

|       |        |         |        |         |         |               |
|-------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------------|
| ʌ - ɒ | ɛ - æ  | ɪ - i   | ʊ - u  | ɔ - aɪ  | e - ɔɪ  | o - aʊ(m)     |
| up on | yet at | if each | put to | awe eye | aid oil | go now        |
|       |        | kə      | gə     | ŋ       | tʃə     | dʒə n         |
|       |        | kit     | gag    | sing    | churn   | jut nod       |
|       |        | tə      | də     | θə      | ðə      | pə bə m       |
|       |        | tap     | dew    | thaw    | thy     | puff bell moo |
|       |        | yʌ      | rʌ     | lʌ      | wʌ      |               |
|       |        | yip     | rub    | lit     | weft    |               |
|       |        | ʃə      | ʒə     | sə      | zə      | fə və hmm     |
|       |        | shh     | siege  | so      | zag     | fad vow       |

## AN AMERICAN VARNAMALA MANTRA *for Senan*

Breath is precious. There's not a moment to lose in breath-time. Think of the choices evolution has made to get us right here, sentiently, sentimentally, as open as the sky, dead as a doornail. We can't be re-used. Pure grace. I'm wasting your time if I'm wasting mine. Let's look at the alphabet from the perspective of the four paths: the path of gnosis, the path of unconditional love, the path of selfless conduct and the ascetic path, keeping in mind that the end-time, this time, might be real, not apocalyptically, eschatologically or prophetically but just straight-up secular stupidly and rapaciously; not as a fullness of time but just the pure waste of denaturation without a regenerative follow-up cycle — honesty thrown into question, the greatest respect shown to those who do the greatest damage, the homeless having given birth to those who own the most. A despair no one would be spared.

A path implies there's somewhere to go; somewhere to get to; some way to fully appreciate the preciousness of the opportunity to be on the path. But if there's somewhere to get to — if it's an actual path — there's inherently a way in which one has already arrived. Paths are for already being where one would go. Paths are for realizing just that. Otherwise we run ourselves ragged to no end, realizing dissatisfaction over and over again. We can't place every bet. On which particular path have you already arrived (if you only knew)? That's the one.

The alphabet appeared. Or did it cause appearance? Did it cause appearance once it appeared? It appeared *cosmogenically*, having self-occurred as part of the process of manifestation through evolutionary forces well beyond our understanding; it appeared *creatively*, as bestowed upon wretched, wondrous creatures by maker or making; it distinctly appeared in the second millennium BCE as an *invention* gleaned from

phonographic elements of magisterial Egyptian glyphs by Canaanite captives. It's all the same; indivisibility is the illumination. We speak, phonemically. We speak writing. Before, we were just *run-on*. Behind alphabetization lies discrete phonemic insight into speech: recognition of a limited number of sounds capable of infinite combination.

How we understand, phenomenologically, *that* we speak determines the depth of our understanding *of* the words that we speak. It makes all the difference in the world because (in a double sense) it made all the differences. Speech, re-discerned as phonemes, takes us all the way back to originary differentiation. The potency of each sound is integral to the fullness of speech. And each phone played a critical, formative role in manifestation of the phenomenal world. These formative energies appear to us as the *alphabet*. One sound one sign, a limited set that accords with the physiological capacity of our vocal apparatus.

Was the alphabet ever silent? We can read silently. The alphabet in-waiting. Letters are "out loud," aren't they? Are reading and writing really indivisible? The seventeen tantras unearthed in Tibet in the eleventh century attest that we can read the unwritten. At least the *Tantra Without Letters* can begin to dispel the administrative fallacy of the origin of the alphabet as accounting, or as a hierophantic tool for maintaining hierarchic authority, or the alphabet as demoted to demotic socializing and information exchange under the free market precept of people as commodities, stripped of mystery, gutted.

I can say that the alphabet is love, and live accordingly. Is the alphabet love because everything is love, realized or not, embraced or wasted? Does it have a special place in creation, as source, safeguard or destroyer? Is it that which makes us special among species? Do letters really just do what we say? To what extent can it be said they're acting on their own; not as in "out of control" but *given*, as against *taken*, guided and guiding. Is the zone beyond which words are less given than taken — the zone in which we make words our own — the danger zone of conflict, misunderstanding, aggression and alienation? Don't tread on me, I tread on you. It's a free country. The free (in this country full of that which its people are free from or for) make the laws that make them free, so the less free can secondarily benefit in ways small enough to merely verge on revolt. Could a need as fundamental as freedom actually be an artifice of the alphabet? Here we are again: the people grabbing back the alphabet from those who stand to benefit from others' dispossession. Weaponry comes after that fact. Is the alphabet doing this to us? Is it a program that we've simply been playing out, played by, since the on-switch of oracle bones to the present corporation-scripted congress and presidents eating their own vomit as "speech." We could never have been backed into this corner without the alphabet. Reciprocally, not a single word could have ever been written without this corner we've painted ourselves into. Would we sooner die than step straight onto and redo our fresh laid selfmadeness? We've worked ourselves to the bone to keep the appearance of still being alive. Is no path better than none?

The alphabet is a curse, a blessing, both, and neither both nor either. "Without letters there could be no machines; what letters do for sound the machine does for force." (Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Abecedarium*.)

But sound is the force of the letters. It can pulverize concrete and easily animate abstraction. Sound did not need the letters. They were invited, to find out if they'd be welcome. And without first inscribing the critical questions onto ox scapulae and

tortoise plastrons, how would the Shang Dynasty diviners have ever conducted the pyromancy that first necessitated the alphabet. The answers were foretold. Perhaps that's why the alphabet began. Afraid of the future. Unable to afford one crop failure or foul marriage. Wisdom replacement. A kind of blindness caused by already being blind — the definition of "advantage." We keep making matters. Even deepest sleep can't unspell a word.

The letters are our place of burial. The intimacy of the struggle with our self-imposed limitations in an illimitable medium. As such, they are our personalized miracles. They have no inside or outside. They're self-originating, uncontrived and totally made-up. Dressed for the occasion. The arbitrariness of the signified and its sounds and divine phonosemantic indivisibility are without a trace of contradiction.

Letters obscure the literacy of direct revelation. They are avatars of the unseen in which we look for hidden meaning. Letters are here to cast no doubt. In turn, we treat them as outcasts; not exactly as a "necessary evil" and rather as that which must be kept in line by our own limitations.

Blame it on the Book. Apparently we're continually re-corrupting and uncorrupting the message, while denying this syndrome by periodically pronouncing the "truth" ... whether the radical reformations take place within religion, science or the arts. Scorch the ground on which the ground was scorched. Apparently we want our proper brand of the end-of-days, to be scattered together in a lay capitalcommunist apocalypse, slugging it out in an anguishingly overwrought slowed-motion flash.

Egyptian King Thamus refused the divine gift of writing from the Thoth, on the grounds that reading a text is like talking to a person in a painting. As recounted by Socrates: "One cannot remember with the memory of another. Men will record, but they won't recall. They will repeat, but they will not live. They will learn of many things, but they won't understand a thing."

The most radical manifestation of northern Europe's 16th-century Radical Reformation was the fringe Anabaptist sect known, paradoxically, as the *Abecedarians*. The Abecedarians denounced all "human" knowledge. For the Abecedarians, learning was idolatry, a fatal diversion from direct divine instruction. Their surefire formula was simple: remove the alphabet. Although speech itself (as distinct from reading, writing, biblicism and blathering) wasn't blasphemous, the sect had a strict code of silence and self-restraint. To be fair-minded, I would note that, in effect, in intent, Abecedarian practice was perhaps not entirely unrelated to Sanskrit *nirvikalpa*, i.e., the state of being without concept or order (such as alphabetic concatenation.)

What did the advent of the alphabet *end*? Suddenly almost everyone was illiterate. Although the Abecedarians wanted to roll back the alphabet, their refusal was merely the crafting of an obscure realtime footnote in reaction to the 2000-year history of the "Book" and the *Alphabet Monster*. There's no way to rinse ourselves of the ABCs. What freedoms have we sacrificed along the path of Alphabetization? Then again, the *alphabet* is not the same phenomenon as *alphabetization*, the letters' standardization of sequence and classificatory deployment.

It's not that the alphabet is overrated, rather it's taken for granted. And we've lost sight of the benefits of its *non-existence*, and therefore its existence as well, as though we're not necessarily hearing the letters or seeing them as we speak and read, in order to fluently flap on. The being of the alphabet's nonbeing? At least try to imagine the absence of the phonographic standardization of speech. Revel in the wonder of word/phone correlation, coextensive with the ease of your eloquence. Carried away by grace.

Appalled by the *Encyclopædia Britannica's* random — alphabetical — ordering of subject matter, Samuel Taylor Coleridge attempted to publish an alternative, thematically organized *Encyclopædia Metropolitana*, based on the natural relations of ideas. For Coleridge, alphabetization was "an arrangement determined by the accident of initial letters" that scattered relevant information "like a mirror broken on the ground." "Why should things that begin with A be at the beginning?" Of course Coleridge was objecting to the alphabet as a method of classification, not the standardization of the letter-order per se. Unwittingly, by renouncing the *semantic* confusion of alphabetization, Coleridge at once disregarded the *phonosemantic* coherence of language: i.e., *snort, sniff, snore, snot, snorkel, snivel, snuff, sneer, snide, snob, snooty* and so on.

One poet's shackles are another's liberation. Velimer Khlebnikov, like Coleridge, argued for a more organic use of the letters. Unlike Coleridge, Khlebnikov employed a more *phonic*, primitive approach to the alphabet, divining originary potencies in individual phonemes. "Words that begin with an identical consonant share some identical meaning: it is as if they were drawn from various directions to a single point in the mind. If we make a list of words that begin with *ch*—*chuluk* [stocking], *choboty* [a kind of boot], *chereviki* [high-heeled boots], *chuviak* [slipper], *chupaki* [felt boots], *chekhol* [underdress], and *chasha* [cup], *chara* [magic spell], *chan* [vat], *chelnok* [bark], *cherep* [skull], *chuchelo* [stuffed animal], then we observe that all these words coalesce at the point of the following image: the volume of one body fills up the emptiness of another body, which serves as its surface." Khlebnikov held that language had become stiff and divisive. As a recourse, he broke language down to its indivisible phones to arrive at a proto-phonosemantics. "I observed that the roots of words are only phantoms behind which stand the strings of the alphabet." After exhausting his work with word roots, Khlebnikov's goal was to "find the unity of the world's languages in general, built from the units of the alphabet."

In the Vedas, gods have no existence apart from the mantras that name them. For Kukai, letter sounds and the world are isomorphic, with the written letters being even more primary than their sounds, assuring the sounds' connectedness with the world. Words that realize this inter-constitutive nature of word and world are *shingon*, "real words."

Both prayer and magic would agree. There is a real efficacy beyond words' use as instruments of description and semantic intelligibility.

The alphabet is itself a prayer wheel. The world spinning round. Are we to be a slap in the face of outer space?

The fascination of a glyph was always direct contact with the invisible.

## OX HOUSE CLUB OR CAMEL DOOR OR FISH REJOICE OR WINDOW

*"And you have to think of alphabets too, without an alphabet well without names where are you, and birthdays are very favorable too, otherwise who are you." Gertrude Stein*

Egyptian hieroglyphs are a rich mix of logographs (representing words or morphemes,) phonograms (phonemic representation,) semagrams and determinatives (unpronounced glyphs associated with concepts, semantic identification and disambiguation) and artistic representation. A logogram representing a word was frequently followed by phonetic complements. Meanings were also assembled according to the rebus principle. The script also contained a complete consonantal abjad of 24 "uniliteral" symbols that stood for single consonants. The complexity of the hieroglyphic system and its subsequent hieratic and demotic scripts could have easily been "simplified" into a purely phonographic script, expressing every Egyptian word according to the one-sign one-sound alphabetic principle; it was within their purview to do so. I'm convinced that this evolutionary alphabetic step — generally unquestionably regarded as "ingenious" — for ancient Egyptians would have marked a *loss* of literacy, a loss of possibility, culture and connection to origin; a disembodiment or mutilation of a whole sense of being.

Once a symbol is correlated with an individual phoneme and a sequence of phonemes is correlated with the complete set of speech sounds, a language has its alphabet. (Egyptians didn't note vowel sounds, nor did the subsequent Semitic languages.) The archeological record shows that Egyptian writing contained the three requisite features that define alphabetization: glyph/phone correlation, fixed concatenation, and *acrophony*. (Acrophony is the naming of a letter with a name that begins the letter itself, a principle that has acted as a constant through time, all the way up to NATO's anglo-slanted International Radiotelephony Spelling Alphabet: *Alfa Bravo Charlie Delta Echo Foxtrot Golf Hotel India Juliett Kilo Lima Mike November Oscar Papa Quebec Romeo Sierra Tango Uniform Victor Whiskey X-ray, Yankee*.) Two of the earliest attestations of abecedaries (alphabetic tables) were found on the same limestone ostrakon unearthed from a tomb at Luxor (late fifteenth century BCE.) Each side of the sherd bears a phonetic transliteration (from a Semitic language into cursive Egyptian) of a script's canonical sequence of letters. On one side is written the "aleph-beth-gimel" standard sequence of the Proto-Sinaitic precursor of Phoenician, Paleo-Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Greek, Roman and possibly Brahmi scripts. On the obverse side of the sherd, the initial consonants of the first four lines appear acrostically as *h-r-ḥ-m*, denoting the "halaḥam" order of the Ancient South Arabian (Ethiopian) abecedarium. (The same two Semitic abjads are also attested in Ugaritic cuneiform in the thirteenth century BCE.) The Luxor ostrakon may have served as a primer or mnemonic key allowing Egyptian literati to decode the foreign "guest-worker" languages.

Egyptian "graphics" and the principle of phoneme/grapheme-correlation were, in all likelihood, the template for Proto-Semitic alphabetization, re-purposed glyphs adapted to the foreign phonology and nomenclature. Once a language has its phonographic

abecedary, it can be used to spell out the sounds of other languages, and those other languages can adopt the antecedent alphabet to write itself. The A-B-C/G ordering of the Egypto-Sinaitic-Graeco-Roman-Anglo alphabet was locked-in before the letters ever left Luxor for the Levant — alpu (ox, [ʔ]), baytu (house), gamlu (throwstick), diggu (fish), haw (praise), with mid 'l' 'm' 'n' and final 'p' 'q' 'r' 's' 't' — and has been stable ever since.

Why place the letters in a fixed order? What logic (if there was logic involved) determined the order? How to sprinkle the vowels into an ancestral abjad, as did the Greeks? Why were there only 24 unilaterals (consonantal phonemes) among 800 hieroglyphs? This is a question that answers itself. It's physiological. You can try to create an alternative, non-overlapping phonetic alphabet (as I have done a number of times,) adding clicks, grunts and whatever wheezings, and you'll find that you're able, more or less, to spell out your new tongue with the old. Any usable, novel script will largely fall within the standardized IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet.) Graphemes are a different story. Any sign could be assigned to a letter in a set of novel signs. But again, is it practicable, or beautiful. Ditem tsa Dinoko is a brilliant, recently constructed script for southern Bantu languages. It's a triangular, *featural* syllabary — graphemes combine to form a consonant or vowel sound while indicating the correlative place and manner of articulation in the mouth.

And an abecedary by a different name is still an abecedary *in principle*: runic Futhark is named by stringing together the initial phonemes of the names of its first six runes: F, U, Þ, A, R and K. The impulse to collate is apparently irrepressible. Non-alphabetic writing systems such as Chinese hanzi and Japanese kanji use, primarily, a radical-and-stroke sorting system to form their dictionaries. Characters are grouped under radicals (morphemesque base-components.) The character groups are then listed according to their number of strokes, from least to most. And with the development of pinyin ("spelled sound") romanization strikes again. And to a very real extent, computer search engines are obsoleting the need for alphabetization. Just type in a search word or phrase and the code will take it from there. (This may have been the open approach Coleridge was searching for.)

Adlam is one of the many indigenous scripts developed for West African languages. In the late 1980s two teenage brothers, Ibrahima and Abdoulaye Barry, developed the script for their Fulani language. Adlan is, as in the beginning, acrophonic, though this time more specifically meaningfully so. The first four letters of the Fulani alphabet — A, D, L, N — stand for *alkule dandayde leñol mulugol* which translates as "the alphabet that protects the peoples from vanishing."

Analogous to the way in which Proto-Sinaitic script borrowed non-phonetic Egyptian hieroglyphs to transcribe speech-sounds, Japanese kana characters were drawn from logographic Chinese characters (*kanji*) to represent phonological syllabograms. "Kana" literally means "false name." Kana were considered *fake kanji* due to their purely (lesser) phonetic function bereft of meaning. Exquisitely beyond the organizational concept of meaningful acrophony, Japanese kana follow the order of a 7-line poem, known as the *Iroha*. The *Iroha* is a fixed inventory of the letters, but it is also a perfect pangram, a holoalphabetic poem, using every kana exactly once. The first attestation of the poem dates back to 1079, and although the *Iroha* ordering is still in use, it has been somewhat superseded by the *gojūon* system, a 5x10 grid based on the articulatory

phonetics of Sanskrit (see below) imported via China by Kūkai in 806 CE. A translated version of the Iroha:

Even the blossoming flowers  
will eventually wither.  
Who in our world  
is unchanging?  
The high mountains of pride—  
we cross them today  
and we shall not have dull dreams nor be deluded.

The Gāndhāri language used what's known as the Arapacana syllabary (named after the first five letters) and was written in the Kharoṣṭhī script. Recitation of the full Arapacana sequence appears as a mantra in a number of Mahāyāna Sutras, with each letter serving as a deep-mnemonics for bringing to mind basic Mahāyāna teachings. "A" is for "apple" in English. In the Arapacana, "A" is for "a door to the insight that all dharmas are uncreated from the very beginning."

The only phonographic script I'm aware of that is *not* learned in a particular order is Hanunó'o, a language spoken by the Mangyan peoples indigenous to the Philippine island of Mindoro. It's said that the Mangyans "learn the script primarily in order to memorize love songs. The goal is to learn as many songs as possible, and using the script to write the songs facilitates this process."

Is the alphabet a primer for itself — a didactic, Dr. Seuss, singsong tool for instructing children? (Although there are teachers who believe alphabetization is an impediment to learning the letters.) The acrophonically-named letters of the Cyrillic alphabet are ordered: *Az, Buky, Vedi, Glagol, Dobro, Est*, a sequence that forms a sentence in Old Church Slavonic: "I know letters, the word is good." Every language that alphabetized according to the Sinaitic Ox-House-Camel-Door abjad used the letters to represent numbers. Perhaps numbering is the oldest writing system (as the *Sefer Yetzirah* would have us believe) and the alphanumeric letters followed. And the occult folks will certainly follow upon a phenomenon as fundamentally powerful as the alphabet; thus we have gematria, isopsephy, steganography, numerology, incantation, talismans, divination, divine intercommunication, defixion, spells, pyro-scapulimancy, cryptograms, military coding and so on. And because we'll never really know why the letters are in order, there's bound to be magic in it. Words are a place in which to hide things, including words. And the worlds of words.

The order wasn't only for edifying and indexing. Poets also picked up the new technology (perhaps they felt it was their possession!) In the Book of Jeremiah, the prophet uses an alphabetical atbash cipher to encrypt the plaintext. Acrostics are common in the *Tanakh*. In the Psalms alone there are seven acrostic poems, most notably Psalm 118/119 consisting of twenty-two 8-line stanzas, with the lines of each stanza beginning with the same letter of the alphabet. In time, Augustine of Hippo wrote an abecedarian psalm against the Donatists. Geoffrey Chaucer's first known poem, An A.B.C. (The Prayer of Our Lady) begins with the Latin phrase *incipit carmen secundum ordinem litterarum alphabeti*: "here begins a song according to the letters of alphabet." As instruction in prayer, Chaucer's A.B.C. covers all that is implied by *abecedary*: a letter lineup, a primer, the rudiments of a practice, and a prosodic/literary device. More

recent abecedarii include Gertrude Stein's under-recognized children's book *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* and Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary*. John Cage uses an acrostic subversion called a *mesositic*. In a mesostic, a proper-name is used to form a spine that intersects the mid-area of horizontal lines. His compositions, governed by chance operations and rule-based permutations, attempt to de-regiment alphabetic linearity, demilitarize syntactic sequence and undo self-fixation with a more enlightened contrivance. (His exiguous insight into prosody, from the Foreword to his book *Silence*: "As I see it, poetry is not prose simply because poetry is in one way or another formalized. It is not poetry by reason of its content or ambiguity but by reason of its allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of words.") Using a "diastic" procedure, Jackson MacLow breaks the abecedarium acrostic by using seed words from a poem's title to step across or down the lines on a page. To give one diastic example, the first line from his poem titled 'POOR': "**P**overty notices **p**oorest **p**oor" (bold added here for clarity.)

To go in the direction of liberation, remove direction? Samsara and nirvana are selfsame. That's well established, after tens of thousands of years proving otherwise. We learn the hard way. We can only liberate with that which is not liberating. We're already free. It's said that we're fundamentally tool-users. Although a word is not a tool but a gift given without instructions. There's an emptiness that language relies on in order to arise. Words are our specialty, as is creating problems out of nothing. Listening to the end of words brings us to their beginning. Like us, language is already free. It doesn't need our use to be so, though we may have need. Writing has arrived. It was only yesterday. It arrives as an invention each of us reinvents as the means we've been given for coming to realize we're incapable of such invention. It comes with the instruction *please return*.

Writing is oasis where there had been mirage. It's not contradictory to think the opposite, but all-embracing.

## NOW WE KNOW THERE ARE SECRETS

*"When we invent with language we are not interfacing one invention with another."*

*"No one can be afraid that the contemplation of characters will lead us away from things; on the contrary, it will lead us into the secrets of things." Leibniz*

We incarnate in the alphabet. It incarnates us. The alphabet is the alphabet incarnate. It is indivisibly all that it can ever be, even when its different dimensions — mythological, supernatural, archeological, linguistic, philological, logical — are busy attempting to dispel each other.

Above all, the alphabet is anything but *our own*; the conceit of human invention, our tower built tall enough to reach heaven, casting into shadow, dangerously teetering over, the beauty and wonder of our globe's differentiated tongues, roughly half of which are currently endangered. Who would have been capable of creating the letters? Not even a Creator. We're lowly tinkerers and tweekers. Owning one's own opinions is

conceivable. Believing we're in charge of the wonder of the correlation of words autogenously arising in us and their direct transcription into writing is simply not veridical.

Phonemes formed us, and now we're written.

We could look ahead, beyond writing, to the future-tacit when we will not only no longer be thinking each other's thoughts but beholding each other without conceptual device — but that trip would be too conjectural to actually get us anywhere. So let's just call that reverie the present, and then reminisce back in time to the hard epigraphic evidence of our earliest abjad and begin to rebut the insistence on writing's purely contrived, commercial, mercenary origins, by simply reading the writing on the wall.



The above partially-abecedarian Wadi el-Hol inscriptions were carved into limestone cliffs northwest of Luxor along the Nile's Qena Bend circa 1800 BCE. The wildly divergent translations of the script attest to both its ultimate indecipherability and to translator bias. The various translation attempts, on the other hand, altogether manage to bring forth the unequivocally theophoric, supplicatory nature of the messaging:

“Excellent (R[’š]) banquet (mšt) of the celebration (H[illul]) of `Anat (’nt). ’El (’l) will provide (ygš) [H] plenty (rb) of wine (wn) and victuals (mn) for the celebration (H[illul]). We will sacrifice (ngt\_) to her (h) an ox (’) and (p) a prime (R[’sh]) fatling (mX).” (Brian Colless, 2009.)

"These are for the goddess Athtar, the bow and the scimitar." "... [is] the Powerful Lord who intoxicates her soul, and removes its violence." (Michael Sheflin, 2012)

"Lord of peace! Hallelu! Rejoice O great nations, brothers of Egypt. (Celeste Horner, 2020.)

"Motion-Powers are making rigid the Revealer (Yahu) by paralyzing the vulture-eyes causing the fertility-fluid revealer to disperse the abundant nourishments." (David Olmsted, 2020, with a Minoan Linear A twist.)

A similar script was found on a votive sphinx at Serabit el-Khadim, the site of an ancient turquoise mine and major Hathor temple in the southwest Sinai Peninsula. Like a miniature Proto-Sinaitic Rosetta Stone, the sphinx bears a hieroglyphic inscription and two phonographic Proto-Sinaitic complements. The Egyptian reads: "Beloved of Hathor [Mistress] of turquoise." The translations of the Sinaitic phrases (*m'hb'lt*, *hnd wz lb'lt*) are still in progress. Here are a few variations, beginning with Alan Gardiner's 1916 deciphering: "the Lady" (a title of Ba'alat/Hathor"; this inscription is for the Lady"; "to Ba'alat"; "Man (belonging) to the side of Ba'alat." A recent, dramatic interpretation of *m'hb'lt* by Michael Shelomo Bar-Ron identifies Ba'alat as the Golden Cow goddess of the Israelite Exodus, rendering phrase as "death to Ba'alat"!

Then again, writing is written neither *to* nor *for* the divine but *from* the divine, correct? This is basically what the hieroglyph/abecedary juncture uncovers.

*Mdw ntr* is the Egyptian word for hieroglyphic writing. It's a direct genitive construction: *mdw* (word) of *ntr* (god). Our tongue is the tip of the iceberg. We stake our claim atop an erupting phonetics. A text is its last minute touch-up to keep creation from landing on top of us. Teeth chattering is ordinarily what we hear as "speech."

The *Nag Hammadi*, written in Sahidic Coptic, defined hieroglyphs as "writings of the magicians, soothsayers." Import of message was clearly integral to — if not constitutive of — the genesis of writing, whose first role was to write the story of its own genesis selfsame as ours.

Before Germanic languages were Latinized, they employed the runic alphabet, a phonemic and ideographic mix. The *Hávamál* (80) defines the runes as *reginkunnr* 'god-sprung,' with the runes themselves as knowledge of the gods. In *Hávamál* (139), Odin, after hanging for nine nights upside down from a tree with unknowable roots, looked down and "took up the runes, screaming I took them and fell back." In Old English *rún* also means 'whisper, mystery,' tracing back to Proto-Germanic *rūnō* 'secret, secret conversation, hidden.' In modern Irish, a *rún* is still a 'secret.' Finnish *runo* means 'poem,' appropriately enough, as the originary secrets of the alphabet were kept and divulged as poetry.

Writing is poetry.

The subject of the alphabet — its prime topic and *raison d'être* — is the *hidden*. Suddenly, there was a key. How deep would its cavern be? How vast our exuberance? The letters are the same as the hidden unhidden and kept hidden, beginning with the knowledge of themselves. The first secret that was kept with the alphabet was ... *itself*; beyond which, not even the sky was the limit.

A deal was cut. The letters reveal by keeping themselves secret.

We want to know less that which is kept secret, and more that which keeps secret.

We wouldn't have known there are secrets. Secrets are made so that we know there are secrets. It's the play between existence/non-existence. It's the unhidden that hides.

Knowledge of the alphabet was tantamount to holding the patent to reality. ("Twenty-two letters are engraved by the voice, hewn out in the air, and fixed in the mouth in five places. Twenty-two letters were engraved, hewed out, weighed, changed, combined, and formed out of them all existing forms, and all forms that may in the future be called into existence." Sefer Yetzirah, 2.2-3.)

Impressed by a hunter's ability to identify a hoof-print with its corresponding animal, the legendary Cangji hit upon the Chinese writing system. In one account of Cangji's story, his discovery was so miraculous that millet rained from heaven and ghosts wailed through night due to the power over the spirit-realm people would now possess. In yet another version of the story, the millet fell mercifully from heaven because deceit would inevitably appear along with writing and the farmers would neglect their fields.

The history of hieratic, highbrow elites hoarding the power of knowledge to maintain hierarchical, oppressive societies is undeniable and indefensible. On the other hand, it can be said that a priestly class was an actual marker for divine revelation and the embodied responsibility to protect and authentically transmit a truth. Nonetheless, contrary to any dilution of the sacred, what the history of the alphabet itself reveals, through its irrepressible tendency toward the demotic, the vernacular and popular literacy steeped in everyday exchange, is the boundless renewal, magnification and authentication of mystery as divine presence. (Take Bhakti, for example; as the Alvar and Nayanar poets scrapped imperious Sanskrit to be directly absorbed in God in Tamil and Telugu.)

Fine. The hidden, straight-up. The hidden — because we know it is the hidden, because we see that the *evident* is the form in which the hidden is hidden — is the unhidden. Existence can't be made any more obvious than existence. The sacred simply removes the blinding sheen.

We're still marked by residual hieratics. Call it a culture of *relic-secrecy*. Esoterica, *siddhis*, poetry, sophistry, thaumaturgy, henosis, hypnosis, fanaticism, apophaticism, derangement, seance, estrangement, animism, animal magnetism, *magia naturalis*, *μῶ* (*múō*) mystic concealing in order to unconceal: all fine and well — *phenomenal!* in fact — plenty of room for any supports that don't clutter. Just be sure to be absolutely respectful with regard to where you stand on the emic/etic divides. Deride no one.

Lastly, it can be spelled out: the less covered and contrived, the more we're realized. We're consciousness itself. Love, as only love could, brought creation about. Ring clear as a bell. Spontaneously arise. The alphabet has been our best lesson in this.

There is no god of the alphabet.

The God you love is the letters.

Your love is their use.

## TWINKLE TWINKLE

'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' is carried by the same tune as the standard English Alphabet Song. The original melody dates back to an anonymous 18th century French folksong titled *Ah vous dirai-je, Maman*. This is the same song Mozart adapted in his 'Twelve Variations on Ah vous dirai-je, Maman.' In 1835 the American music publisher Charles Bradlee copyrighted the soon-to-be ubiquitous alphabet song under the long title: 'The A.B.C., a German air with variations for the flute with an easy accompaniment for the piano forte.' In the song, the "*meaningless but fixed*" letter concatenation is set in four 8-beat, end-rhyme lines, with the help of doubling the tempo of l-m-n-o-p, pausing between s-t and x-y, and stretching out w and x. The song dramatizes the state of the art of the order of the alphabet: it's *all over the place* phonetically; both the manner and place of consonantal articulations are unpatterned, vowels are randomly sprinkled about and, as though that weren't disorderly enough, in terms of total speech-sound count, our ABCs also happen to be "short" 18 phonemes. Its disarray does have a history. It's our custom. An accidental inevitability.

Was alphabetization instrumental in discerning the full spectrum of speech sounds? Or had language groups successfully systematized their phones long before the phonographic revolution arrived at their door? Were speech sounds more open, unique — perhaps *infinite* — before being pinned down by graphemes; before the Sanskrit phonemes spilled out of Śiva's damaru during a dream of the great grammarian Panini, or before pinyin sorted Mandarin Chinese into roman letters?

Phonemes are not dependent on graphemes. Is the reverse also true? We read silently, or tactilely (braille cells are sound transcriptions.) Perhaps it was the glyphs that initiated their proper sounds ... or were at least cymatically suggestive of an acoustics — a wavelike line for running water, a circle for a rounded 'o' sound. In Rudolph Steiner's *eurythmy*, every vowel and consonant has a basic gesture; the body's gestures form — conform to — the phonemes, while our movements are the writing of speech, *making speech visible*. Do any of the letter-shapes look like their sounds? Do the sounds come from an embodied phonosemantics? Are they natural entrainments with nature and the signification of all things, the assigning of signs? There is "seeming" onomatopoeia behind the acrophony of at least some of the letters, like 's' 'm' 'i' or 'o'? Or, does an ox *look* like the essential sound of ox as transcribed in its name? Is there greater freedom and possibility in a loosely dissociative system of sound, sense, script and the signified?

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the Vedic tradition is the absolute fidelity with which the pronunciation of the hymns (*sūktas*, "well-recited praise") has been transmitted for 3500 years. Faithful transmission of course presumes the order, voicing and performance of the text has first been fixed. The only way to arrest the Vedas was by halting the evolution of Vedic Sanskrit, by "closing the book" so to speak, and fully elaborating the phonology, morphology and grammar of Vedic Sanskrit while perfecting the methods of teaching, recitation and transmission — to preserve the fully-formed hymns with no possible authorization for future alteration. Frozen. Perfectly memorized. Avoiding the imperfections and limitations of writing.

Vedic culture is so preeminently phonocentric that Sanskrit doesn't have a native script. It couldn't be bothered with developing its own abecedary. It has donned whatever regional script was around: Brahmi, Kashmiri Śāradā, Bengalese Bāṅglā, Gujarātī, Grantha and, since the late nineteenth century, Devanāgarī. And as a rock-bottom debasement, Sanskrit is now frequently transcribed in a romanized scheme referred to as *IAST*. Regardless of the script, written Sanskrit is no more than a transliteration into a foreign medium. There can be no "text." There's no conceivable notation. Each written word is its own exonym.

Language could not have appeared as a "convention" because it would have then needed the convention of language in order to form itself conventionally. Vedic verses were consonant with the inconceivability of the cosmos. As Śrī Aurobindo has stated: "Each of Sanskrit's vowels and consonants has a particular and inalienable force, which exists by the nature of things and not by development or human choice: these are the fundamental sounds which lie at the base of the Tantric seed mantras or constitute the efficacy of the mantra itself."

The logic behind Sanskrit's graphemophobic insistence on pristine pronunciation is evident enough. In Vedic cosmogony, unstruck and undifferentiated sound issues forth the entirely denoted, differentiated world — from Vedic *Vāk* to Upaniṣadic *Śabda-Brahman*, soteriological OM, and the seed sounds and *Nāda-Brahmanism* of Tantra. The potency of the word is such that speech reified the total interconnectivity of reality by means of a sound/sense/signified indivisibility. Naming things into being is not only non-arbitrary but inerrant. Pulsatile phonemes are the emanative energies of all phenomena. Sound is visualizable. Matter is meta-phonetics. Speech is a Goddess, *Vāk*. The Goddess of the alphabet is Matrika, meaning "little mothers," the letters as individuated energies. Grammarians are sages and sages are grammarians. We're acoustic condensations. The mantras that were revealed to the poets are the very templates for re-reciting the cosmos into being with each new cycle. *Akṣara* means both "syllable" and "imperishable." *Svara* is the name for "vowel," "breath" and "tone" (musical note.) Vowels "shine by themselves." (Sanskrit could never have been an abjad.) Ritual recitation of the hymns brings Vedic deities to the table. The poets underwrite the sacrifices. Nature will continue to support people. Words are attuned to an entirely subtilized, spirituo-sensory sphere of resonance we westerners can't even imagine. A cosmogony, entirely within the space of the heart.

Devanāgarī is indeed a beautiful script, worthy of its name as *deva* "divinity" *nāgarī* "abode." But the more I work with Devanāgarī the more I feel that it's not a script that could ever manifest the deeply coherent, correlational, subtly embodied patterning of Vedic speech. I'm left to wonder about, even lament the absence of, the set of phonetically-informed symbols the *ṛṣis* might have envisioned, integral to the receiving of their mantra-verses. It would have had to be more finely-featured than anything we familiarly call "alphabet." It would have had to vibrationally reflect the speech-sounds and all the sacrificial intonations. The letters themselves would have had to be able to undergo considerable modification to encode oscillating phonological features. The graphemes themselves, in their sonic correlations, would have been anything but arbitrarily, abstractly drawn, and not drawn as a simple isomorphism like King Sejong's Korean script in which consonants reflect the shape of the vocal organs used to pronounce them, or the Visible Speech of Alexander Melville Bell wherein symbols

represent the physiological positions of articulated sounds. In Vedic recitation, a single phoneme might have needed a dozen modifiable marks to inscribe the flux of its live contours, cavities and contingencies. "Who knows?" An orthographic Rgvedic treatise would certainly have been on a par with its illustrious grammars and phonology manuals.

Legibility is in the air.



3rd millennium BCE Harappan Script prior to Vedic peoples' migration to the Indus Valley



Dhanadeva Ayodhya inscription, 1st century BCE, earliest written Sanskrit, in Brahmi script

## PURELY PRONOUNCED PERFECTLY PERFORMED

*"... the origin of language: when the seers came forth, naming. Flawless, a name, secret in nature, was shown to them because they were loved by the First to see truth as existence. Through the sacrifice She —Speech — was found, having entered into the seers." — Rgveda X.71,1-3.*

*"There are the pure sounds of the phonemes pronounced alone (pratrna) and the sounds as they turn into euphonic combinations when pronounced together (nirbhujā)." — Rgveda-Prātiśākhya, 1,3*

Although the origins of Sanskrit will perhaps forever remain a contentious matter, I'll hazard a rough hypothetical timeframe, supported by the most recent DNA evidence (as genetics has largely superseded the good old-fashioned archeological and philological dating methods.) Around the close of the third millennium BCE, Proto-Indo-Iranian speakers bifurcated in Central Asia. During the early second millennium BCE a pastoralist, purely-oral, Indo-Aryan people gradually moved southeasterly into the Indus Valley where they met the remnants of the great Harappan Civilization and its Indus script. The oldest layer of the *Rgveda*, the "family mandalas" of mantra-verses,

the pith of the Vedic tradition to-come, was composed in Old Sanskrit over a period of a few hundred years and may have been completed by 1500 BCE. Why and how this ever-evolving, adaptive, innovative poetic tradition stretching back perhaps thousands of years to the Eurasian Steppe was then compiled and capped is a story in itself. This standardization process is believed to have been completed by the end of the second millennium BCE. Although there may have been attempts to write down the Vedas towards the end of the first millennium BCE (the earliest known Sanskrit writing in the Brahmi script dates to the 1st or 2nd century BCE, and the record of the Brahmi script itself begins with the Ashokan inscriptions of the 3rd century BCE) the hymns were probably not committed to writing until the Gupta period (fourth to sixth century CE) when the Brahmi script was widespread. The oldest surviving Rgvedic manuscript dates to the eleventh century CE.



*Hathibada Ghosundi Inscription, 2nd century BCE, earliest written Sanskrit, in Brahmi script*

In brief: there's a period of roughly 2000 years between the composition of the oldest layer of the *Rgveda* and its eventual transcription, during which time writing systems (beginning with the Harappan script, through Aramaic, Kharoṣṭī and Brahmi) would have been within the purview of the Vedic poets, priests and phonologists. In his monumental grammar, *Ashtadhyayi*, Pāṇini (c. 500 BCE) refers to scribes and writing (*lipi*.) Yet, it can't be overemphasized that Panini's grammar, marking the shift from Vedic to Classical Sanskrit, was composed when oral composition and transmission were still the norm ... and for the purpose of maintaining the norm, and for assuring Sanskrit's preeminence over the surrounding vernaculars (*prākṛtas*: "derived, evolved, artless".) I've searched in vain for definitive proof that Panini was, himself, literate. His 3,959 ultra-succinct grammatical aphorisms (*sutras*) might indeed have been orally composed and committed to memory, perhaps collectively with his students. It's reputed that Buddha, roughly contemporaneous with Panini, was familiar with sixty-four scripts (*Lalitavistara Sūtra*) — even as hyperbole, a remarkable accomplishment! Writing was in the air. And orality and literacy would have had to have had an extended and intriguing period of overlap.

Surrounded by abjads, abugidas, picto-phones, rebus-o-graphs, logo-syllabic cuneiforms and full phonographics, it's reasonable to suppose that the Vedic people chose to *not* hop on the alphabet bandwagon. For the elite custodians of Vedas, writing may have portended cultural corruption; it may have even been forbidden. The staggering phonetic nuance and complexity of the verses are in fact *untranscribable*. Recall King Thamus' argument for refusing the gift of the letters from Thoth: writing would destroy memory and confer a mere semblance of knowledge. Indeed, in effect,

reading the Vedas is like talking to a person in a painting. Indeed, it would take but one generation to break the heritage, to lose the astonishing memory capable of memorizing the 10,600 verses of the *Rgveda Samhita*. The aids to memory are integral to losing memory. (Just as a book could be lost, and all would be lost.) There are still *gurukulas* (boarding schools) in India where students as young as five years old, practicing from 5am to 8pm, learn to recite the hymns *by heart*. The *samhitas* were, after all, *sruti*, i.e., originally "heard" (by the *rsis*) and meant to be only heard subsequently. On the page, the verses are not what they are. Their efficacy entirely depends on the finest tone-phoneme synchronization.

The acceptability of written Rgvedic hymns and the advent of regional writing at a point in time when the intelligibility of Vedic Sanskrit was all but lost were the coextensive conditions for the shift from orality to textuality. Reading the Vedic Indologists and translators struggling to make sense of the hymns, it becomes clear that the fabled unbroken oral transmission of the divine language has been a long process of attempting to fit together the pieces of a puzzle.

So, how would this quintessentially aural people discern their constitutive sounds of speech? By fully embodying the phonemes formative of embodiment, by carefully observing how the sounds were formed by the vocal organs. *A microcosmic practice of the cosmogenic phonemes.*

There are six indispensable ancillary disciplines (*Vedangas* "limbs of the Veda") connected with the Vedas. The first *Vedanga*, considered the most important, is a phonetics treatise known as the *Śikṣā*. The *Vedanga Śikṣā* is an utterly exhaustive treatment of all the rules of pronunciation, permutation and euphonic phoneme combination (*sandhi*.) Integral to the perfectionist, preservationist purpose of the *Śikṣā* was the protecting of Vedic Sanskrit — sorting it and setting it apart from its own diglossic everyday speech, as well as intra-Aryan dialects and indigenous tongues such as Pani, Dasas, Dravidian and the hypothesized Harappan language. Vedic Sanskrit was less a language per se and more a certain manner of speaking. "Sanskrit" (from the verbal adjective *sámkrth*: *sám* "together, well, entirely" and *krta* "made, formed, worked") implies a quality of being "cultured, perfected, consecrated." Sanskrit is also known as *Deva-Vani*, "God's language, divine speech." The Dalai Lama refers to it as the "elegant language of the gods," *legjar lhai-ka*. And certainly a strictly linguistic case can be made for Vedic Sanskrit's degree of refinement, with its phonemic combinations based on maximal euphony and efficiency of breath, its 10 tenses and moods, 8 cases, 12 ways of forming infinitives, 4 tones, 3 vowel-lengths, 250 words for "rain" and considerable freedom of word order due to its morpho-syntactic compounding flexibility. (There are as many as 30 ways to form a compound in Sanskrit. The Classical poet Tirumalāmbā, took this inflective stem-suffixing principle to its recursive extreme and wrote a grammatically-correct one-word sentence that is 194-syllables long!)

Vedic mantra-verses are, above all, mnemonic, metered phenomena. Eleven recitation methods (*pāthas*) are used to reinforce and cross-check accurate memorization. The first three basic *pāthas* are considered *natural* (*prakrutipathas*: from *prakṛti* "original or natural form.") The remaining, later (post-Panini,) *pāthas*, involving artifice and the reversing of word order, are called *vikrutipathas*: from *vi* "after" and *kruti* "creation," i.e., "changed, manipulated" (or, in Ayurvedic medicine, "imbalanced" with regard to

one's natural constitution.) *Samhitā-pāṭha* is a continuous recitation without word boundaries, incorporating all rules of euphonic phoneme combination and word-compounding. *Pada-pāṭha* is a word by word, staccato recitation, removing all phonetic rules, and grammatically breaking words back down into their stems, as a semantics safeguard. The *Krama-pāṭha* is a word-pairing patterning: ab bc cd de ef, and so on. *Jata-pāṭha* is a six word-unit measure: abbaab, bccbcb, cddccd, and so on. *Mālā-pāṭha*: ab ba ab, bc cb bc, cd dc cd, and so on. And so on, in an increasing complexity that at once exponentially increases the benefits and blessing conferred by the recitations; as the requisite ability to memorize entire texts is magnified proportionately by the *pāṭha* process itself, and as these originally mnemonic techniques transformed into devotional practices in their own right.

## THE ALPHABET IS THE PRIMER

*"A blue jay cries one mora (note), a crow cries two morae. A peacock should be recognized as having three moras. This is a summary of the three weights." Rgveda-Prātiśākhya, 13,50.*

*"Now I started to understand that the single letters could be invented but, in the way I did it, never joined together in syllables, and that I had to follow nature which has only one glottis and only one mouth out of which all sounds are emitted and only for this reason can connect with each other." Wolfgang Ritter von Kempelen*

We are scarcely, aurally, aware of what we're saying and how it's being said.

One of the Vedic-era *Śikṣā* treatises that has come down to us is the *Rgveda-Prātiśākhya*. *Prātiśākhyas* are phonetics and prosody manuals that were written for each of the Vedas, and for each version of the Vedas practiced by the various regional clans and schools. The *Rgveda-Prātiśākhya* is difficult to even vaguely describe. On one level, it's an interfacing of *Samhitā-pāṭha* and *Pada-pāṭha* recitations that lays out the rules and exceptions for the pronunciation of every possible intra- and inter-word phoneme adjacency in the hymns. It's as if the resonance of each phoneme — as it anticipates and intermixes with contiguous phones, tones, pauses and inflective shifts — is a unique occurrence of its sound in a particular vocalization. (In a writing system, a linguist might say that Sanskrit's phonemic orthography is continually modified by speech.) Perhaps it can be said that sound was infinite in potential, while expression was finite. (Today we say absolutely whatever we want with a few dozen sounds used over and over again.) The *Prātiśākhya* covers metrics, proper classroom etiquette, attempts to enumerate the innumerable common pronunciation errors and opens wide a window to Vedic practice. Be that as it may, that which I want to draw attention to — and my sole purpose in having travelled this far through alphabetic history — is the *Prātiśākhya's* introducing of the Sanskrit phonemes in its opening chapter, revealing an "alphabet" that is inscribed in the body. This alphabet (*varṇamālā*: *varṇa* "letter," *mālā* "garland") is, in itself, a fully realized, fully embodied articulatory phonetics in which the speech sounds are correlated with both aspects of physiological production, i.e., the *place* and *manner* of articulation. A speech science even remotely comparable to the understanding inherent in Vedic Sanskrit didn't appear in the west until, say, Wolfgang Ritter von Kempelen exhibited his Speaking Machine in 1804, shortly after the Imperial

Academy of St. Petersburg offered a prize to anyone who could define the physiological differences between the vowels. Up until the 18th century, astonishingly, no real distinction was made between letters and sounds, and the mishmash of alphabetic letter-order wasn't grappled with until the International Phonetic Association turned to the Vedic *varṇamālā* to devise its International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in the late 19th century.

And of course this Vedic articulatory phonetics would have been instilled and practiced long before it was systematized and written down for the purpose of preserving the authenticity of the hymns, and long before Panini dreamt the compact phonemic groupings of his 14-line *Maheshvara Sutra* that opens his grammar book. The full Vedic *varṇamālā* comes down to us, as it appears in the introductory stanzas of the *Rgveda-Prātiśākhya*, patterned as such:

|              |         |        |           |        |                |               |      |     |      |      |       |      |       |
|--------------|---------|--------|-----------|--------|----------------|---------------|------|-----|------|------|-------|------|-------|
| guttural     | palatal | labial | retroflex | dental | palatoguttural | labioguttural |      |     |      |      |       |      |       |
| a            | a       | i      | ī         | u      | ū              | ṛ             | ṝ   | ḷ   | ḹ   | e    | ai    | o    | au    |
| अ ऎ          | आ a:    | इ I    | ई i:      | उ उ    | ऊ u:           | ऋ ṛ           | ॠ ṝ | ऌ ḷ | ॡ ḹ | ए e: | ऐ e:j | ओ o: | औ e:u |
| <i>svara</i> |         |        |           |        |                |               |      |     |      | am̐  | अं ā: | ah̐  | अःh   |

|                          |                               |             |                          |             |                          |             |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| plosive<br><i>sparśa</i> |                               | unvoiced    |                          | voiced      |                          |             |
|                          |                               | unaspirated | aspirated                | unaspirated | aspirated                | unaspirated |
|                          | guttural<br><i>kaṅṭhya</i>    | ka<br>क k   | kha<br>ख k <sup>h</sup>  | ga<br>ग g   | gha<br>घ g <sup>h</sup>  | ṅa<br>ङ ṅ   |
|                          | palatal<br><i>tālavya</i>     | ca<br>च cʃ  | cha<br>छ cʃ <sup>h</sup> | ja<br>ज dʒ  | jha<br>झ dʒ <sup>h</sup> | ña<br>ञ ɲ   |
|                          | retroflex<br><i>mūrdhanya</i> | ṭa<br>ट t̪  | ṭha<br>ठ t̪ <sup>h</sup> | ḍa<br>ड d̪  | ḍha<br>ढ d̪ <sup>h</sup> | ṇa<br>ण ɳ   |
|                          | dental<br><i>dantya</i>       | ta<br>त t̪  | tha<br>थ t̪ <sup>h</sup> | da<br>द d̪  | dha<br>ध d̪ <sup>h</sup> | na<br>न n   |
|                          | labial<br><i>oṣṭhya</i>       | pa<br>प p   | pha<br>फ p <sup>h</sup>  | ba<br>ब b   | bha<br>भ b <sup>h</sup>  | ma<br>म m   |

|                                      |  |           |           |           |           |            |
|--------------------------------------|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| approximant<br><i>antastha</i>       |  | guttural  | palatal   | retroflex | dental    | labial     |
|                                      |  |           | ya<br>य j | ra<br>र r | la<br>ल l | va<br>व ʋ  |
| fricative<br><i>ūṣman/saṃgharṣṭī</i> |  | ha<br>ह h | śa<br>श ʃ | ṣa<br>ष ʂ | sa<br>स s | kṣa<br>क्ष |

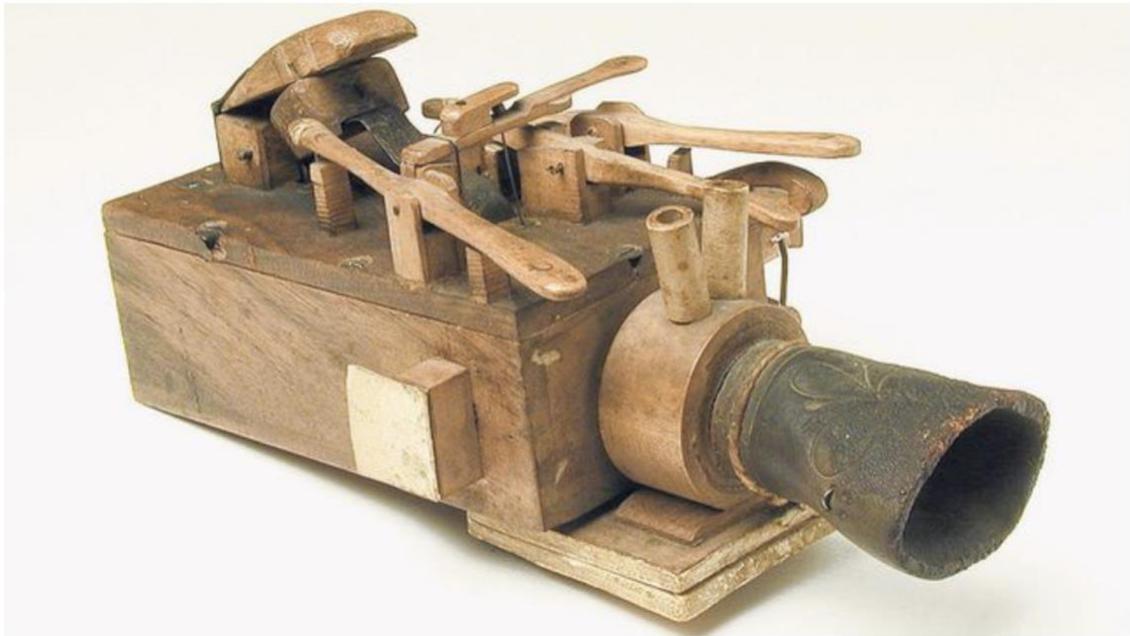
In terms of the five places of articulation, both vowels and consonants move from the back of the mouth forward, from guttural to palatal, retroflex, dental and labial. (I've intentionally, and reluctantly, placed the 'r' and 'l' vowels out of sequence as per the *varṇamālā* recitation as it's practiced today.) The vowel sequence is ordered as short-long pairings, ending with the compounds (diphthongs.) In terms of manner of articulation, the consonants are first ordered as plosives (stops,) with each place of articulation having a double-pairing of unaspirated/unaspirated voiceless stops and unaspirated/unaspirated voiced stops followed by the corresponding nasal stop. The plosive sequence is followed by the glides (semi-vowels/approximates.) (Note: in Sanskrit the 'r' and 'l' sounds are also proper vowels.) Finally, there are the sibilants, ordered according to the place at which each sound is shaped. *Kṣa* was added as the 35th consonant.

The above chart shows the *varṇamālā* 's correlation of the sounds with vocal physiology. Of course, in the dizzyingly correlative Hindu world, further correlations abound. The *varṇamālā* is a mantra in itself, often used as a purificatory rite at the beginning of any recitation. The *varṇamālā* can be used as a recital of the cosmogenic emanation. The letters are also correlated with colors, chakra petals, body parts, constellations, physical forces and so on.

Following this Vedic template, as a way to open the space of the heart as subtlest place of hearing, I'll end by proposing a practice of an American *Varṇamālā*. English is a highly non-phonemic language. There are 26 letters and 44 sounds. "A" alone makes seven distinct sounds. There's no orthographic distinction between aspirated and unaspirated consonants. English orthography is deficient in the sense that not all sounds are represented by its script (such as the difference between voiced and unvoiced "th" as in *thou* and *thing*.) What we say is not what we see (hiccough?). The sounds of the letters we write are often not what we say. English is fluid. Its perfection lies in its capaciousness. Tune the *varṇamālā* to your "own" idiolect, ethnikos, intonation and cadence.

#### an american varnamala mantra

|       |        |         |        |         |         |               |
|-------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------------|
| ʌ - ɑ | ɛ - æ  | ɪ - i   | ʊ - u  | ɔ - aɪ  | e - ɔɪ  | o - aʊ(m)     |
| up on | yet at | if each | put to | awe eye | aid oil | go now        |
|       |        | kə      | gə     | ŋ       | tʃə     | dʒə n         |
|       |        | kit     | gag    | sing    | churn   | jut nod       |
|       |        | tə      | də     | θə      | ðə      | pə bə m       |
|       |        | tap     | dew    | thaw    | thy     | puff bell moo |
|       |        | yʌ      | rʌ     | lʌ      | wʌ      |               |
|       |        | yip     | rub    | lit     | weft    |               |
|       |        | ʃə      | ʒə     | sə      | zə      | fə və hmm     |
|       |        | shh     | siege  | so      | zag     | fad vow       |



*Speaking Machine, Wolfgang Ritter von Kempelen, 1804*