

A Die

with

Twenty

Six

Faces

Louis Luthi

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A B C D

e # c

One Saturday afternoon in the winter of 2012, after visiting Trinity College Library in Dublin, L. bought a notebook in a bookstore off College Green. For several years now, he has been collecting alphabet books, that is, books with letters for titles, and in Dublin he decided to start keeping a record or, if you will, a log of these occasional searches. To begin with, L. wrote down bibliographic details and cataloged the travels—either his own travels or the shipping history of the book in question—as well as the expenditures involved in finding and acquiring this or that item, but soon his entries became less rigorous. The notebook has a convenient, expandable inner pocket where he keeps receipts (“1 H = €8.05,” “1 P = \$13.50,” “1 T = £4.50”), and on the inside cover he’s penciled the following inscription:

A, B, C, D, etc.

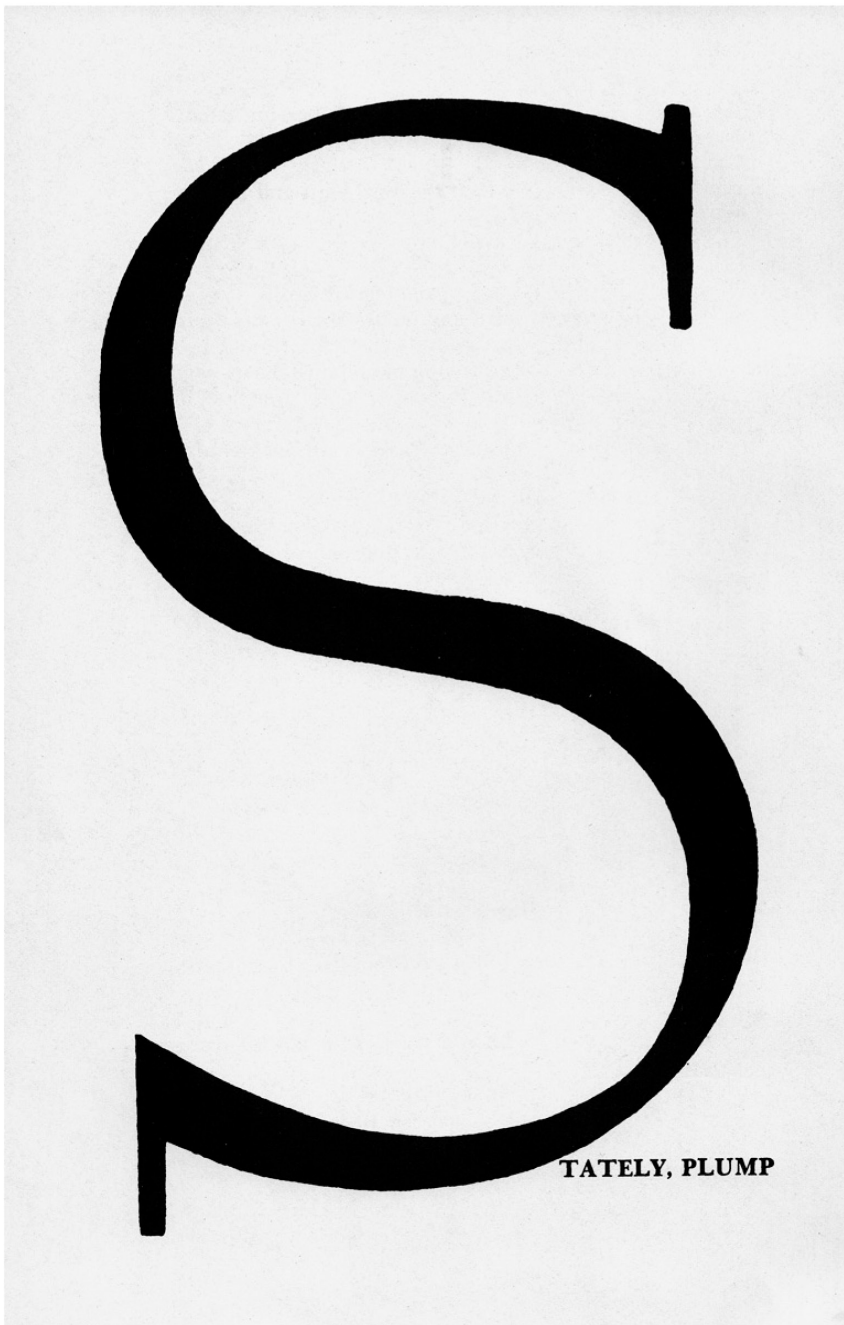
The main impulse behind his collection is provided by a passage from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, though there’s been an element of chance about it from the outset. The phrases “alphabet books” and “books with letters for titles” are taken from *Ulysses*—from the third chapter, to be precise, during which the poet Stephen Dedalus walks along Sandymount Strand, reflecting on his youth and ambition:

Reading two pages apiece of seven books every night, eh? I was young. You bowed to yourself in the mirror, stepping forward to applause earnestly, striking face. Hurray for the Goddamned idiot! Hray! No-one saw: tell no-one. Books you were going to write with letters for titles. Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O yes, W. Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you

died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria? Someone was to read them there after a few thousand years, a mahamanvantara. Pico della Mirandola like. Ay, very like a whale. When one reads these strange pages of one long gone one feels that one is at one with one who once ...

Shortly afterward, the young writer again mentions these abandoned books, this time in connection with lust: “The virgin at Hodges Figgis’ window on Monday looking in for one of the alphabet books you were going to write. Keen glance you gave her.” That Stephen derides his youthful ambition to rewrite the alphabet is indicative of both his arrogance and his sardonic temperament, further evinced by the parables, riddles, and conundrums he fabricates throughout *Ulysses*. Later in the day, we find him in the midst of a tortuous conversation in the National Library, saying to himself: “I, I and I. I.,” followed by: “A. E. I. O. U.” In his biography of Joyce, Richard Ellmann speculates that with the latter remark Stephen acknowledges the author’s (monetary) debt to the Irish writer George Russell, whose pen name was *Æ*. The row of vowels can, therefore, be read as: George Russell, I owe you. It’s an awful pun, and one of several instances in the novel when attention is drawn to letters themselves, that is, to the raw material of language. Here, as elsewhere, Stephen’s words require some decryption.

In “Joyce’s Forest of Symbols,” the critic Guy Davenport suggests that words in *Ulysses* can be scrutinized for what he calls the “Kells effect.” Referring to the ornate initials of the Book of Kells, he defines this effect as “the symbolic content of illuminated lettering serving a larger purpose than its decoration of geometry, imps, and signs.” For instance, the original connotations of the first two words of the novel—“stately” is an adjective



Prominent letterforms, such as those at the beginning or at the end of a chapter, can serve a larger thematic and structural purpose

for kings, and “plump” is for plebeians—encapsulate the conflicts in the opening chapter. At the same time, the last word of the novel, “yes,” is contained within the first, “stately.” Thus prominent letterforms, such as those at the beginning or at the end of a chapter, can serve a larger thematic and structural purpose within the book. As for the basic structure, there are eighteen episodes in *Ulysses*, which is curious in light of Joyce’s fastidious attention to symbolic detail, given that *Ulysses* is a modern re-enactment of the *Odyssey*, and Homer’s epic poem contains twenty-four. To account for this discrepancy, Davenport argues that an old Irish alphabet underpins *Ulysses*, dictating its number of chapters. Stephen’s reference to books with letters for titles signals this alphabet’s harmonizing presence.

If we’re to believe Roderic O’Flaherty, the author of *Ogygia, or, A Chronological Account of Irish Events*, the Irish alphabet derived from trees and plants with magical properties (in alphabetical order): the birch, the wild ash, the alder (“of which shields are made”), the willow, the ash (“of which spears are made”), the hawthorn, the scarlet oak, the hazel, the apple tree, the vine, the ivy, the reed, the blackthorn, the elder tree, the fir, the gorse, the heather, the aspen, the yew, the spindle tree, the honeysuckle, and the gooseberry shrub. In part three, chapter thirty of *Ogygia*, he sets out to attribute one tree to each letter of this alphabet, but in three instances admits he cannot provide a satisfactory explanation. He nevertheless insists on direct correspondence between Irish trees and letters, drawing his case in large part from a medieval Gaelic primer in which each letter is glossed in metaphorical terms. What’s more, he says, the alphabet’s eighteen basic elements (five letters are diphthongs and three are superfluous consonants) are “as many Greek letters as were according to the testimony of Pliny from Aristotle.” As the title

confirms the ancient order of them. For as it is called *Alphabet* from the two first Greek letters *Alpha*, *Beta*, and *Abecedarium*, from the three first Latin letters A, B, C; so it is called *Bobelloth*, from the two first Irish letters B, L; or as I find it more commonly stiled *Beth-luis-nion* from *Beitbe*, which is B; *Luis*, that is L; and *Nion*, which is N. Wherefore we must imagine the N to be the third in order; though as below it is the fifth. Now I shall lay before you the number, order, and name of each letter as they are in the book of Iacan, with an English explanation to most of them.

- B. 1. *Beitbe*, the Birch tree.
 L. 2. *Luis*, commonly *Caertbeann*; the wild Ash.
 F. 3. *Fearn*, the Alder, of which shields are made.
 S. 4. *Sail*, the Willow.
 N. 5. *Nion*, vulgarly *Unsonn*; the Ash tree of which spears are made.
 H. 6. *Huath*, vulgarly *Sce*; White-thorn or thorny bushes, that grow on hedges.
 D. 7. *Duir*, vulgarly *Guileann*; the Scarlet Oak, Broom, Holm, Holly.
 T. 8. *Tinne*, the explanation of this letter is not given.
 C. 9. *Coll*, the Hazle.
 Q. 10. *Queirt*, vulgarly *Abboll*; the Apple tree.
 M. 11. *Muin*, vulgarly *Fineambuinn*; the Vine tree.
 G. 12. *Gort*, vulgarly *Fidbeann*; the Ivy.
 Ng. 13. *Ngedal*, vulgarly *Gilcach* or *Raid*; the Reed.

P. 14.

- P. 14. *Pethpoc*, we have no explanation for this.
 Z. 15. *Ztraif*, vulgarly *Draighean*; the Sloe tree.
 R. 16. *Ruis*, vulgarly *Trom*; the Alder tree.
 A. 17. *Ailm*, vulgarly *Gius*; the Fir tree.
 O. 18. *Onn*, vulgarly *Aiteann*; Furze.
 U. 19. *Ur*, vulgarly *Fræch*; Heath or Ling.
 E. 20. *Eadbadh*, vulgarly *Cranncriothbach*; the Aspen tree.
 I. 21. *Idbo* or *Idbad*, vulgarly *Ibbar*; the Yew tree.
 Ea. 22. *Ebbadh*, vulgarly *Criothbach*; the Aspen tree.
 Oi. 23. *Oir*, vulgarly *Feoras*; the Spindle tree or Prickwood.
 Y. 24. *Uilleann*, vulgarly *Eadbleann*, which I think is the same with *Feitbleann*, and is known by these Latin names *Periclymenum*, *Matrisylva*, *Caprifolium*, *Volucrum majus*, *Lilium inter Spinās*, *Sylvæ mater*; Woodbine or Honey-suckle.
 Io. 25. *Iphín*, vulgarly *Spinan* or *Ispin*; the Gooseberry tree.
 X. 26. *Ambancholl*, I do not know the meaning of it

The five last of these are diphthongs, one for each vowel; of which the Y has the force of *Ui*, and X of *Æ*. By deducting five diphthongs and Q, Ng, Z, the superfluous consonants from the twenty-six letters, eighteen simple elements remain; as many Greek letters as were according to the testimony of Pliny from Aristotle.

I find

indicates, O'Flaherty's history presents Ireland as Ogygia, the mythical island described by the Greek historian Plutarch as five days' sail to the west of Britain, the very island where the nymph Calypso held Ulysses captive for seven years in a cave sheltered by alders, aspens, and fragrant cypresses.

According to Davenport, the idiosyncratic combination of Irish history and Greek mythology was precisely what attracted Joyce to O'Flaherty's book and to its alphabet in particular. Written in Latin, *Ogygia* was translated into English by one Reverend James Hely in 1793. As it happens, there are five men in *Ulysses* who wander the streets wearing tall white hats that spell out Hely's, advertising the name of a Dublin stationers.



Letter by letter, Davenport contends that the eighteen trees of O'Flaherty's alphabet provide a pattern of correspondences for the eighteen episodes of *Ulysses*. "This scheme of alphabetical trees," he writes, "extends an invisible forest over Joyce's cityscape, thereby tenting over the whole novel with Dante's *selva oscura*, Calypso's magically restraining trees, the lost Eden, the forest of Europe from which our culture arose." In this forest, the ash, for example, is a charm against drowning and corresponds to the third episode, in which Stephen

struggles with the fluidity of thought as he contemplates history against the background of the Irish Sea.

Since 1922, the year *Ulysses* was published, most—perhaps all twenty-six—of the alphabet books alluded to by Stephen in this episode have been written. Indeed, some titles are well known: Louis Zukofsky's "A," Andy Warhol's *a*, John Berger's *G.*, Thomas Pynchon's *V.*, Georges Perec's *W, or the Memory of Childhood*. (And it's easy to imagine a parodic autobiography titled *I*, in which the narrator, by turns mannered and earnest, continually shifts perspective; a serialized crime thriller for adolescents titled *X*; or a science fiction novel titled *Z*, eschatological in tone and substance.)

At present, L.'s collection of alphabet books amounts to thirty-four volumes. Two triples and five doubles means he has tracked down twenty-five letters so far, including the three that Stephen mentions by name: F, Q, and W. The only letter missing is L:

a by Andy Warhol, 1968

"A" by Louis Zukofsky, 1978

A by Zach Sodenstern, 2013

B by Eva Figes, 1972

C by Arnold Skemer, 1992

C by Tom McCarthy, 2010

C: Honderd notities van een alleslezer by Paul Claes, 2011

D by Arnold Skemer, 1995

e by Matt Beaumont, 2000

F by Antônio Xerxenesky, 2014

G. by John Berger, 1972

H by Philippe Sollers, 1973

I. by Stephen Dixon, 2002

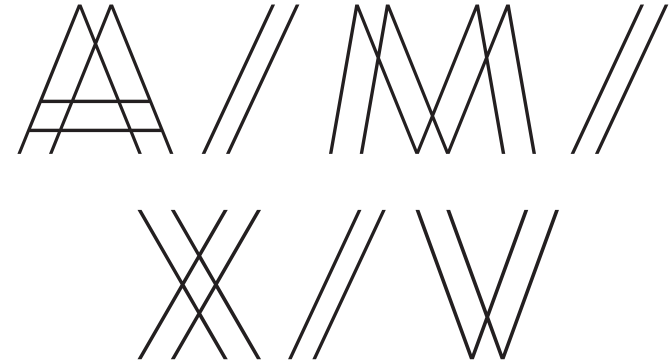
J by Howard Jacobson, 2014

K. by Roberto Calasso, 2002

K by Bernardo Kucinski, 2011

M: Writings '67-'72 by John Cage, 1973

M by Acton Das, 2016
N. by Ernesto Ferrero, 2000
O by Leslie Scalapino, 1976
P by Andrew Lewis Conn, 2003
Q by Luther Blissett, 2000
R by Kenne Fant, 1988
S. by Florence Delay et al., 1997
S. by John Updike, 1988
t by Victor Pelevin, 2009
U by Bosse Gustafson, 1973
V. by Thomas Pynchon, 1963
v. by Tony Harrison, 1985
W ou le souvenir d'enfance by Georges Perec, 1975
X: Tien dizijnen by Paul Claes, 1997
X: Writings '79-'82 by John Cage, 1983
Y by Kenneth Jensen, 2012
Z by Vassilis Vassilikos, 1966



Although grouped together here, these books are scattered throughout his shelves, immersed in an altogether different system of classification (by author, per language). It's a small library within another library. As such, the collection is inconspicuous, though each new addition is, of course, acknowledged by an entry in his notebook. From time to time, L. considers arranging the entries in alphabetical order, but that wouldn't be an accurate reflection of how his collecting and note-taking have progressed. Besides, his intention is not only to follow the intricate paths that lead from Joyce's imaginary alphabet books to actual books with letters for titles, but to trace the connections between these latter books and their authors, who have each made prominent use of the isolated letter. By compiling these notes, L. hopes to provide a survey of the Kells effect in contemporary literature, and to evoke, but only dimly, an insular art of the future.

Louis Zukofsky began writing a poem called “A” after attending a performance of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* at Carnegie Hall in New York on Thursday, April 5, 1928. According to the poet Ron Silliman, the following day the *New York Times* printed a review of the performance next to an article on the Philadelphia Athletics, who’d replaced their elephant logo with a large Gothic A. It took Zukofsky forty-six years to complete his monumental poem, which is divided into twenty-four movements, beginning with a round of fiddles playing Bach at Carnegie Hall and ending with a score composed by his wife, Celia.

Zukofsky designed poetry with an engineer’s love of structure, and in “A,” the first letter of the alphabet takes various forms: an initial; a word; a sound, such as the musical note to which an orchestra tunes; the shapes of tetrahedrons, gables, and struts. Most of the movements begin with an indefinite article. In the appended “Index of Names & Objects,” the letter A is followed by 103 page numbers.

a, 1, 103, 130, 131, 138, 161, 168, 173-175, 177, 185, 186, 196, 199, 203, 212, 226-228, 232, 234, 235, 239, 241, 243, 245-248, 260, 270, 281, 282, 288, 291, 296, 297, 299, 302, 323, 327, 328, 351, 353, 377, 380-382, 385, 391-394, 397, 402, 404-407, 416, 418, 426, 433, 434, 435, 436, 438, 448, 457, 461, 463, 465, 470, 473, 474, 477-481, 491, 493-497, 499, 500, 505, 507, 508-511, 536-539, 560-563

The defining force of the Objectivist poets, Zukofsky was not so much interested in objectivity as in the process of objectification, a poetics that is playfully exemplified in the seventh movement. Here, the letter A appears as a sawhorse on a Brooklyn sidewalk. It’s 1928, on

the way to 1929 and the Great Depression. Diggers are excavating the street, and the poet is sitting on a stoop, observing the cityscape. The sawhorses are painted blood red, the words “Street Closed” are printed on the crosspiece logs, and red lanterns hang at their ends. A kind of uncontrolled horse itself, the human imagination sets objects into motion: words animate the wood. The sawhorses are horses, but ones lacking heads, necks, and manes, which the poet will provide. The printed words, therefore, are seen on their stomachs. As the horses are standing motionless, the words enjoin them to trot. Each sawhorse makes an A, and two together make an M—or a horse, the symbol of animal drive that appears throughout the poem, as throughout Zukofsky’s writings.

Zukofsky’s sawhorses are an alphabetic objectification of the world and, it seems to L., a distant relation of the sawhorses in Georges Perec’s *W, or the Memory of Childhood*. In this autobiography of a sort, Perec alternates two texts that never quite intersect. One is a reconstruction of a childhood fantasy about a land called W, which is in thrall to the Olympic ideal; the other is the story of his wartime childhood, “made up of scattered oddments, gaps, lapses, doubts, guesses, and meagre anecdotes.” At one point, he recalls moving to the Alpine village where he took refuge during the Second World War as a Jewish orphan. Although he has no precise memories of his aunt’s house there, he vividly remembers an old man who lived nearby, on a farm. The man had a gray beard, wore collarless shirts, and “sawed his wood on a sawhorse made of a pair of up-ended parallel crosses, each in the shape of an X (called a ‘Saint Andrew’s Cross’ in French), connected by a perpendicular crossbar, the whole device being called, quite simply, an x.” Of all images, this one is tied inextricably to Perec’s life story, not as a memory of a scene,

The twenty-third letter of the alphabet is written in French, as in English, as a double V; and in French the letter “W” is also called “*double-vé*”. The title of Perec’s double tale of the Olympic ideal and of the discovery of a lost childhood thus has nothing to do with the sound of the letter U; it’s not ‘dʌbəl. ju: (or dɒ.b’l,yū) that is meant to echo through these pages, but ‘dʌbəl. vi: (or dɒ.b’l,vē).

D.B.

but as a memory of a letter that is a word, the only word in French shaped like the object to which it refers. Subsequently, he traces the major symbols of his childhood, each derived from the geometrical form of the old man’s sawhorse:

Two Vs joined tip to tip make the shape of an X; by extending the branches of the X by perpendicular segments of equal length, you obtain a swastika (卐), which itself can be easily decomposed, by a rotation of 90 degrees of one of its ㄟ segments on its lower arm, into the sign ㄟ; placing two pairs of Vs head to tail produces a figure (XX) whose branches only need to be joined horizontally to make a star of David (☆). In the same line of thinking, I remember being struck by the fact that Charlie Chaplin, in *The Great Dictator*, replaced the swastika with a figure that was identical, in terms of its segments, having the shape of a pair of overlapping Xs (X).

Looking over these two passages on sawhorses from among the first alphabet books he purchased, L. sees in each an affirmation of the materiality of words, which is, further, always a *social* materiality. In both there is a dance of letters and objects: words are grounded in physical acts. Yet Perec’s sawhorse also alerts us to the problematic relationship between words and objects, between writing and memory. In a scene that echoes the author’s autobiography, the dying protagonist of Perec’s *Life: A User’s Manual* holds a jigsaw piece shaped like a W in his hand, while the black hole somewhere in the sky of the puzzle before him is shaped instead like an X. This linguistic space of the unknown, evident in most of Perec’s works, brings to mind yet another sawhorse, from Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy*:

“Two Vs joined tip to tip make the shape of an X ...”

I had stolen from Lousse a little silver, oh nothing much, massive teaspoons for the most part, and other small objects whose utility I did not grasp but which seemed as if they might have some value. Among these latter there was one which haunts me still, from time to time. It consisted of two crosses joined, at their points of intersection, by a bar, and resembled a tiny sawing-horse, with this difference however, that the crosses of the true sawing-horse are not perfect crosses, but truncated at the top, whereas the crosses of the little object I am referring to were perfect, that is to say composed of two identical Vs, one upper with its opening above, like all Vs for that matter, and the other lower with its opening below, or more precisely of four rigorously identical Vs, the two I have just named and then two more, one on the right hand, the other on the left, having their openings on the right and the left respectively.

Molloy enjoys puzzling over the miniature sawhorse because its specific function eludes him, so he feels he is beyond knowing anything at all, and this affords him a kind of peace. From time to time, he gazes at the four identical Vs in affection and astonishment. Beckett's other listless characters include Moran, Murphy, Malone, and Mercier, not to mention Pim, Krim, Kram, Bom, and Bem—"one syllable m at the end all that matters." Like Perec and Zukofsky, Beckett had a patient concern with a specific letter of the alphabet. In his writing, the initial M transmutes endlessly.