

Professor Laurence de Looze

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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.

CL 9612A: Metamorphoses of the Letter

Tentative Program

Required texts:

– Course packet, bookstore (contains: “Death of the Word”; *ABC par ekivoche; 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. (Weldon Reserves, [NK3610.K46 1999](#))

– Rasula, Jed, and Steve McCaffery, *Imagining Language: An Anthology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998) (Weldon Reserves, [NK3615.T6 1970](#))

Week 1: 6 Sept.: Introduction: What is writing? What is an alphabet? What does alphabet writing do? What are “letters”?

Week 2: 13 Sept.: Where do alphabetical letters come from? Histories of origin.

Peruse several of the following:

--- José de Acosta, *The Naturall and morall historie of the East and West Indies*. (Weldon 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 (Weldon Online)

-- Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* I: 3-4 (if you read either Latin or Spanish; there is no English trans.)

-- Herodotus, *The Landmark Herodotus*, ed. R. Strassler. 5.58-61. (on reserve): DH58.H4713 2007

– Plutarch “The E at Delphi.” Plutarch, *Moralia*, vol 5. Trans. Frank Cole Babbitt. Cambridge: Harvard UP. 194-253 (Weldon Online: <https://www-loebclassics-com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/LCL306/1936/volume.xml>)

– Plato, *Cratylus* sections 393-94, 426-37 (in *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Weldon Online)

– 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: 20 Sept.: Paleography: letter forms; Monumental capitals; The Middle Ages (Merovingian writing; Carolingian minuscule); “alphabetical order”

– Drucker *Alphabetic Labyrinth*, chaps 4-6

– Kendrick, *Animating the Letter*, Introduction, chaps. 1-4.

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

Week 4: 27 Sept.: Letters and meaning: *carmina figurata*; Geoffroy Tory; More’s *Utopia*; Do certain letters have special meanings? (C vs. K; Y; X; T; A-Z)

– Drucker *Alphabetic Labyrinth*, chaps 7-10

– Kendrick, *Animating the Letter*, chaps 5-6, and conclusion

– Zumthor, “Carmina Figurata” in *Langue, texte, énigme* (French original, Weldon Reserves (English translation somewhere?); also discussed in Massin, *La Lettre et l’image* (Weldon Reserves, [NC997.M29 2003](#))

– Geoffroy Tory, *Champ Fleury* (complete work on reserve, Weldon; excerpt in *Imagining Language*, 386 ff)

– *Imagining Language*, 327-431

Assignment: 1-2 page reflection on how letters can be bearers of cultural ideologies because of how they are formed or arranged. You may want to pick a particular text that deals with the *form* of individual letters or with the order in which 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: 4 Oct. Letters as Art: Illuminated letters; Mallarmé; cubism, etc.

– Drucker, Joanna, *The Visible Word*, chaps. 2 & 3. (Weldon Reserves, [Z124.D78 1994](#))

– Nicolette Gray, *Lettering as Drawing*, vol. I, chapt. 5; vol. II, chaps. 3 and 4 (optional) (Weldon Reserves, 2 vols. [NK3600.G82](#))

– Steingruber, Johann David. *Architectural Alphabet 1773*. Ed. and trans. Berthold Wolpe. London: The Merrion Press, 1972 (Weldon Reserves, [NA1088.S63A4313](#)).

– 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: 11 Oct: No class (Fall Reading Week)

Week 7: 18 Oct.:

What's in a Typeface?

- Alexander Lawson, *Anatomy of a Typeface: "Arrighi" and "Baskerville"* (Weldon Reserves)

Meggs, *History of Graphic Design* (Western Reserves, Z244.5.M42 2012) (pages tba)

- J. Abbott Miller and Ellen Lupton, "A Natural History of Typography." In *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design* (on reserve)
- –Ray Russell, "A Note on the Type," *The Paris Review* 82 (1981) (in stacks)
- **Assignment:** 1-2 page reflection paper on how letter forms create (or are seen as creating) meanings. Include a reproduction of any typeface you discuss.

Week 8: 25 Oct.: 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 Reserves and online)
- Ward, Seth, *Vindiciae academiæ* (1654) (Online)
- Mersenne, Marin. *Harmonie universelle* (1636) (Weldon Reserves and Online)
- Top, Alexander. *The Olive Leaf* (1603) (Weldon Reserves)
- 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 shipwreck, 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 9: 1 Nov.: missing letters; decipherability; cryptography, imaginary alphabets; Voynich Manuscript (by Roger Bacon?), Codex Seraphinianus, Sylvia Ptak.

– See film π (“Pi”) in UC film room.

– Codex Seraphinius (Weldon Reserves, [PN6381.S47 2013](#))

– *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*], Weldon Reserves, [B53.D4613 1982](#))

– recommended: Singh, Simon, *The Code Book: The Science of Secrecy from Ancient Egypt to Quantum Cryptography* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000). (history of cryptology) (Weldon Reserves, [Z103.S56 2001](#))

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 10: 8 Nov.: The *humanity* of the alphabet (1): is the alphabet a sign of “civilization”? Does the alphabet say something about a person?

– Balzac, “Sarrazine” (available on line); Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (portions).

– Isaac Dinesen, “The Blank Page” in *Last Tales*:

http://www.whiterabbit.net/@port03/Dinesen/BlankPage/blank_page.htm

– Josipovici, “Death of the Word” (in packet)

– review: medieval initials as corpora (examples in Drucker, Nicolette Gray, Geoffroy Tory, etc.

– Consult “Writing and Civilization” Owl document

– **Paper topic due**

Assignment: 1-2 pages on the relationship between the letter and the body (identity, sexuality, gender).

Week 11: 15 Nov.: The *humanity* of the alphabet (2): the letter and the body

– human alphabets: <https://publicdomainreview.org/collections/the-human-alphabet/>

– the *Figure Alphabet* of Giovannino dei Grassi (late 14th century) is especially famous; NB: see also the *ABC par ekivoche* in course packet.

– Erotic alphabets (esp. Joseph Apoux, online)

Week 12: 22 Nov.: *Oulipo* and the Potentiality of Literature

– Perec, *La Disparition*

Assignment: 1-2 pages on the application of arbitrary rules to production of “letters.” To consider perhaps: 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 13: 29 Nov.:

– Perec, *La Disparition*

– Borges, “La biblioteca de Babel” (in *Ficciones*); “La muerte y la brújula (*Artificios*); “La escritura del dios” (*El Aleph*); English trans. In *Labyrinths*, Weldon Reserves,

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 14: 6 Dec.: Wrap-up

Required Work:

Class Participation 20%: Your primary responsibility is to well be prepared. This means not only being present, but also 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.

Reflection papers 20%: These are short (1-2) page, *typed* discussions to be handed in in class on the day’s readings. These are not summaries of the week’s readings; rather they are a chance to reflect on some aspect or some detail of what we have read. 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 1 November. As noted below, the topic can grow out of the seminar discussion you have led (this will be explained in greater detail in class) or even a response/reflection paper. The due date for essays is 11 December. Late papers will be penalized. All papers must be handed in in print form and electronically).

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 13 September. 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 more than once 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. You will be evaluated on both content and accessibility of the presentation.