

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 *lett~~er~~BT~~OOZ~~oolate*

“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,

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

— T.H. Gallaudet's 19<sup>th</sup>-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 françoise* (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.

— Athanuis Kircher *Turris 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).

—n 12 Tf1 0 0 1 72.0.93 433.15 Tm[(-)] m[, Tm[(n 12 Tf1 0 0 1 72.i7ETBT/F1 12 06.972.024 3 BT/F3 12 Tf1 0

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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:

*ABC par ekivoche;*

*A Void)*

Course packet: Drucker, Joanna. *The Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History and Imagination*



- 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. *Steganographi* 3 ¶¶¶¶¶¶¶¶ ¶¶ ¶¶ ¶¶

No cryptographic writing!

Week 9: 5 March: the letter and the body

*S/Z* (portions).

