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THE COMMANDMENTS: MYSTICAL FONTS BY ALAIN KIRILI

For the last seventeen years Alain Kirili, the French sculptor who lives most of the time in New York City, has been creating groupings of sculptures that resemble different fonts of type, or perhaps the molds from which they are cast, or a combination of letters and molds. My dictionary defines a font as "A complete set of type of a particular face and size, a set of characters of a consistent design (esp. as bought from a particular supplier) for the composition of text; a typeface." Of course, in English, a font can also be a baptismal font or a spring or source. The poet James Merrill used to say that there is a collective unconscious, and it is language, especially the strange connections revealed by puns. Here the word *font* unites the holy, flowing immersion of baptism with the scattered, rigid forms of letters. Created in forged iron, which is sometimes painted black or white or other colors, or made out of painted stone, or even occasionally terra cotta or painted styrofoam, these "alphabets" can consist of 17 elements or 18 or 26 – in fact as many as forty or as few as ten. Most of them are about 17 inches high. When they are exhibited outdoors (*Grand Commandement blanc*, 1985 is installed in the Tuileries Garden in Paris, for instance), they cast varying shadows like sundials; the viewer becomes all the more conscious of the power of the negative space each shape excavates out of the sky, the grass, the gravel.

Their repertory of images is rich: straight lines; notched surfaces; rounded forms surmounting pedestals; and crosses in which the horizontal bar rests on a column or transects the vertical near the top or cuts it in half in the Christian symbol or floats just above the ground. Or the shapes can include a "saddle" on a column, a pyramid or its inversion, rounded forms surmounting a polyhedron or just a bump, like a mole's path, on top of a smooth plain. Rigorously non representational, the shapes invoke nonetheless a bull's head and horns, a new moon, arms cradling a baby or a lectern or a teepee or chess pieces or unsheathed lipsticks.

All these interpretations, however, are possible because none is authorized; the letters remain just that – integers in a symbolic system we cannot "read".

Even Kirili's avowed influences are both abstract and mystical – The Rothko Chapel in Houston and Barnett Newman's "Broken Obelisk". David Smith, moreover, has set his seal on Kirili's entire endeavor. But there are other influences outside the contemporary mainstream. Kirk Varnedoe, including Philippe Sollers, long a friend and inspiration. And Kirili has written suggestively in a 1990 text: "In New York I encountered the religious aspect of writing. On Essex Street on the lower East Side, the calligraphers of the Torah trace their letters in the tradition of stone engravers."

This remark, when joined to the name “Commandments”, points the viewer toward the Kabbalah and its symbolism. According to Gershom Scholem, some rabbis have asked, “When the children of Israel received the Ten Commandments, what could they actually hear, and what did they hear? Some maintained that all the Commandments were spoken to the children of Israel directly by the divine voice. Others said that only the first two Commandments : “I am the Lord thy God” and “Thou shalt have no other God before me”... were communicated directly. Then the people were overwhelmed, they could no longer endure the divine voice... In Rabbi Mendel’s view not even the first two Commandments were revealed directly to the whole people of Israel. All that Israel heard was the *aleph* which in Hebrew text the first Commandment begins, the *aleph* of the words *anokhi*, “I”. This strikes me as a highly remarkable statement, providing much food for thought. For in Hebrew the consonant aleph represents nothing more than the position taken by the larynx when a word begins with a vowel. Thus the *aleph* may be said to denote the source of all articulate sound, and indeed the Kabbalist always regarded it as the spiritual root of all other letters, encompassing in its essence the whole alphabet and hence all other elements of human discourse. To hear the aleph is to hear nothing, it is the preparation for all audible language, but in itself conveys no determinate, specific meanings.” Borges, of course, explored the meaning of this letter after his own fashion.)

The Kabbala thereby indicates not only that the basic laws of God were never delivered intact and complete to Israel but that perhaps that they were indicated only by a single mysterious letter, which in itself is unvoiced, which is only the position the vocal cords assume for a future sound. Other Kabbalists believe that the Torah was originally written by black fire on white fire and that the flames were continuous which made it possible to interpret them in several different ways (as the many names of God, for instance, or in the traditional way as history and commandments). Another interpretation holds that the white fire is the written Torah (incomplete since in Hebrew words become coherent only when the vowel points are added – by the black fire, according to his theory). Yet another Kabbalistic tradition argues that in every word shine many lights – that in every letter of the Torah there are depths of mystery that we cannot penetrate.

The theories proliferate. Rabbi Eliyahu, a follower of the false Messiah Sabbatai Zevi, wrote that the Torah was originally inchoate and entirely potential: “ Without sin there would have been no death. The same letters would have been joined into words telling a different story. That is why the scroll of the Torah contains no vowels, no punctuation, and no accents, as an allusion to the Torah *which originally formed a heap of unarranged letters.*”

Traditional Judaism claims that every letter of the Torah represents a concentration of divine energy – but even here the Kabbalists insinuated their inventiveness, for they argued that there is a *missing* letter which has become invisible. The complete Torah, once the missing letter would be restored, would contain twenty-three letters. As Scholem writes in *One the Kabbalah and its symbolism*, *it is only because this letter is missing that we now read positive and negative ordinances in the*

Torah. Every negative aspect is connected with this missing letter of the original alphabet”.

I find these adventures in Kabbalistic hermeneutics strangely related to Kirili's *Commandments* or, to cite another title, his *Celestial Alphabet* – everything from the predominating colors of white and black (the holy text written in white and black fire) to the varying number of letters in the alphabet to the way in which one element can be viewed as the mold from which another was cast. The hieratic presence of these letters, so still, so ready to start work, bristling with potential energy, also returns us to a moment that began not with the word but with the letter we can imagine that if this font began to function it might print out nothing but positive injunctions, as though the missing, redeeming letter had been retrieved – or, as Kafka's "The Penal colony", it might inscribe our sins into our flesh.