

A is for A: Alphabet as Icon

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LITERATURE, most critics agree, is essentially a time art. Language, most linguists agree, begins as speech. Yet the spatial elements of literary form – including the shapes of verses, narrative perspective, the corporeality of the imaginary world, stage space, the point-counterpoint of plot – we know, deserve attention too. Nor should the graphic elements of language be neglected. Realizing that the letters of the English alphabet are arbitrary devices for representing sounds, we should nevertheless remember their iconic potential.

This is not to say that the letters are acoustically representational. Their shapes do not echo the sounds they stand for. We must *learn* to pronounce them, with due regard for differences in their phonetic, syntactical, and semantic contexts. Quantitatively, a long sound is not always matched by a long letter, or by a doubled one; juncture is not wholly indicated by the spaces between letters; pitch and stress lack inherent alphabetic correspondences.

Nor do letters imitate elements of the visible world as did their ancestral forms, selected hieroglyphs. We can hardly be expected to see oxheads in *A*'s or oxgoads in *L*'s. In their own way, the letters, like words, have undergone morphological change. And yet letters can be iconic. Their spatial configurations have become familiar to readers, and, being simple, spare, clearly structured, even skeletal, can and do serve as archetypes for whatever in the world has comparable shape. We can see both *A*'s and *L*'s in houses and elsewhere, whether we project the images or whether nature, after Wilde, has imitated art. When we name what we see, the letter then shapes the meaning. It requires no verbal explanation – only familiarity with the letter as a form. To understand *A frame*, look at the letter. I am not saying that *A* is *A*. With respect for both Aristotle and Korzybski, I say only that in these cases *A* is for *A*: *A* stands for the configuration that it exemplifies. Form serves function.

Now, not all instances of a letter (the tokens) have exactly the same contour. Neither handwriting nor printing has ever been uniform. And, customarily, upper case and lower case forms of the same letter differ, sometimes markedly. Nevertheless, we have a fairly common understanding of what is referred to by *A* in *A frame* or by *U* in *U turn*. For such an identification, we seem to abstract the basic form (the type). We know that we much ignore the lower case, even though the unabridged *Webster's Third* (unlike the subsequent *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate*) has converted most of the entries we are concerned with to it, while still basing all general explanations of alphabetical analogies on the capitals. Likewise we ignore those non-essential variations of upper case ascribable to serifs, tapered lines, etc. Always we understand that the picture is two-dimensional and without designated color. The generally accepted alphabetical model is augmented Roman square capitals.

Depending on context, a single letter, as consonant or vowel, has phonemic value, and perhaps morphemic value too, as *a* does when it is a prefix meaning "without" (*amoral*) or a word (*a house*). But in the usage that I am describing, a letter has as its morphemic value the very idea of the letter. It is a word naming itself, especially its shape. It could be drawn out into a kind of simile ("The *L-shaped* Room"), but, almost metaphorically, it is fused with another word into a new compound word. The printing may be with or without a capital, hyphen, or extra space, although at least one device is usual. The pronunciation of the initial letter, however, remains that of a letter in the alphabet, intact.

There are, of course, several other usages that formally resemble this one but that are not iconic. In the first sort, the letters merely stand for sub-types, whether enumerative (*A, B, and C Companies; M and X radiation*), or evaluative (*A paper, B movie*). Examples abound in such fields as music (flats, sharps, majors, minors), mathematics (axes, functions), physics (electrons, rays), chemistry (acids), genetics (chromosomes), and medicine (vitamins, viruses). Nor should we overlook practical serializing of all kinds (*K ration*). In the second usage, the letters are abbreviations (*Q[artz] wedge, G[overnment] man*). Yet, despite the general attractiveness of short forms (*TV* over *television* and *phone* over *telephone*), examples of this sort are infrequent in English. The best known are war-related (*A[tom] bomb, C[anned] ration, D[ay] day*,

H[ydrogen] bomb, *M*[obilization] day). We need not concern ourselves with pure abbreviations (*UN*, *B.A.*, *N.Y.*, *q.t.*, *Pa.*, *R.F.D.*), acronyms (*NATO*), simplified spelling (*U haul*), or contractions (*'tis*).

Are all the letters iconic? Theoretically, they are. Although the *DAE* and the *DA* are silent, *Webster's Second* and *Webster's Third* give as a possible meaning of every letter except *G* (an oversight?), being shaped like the letter; and the *OED*, with numerous exceptions, does the same. Nevertheless, appropriate examples are often lacking, no doubt because they were never actualized or because at best they were odd coinages with no circulation. I estimate that the total number of accepted words like *A frame* does not exceed by ten the 161 clear examples I have found, some of them now obsolete. For the letters *B*, *E*, *N*, *P*, *Q*, *R*, I can report no examples. And *G* (with the possible configuration of *G string*, as attire) and *J* (with the shape of the stamped-in letter of *J-pen*) barely qualify. *F*[engine], *K*[frame], and, by benefit of Shakespeare, *O* [the Globe Theatre] are also single. The number slowly increases with *M* and *W* (2), *A*, *C*, and *Z* (4), *I* (5), *L* and *S* (6), and *X* (8). With *D* it reaches 9, with *H* and *U* 11, with *Y* 14. But there are 33 *V*'s and 39 *T*'s.

To rationalize this distribution, it would be necessary to consider relative letter frequencies, phonetic, semantic, and sociological change, and many other factors. Apparently, however, there is no correlation between the antiquity of the letter and the extent of its iconic use: *W*, added to the alphabet in the eleventh century, and *J*, in the seventeenth, have contributed little, whereas *U*, not clearly separated from *V* until the nineteenth, has a better than average record.

Could the shapes themselves vary in potential? Why not? The letters can be analyzed (see Freud) as straights and curves; or (see hand-writing experts) as rectangles, circles, triangles, and *D*-shapes – in various arrangements. It may be significant that our alphabet has curves in only 11 of its 26 letters, and that there are but from 31 to 33 iconic examples, six of which belong to *S*, nine to *D*, and 11 to *U*. The preponderance is with the straight letters. Yet several of them count for little or nothing. It would seem, then, that the image-carrying power of *some* straight letters is peculiarly great. Whereas *E* and *N* are idle, *Y*, *V*, and *T* are extremely active. The

difference may lie in the contingency of shapes, some occurring in the non-alphabetic world infrequently and others often, yet without an established name. Thus the commoner adoption of *Y*, *V*, and *T*.

Probably the availability of other ways of naming a shape influences the selection. A round or *O* form, for instance, might easily be called a *ring* or a *circle* (terms preferred by theatres in the round). On the highway, *U* goes with *turn* and *hairpin* with *curve*, and not the opposite. The letter *S* bends like a swan's neck or coils like a snake. To describe a certain river channel, *S* would, therefore, not be obligatory. And there are straights and angles for which, besides letters, there exist abundant parallels: pencils, spears, wedges, elbows, forks, hammers, arches, etc. In the vocabulary of Basic English, the 200 "picturable" words allow innumerable comparisons, each usually ampler than those suggested by the alphabet. Yet 24 of those words, some of them picturable enough to be matched with isotypes, are further defined when a letter modifies them (*T branch*, *Y bridge*, *V comb*, *M tooth*, *S neck*). Others of the set — *angle* and, especially *circle* — are letter-proof.

The suitability of the alphabet is greatest when the analogy is thin, like a pencil line, and its function utilitarian, like identifying a mechanical form. Of my examples, the overwhelming majority occur in the language of construction, transportation, and electrification. This lexicon includes *H*, *I*, *L*, and *T bars*, *beams*, and *girders*; *F*, *I*, *L*, and *V engines*; *D*, *L*, and *V blocks*; *T* and *U bolts*; *H* and *T hinges*; *S* and *V hooks*; *T* and *Z cranks*; *U* and *Y tubes*; *C clamps* and *springs*; *D bits*, *nets*, and *valves*; *T bulbs*, *carts*, *joints*, *keys*, *squares*, etc.; *U magnets* and *rails*; *V antennae*, *anvils*, *belts*, *gears*, *pipes*, *troughs*, *wings*, etc.; and *Y boxes*, *guns*, *levels*, *tiles*, *tracks*, etc. There is also a sprinkling of more abstract words, with a letter modifying a term that by itself would not be picturable: *H section* and *shift*; *V edge*; *T* and *Y connection*; *H*, *T*, and *U piece*; and *T connector*, *end*, *pattern*, *plan*, and *top*. But in all these examples, the meaning is focused by the initial letter.

Architecture, naturally, shares some of the terms. It also has a set of its own, including *A*, *H*, and *K frame*, *A tent*, *V hut*, *L wing*, *M roof*, and *T wharf*. The language of furniture design repeats *H* and *T hinges*, and adds *S scrolls*, *L desks*, *T* and *Z chairs*, *X chairs*, *stools*, and *stretchers*, and *X braced chairs*.

Finally, there are scattered usages of all sorts. In agriculture we read of *V-ing* (a way of plowing); *H budding* (grafting); *D harrow*, *hoe*, and *ring* (harness link); *T tin* (placed in a bee-hive), and *U valley*. A certain weaving pattern is called *Z twist*. Some birds (and planes) fly in a *V formation*. There are *Y moths* and *ligaments*, and *T bone* [*steaks*]. Once, *T beards* were fashionable. There are *T bandages* and *shirts*, and also *V blouses* and *necks*. Football teams use *I* and *T formations*. There has long been an ecclesiastical cross called a *T cross*.

It should be noted also that some letters can occur alone and yet name a shape. (They are not abbreviations for ideas like *A* for *adultery*, *G* for *grand*, meaning \$1,000, etc.) This is true of *D* (an area of a billiard table), *T* (a target area in curling), and *X* (a cross). The use of *X*, however, may be more symbolic than iconic, if it refers to the unknown, or a religious idea (as is the case also in *T cross*); or if it stands for assent or approval, as on a document or ballot. Then it is no more iconic than certain sets of letters which have a similar conventional meaning, like *O.K.* and *A.O.K.* (*satisfactory*). There are, in fact, a number of familiar expressions which use alphabetic terms in a figurative sense only: "Watch your *p*'s and *q*'s," "Dot your *i*'s and cross your *t*'s," "The *ABC*'s of," and "From *A* to *Z*."

The word *V sign* is interesting because, like some instances of *X*, it has to do with the activity of symbolizing. It is the word for a gesture that imitates a letter. The fingers stand for *V*, but the *V* is an abbreviation of *victory*. The effect is similar to the duality of a rune that is used as both letter sound and letter name simultaneously.

Despite their role in the applied sciences, nearly all iconic words are static, for they concern objects rather than acts. They identify objects by the look of their structure rather than by performance. The exceptions, perhaps, are *V-ing* and *V formation*. On the football field, the *I* and *T* formations, again, are more obvious as line-ups than as plays, although their prototype in 1899 was known as the *V-trick*. On the highway, according to local rules, *U turn* is something to execute or not to execute.

The acquisition of iconic words began essentially with the industrial revolution and was probably heaviest in the period from 1830 to 1930. Already there has been some obsolescence, accompanying changes in shop and field. Today the English lexicon is

growing rapidly – without adding many words of this type. Each of the new technologies, such as electronic computing, radar, rocketry, and television, has its own jargon, of course; but, like common slang, each jargon is more likely to use sub-types and abbreviations than iconic words. There have been few coinages to compare with *V beam* and with *T* and *V aerial* or *antenna*. In the clothing industry, the cycles of fashion have yielded nothing newer than *V neck*, *T shirt* and *A line*. From architecture comes *A frame*. And, resurrecting an “ancient” style, *Webster’s Third* has found a place for the *X* forms of furniture. The *Z chair* is newly advertised.

What is the outlook? The teaching of reading will continue to influence the way people see the world. Perhaps the renewed emphasis on the letter (phonics) rather than the word (flashcard) will produce more alphabetic analogies. And if the alphabet is revised – by subtraction, addition, and alteration – there may be equivalent changes in our descriptions of reality.

New stimulus may come from architecture. The forms of canyon houses that are cantilevered or supported only by stilts may well be called *B* (consistent with the letter’s origins), or *P* or *R*. As seen from the air and thus simplified, the lines of new buildings suggest an alphabetical description. Besides the *Y* of the *UNESCO* headquarters, there are, of course, *O*’s again (churches, schools, synagogues, stadiums) and the innumerable *E*’s, *M*’s, *N*’s, *V*’s, etc. of apartment houses, hospitals, factories, stores, and office buildings. We have artists who, like Steinberg, see the expressiveness of the alphabet. Where are the euclidian poets to name beauty bare?

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