

Laurence de Looze

Metamorphoses of the Letter

A “letter” in English (and in several other languages) is both that of which words are made and, in some instances, that which is made of words. As such it is deeply involved, in the most “litteral” (that is, “lettered”) way, in the processes of writing and interpretation, from the briefest of texts (the alphabetic letter as signifier) to long epistolary novels. My seminar would propose to investigate *letters* from a variety of stances, both historical and theoretical. It would wade in and choose from among the following:

— The role of the alphabetic script in the development of writing, in comparison with other modes of writing (pictographic, hieroglyphic).

— The Christian articulation of “literality” as a mode of reading. (“The letter of the law kills; the spirit of the law vivifies” says the New Testament, setting up an opposition between the literal and the typological or figural).

— The evolution of alphabetic letters (scripts) in pre-printing-press Western society: the rationalization of a system of *mise-en-page*, word separation, and letter forms (Beneventan, Merovingian, Visigothic, Carolingian, gothic, etc.). The art of letter writing (in calligraphic terms).

— The illuminated letter: the letter as signifier (the letter as artistic space; the “animated” letter; the “marginal” letter (especially in handwritten books, both medieval and modern)

— The letter and literacy. Being “lettered” as a cultural phenomenon, first regarding Latin (*litteratus*), then in vernacular culture (we still study “letter-ature” [*lettres modernes* in the French university]).

— From the eleventh century on, “letter” can also mean epistle. What are the implications of this *translatio*?

— ABC books (*abécédaires* from the 12th to the 21st centuries). The *ABC par ekivoche*, for example, gives meaning to the shape of each letter (“T = *trahison* [treason], as evidenced by its shape in the form of the crucifying cross); the OULIPO (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*) has formulated *abécédaires* that wrap each consonant around the vowel sequence AEIOU (ex. R: *rare est rire aux rues*). ABC books for both children and adults. Development of alphabetized dictionaries.

—Psychoanalytic considerations of the “letter.” (e.g. Barbara Johnson’s deconstruction of Lacan/Derrida on Edgar Allen Poe)

— “letter” poems, such as the “letterklankbeelden” poems of Theo van Doesburg (editor of *De Stijl*) in the 1920s. (There are similar *futurist* and *dadaist* creations). Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes*. The *carmina figurata* tradition (Hrabanus Maurus, etc.). 20th-century “Concrete” poetry, avant-

garde painting that include letters (Miró, Xul Solar, etc.).

— T.H. Gallaudet's 19th-century finger-signing alphabet (still in use today) and the Duchamps/Bataille parody of same in 1947. Invented alphabets (Xul Solar, etc.)

— the *vtopiensvm alphabetvm* drawn from Thomas More's *Utopia* and Rabelais's *Gargantia*. Geoffrey Tory's allegorical treatment of alphabetic letters in *Champ Fleury* (1529); John Wilkins on writing with invented characters.

— Jonathan Swift, *A Litteralial Scheme of Writing*. Other proposals for orthographic reform, organic alphabets, and such. The Chevalier de Boufflers "Vie d'Héélè ne de Troye" that consists entirely of letters pronounced à *la française* (example: L N N E O P Y = Héélè ne est née au pays grec) (Duchamp's LHOOQ = "Elle a chaud a cul")

— A.E. (real name: George Russell, 1867-1835) discussion of the sacred meaning of alphabetic letters in his *The Candle of Vision* (1918). Also various occult scripts.

— Athanius Kircher *Turrus Babel, Lib III (The Origin of Writing)* and other Kircher texts.

— Three dimensionality: Antonio Basoli's designs of letters as inhabited buildings; Herman Damen's program for three-dimensional letters; Johann David Steingruber's *Architectural Alphabet* (buildings whose floorplans form letters).

—non-sense alphanets

Other readings:

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*

Derrida, Jacques, "La carte postale" and "Mythologie blanche"

G. Sorrentino.

Georges Perec. *La Disparition*

Dinesen, Isaac. "The Blank Page"

Borges. "La biblioteca de Babel" (in *Ficciones*); "La muerte y la brújula (*Artificios*); "La escritura del dios" (*El Aleph*)

Ulmer, Gregory. "D-E-R-R-I-D-A" in *Applied Grammatology*

Herman, David. "Universal Grammar and Narrative Form"

France, Anatole. *Le Jardin d'Epicure*

Josipovici, Gabriel. "Death of the word." In *Four Stories*.

Choderlos de Laclos. *Les Liaisons dangereuses*

Barth, John. *Letters*

de Looze, Laurence. "Correspondance"

Poe, Edgar Allen. "The Purloined Letter"

Rasula, Jed, and Steve McCaffey. *Imagining Language: An Anthology* (MIT Press)

Kendrick, Laura. *Animating the Letter*.

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NB: Please do not hesitate to call me at (almost) any time--with the singular exception of panic-stricken, 11th-hour calls before an exam or due date for papers.

Metamorphoses of the Letter

Tentative Program

Required texts:

- Course packet, bookstore (contains: “Death of the Word”; *ABC par ekivoche*; “Correspondence”; *A Void*)
- Course packet: Drucker, Joanna. *The Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History and Imagination*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1995.
- On reserve: (unfortunately, all the main texts for this course are currently out of print)
- Kendrick, Laura. *Animating the Letter: The Figurative Embodiment of Writing from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1999.
- Rasula, Jed, and Steve McCaffery, *Imagining Language: An Anthology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998)

Week 1: 8 Jan.: Introduction: what is an alphabetic letter? What does it do?

Week 2: 15 Jan.: histories of origin

- Peruse: José de Acosta, *The Naturall and morall historie of the East and West Indies*.(Online) or Fry, Edmund. *Pantographia; containing accurate copies of all the known alphabets in the world; together with an English explanation of the peculiar force or ...* London, 1799 (Online)
- Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* I: 3-4 (if you read either Latin or Spanish; there is no English trans.)
 - Plutarch “The E at Delphi.” Plutarch, *Moralia*, vol 5. Trans. Frank Cole Babbit. Cambridge: Harvard UP. 194-253 (Weldon Reserves)
 - Plato, *Cratylus* sections 393-94, 426-37 (in *Complete Works of Plato*, on reserve)
 - Drucker, *Alphabetic Labyrinth*, chaps. 1-3.

Assignment: 1-2 page reflection on a particular theory regarding the development of letters or a particular letter; you may choose to theorize about the theory.

Week 3: 22 Jan.: letter forms - paleography; alphabet as ordering principle

- Drucker *Alphabetic Labyrinth*, chaps 4-6
- Kendrick, *Animating the Letter*, Introduction, chaps. 1-4.
- read and bring any ABC book; consult the *Figure Alphabet* of Giovannino dei Grassi (late 14th

century); NB: also the *ABC par ekivoche* in course packet.

Assignment: 1-2 page reflection regarding the implications of an ordering principle for the alphabet. You may want to consult other books that are ordered alphabetically (e.g. books of recipes, etc., or even critical works (such as the *Abécédaire critique* by Jean-Charles Gateau, Weldon: PQ 294/ .G 38/ 1987).

Week 4: 29 Jan.: letters and meaning

- Drucker *Alphabetic Labyrinth*, chaps 7-10
- Kendrick, *Animating the Letter*, chaps 5-6, and conclusion
- Zumthor, “Carmina Figurata” in *Langue, texte, énigme* (French original) and _____ (English translation)
- Geoffroy Tory, *Champ Fleury* (complete work on reserve, Weldon; excerpt in *Imagining Language*, 386 ff)
- *Imagining Language*, 327-431
- Ray Russell, “A Note on the Type,” *The Paris Review* 82 (1981) (in stacks)

Assignment: 1-2 page reflection relating the question of meaning to a particular text that deals with the *form* of individual letters or how letters are arranged. You may want to pick an example from *Imagining Language*, *Concrete Poetry*, any of the facsimile books, or texts provided. (NB: the interest here is with the cultural/semiological value of individual letter forms and scripts, **not** with the **mise en page**, which we will take up in the following week. You may want to look at Michel Leiris’ “Alphabet” in *Scratches/Biffures*).

Week 5: 5 Feb.: illuminated letters; letters as art

- Drucker, Joanna, *The Visible Word*, chaps. 2 & 3.
- Nicolette Gray, *Lettering as Drawing*, vol. I, chapt. 5; vol. II, chaps. 3 and 4 (optional).
- Steingruber, Johann David. *Architectural Alphabet 1773*. Ed. and trans. Berthold Wolpe. London: The Merrion Press, 1972 (on reserve).
- Discussion: Expressionist and Art Nouveau letters; Paul Klee; Xul Solar; Torres-Garcia; calligrammes; juxtaposition of letter types; letters as buildings, as sculptures, etc.

Assignment: 1-2 page essay on a particular example of a letter as art. Include a colour reproduction of the letter and 8 black-and-white xeroxes in case your essay/example is used for class discussion.

Week 6: 12 Feb.: letters and universal language projects (16th-18th century)

From your readings you will already be somewhat familiar with one of the following. Pick one and learn more about it:

- Wilkins, John, *An essay towards a real character, and a philosophical language* (1668) (Online) and *Mercury, or The Secret Messenger* (1641)
- Dee, John. *A true & faithful relation of what passed for many years between Dr. John Dee ...and some Spirits (The Book of Enoch)* (1659) (Weldon and online)
- Ward, Seth, *Vindiciae academiaram* (1654) (Online)
- Mersenne, Marin. *Harmonie universelle* (1636) (Weldon and Online)
- Top, Alexander. *The Olive Leaf* (1603) (Weldon)

- Agrippa, Cornelius. *De Occulta Philosophia* (1529)
- Beck, Cave. *Universal Character* (1657)
- Franciscus Mercurius Van Helmont. *Alphabeti Vere Naturalis Hebraici* (1667)
- Kircher, Athanasius. *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652).
- Lodwick, Francis. *A Common Writing* (1647)
- Porta, Giambattista. *De furtive literarum notis vulgo zypheris libri quinque* (1563)
- Trithemius, Johannes. *Steganographia* (1499) and *Polygraphia* (1506)
- Leibniz, Gottfried. *De Arte Combinatoria* (1666)
- Maimieux, Joseph de. *Pasigraphie, ou premiers élémens du nouvel art-science* (1797)
- Comenius, J.A. *The Analytical Didactic of Comenius* (Eng. Trans, V. Jelinck, 1953). See also *J.A. Comenii orbis sensualium pictus....Translated into English by Charles Hoole* (1659)
- Foigny, Gabriel de. *A new discovery of Terra incognita Australis, or, The southern world, by James Sadeur, a French-man, who being cast there by a shipwrack, lived 35 years in that country and gives a particular description of the manners, customs, religion, laws, studies and wars of those southern people, and of some animals peculiar to that place ...* London: printed for John Dunton, 1693. (UWO university catalog, online)
- Allais, Denis Vairasse d'. *The history of the Sevarites or Sevarambi, a nation inhabiting part of the third continent commonly called Terræ australes incognitæ: with an account of their admirable government, religion, customs, and language / written by one Captain Siden, a worthy person, who, together with many others, was cast upon those coasts, and lived many years in that country.* 1675, Eng. trans. of French 1678 edition, London: Henry Brome, 1738. UWO catalog online.
- Dalgarno, G. *Didascalocophus, or The Deaf and Dumb Man's Tutor....* (1680; facsimile reprint, Menston 1971).
- Delormel, Jean. *Projet d'une langue universelle* (1795)

Assignment: what is the role of alphabetic letters in the project you have studied? How are letters used? How does their use (or lack thereof) tell us something about the alphabet? If the project uses a means other than letters, how is that fact significant? How does the historicity of the project affect it?

Week 7: 19 Feb: no class (Reading Week)

Week 8: 26 Feb: missing letters; decipherability; cryptography, imaginary alphabets; Voynich Manuscript (by Roger Bacon?), Codex Serafinus, Sylvia Ptak.

– See film π (“Pi”) in UCC Rm. 1

– Codex Serafinus (on reserve)

– *Imagining Language*, 127-52.

– Jacques Derrida, “La Différance” (The Eng. translation is available in many anthologies. The essay first appeared in *Marges de la philosophie* [1972: Eng. trans. *Margins of Philosophy*])

– recommended: Singh, Simon, *The Code Book: The Science of Secrecy from Ancient Egypt to Quantum Cryptography* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000). (history of cryptology).

Assignment: 1-2 page discussion that considers the relationships between evident sense, occulted sense, and non-sense as they relate to cryptography and decipherability. You may want to investigate a particular example mentioned Druckner, *Alphabetic Labyrinth*, pp. 171-76. (NB:

No cryptographic writing!)

Week 9: 5 March: the letter and the body

- Balzac, “Sarrazine” (available on line); Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (portions).
 - Isaac Dinesen, “The Blank Page” in *Last Tales*.
 - Josipovici, “Death of the Word” (in packet)
 - review: medieval initials as corpora (examples in Drucker, Nicolette Gray, Geoffroy Tory, etc.)
 - **Paper topic due**
- Assignment:** 1-2 pages on the relationship between the letter and the body (identity, sexuality, gender).

Week 10: 12 March: *Oulipo* and the Potentiality of Literature

– Perec, *La Disparition*

Assignment: 1-2 pages on the application of arbitrary rules to production of “letters”; if arbitrary rule is applied is it no longer arbitrary – that is, does it have implications that infuse it with meaning and rob it of arbitrariness? (NB: your essay is to discuss these matters not to imitate them, though if you can write your whole essay as one long palindrome, so much the better).

Week 11: 19 March:

– Perec, *La Disparition*

– Borges, “La biblioteca de Babel” (in *Ficciones*); “La muerte y la brújula (*Artificios*); “La escritura del dios” (*El Aleph*)

Assignment: 1-2 pages on the letter and loss. (NB: if you wish to write your essay as a lipogram, that is fine. But it has to be intelligible as an essay....).

Week 12: 26 March: No Class (professor at conference)

Week 13: 2 April: Wrap-up

Required Work:

Class Participation 20%: Your primary responsibility is to well be prepared. This means not only being present, but having read *and thought about* the primary and secondary texts assigned. Participation grades will be based on the degree of preparation and the nature (quality and quantity) of classroom contributions. To miss one class is to miss almost 10% of the class sessions. As part of class participation, you will also have responsibility for a particular letter. I will pass around a sign-up sheet on 19 January, at which time each student will sign up for one of the letters A-Z; students who want to choose a non-Western letter or character should see me. You will be expected to familiarize yourself with the history, forms and possibilities of your letter and to be ready to comment on it in class discussions if asked to do so (You will want to consult some of the histories of scripts in Bischoff, Nicolette Gray, David Diringer, Drucker, Sachs, Sprengler, etc., as well as some of the eccentric treatments of letters in Tory, Drogon,

Haab, Massin, McCaffery, Alexander, etc.). It may prove that we need one additional class meeting, most probably during the exam period; we can discuss this as a group.

Reflection papers 20%: These are short (1-2) page, *typed* discussions to be handed in in class on the day's readings. All students will be required to do 7 of these during the term. On any given day I may ask some of the students who have done a *précis* for that class to read theirs aloud as part of our class discussions. Or I may read one aloud myself. A *précis* is always due at the beginning of the class meeting and none will be accepted later.

Research Paper 40%: This is a major essay (around 20 typed pages, double spaced) with full critical apparatus (notes, works cited, etc--see MLA Style book), which scrutinizes some issue/text/aspect that has come to light during the course. You are *strongly encouraged* to come talk with me at the earliest possible time about potential paper topics--but only after you have delineated several *in writing*. At the very latest, you must inform me of your topic *in typewritten form* by 5 March. As noted below, the topic can grow out of the seminar discussion you have led (this will be explained in greater detail in class). The due date for essays is 16 April. Late papers will be penalized. All papers must be handed in in print form (no email submissions).

Seminar 20%: You will be expected to give one 25-minute seminar presentation in which you will report on (e.g. analyze) **one** of the readings for the week. You must let the professor know one week in advance which text you have chosen. I will circulate a sign-up sheet on 15 January. Each student will be held to 25 minutes **and no more**, since for conference presentations you will need to learn to respect a strict time limit (practice your presentation at home so that you know exactly how long it takes). In your seminar report you will want to work from notes, but, as at conferences, you can put your audience to sleep if you simply read a text that a person would need to read carefully in order to follow. The seminar report may be used as a basis for the research paper, if you wish.