, speechless until Corbin finally said: "This is the state of mind which Suhravardi, the master of light, called no-'ugl-ubbd - the Land of Nowhere."