

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 “literal” (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.

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*.

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*.