# Crash Goes the Alphabet

## Time for a new one!

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a review of
*Breaking the Alphabet* by Sascha Engel. Ardent Press 2022

Critiques of language and its objectifying, alienating effects are older than history itself (history defined as the linear, language-based story of civilization). Those early incarnations still exist today in mystical and spiritual practices like no-mind meditation, ecstatic dance, and mantra.

All of these techniques bypass the language centers of the brain to experience relatively unmediated reality. Critiques of language also exist in nearly every spiritual and religious tradition.

All religions come from different forms of tribal mysticism and all mysticism is a critique of language and linear logic. In the 20th century, secular critiques of language and writing exploded from every direction including the structural approach of Alfred Korzybski's General Semantics and the anthropological approach, documenting the mostly state origins of writing, by thinkers like John Zerzan and James C. Scott.

Despite the comprehensive and voluminous critiques, practical applications are relatively rare. There are two practical approaches worth mentioning. The first is David Borland's E-prime, English without the verb "to be." The second is anarchist Stephen Pearl Andrews' idea to use the phonetic Pitman shorthand used in office dictation as a universal writing system. Both of these ideas have some merit, but neither prove sufficiently radical or comprehensive to replace the alienation inherent in writing as a representation.

Thunder rumbles, lightning splits the sky, animals scurry for cover, and Sascha Engel's book arrives in the mail. *Breaking the Alphabet* is a square little book decorated with mysterious symbols and sketches that, turns out, are part of a new alphabet. Engel makes the case for, and then teaches his new alphabet in just over 100 pages.

Unlike E-prime or Pitman shorthand, the Anti-Alphabet, as Engel calls it, is aimed not just at improving writing, but at phasing it out altogether. For Engel, the most harmful aspect of writing is authoritarian iteration, repetition, reducing individual processes into a category of abstract things, removing them from their individual time and place.

The Latin alphabet is particularly guilty of breaking the world up into individual iterated letters with which to create individual iterated labels and then lay them out in a linear, logical structured sentence full of iterated rules. Every human interaction is hemmed in by the rules of language.

Engel finds the inspiration for his elemental antidote to iteration in the stone tool, which is removed only temporarily from its natural state, minimally interfered with, and then dropped back on the ground to continue its natural evolution. The Anti-Alphabet was created with this minimal intervention and a return to nature in mind.

The Anti-Alphabet takes elements from four writing systems: ancient Phoenician, Mycenaean Linear B, Egyptian Hieroglyphs, and the Latin alphabet. Each is chosen for specific characteristics that combat the structural biases of our alphabet to create a writing system that hopefully turns us away from the page and back toward the direct experience of life. Phoenician and Linear B both break down the structure of words and sentences as well

as adding competing phonemes and syllabograms. Phoenician is written right to left, without breaks for individual words, and contains no vowels. Linear B breaks down the structure of words further by representing syllables instead of letters. The final addition, the hieroglyph which, as Phoenician and Linear B destabilize the word and the sentence, destabilizes the symbol itself, never letting the reader forget the real world to which the symbol only refers.

Four writing systems have a combined advantage. There are multiple, sometimes many multiple, ways to write a single word or phrase so that the phrase can be repeated without ever repeating the set of symbols and thus side-stepping authoritarian iteration. Altogether, the Anti-Alphabet retains its readability just enough to get the job done while breaking all the authoritarian rules of civilized writing.

This is a beautifully written, but dense book with all the precision and specificity of a technical manual and the flow and emotional weight of exquisitely crafted poetry. In the post-fact era of virtue signaling, disingenuous language police and double speak political rhetoric, a radical critique of language is an important focus of the anarchist project and Sascha Engel's contribution is a doozy.

Twenty-eight pages of the latter half of the book are devoted to the translation of 218 letters and syllables from the Latin alphabet to the Anti-Alphabet, making translating simple phrases and words relatively easy and fun.

Many people may find the task of learning a new alphabet a daunting one. But even without becoming fluent, casual experimentation with the Anti-Alphabet may induce some interesting results and states of consciousness if even just by way of a comparative perspective.

Translate your favorite haiku or song lyrics into Anti-Alphabet, corporate catchphrases and sitcom theme songs, paint situationist slogans in the bathroom of your local Mc-Donald's, a coded message pointing the way to Croatan.

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