

Letters to Children

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I prepared the following “paper” for the 2004 Children’s Literature Association Conference, in Fresno, California. Each of the paragraphs below was affixed to a 5”x 8” white notecard, the front marked by a symbol suggesting a letter of the modern Western alphabet (A–Z). Before reading the cards, I shuffled them thoroughly. The paragraphs below are arranged in the random sequence I arrived at that day in Fresno, though the paper is designed to be read in any order. There is no “correct” sequence.



Historically, alphabet books have often done just the opposite of what Coats suggests, stressing the materiality of the letter, its form. Take the 1824 alphabet book *Men Among the Letters*, which features such rhymes as “W Was a watchman, / And guarded the door / X Was expensive / And so became poor” (n.p.). Besides giving agency to the letters (which Coats argues is a relatively recent phenomenon, pointing to *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* and *The Z Was Zapped* for contemporary examples), this nineteenth-century rhyme has “X” becoming “poor,” has “W” as the watchman. (“A Apple-Pye,” from *The Child’s New Plaything* [1750], is similarly performative: “B bit it / C cut it” etc. [qtd. in Crain 66]). Additionally, *Men Among the Letters* features huge, stylized letters with human figures physically interacting with them (a watchman peeks from behind the huge W, for instance).



In his review of Phil Nel's excellent *The Avant-garde and American Postmodernity: Small Incisive Shocks*, Kenneth Kidd wonders playfully whether avant-garde techniques might make for interesting reviews, perhaps even interesting monographs. He writes, "Nel's playful subtitle reflects his own faith in the avant-garde, even though the book is a sturdy and familiar sort of inquiry. Rather than play avant-garde games, Nel is content to evaluate them" (247). Though I doubt we should expect *The Quarterly* to start publishing experimental texts, we nevertheless might take him up on his playful jab at Nel, and compose an experimental conference paper, keeping in mind Bob Creeley's famous dictum, "form is never more than an extension of content."



Even now, as we lament our students' inability to spell, we are duped by published books that "correct" and modify (mis)spellings (Charles Bernstein's marvelous poem taken from his typewriter's corrective tape demonstrates the imaginative potential in these stricken and "corrected" texts), robbing us of the hints such misspellings afford regarding the author's pronunciation and the conceptual relationships he or she may see between words. Joe Brainard's wonderful poem *I Remember* has been "fixed" by Ron Padgett, who has turned the hand-lettered, misspelled, and all-capitalized version into a typeset and "clean" copy that, in its regularized font and margins, removes the presence of the person who wrought those words, diminishes (but does not erase) the physicality of the words themselves as objects, made, crafted, formed by a hand with a pen.



Robert Frost once wrote:

A poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written. We read A the better to read B (we have to start somewhere; we may get very little out of A). We read B the better to read C, C the better to read D, D the better to go back and get something more out of A. Progress is not the aim, but circulation. The thing is to get among the poems where they hold each other apart in their places as the stars do. (815)

Could the same thing not be said for the alphabet from which Frost culls his variables? Progress is not the aim, but circulation.



One of my long-term research projects is the bridging of two discourses: experimental poetry and children's literature. One especially rich intersection of these discourses is abecedarian poetry—what young people often find printed on the pages of their alphabet books. I ask how experimental alphabets and the theories underlying such diverse avant-garde schools as, say, Lettrism and Concretism, can inform our reading of more conventional children's alphabets. Alphabet books are always about form: what we can learn to do with form and how we can resist or playfully engage preexisting forms.



Just a few weeks ago, at the American Literature Association conference in San Francisco (May 29, 2004), Bay area poet Robert Grenier reminded us of the struggle that accompanies learning an alphabet *and* how to look anew at the loveliness of hand-inscribed letters. To him, “the essential text of the poem is not the printed one on the page but the holograph one composed in the in-stress of the moment, as encounter finds words” (Gelpi and Grenier 51). That is, how we encounter each letter and combine them into words, how we, in essence, learn to make sense of letters rearranged as words. The poems Grenier presented are not to be transcribed into a standardizing font (and thus are called “drawing poems”), created as they are of “the strokes of the pen on the sheet [of paper],” each stroke “creat[ing] a composition, word by word, letter by letter, that is at once visual and verbal, spatial and temporal” (51). The more complex of these poems are nearly impossible to interpret without physically tracing the letters with your finger, redrawing them, in effect. However, even then, his letters are not conventional; r’s and n’s, for instance, look rather similar. What joy it was to sit in the room and listen to literature professors slowly sounding out “moorer moos” unsure at first if the word was “moorer” or “moon.” Learning to read again.

B

Charles Olson, in his seminal essay “Projective/Verse,” rails against “that verse which print bred” (174). Though Olson offers an alternative to this cold, impersonal, and musically dead verse, his alternative—projective verse—does not forget the written word, just as it does not forget sound, for it is rooted in “the breathing of a man who writes” (174). This paper—this presentation, rather—is similarly linked to the “breathing of a man who writes” (sexist language aside) and resists the conventions of the convention paper, not simply for fun, but to make a point about alphabets, linearity, and, to borrow from the Oulipans, “constraint-based literature,” for what is abecedarian poetry, what is the alphabet book, if not constraint?

In his “Manifesto for Concrete Poetry,” Swedish poet Öyvind Fahlström asks us to “SQUEEZE the language material. . . . Do not squeeze the whole structure only: as soon as possible begin with the smallest elements, letters and words. Throw the letters around.” How better to do this than with alphabet blocks?



One might say that that even rearranged, whether into the shape of words or into new alphabets, an alphabet still suggests the preexisting symbolic (and patriarchal) order (consider, say, *Uncle Shelby’s ABZ Book* or Judith Viorst’s *Alphabet from Z to A: (With Much Confusion on the Way)*, which features such wonderful rhymes as “Y is for YEW and for YOU, / But it isn’t for USING”) (n.p.). But, again, as Derrida might have it, a system suggests its opposite, its counter. Dr. Seuss uses the alphabet as a jumping-off point to a new liberatory alphabet of his own imagining, or, as Ron Silliman writes, “from one letter / generalize an alphabet / add civilization to weeds / yield flowers” (13), or, as Aram Saroyan’s visual n/m combination implies, we can create new hybrid letters. Or recall Takehisa Kosugi’s “75 Letters an Improvisation,” a sound poem/visual poem involving seventy-five alphabetic characters. Now that’s an alphabet.

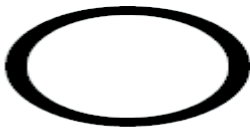


Now some of you—say, Richard Flynn—might think this presentation is just a clever—or perhaps not so clever—way of getting out of discussing children’s literature. “Ron Silliman’s *Alphabet* isn’t for kiddies,” a friend told me recently on the phone, and then again later in a bar in downtown San Francisco. Well, perhaps not. But if we’re to explore what makes children’s literature children’s literature from a formal standpoint, well, avant-garde works at the very least approach children’s literature as conventionally described, just as they share many of the same interests and approach some of the same topics. The one

that pertains to this discussion is the materiality of the alphabet. Gertrude Stein famously insisted that all her work was for children. Her alphabet book, *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*, crackles with an energized mix of lined and prose poetry that plays with the stuff of language, its sonic and its physical textures: “And that is the end of the sad story of N which is not as sad as his story of M which is much sadder and badder, of course it is” (54). Children’s literature? The avant-garde?



Letters to Children



Erasmus also suggested pedagogues carve letters out of ivory for children to play with (wealthy children, I imagine). We’re all familiar with the more economical analog to ivory alphabets: wooden alphabet blocks. Cookies, ivory, wood—physical objects with which children can play and taste, smell and touch. With blocks a child can build forts or words. Anno’s *Alphabet* suggests too this materiality. Yet so carefully (and impossibly) does he represent this tradition of three-dimensional materiality, that it can be easy to miss the materiality of his drawings, calling them “illusions” of concreteness. Take, again, Coats’s essay, which astutely notes that our textual traditions tend to erase or, more exactly, reduce our tendency to notice the physicality of text. Coats remarks:

But in the center of the page is the letter itself, impossibly “carved” out of wood. Evoking Escher, Anno teases the child with the illusion of the concreteness of the letter. But following Anno, more and more alphabet books present the letters as material objects who act, and in acting, produce material effects. (94)

However, the only illusion in the picture is that the letter is a three-dimensional object, one made of wood, “impossibly” formed. For the letter *is* a material object, a two-dimensional product of colored ink, printed on a page. Works like Tom Philips’s *A Humument* or Chris Van Allsburg’s coloring book spoof, *Bad Day at Riverbend*, remind us of this fact, remind us that books consist

of ink pressed onto physical pages that can be torn, drawn upon, annotated, added to.



Alphabet books, too, can remind us of this physicality, and the historical and contemporary avant-garde can remind us how to read even the most conventional alphabet books as books first and foremost about the physicality of language.



DuPlessis comments on her poem:

I was struck . . . at how chant or primer or a nursery rhyme was one of the immediate and provocative dictions or tones to assume . . . Intellectually, I was struck with . . . the way any part of the alphabet calls to all other parts, once you isolate ‘a’ letter as such. Hence, I wanted to do something like Ronald Johnson and maximize the number of allusions to other letters of the alphabet, visually (K looks like X) and in puns (put a circle around = O; See = C). (qtd. in Silliman “Blog”)

We read A better to read B better to read C better to read A.



The very purpose of an alphabet is to be rearranged; if it suggests linearity—if it, as Coats’ maintains, writes us into the symbolic order of the patriarchy, it simultaneously suggests this order’s opposite (this sentence, in fact, is a queer dismantling of that ziggurat, the alphabet, each letter extracted, joined to another in words strung along to cobble a kind of sense, a sentence). As Ron Silliman writes in NON, the “N” section of his Alphabet: “(workers of the word unite)” (N/O 19). Or, earlier, “Here we fathom connection / each word an accident of letters / ink bleeding into the page” (N/O 9).



“J is for Juvenile” shows Silliman’s awareness of the material history of books and that history’s relationship to “signs of youth,” letters, and their own formal and etymological development. In his blog, he comments on the poem:

J . . . [is] derived ultimately from the Phoenician *yōdh*, meaning hand & voiced as the modern *y* as in *boy*. The dot over the lower case *j* turns out to have been imported literally from its neighbor *i* & save for that detail, what stands out graphically for me is how much the sign itself is characterized by a single stroke of the pen.

“I was there,” the poem reads, the letter I a single line when printed sans serif, or when drawn with a quick “stroke of the pen.” His poem also suggests the hornbook: “never mourn / the boy his horn” (the J looks a bit like a horn) and the battledore (spelled “door” in the poem), recalling that both these early primers were associated with alphabets, the crisscross row, while simultaneously taking us back to the earliest form of writing, the “scores” that, as Drucker reminds, were the marks, the strokes, burned directly into wooden crates to mark their contents: “one stroke to score / his battledoor.” Education, writing, and commerce neatly linked.



In “Against National Poetry Month as Such” Bernstein contends that

The reinvention [of poetry], the making of a poetry for our time, is the only thing that makes poetry matter. And that means, literally, making poetry *matter*, that is making poetry that intensifies the matter or materiality of poetry—acoustic, visual, syntactic, semantic.



Silliman's section of the Rosenbach alphabet:

J is for Juvenile

This April eve
you do deceive
with a sign of youth
as an open mouth

or a book laid wide
& a wish supplied
anonymous as a stare
that cried "I was there"

with my silver boat
& a mouth my moat
so never mourn
the boy his horn

one stroke to score
his Battledoor ("Blog")



The Rosenbach Museum, a private museum in Philadelphia, featured an interesting project to supplement an exhibit called "R is for ROSENBAACH," which included, among other things, "[Maurice] Sendak's original drawings and preliminary work for *Alligators All Around. An Alphabet*" (Rosenbach "Current"). Titled "26 Letters, 26 Poets," this project was an April 26, 2004 poetry reading inspired by the various exhibits. Silliman characterizes the project in his blog:

Twenty-six poets take one letter of the alphabet each & write a poem that is

supposed to last, when read aloud, no more than two minutes. Each piece also is to focus upon an exhibit, one for each letter, of items from the permanent collection of the . . . Museum . . . in celebration of its 50th anniversary. The museum was the home of rare book dealer A.S.W. Rosenbach and his brother Philip & was created to house & present their personal collection of mostly literary treasures[.]

including around 7,000 original Sendak manuscripts and drawings.



Furthermore, Coats also looks to the interesting *Let's Play ABC* as an example of “the playful, performative, postmodern alphabet” (94), featuring as it does “pictures of toddlers contorting their bodies into the shapes of the letters,” a preamble “encourag[ing] children to imitate the pictures” (95). Yet contrary to Coats, this sort of “body alphabet” (as Patricia Crain calls it) has been with us a long time, from the 1780s in England and the early 1800s in the U.S., *The Comical Hotch-Potch, or the Alphabet Turn'd Posture-Master*, for instance, features a schoolboy contorting his body into the shapes of letters, each contortion accompanied by a rhyme. “To please every Sex / I am forming an X,” for example, is illustrated by a lad bent over, his arms and legs outstretched X-like (n.p.). Playful and performative. I can't imagine a school child reading this book without feeling the urge to form a *P* or, more challenging, a *Q*.



From their earliest incarnations, alphabet books have foregrounded the materiality of letters, for they, at the most primal level, are primers on form. Patricia Crain, in *The Story of A* (not Zukofsky's), reminds us that before books, the alphabet was sometimes taught through other “media and material” (19). Erasmus, for instance, encouraged the “baking [of] letter-shaped cookies” which the child could physically consume (19)—the reading/eating analogy taken quite literally. The “A Apple Pie” alphabet primers so common in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America are no doubt these cookies' legacy, turning A not into a cookie, but into a pie (or pye), as we see in *The History of an Apple Pie* (1850s): “A apple pie. / B bit it / C cried for it. / D danced for it” (qtd. in Crain 70). The common “A is for Apple” still resonates with this history. Crain notes that these “swallow alphabets” are “among the earliest and most clearly and

closely linked to folk motifs[,] . . . display[ing] tropes of consumption—letters eating other letters, letters being eaten by children, letters in the mouths of animals, letters pictured with, or as, food” (85).



Consider Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s section of the Rosenbach alphabet, to which I will return (or perhaps, which I have already discussed):

The Alphabet for Rosenbach: K

Kith and Kin
cattle and Kine
Milton’s hair
provokes Keats’ rhyme.

K will leap from lines like X.
One WunderKammer [sic] fetish boxed
in apparatuses of keep
will rock your socKs, cue your sex,
hit the Keister, KicK the moon.
Yo! Kiss my wrinKled
Bonnie Doon.

Lips that marK a rosy barb
Kiss me into Kismet parK.
Greta’s Kiss on Miss M’s garb.
Kiss my stocKing, kiss [sic] my shoe.
Kiss my complete thing you do.

K is found in KnocK and Know.
though it’s hard to make it show.
K is for Potassium.
K comes from the hollow hand.
K the Kumquat that it holds.
Jot and tittle, dotted com.
Knick-KnacKs elf museum shelf.
Click the Klaxon, KinK the molds.
CooK your Kohl to O your eye.
See whole alphabets pass by.

K will Couple you, K will Double you,
these manu-scraps from Kudzu hives.
This the primary pigment of primer;
this the Kissing cosine twining lives.

All Very Letters refract inside the sentence.
Scattered, scattering, Keyhole iotas
open abcdarium armoires.
And at the end, as linK, and blanK, and marK,
a pinK-red ticket discard
falls from the inexhaustible arK. (qtd. in Silliman “Blog”)



In his blog, Ron Silliman, one of the twenty-six Rosenbach poets, recalls preparing for “26 Letters, 26 Poets”:

a few of us took a tour of the museum, pausing in its third floor recreation of Marianne Moore’s Greenwich Village studio, or noting the curious juxtaposition of the Rosenbach’s Melville collection housed in a case in a room otherwise given over to a display of the work of Maurice Sendak (who, in addition to his own books, is both a serious Melville devotee and a Rosenbach board member). The current Sendak exhibit is of sketches for *Alligators All Around*, a book my sons read several hundred times a few years back.

All this inspired a rather interesting bit of writing, one that borrows from the rhythms one expects of conventional children’s poetry, all the while evoking, in Silliman’s words, “[Sendak’s] presentation of the dark side of childhood.”



In “P is for Patriarchy,” Karen Coats argues that “written language has . . . [a] profound distancing effect in that it is disembodied” (89), a statement that struck me as odd, having been so long interested in visual poetry and other forms of “intermedia” whose effect often depends on the material stuff of written language, on the look of language (or language-like signifiers). She goes on to suggest that the traditional alphabet book, with its triumvirate of

the letter, the word, and the picture . . . forge[s] a link so substantial that the letters become transparent, a mere index, an inert pointer to the world outside

itself. Language is not material, it has no body; rather it is an epistemological tool, an abstract way of 'knowing' the concrete world. (91)

I'm not so sure.



The binary opposition Coats sets up between alphabet and image is not as tidy as she suggests. Johanna Drucker's excellent *The Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History and Imagination* explores the historical and imaginative links between letter and image, just as Dick Higgins's fascinating *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* shows us that before the nineteenth century, pattern poems—that is, poems either in the shape of what they represent, or, equally common, poems figured in pleasing shapes with no direct relation to their content—were the rule, not the exception, pictures made of words made of letters. Furthermore, until relatively recently, written English was not yet codified; spellings were fluid. Homophonic and homonymic puns were possible through creative spellings, an openness often lost to us in modern, regularized editions of past texts.



The symbols on the other side of the cards are modeled on Barbara and Alexander Maloutas' designs for Paul Vangelisti's *Alphabets* (1999):

Z is much closer to the start than you ever imagined. She stands apart, on nobody's lap. If anything you'd love to lay your bitter head on hers. If she speaks it's right out of the top of her forehead. Or so it seems. Z, not X, marks the spot. (23)

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