

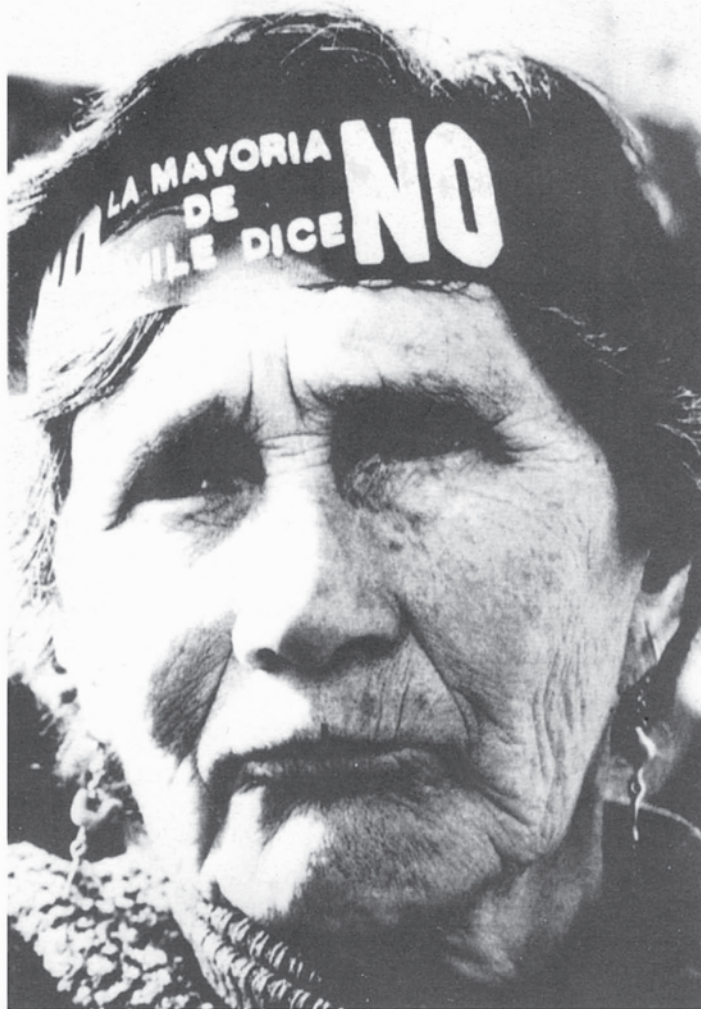
1 | SIGNS AND THE PATTERNS OF POETRY

We live in a world made up of signs. On all sides, words and images surround us – think of all the advertisements, posters, newspapers, magazines, textbooks, directories, brochures, timetables, inscriptions, slogans, graffiti, all the radio and television programmes.

Think of how we shape our experiences every day through language; think of the talking, all the words that are spoken incessantly in houses, shops, streets, schools, classrooms.

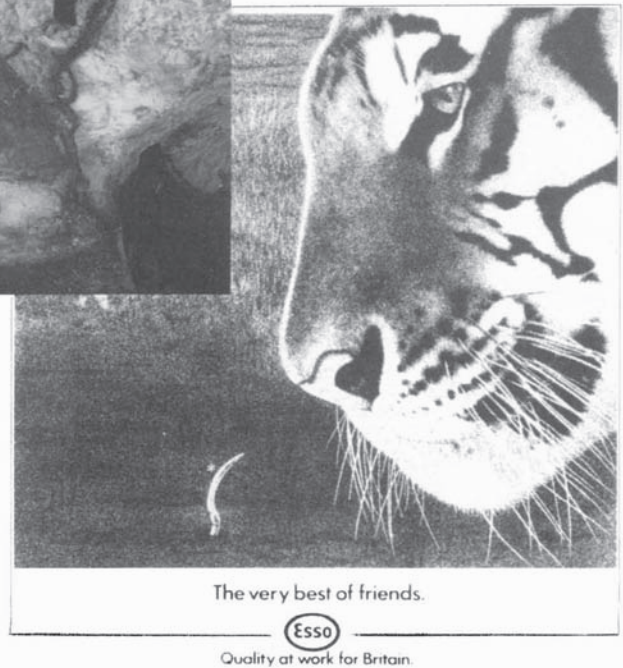
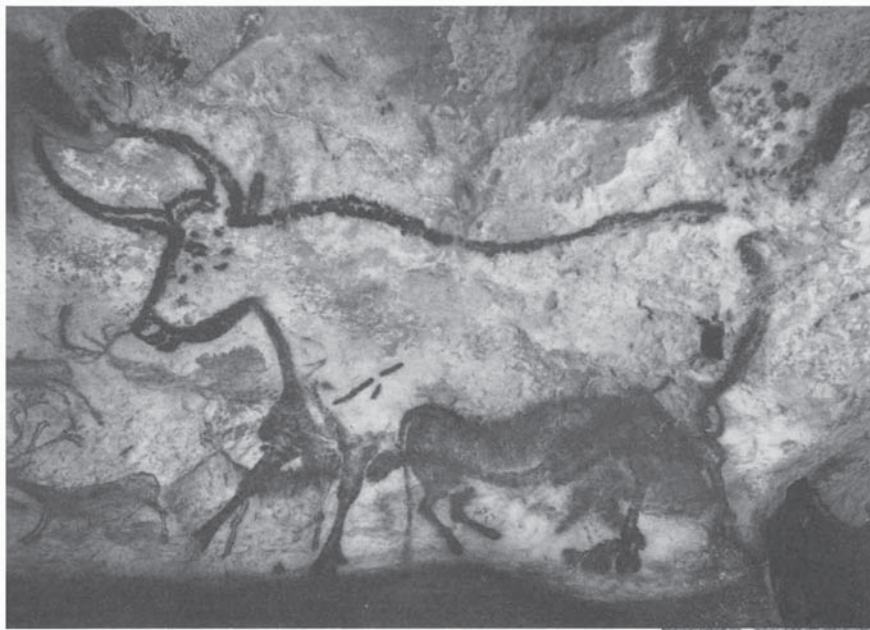
Think of the various clothes we wear, not just to keep us warm but also to say something about ourselves. Consider the way we style our hair, tattoo our skin, wear badges, amulets, crucifixes, jewellery, in the shape of hearts or animals or sacred objects.

Whenever an object **represents** something, it acts as a **sign**.



From the very beginning, human beings, in contrast to animals, have built up an elaborate world of signs. Human beings have created religions, myths, stories, theories, songs, conversations, games, mathematics, statues, clothes, dances, books, newspapers, television, fashion, weddings, funerals, and so on. In the prehistoric period the cave-dwellers used the hard sides of their dark walls to create images representing their own deepest concerns. If you study these images you can perhaps interpret something of their world.

- Why did they depict animals?
- What do the images show about their relationship to animals?



It is difficult for us to understand fully what these animals represented for the cave people. Certainly they do not serve the same purpose as the animals we see in today's advertisements.

What is important from our point of view is that these early ancestors felt the need to create signs which depicted and expressed their lives.

The need to make signs would seem to be fundamental to us. It marks us out. It separates us from other animals. Human beings are sign-makers and live largely in a world of their own signs – and these signs represent **human values, feelings and ideas**.

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One of the most powerful means of sign-making is **language**. Language was spoken long before it was written down. The prehistoric cave-dwellers left pictures and carvings in their settlements, but no words. They must have had their own myths, stories, legends, songs, chants and prayers, but they did not develop any method of recording them, so they have not been preserved. Our understanding of their lives depends on the way we interpret the actual signs they left: the carvings in stone and bone, and the drawings on the cave walls.

A system of recording spoken language first appeared around 3000 BC. Tiny pictures representing things and activities were inscribed with a finely pointed stick or stylus on small slabs of clay.



The first written language was a visual language – rather like modern street signs – based on small diagrams and built up by putting together related diagrams. Look at these early pictograms, which mark the beginning of writing, and some of our modern visual signs.

PICTOGRAMS			Picture	Meaning
URUK Upright	c3100BC Turned 90° to Left	JEMDET NASR c.2800 BC		
			NECK + HEAD	HEAD FRONT
			NECK+HEAD + BEARD OR TEETH	MOUTH NOSE TOOTH VOICE SPEAK WORD
			SHROUDED BODY	MAN
			SITTING BIRD	BIRD
			BULL'S HEAD	OX
			STAR	SKY HEAVEN-GOD GOD
			STREAM OR WATER	WATER SEED FATHER SON
			LAND-PLOT + TREES	ORCHARD GREENERY TO GROW TO WRITE

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From this early visual language our modern alphabet, depending on sounds, vowels and consonants and not on diagrammatic pictures, slowly developed. Our alphabet derives from the Roman alphabet, which derives from the Greek alphabet, which derives from the Phoenician, which derives from the Egyptian picture language.

Phoenician	Classical Greek	Greek	Modern Roman	Sans Serif
𐤀	Α	Αα	Aa	Aa
𐤁	Β	Ββ	Bb	Bb
𐤂	Γ	Γγ	Cc	Cc
𐤃	Δ	Δδ	Dd	Dd
𐤄	Ε	Εε	Ee	Ee
𐤅	Φ	Ζζ	Ff	Ff
𐤆	Η	Ηη	Gg	Gg
𐤇	Θ	Θθ	Hh	Hh
𐤈	Ι	Ιι	Ii	Ii
𐤉	Κ	Κκ	Jj	Jj
𐤊	Λ	Λλ	Kk	Kk
𐤋	Μ	Μμ	Ll	Ll
𐤌	Ν	Νν	Mm	Mm
𐤍	Ξ	Ξξ	Nn	Nn
𐤎	Ο	Οο	Oo	Oo
𐤏	Π	Ππ	Pp	Pp
𐤐	Ρ	Ρρ	Qq	Qq
𐤑	Σ	Σσς	Rr	Rr
𐤒	Τ	Ττ	Ss	Ss
𐤓	Υ	Υυ	Tt	Tt
𐤔	Φ	Φφ	Uu	Uu
𐤕	Χ	Χχ	Vv	Vv
𐤖	Ψ	Ψψ	Ww	Ww
𐤗	Ω	Ωω	Xx	Xx
	Ξ		Yy	Yy
	Ζ		Zz	Zz