Extreme type: progress, 'perfectibility' and letter design in eighteenth-century Europe

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On 15 February 2005 Justin Howes circulated this paper to the members of Reading's postgraduate research seminar in typography. At its Thursday meeting two days later he projected and commented on a sequence of pictures – those 'examples of "improved" types, "perfect" types, and "extreme" types' to which he referred in his second paragraph. The paper explores one theme emerging from his doctoral research into eighteenth-century types and letters: contemporary notions of 'progress' in letter design, and of its potential for 'perfectibility'.

Justin Howes died suddenly and unexpectedly of heart failure on Monday 21 February 2005. The members of his advisory group have assembled his text and pictures into a relationship on the page which we think fairly represents his intentions for that February meeting. His text has been given the lightest of editorial touches, and we have added captions and a few notes.

Introduction

I don't, as yet, have anything as straightforward as a title for my thesis, because I can't think of one. It's about letter design between around 1670 and 1830 – an attempt to account, mainly through contemporary comment, for the apparent shift from the stability, complacency even, of letter design in the late seventeenth century to the eclecticism of type design in the 1820s. What was it that drove eighteenth-century letter design? What *were* the developments? What is the precise chronology? Why do they take place then, rather than a century earlier or a century later? But defining my subject, as an Australian friend would say, is like nailing jelly to a wall.

The notes below discuss one of my themes, the eighteenth-century belief in 'perfection', and its effect on typefounders and printers. Several of the key documents are not mentioned, notably Didot's *Épitre sur les progrès de l'imprimerie* (1784–6). On Thursday I'll be showing examples of 'improved' types, 'perfect' types, and 'extreme' types, and talking about how my approach has been modified over the past year.

Extreme type

The new types of the 1800s could be bigger or smaller, finer or fatter, than any that had preceded them. Progress could take many forms, and type could be:

Bigger . . .

Pyne tells us in 1808 that 'the letter-founders have reached the *ne plus ultra* of their art, in type of twelve inches diameter', one of the 'exertions that characterise the dashing spirit of the times'.[1] William Caslon III's newly-invented matrices for such types, enabling their casting in a conventional mould, was styled 'sans-pareil'.[*]

. . . or smaller

At the other end of the scale, one of the odder manifestations of the belief in perfectibility was a succession of very small printing types produced by, amongst others, Henri Didot (1823) in France, and by Cesare Antonio Farina (1834) and Claudio Wilmant (1834) in Italy.

1. W. H. Pyne, *The costume of Great Britain, designed, engraved, and written by W. H. Pyne* (London, 1808), text to plate 43, 'Bill-sticker', quoted in James Mosley, *Ornamented types* (London, 1993), p. 7.

Editorial note: Justin Howes, 'Caslon's Patagonian', *Matrix* 24 (2005), pp. 61–71, is an account of the big sand-cast types made by the Caslon foundry in the 1780s, with his own photographic record of the process. James Mosley, 'Sanspareil types', *Matrix* 23 (2004), pp. 104–14, is a summary of what is known about making type with 'sanspareil' matrices.

Henri Didot's *caractère microscopique* or *Sans-pareille* (3-points Didot) and Farina's *occhio di mosca* (3-points Didot) type of 1834 were remarkable examples of punch-cutting at its most minute, self-consciously rivalled by Claudio Wilmant's 'Carattere Milanina', shown in a specimen of October 1834. Wilmant's specimen noted that

> In un secolo cosi fecondo come il nostro di chiari ingegni in ogni sorta di Scienze ed Arti, ognuno si studia di perfezionare e creare ben anco quanto nella propria possa esser di vantaggio e lustro, onde questa nostra Italia non sia seconda alle altre nazioni. Animato fo pure da questi sentimenti per l'arte che professo, avendo veduto apparire al pubblico due mesi fa il saggio di un carattere detto microscopico inciso dal sig. A. Farina, mi sono accinto ad altra più ardua impresa coll' incisione di un carattere più piccolo del medesimo.[2]

> In a century like ours that is so rich in outstanding minds in all the sciences and arts, each seeks to perfect and to create whatever will distinguish him in his own field, so that Italy may not be second to other nations. I am myself inspired by such feelings for my own art, and having two months ago seen the public appearance of the microscopic type cut by Signor A. Farina, I have attempted an even bolder task by cutting a type that is smaller still.

… or finer

François-Ambroise Didot had introduced the first 'modern face' types around 1782, which were hailed by contemporaries as 'les dernières limites de l'art' for their sharp contrast of thick and thin, and fine, rigidly rectangular serifs.[3] Richard Austin, whilst acknowledging that much had been done 'to bring to perfection an art of such vital importance to the well-being and civilization of man', remarked of these sharply modelled and finely cut types that a transition had been made 'from one extreme to its opposite: thus instead of having letters somewhat too clumsy, we now have them with their hair lines so extremely thin as to render it impossible for them to preserve their delicacy beyond a few applications of the lye-brush'.[4]

… or fatter.

As serifs became finer, the typefounders seem to have vied with one another in producing Fat Face types of extraordinary blackness:

> That there was ample room for improvement is sufficiently manifest, but the rage unfortunately ran into the opposite extreme, and nothing was considered handsome but that which exhibited as broad a surface as the dimensions of the body of the type would admit, in many instances forcing the letters so close together, that the word appeared an indistinct mass of black, not to be read with facility.[5]

Figure 1. 'Modern face' roman of F.-A. Didot and P.-L. Wafflard, from F. Fénelon, *Les aventures de Télémaque* (Paris, 1783). 10 lines/66.5 mm.
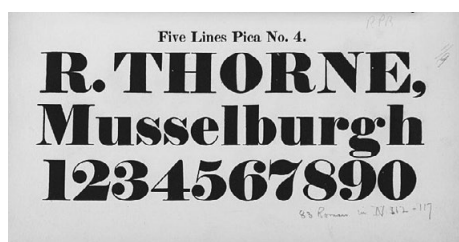

Figure 2. 'Fat face' of Robert Thorne, from a specimen of the Fann Street Foundry, 1820s.

2. *Carattere Milanina scolpito e fuso da Claudio Wilmant in Milano* ([Milan], Ottobre 1834). I am grateful to Sig. Renato Cassamagnaghi and Dott. Ing. HC. Andrea Schiavi of the Museo della Stampa e della Stampa d'Arte a Lodi for a photocopy of this specimen in a private collection, and to James Mosley for his accurate transcription of the text.

3. See Frans Janssen, *Technique and design in the history of printing: 26 essays* ('t Goy-Houten, 2004), p. 205.

4. *Specimen of printing types, cast at Austin's Imperial Letter-foundery, Worship-Street, Shoreditch, London* (London, 1819), Address to Printers.

5. Caleb Stower's, *Printer's grammar* (1808), pp. 495–6. This passage is quoted, more or less verbatim, by Johnson, *Typographia* (1824), II, p. 646 and T. C. Hansard, *Typographia* (1825), pp. 616–7.

Whether bigger or smaller, or finer or fatter, all these types had in some way been pushed to the limit, usually in the name of progress. Perhaps a better way of referring to them than 'new' or 'improved', would be to say that they were 'extreme'.

What seems to have been an unwritten policy of continuous technical innovation and aesthetic improvement calls to mind the perfectibilian philosophy of Thomas Love Peacock's Mr Foster, 'a thin gentleman, about thirty years of age, with an aquiline nose, black eyes, white teeth, and black hair', who held forth in *Headlong Hall* with great energy on the subject of roads and railways, canals and tunnels, manufactures and machinery: '"In short," said he, "every thing we look on attests the progress of mankind in all the arts of life, and demonstrates their great advancement towards a state of unlimited perfection."'[6] This spirit of scientific progress and manufacturing improvement was itself an expression, adapted to commercial ends, of a core philosophy of the Enlightenment: an idea of a general 'improvement' in the conditions of mankind central to the eighteenth-century idea of the world. William Godwin thought 'science … capable of perpetual improvement', arguing that 'men will also be capable of perpetually advancing in practical wisdom and justice.'[7] Thomas Jefferson, that man's 'mind is perfectible to a degree of which we cannot as yet form any conception'.[8]

The notion of progress

The optimism of this belief in 'perpetual improvement' can be seen as having informed both the manufacturers of new types and their public during the long eighteenth century, a period stretching (for present purposes) from around 1670 to 1830. Its impact on other forms of letter design (such as hand- or sign-writing, inscriptional and engraved lettering) is less evident, other than where these were affected by fashions in type design.

The stability of type design in the century or more after Garamond's death in 1561, and the continued availability of his and his contemporaries' types well into the eighteenth century, suggest a long-lasting consensus regarding letter design.

Although innovative, the 'baroque' types of masters such as Christoffel van Dijck (*c*. 1605–69) and Miklós Kis (1650–1702) were seen as no more than workmanlike improvements on the existing model. Writing of contemporary Dutch types, Joseph Moxon thought them 'managed with greater Curiosity than hitherto any Nation hath performed'. Their 'Regularity and Beauty' he ascribed, unequivocally, to the mercantile 'Necessity of their Countrey' and to a market economy in which, when 'so many Curious Artists meet, each, for his Profit, or Credit, or both, strives to out-do the other'. 'By this means Manufactures are so improv'd, that the most rare Artists flock thither as to a Market'. The designs supplied by Moxon in his *Regulæ trium*
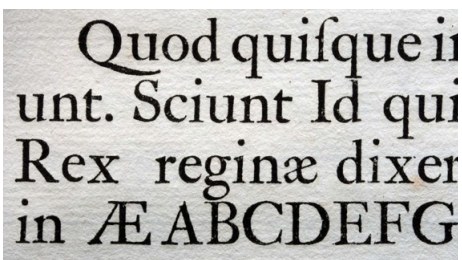
Figure 3. Christoffel van Dijck, Ascendonica roman, from *Proef van letteren, welke gegooten worden in de Nieuwe Haerlemsche Lettergietery van J. Enschedé* (Haerlem, 1768).

6. David Garnett (ed.), *The novels of Thomas Love Peacock* (London, 1948), p. 11.

7. William Godwin, *An enquiry concerning political justice, and its influence on general virtue and happiness …* (Dublin, 1793), vol. 2, p. 51.

8. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to William Green Mumford, 18 June 1799, quoted from <http://www.search.eb.com/elections/pri/Q00066.html>, consulted 23 January 2005.
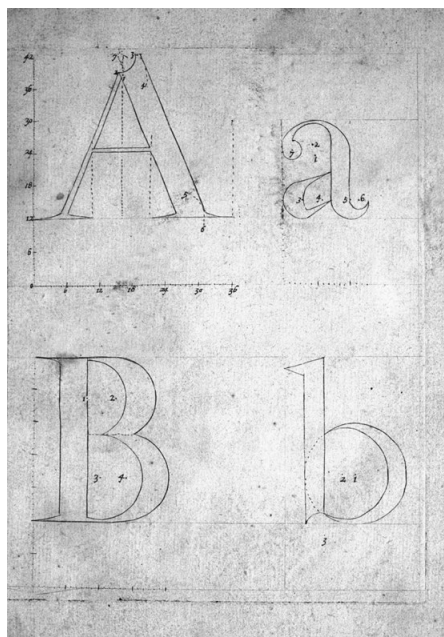
Figure 4. Plate from Joseph Moxon, *Regulæ trium ordinum litterarum typographicarum* (London, 1676).

ordinum litterarum typographicarum: or the rules of the three orders of print letters … useful for writing masters, painters, carvers, masons, and others that are lovers of curiosity (London, 1676) were descriptive of an existing model (Van Dijck's), although there was a tension between his acceptance of an existing model and the attempt to extrapolate from it a set of universal rules; the tension is, perhaps, that between old and new approaches. He is trying to reduce the best of contemporary practice to method:

> I finding therefore that the *Holland* Letters in general are in most esteem, and particularly those that have been cut by the Hand of that Curious Artist *Christofel van Dijck*, and some very few others, have elected them for a Patern in *Romans* and *Italicks*, and have given you those Proportions and Dimensions they observed.[9]

The pragmatic, practical, nature of Moxon's undertaking is well enough conveyed by the word 'mostly' in his promise to show how 'Print Letters' are 'compounded of Geometrick Figures, and mostly made by *Rule* and *Compass*.' He was aware that the prevailing response to his work, an attempt to find 'Rules' in the roman, italic and black-letter hands, would be robustly practical:

> It is possible my Pains and Endeavours may lie under the Censure of Detracting *Momes*,[10] who neither know, or are capable to learn the Excellency of Rule and Proportion; and account those Fantasticks that either prescribe or follow them: For, say they, what needs all this ado about Letters, when every Painter or Mason can make them well enough without these Directions?[11]

No-one, when Moxon wrote, seems to have thought seriously of bettering, let alone questioning, the achievements of the acknowledged masters. Innovation was prompted, chiefly, by either pragmatic or mercantile considerations, or both. Jean Jannon (*c*. 1580–1658), a Protestant printer whose *Sédanoise* type was the smallest of its time, took up letter-cutting because he had been unable 'to secure the types I required readily from the founders, some of whom could not and

9. Joseph Moxon, *Regulæ trium ordinum litterarum typographicarum* (London, 1676), p. 3.

10. Moxon's use of '*Momes*' is cited in OED as meaning 'a carping critic'.

11. Moxon, *Regulæ trium ordinum litterarum typographicarum*, p. 4.

others [who] would not supply me'.[12] Similar difficulties in obtaining the types he wanted seem to have prompted Kis to begin cutting types.

The empirical, essentially descriptive approach (one befitting his public office as the King's Hydrographer) of Moxon's *Regulæ* (1676) was confirmed in the *Mechanick exercises on the art of printing* (1683–4), in which his approach is more prescriptive, offering an idealised description of printing office practice, rather than a delineation of reality. In a sense he has moved from depicting the known world of the Admiralty sea chart to *terra incognita*. His approach was strikingly close to that adopted by the Committee appointed by Louis XIV 'pour la description & perfection des arts'.[13] This had originated in the astronomer Auzout's modest suggestion, made in 1666, that the Académie des Sciences should undertake a study of craft techniques, with their improvement in mind.[14] Improvement is one thing: perfection another. By the time the committee was formally brought into being on 16 January 1693 its brief had been extended to 'la description & perfection des arts'. One of its early tasks was to find 'une parfaite construction des lettres pour réformer les poinçons & matrices dont on s'était servi jusqu'à présent'.[15]

This was an altogether more ambitious task than that Moxon had set himself, of finding constructional rules for an existing alphabet. Its spirit was that of the principles that were to underlie societies such as the the Dublin Society for Improving Husbandry, Manufactures and other Useful Arts, established in 1731, or the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce, founded in 1754 by William Shipley 'to embolden enterprise, enlarge science, refine arts, improve our manufactures and extend our commerce'. Institutionally, and locally, the desire to reward printers for advancing this art to the highest level, even though 'the art of printing in this country requires no encouragement', was expressed by the Edinburgh Society's resolution in 1755 to offer premiums for 'the best printed and most correct book'.[16]

Improvements in letter founding were discussed in the context of a general pride in, and concern for, the improvement in British arts and manufactures, with Caslon's great achievement resting as much with his business acumen as with his skill in letter-cutting. This is made explicit in an editorial footnote in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for July 1749:

> An *Englishman*, without any instruction either public or private, has, by the mere force of his own genius, carried the art of *Letter-founding* to a degree of perfection not known in any other country; so that, instead of our sending great sums of money abroad, as formerly, for Elzevirian types, these sums are now sent to *England* for types cast here.[17]

Figure 5. Romain du Roi, from *Médailles … de Louis le Grand*.

12. Specimen, 1621, quoted in James Mosley's unpublished 'Dictionary of punchcutters'.

13. The phrase 'pour la description & perfection des arts' occurs in the minutes of the committee compiled by Filleau des Billettes, quoted in André Jammes, 'Académisme et typographie: the making of the Romain du Roi', *Journal of the Printing Historical Society*, no. 1 (1965), p. 88.

14. André Jammes, 'Académisme et typographie: the making of the Romain du Roi', *JPHS*, no. 1 (1965), p. 71. [*Editorial note*: It should be noted that – as its editor failed to make sufficiently clear – this English text was an authorized and abridged translation from André Jammes, *La réforme de la typographie royale sous Louis XIV: le Grandjean* (Paris: Librairie Paul Jammes, 1961), the introduction to a set of new impressions made from the original surviving copper plates. A lithographic reprint of this edition of 1961 was made on a reduced scale with the title *La naissance d'un caractère: le Grandjean* (Paris: Éditions Promodis, 1985).]

15. Filleau des Billettes, quoted in André Jammes, 'Académisme et typographie: the making of the Romain du Roi', *JPHS*, no. 1 (1965), p. 88.

16. Brian Hillyard, 'The Edinburgh Society's silver medals for printing', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, vol. 78, no. 3 (1984), pp. 295–319.
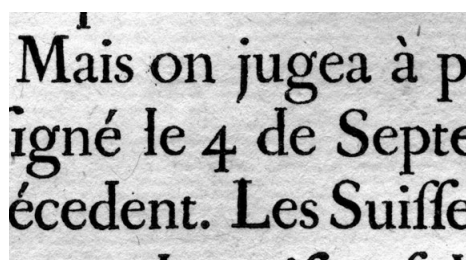
17. *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. XIX (July 1749), p. 319.

The search for perfection

The search for 'une parfaite construction des lettres', always a preoccupation of proponents of geometrical constructions of letterform, became the dominant theme in eighteenth-century type design, but because it was chiefly a result of industrial philosophy seems to have left other areas of letter-making untouched. The perception, after years in which type had remained relatively static, that they were susceptible of improvement sparked a fierce competition amongst type-founders. Louis Luce's *Essai d'une nouvelle typographie* (Paris, 1771) was dedicated to the King, and endorsed by Capperonnier, the King's librarian:

> M. Luce, à qui l'on n'en peut contester l'invention, y prouve aux Amateurs, que l'art des Garamonds étoit encore susceptible de perfection dans la forme des Caracteres, dans la justesse des approches et dans la beauté du coup d'œil.[18]

> M. Luce, whose inventiveness is beyond all doubt, here shows *amateurs* that the art of Garamond was still susceptible of perfection in the form of the characters, in the precision of the spacing, and in the beauty of its appearance.

Early in the eighteenth century the pioneering bibliographical studies of men such as John Bagford, Humfrey Wanley, Joseph Ames and Michael Mattaire had resulted in a comparatively accurate sense of the history of printing, from which it was possible to deduce that '*Printing* … is but another way of writing, and brought to Perfection by degrees, as other Arts'.[19] William Jackson – anticipating Emery Walker and William Morris of a century later – noted in 1795 that:

> Printing was carried to a great degree of perfection soon after its discovery. The early Italian books are inferior to no modern ones in the essential principles of the art.[20]

Comparable studies in other fields resulted in greater understanding of the history of manufactures, and a keener appreciation of the works of the past as a standard. The newly-acquired historical perspective was to inform the technical achievements made during a century which saw the construction of the first purpose-built printing offices, laid out on rational principles, and Sir William Blackstone's scientific attempts to reform the University Press at Oxford; developments in stereotype printing; and the introduction of larger, and more accurately built, printing presses, new recipes for inks, and the development of smoother papers for printing. In the last three of these innovations the example set by John Baskerville was to be emulated across Europe. English writers such as John McCreery, commenting in 1803, saw a continuous effort at improvement which they traced back, if not to Moxon or to the Romain du Roi, at least to the work of John Baskerville:

> The extraordinary efforts which have of late years been made to produce the finest models of Printing Types, must be highly gratifying to those who have in any measure interested themselves in raising the credit of the BRITISH PRESS. The spirit for this species of beauty has long been gaining an ascendancy, having received a strong impulse from the talents of Baskerville, who endeavoured to combine sharpness and

18. *Essai d'une nouvelle typographie* (Paris, 1771), 'Approbation', dated 1 July 1771.
19. Humfrey Wanley, 'An account of Mr. Bagford's collection for an history of printing', in Henry Jones (ed.), *The Philosophical Transactions (from the Year 1700, to the Year 1720) abridg'd …* (London, second edition, 1731), vol. VI, p. 23.
20. William Jackson, *Thirty letters on various subjects* (London, third edition 'with considerable additions', 1795); first edition published 1783.
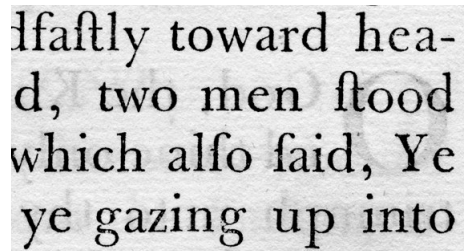
Figure 6. John Baskerville, Great Primer roman.

perfection of impression, with graceful types, giving to his works a finish which was before unknown in this kingdom.[21]

Similar comments were to become a topos in many writings about printing. William Savage, having commented on the 'considerable improvements' made by Baskerville, 'both in his types and his workmanship', believed that 'since that time the art has been continually improving in Great Britain; and has been carried almost as high as it is capable of, by Bensley, Bulmer, Ballantyne, Corrall, Davison, McCreery, Whittingham, and a few others.'[22]

The spirit of improvement, the sense of emulating and exceeding one's predecessors, seems to have been felt by many punchcutters, such as Jacques Louis Joannis, who prefaced his only specimen of types in 1776 by stating that he hoped to following in the footsteps of the great masters of his trade, but hoped to add some improvements to it:

> Attaché par inclination & par état à un Art où de grands Maîtres ont excellé, j'entreprends de marcher sur leurs traces… J'espére même accroître par quelques nouvelles découvertes, les progrès dont cet Art est encore susceptible. C'est dans cette vûe que je réunis le talent de Graver à celui de fondre, afin de suivre mon goût dans le genre que je me rendrai propre.[23]

> Being committed both by my taste and my trade to an art at which great masters have excelled, I have set out to follow in their footsteps. Indeed I hope to add to the progress of which it is still capable by some new discoveries. With this end in view, I have joined the talent of a punchcutter to that of a typefounder in a manner which I shall make my own.

McCreery and Savage's choice of Baskerville as a starting-point for the English improvements in type design was itself significant, of an understanding that improvements in printing were somehow to be related to the larger industrial revolution, centred on the West Midlands. Baskerville was discussed as one of the 'Artists of Birmingham' (Franklin),[24] as '*Mr Baskerville* of *Birmingham* that enterprizing place' (Edward Rowe Mores),[25] as 'Jean Baskerville, de la ville de Birmingham dans la province de Warwick' (Abbé Delaporte).[26] He was the first of the Birmingham manufacturers visited by Samuel Derrick, Master of the Ceremonies at Bath, in his tour of Great Britain. Derrick describes Birmingham as 'spacious, and well built: its toys, hard-ware, fire arms of all sorts, and false stones for buttons, buckles, necklaces, and all kinds of ornament, are known in every part of the trading world'; Baskerville, 'one of the best printers in the world', as an 'ingenious artist' who 'carries on a great trade in the japan way', reminding us that to his contemporaries Baskerville was as much an industrialist as a fine printer.[27] His books, like Wedgwood's wares or Boulton's buttons, could be appreciated as the product of the West Midlands industrial revolution, born out of the fervour for industrial and scientific improvement. Widely admired as the types were, contemporaries appreciated his other efforts at improving the art of printing, with better presses, more careful presswork, and hot-pressing – 'even his rivals in the same line admit the superiority of his mechanical talents'[28] – and admired the fact that his fortune had been made in trade.

21. John McCreery, *The press, a poem* (Liverpool, 1803), p. iii.

22. Savage, *Practical hints on decorative printing* (1822), p. 7.

23. James Mosley, unpublished 'Dictionary of punchcutters'.

24. Transcribed from *The papers of Benjamin Franklin* (1966), IX, pp. 259–60, reprinting the text of an advertisement placed by Baskerville in *The General Evening Post*, (London), 9–11 August 1763; *The London Chronicle: or, Universal Evening Post*, 11–13 August 1763; *The St. James's Chronicle; or, The British Evening-Post*, 13 August 1763.

25. Harry Carter and Christopher Ricks (eds.), *Edward Rowe Mores: a dissertation upon English typographical founders and founderies* (Oxford, 1961), p. 81.

26. L'Abbé Delaporte, *Le voyageur françois, ou la connoissance de l'ancien et du nouveau monde* (Paris, 1773), XVIII, pp. 252–3, quoting a text by M. Brossier.

27. Samuel Derrick, *Letters written from Leverpoole, Chester, Corke, the Lake of Killarney, Dublin, Tunbridge-Wells, and Bath* (Dublin, 1767), p. 3.

28. *Proposals for printing by subscription a complete edition of the works of Voltaire … for the Literary and Typographical Society* (London, [before 1782]), p. 5.

Comments on actual works

Increasingly in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century criticism type designs were to be measured against an ideal, rarely defined, standard of 'perfection'.

For a few commentators, perfection had already been reached, and was to be found in the works of the early printers. Voltaire, looking forward to a revival of printing in 1774, wrote:

> Il seroit à desirer que tous ceux qui exercent l'Art Typographique eussent vos talens; le siecle des *Elzévirs*, des *Estiennes*, des *Frobens*, des *Plantins*, &c. renaîtroit. Je ne le verrai point, mais je mourrai au moins avec cette espérance.[29]

> One can wish that all those who practise the art of the printer should have your talents; thus would the age of the *Elzevirs*, the *Estiennes*, the *Frobens*, the *Plantins*, etc. be reborn. I will never see it, but I will at least die with this hope.

The preface to a new edition of Horace, published by T. Payne and J. Edwards (London, 1792–3), described 'the typographical part of this work' as embodying 'the highest degree of perfection', an assessment which was echoed by an anonymous reviewer (probably Dr Samuel Parr) in the *British Critic*:

> the brightness of the paper, the amplitude of the margin, and the elegance of the type displayed in this work, are nearly unrivalled; they do honour to the taste and liberality of the editors; they shew, that by encouragement and exertion, the art of printing is in a high and progressive state of improvement, and many readers will be eager to purchase an edition which has so many recommendations from novelty and magnificence.[30]

Dibdin recalls that Nicol contrived

> to silence some connoisseurs of Printing, who, upon seeing the productions of the Shakspeare Press, were constantly saying 'This is very well, but what is this to the printing of Bodoni?' ... A specimen sheet of a pretended edition of Cicero was set up with the Shakspeare types, of the size of Bodoni's publications. When this specimen was shewn to the same connoisseurs, they exclaimed, 'To what degree of perfection does this man mean to carry the art of Printing! Why this surpasses all his former excellence!' And they were all very anxious for Mr. N. to procure them copies of the work. To this Mr. N. replied, 'that Mr. Bodoni had an agent in town; and if they would turn to the bottom of the last page of the specimen they would find his address' – which they found as follows – '*W. Bulmer and Co. Shakspeare Press*'![31]

Figure 7. Details from Cicero, *De inventione*, 4 leaves, printed by William Bulmer & Co., 1790s (see note 31).

29. *Lettres et épîtres amoureuses d'Héloïse et d'Abélard* (A Londres, et se trouve à Bruxelles, chez B. Le Francq', 1793), p. xii, letter to the printer (?) from Voltaire, dated 'Du château de Ferney, le 13 Avril 1774'.

30. *British Critic*, III, p. 48. The review is attributed to Dr Samuel Parr in *Literary memoirs of living authors of Great Britain ...* (London, 1798), I, p. 111. These comments give an altogether misleading view of a work set in the types of William Caslon I, predominantly in his Great Primer roman, seen for the first time in 1728 but mod-

elled on Dutch types of the seventeenth century. The same publisher's edition of Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, printed by Bodoni, had appeared a year earlier, and from these comments one might have been led to expect a book similarly progressive in its typography.

31. Updike, *Printing types, their history, forms, and use: a study in survivals* (Cambridge, MA, 1937), vol. 2, p. 144. Updike adds a note, at pp. 283–4, describing a sheet in his own collection (present whereabouts unknown) formerly owned by Sir George Shuckburgh, 'one of the

Bulmer coterie', consisting 'of four pages in quarto, of Cicero's *De inventione*, set up in the Bodoni manner, and bearing at the bottom of the last page the imprint "From the Shakspeare Press, by W. Bulmer and Co."' James Whatman's copy of the same specimen, printed on his own wove paper, has recently come to light inside a copy of Bodoni's quarto edition of Longus, *Daphnis et Chloe ... cum proloquio de libris eroticis antiquorum* (Parma, 1786; Brooks 314) now in the possession of Piers Rogers.

The hyperbole of such comments – and there were many – seems to have solidified, at least in France, into a complacent certainty that typography had indeed reached its zenith and, by the 1830s, could no longer be improved. The progress of French manufactures was charted in great detail through the industrial exhibitions held in Paris every three years from the 1790s, the catalogues of which provide a useful index to changing attitudes. Fourteen examples of Bodoni's printing, drawn from a private collection, were exhibited in Paris at the 1806 *Exposition des produits de l'industrie française*. Bodoni's exhibits were 'sûr d'éveiller la curiosité des amateurs des belles productions typographiques'. They included Tasso's *Aminta* of 1789, 'qu'*Arthur Young* apporta d'Italie à Londres, et qu'il proposa aux imprimeurs anglais comme un modèle achevé d'éxecution typographique', and the *Oratio Dominica* of 1806, printed in 53 oriental languages and Latin, a work which 'va étonner les vrais connaisseurs de l'art typographique; ils auront de la peine à comprendre qu'un homme seul ait eu le courage et la hardiesse de l'entreprendre sans aucun secours étranger'. The official *Notice* of the exhibition laid due emphasis on Bodoni's patronage by the new royalty: the Greek *Hymn to Demeter* (1805) was described as having been printed in the same types as those of the folio Homer, dedicated by gracious permission to the Emperor himself, whilst the *Oratio Dominica* was dedicated to their Highnesses the Prince Eugène Napoléon, Viceroy of Italy, and his wife the Princess Auguste-Amélie.[32] The immediate context would have been with the other luxury goods, such as hats, silk bonnets, leathers, beeswax and cottons, produced within the newly dependent State of Parma, and exhibited in the same hall.

Elsewhere in the 1806 exhibition the Didot family was well represented. Pierre Didot exhibited the folio Racine, *Fastes de Napoléon*,[33] and several other works, 'qui continuent de prouver que l'imprimerie est portée en France au plus haut degré de perfection.'[34] Firmin Didot, 'qui a porté la gravure et la fonte des caractères d'imprimerie au plus haut degré de la perfection', exhibited a new script type, which had been used for the first time in the dedication to Pierre Didot of his own translation of Virgil's Bucolics: 'Cela s'appelle, disent les membres du jury d'examen des objets présentés à l'exposition par le département de la Seine, avoir fait complétement un livre, et encore plus complétement que ne faisait *Robert Étienne*, qui ne gravait pas lui-même.'[35]

Commentary on new types, optimistic in the early years, became stifled by a feeling that perfection had already been reached.

Depuis longtemps la typographie est parvenue, en France, nous dirons presque aux limites de la perfection, pour la beauté des caractères, le choix des papiers, la pureté du tirage et l'extrème correction dans les éditions destinées à reproduire dignement les chefs-d'œuvre de notre littérature.[36]

For many years French typography has, in our view, attained nearly the furthest limit of perfection, in respect of the beauty of its types, the choice of paper, the purity of printing and the extreme correctness of those editions destined to make a worthy reproduction of the masterpieces of our literature.

32. *Notices sur les objets envoyés à l'exposition des produits de l'industrie française* (Paris, 1806), pp. 212–6.
33. *Fastes de Napoléon: ouvrage imprimé pour les Fêtes du Couronnement de l'Empereur Napoléon 1er, par ordre du Conseiller d'Etat préfet de la Seine*. A Paris, chez P. Didot aîné, an XIII – 1804
34. Ibid., p. 282.
35. Ibid., p. 293.
36. Exposition 1834, rapport, p. 415.

By 1834, a statement of first principles was required:

La perfection des caractères de typographie n'est pas, comme quelques esprits bizarres ont paru le penser dans ces derniers temps, un résultat du caprice et de l'imagination. Des caractères parfaits doivent satisfaire à des conditions sévères et nombreuses, qui rendent pour ainsi dire unique la solution du problème. Aussi, les plus beaux caractères sont-ils encore, à quelques raffinements près dans la proportion des pleins et des déliés, ce qu'ils étaient il y a trente ans et plus, lorsque les Pierre et les Firmin Didot produisaient ces éditions classiques si belles à tous égards, et qui resteront à jamais parmi les chefs-d'œuvre comparables à ce que les presses françaises pourront produire de plus parfait.[37]

Perfection in types is not, as certain bizarre spirits seem to have thought in recent times, the result of caprice and imagination. Perfect types must satisfy strict and numerous conditions, which alone, so to speak, give the solution to the problem. And furthermore, the most beautiful types are still those, slightly refined in the proportion of the thicks and thins, of thirty or more years ago, when Pierre and Firmin Didot produced their classic editions, so beautiful in every respect, and which will remain forever amongst the masterpieces against which to measure the most perfect products of the French press.

The strength of the reaction to some of the new types of the 1810s can only really be understood when one sees them as a reaction to this central theme: they offend against the new canon of 'perfectibility'. They are primitive, backwards-looking, revivals of old, imperfect letterforms with names such as 'egyptian' or 'grecian' or 'old roman'. And yet paradoxically they epitomise the newly industrialised society. Nowhere is this more explicit than in Frey's *Nouveau manuel complet de typographie* (Paris, 1836; 'nouvelle édition, revue, corrigée et augmentée', 1857) in which Egyptian types were characterised as 'a regression, flying in the face of *progress*'.[38]

37. Exposition 1834, rapport, p. 417.
38. 'une rétrogradation bien caractérisée, c'est-à-dire l'opposé le plus manifeste du *progrès*'.