

# TYPOGRAPHERS ON TYPE

AN ILLUSTRATED ANTHOLOGY  
FROM WILLIAM MORRIS TO  
THE PRESENT DAY

*Edited by*  
*Ruari McLean*

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ERIC GILL'S *An essay on typography* was written in 1930, the same year in which Stanley Morison's essay *The first principles of typography* appeared in vol. 7 of *The Fleuron*. Both essays still deserve to be read, at least once, by thinking typographers; but as Francis Meynell pointed out when he reviewed Gill's essay; 'It isn't an essay at all. It is a collection of nine scarcely related essays of which the third is called 'typography'. A fair part of this essay is actually about typography...but an unfair part is about industrial ethics, which obtrudes also into all the other essays.' It should be added that Gill's essay, in its second edition, 1936, is a particularly pleasing small book to handle, not least because of the illustrations drawn and engraved by Gill, which are a lesson in typography and lettering by themselves.

Our excerpt here is taken from the eighth chapter, 'The book', and is chosen for its plain common sense. It should be read in Gill's own typography. A sample page is here reproduced as an example.

Gill was many things: among them, a sculptor, an engraver, an illustrator, and a superb portrait draughtsman in pencil. A dominating activity all his life, however, was lettering, whether drawn or carved in wood or stone. In type design, he gave the world two of the most famous types of the century, *Perpetua* and *Gill Sans* (eventually available in twenty-four different series, one of which, an ultra-bold version, was advertised under the name of 'Kayo' (see *Typography* 1, Nov. 1936, inset between pp 36 and 37). It is sometimes forgotten that he also designed eleven other type faces: *Felicity* (1926-30), *Solus* (1929), *Golden Cockerel* (1930), *Joanna* (1930), *Aries* (1932), *Jubilee* (1934), *Bunyan* (1936), *Floriated initials* (1936), *Perpetua Greek*, a Hebrew and an Arabic.

The finest printed illustrations of a selection of his sculptures, lettering and drawings are in Joseph Thorp's *Eric Gill*, 1929; also to be recommended, among the ever-increasing number of works on Gill, are Robert Harling's *The letter forms and type designs of Eric Gill*, Svensson & Westerham Press, 1976; *Eric Gill: his life and art*, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, 1991; and, of course, the biography by Fiona MacCarthy, *Eric Gill*, Faber & Faber, London, 1989.

#### A BOOK IS A THING TO BE READ

¶ A book is a thing to be read – we all start with that – and we will assume that the reader is as sensitive as well as a sensible person. Now, the first thing to be noticed is that it is the act of reading & the circumstances of that act which determine the size of the book and the kind of type used; the reading, not what is read. A good type is suitable for any and every book, and the size of a book is regulated not by what is in it but by the fact that it is read held in the hand (e.g. a novel), or at a table (e.g. books of history or reference with maps or other necessarily large illustrations), or at a desk or lectern (e.g. a missal or a choir book), or kept in the pocket

(e.g. a prayer book or a travellers' dictionary). ¶ On the contrary some hold that size of book and style of type sh'ld be specially chosen for every book; that such & such a size is suitable for Shakespeare; such and such for Mr. Wells's novels, such and such for Mr. Eliot's poems; that the type suitable for one is not suitable for another; that elegant poetry should have elegant type, & the rough hacked style of Walt Whitman a rough hacked style of letter; that reprints of Malory should be printed in 'Black Letter' and books of technology in 'Sans-serif'. There is a certain plausibility in all this, & even a certain reasonableness. The undignified typography of the Daily Mail Year Book is certainly unsuitable for the Bible; a fine italic might be suitable for Milton but unsuitable for 'Tono-Bungay'; sans-serif may be suitable for a translation of Jean Cocteau but might be unsuitable for a pocket prayer book. And as to size: it is impossible to print the Bible on too grand a scale, but third-rate verse might look and be absurd in a book requiring a lectern to hold it. Nevertheless, the reasonable producer of books starts with the principle that it is the reading, not the reading matter, which determines the size of book and style of type; the other considerations come in only as modifying influences. In planning a book the first questions are: who is going to read this, and under what circumstances?

¶ If then, there are normally four sizes of books, it would seem that there sh'ld be four sizes of type. A pocket book demands small type, say 8 point, for reasons of space. A book held in the hand demands type of about 10 or 12 point on account of the length of the human arm and the normal power of human eyesight, assuming a normally legible type. Table books & lectern books, normally read further from the eye, demand types of still larger sizes, say 14 or 18 point or over. But the sizes of types named here are not binding on anybody; it is only the principle we are concerned with. ¶ The proportions of books were formerly determined by the sizes of printing papers. These were always oblong in shape (probably because this was the shape most easily handled by the makers, or, perhaps, because the skins of animals used for writing on in medieval times are of this shape, and so books followed suit) & when folded in half and in half again and so on, made a narrow folio, a wide quarto, a narrow octavo, &c. But with the machine made papers now almost universally used these proportions are only retained by custom, the width of the web of paper and the direction of the grain being the only determining factors. Books printed on machine made paper can, these factors understood, be of any shape that pleases you. And thus the commercial book designer is, to a greater degree than his predecessor, released from the thralldom of any considerations but that of what will sell.

¶ As to what does or should sell, we may say that the things which should form the

shape & proportions of the page are the hand and the eye; the hand because books of wide proportions are unwieldy to hold; and the eye because lines of more than 10-12 words are awkward to read. (With longer lines, set solid, i.e. without leads between them, there is difficulty in following from one line to the next, &, even if the type be leaded, a long line necessitates a distinctly felt muscular movement of the eye and, in extreme cases, of the head.) As to the height of a page, this is again governed by the needs of hand & eye; a very tall page necessitates either a distinct movement of the neck of the reader or a changing of the angle at which the book is held in the hand, & such things are simply a nuisance. It may be that there are other considerations than those of physical convenience which have helped to determine the normal octavo page; it may be that such a proportion is intrinsically pleasing to the human mind. It is, however, sufficient for us to see that there is a physical reasonableness in this proportion, and we may safely leave the discovery of other reasons to professional æstheticians.

¶ The shape of the page being given, it remains to discover the best proportions for the lines & mass of type printed upon it. Here again physical considerations are a sufficient guide. Two things are to be thought of: the type & the margins. Let us consider the margins first. The inner margin exists simply to separate a page from the one opposite to it, and need be no wider than is enough to keep the printed words clear of the bend of the paper where it is sewn in binding. The top margin, again, needs only to be sufficiently wide to isolate the type from the surrounding landscape of furniture and carpets (just as a 'mount' or frame is used by painters to isolate a picture from wall paper, &c.). On the other hand, the outer and bottom margins need more width than is required for mere isolation, for it is by these margins that the book is held in the hand; enough must be allowed for thumbs, and the bottom margins need more than the side or outer ones. These physical considerations being allowed for, we may now consider the margins in relation to one another, & it will be seen at once that, taking one page at a time, i.e. half the 'opening', slightly more must be allowed to the top margin than is required for mere isolation; for if you make the top and inner margins equally narrow, the outer margin wide and the bottom still wider, the text will appear to be being pushed off the top. We may say then that the general rule should be: a narrow inner margin, a slightly wider top margin, an outer margin at least double the inner, and a bottom slightly wider than the others; the exact proportions being left to the judgement of the printer. It is to be noted that unless the outer margin be at least double the inner the two inner margins, seen together when the book is opened, will appear to be pushing the text outwards off the page.

¶ With a normal octavo page of 5 inches wide and 7½ inches high, & supposing

that we allow margins as follows: inner,  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch; top,  $\frac{3}{4}$ ; outer 1; & bottom,  $1\frac{1}{6}$ ; we shall get a type page  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches wide by  $5\frac{3}{8}$  inches high (i.e. 34 lines of pica type, 12 pt., set solid). This allows for a line of an average length of 10-12 words in pica, & pica is a good ordinary size for a book held in the hand. Obviously these dimensions may be varied slightly without destroying the rationality or normality of the page, & type slightly larger or smaller than pica (12 pt.) can be used without extravagance or loss of legibility; though it is obvious that, for reasons of physical convenience, a variation that entails a lengthening of the line to more than 12 or 13 words is a variation in a direction less commendable than one that entails a shortening of the line. The dimensions given may therefore be taken as a norm.

¶ The title page should be set in the same style of type as the book and preferably in the same size. The unfortunate printers who regard the title page as the only source of interest in an otherwise dull job are the miserable descendants of those scribes who knowing and even appreciating the glory of the books they wrote out naturally gave a glorious beginning to them. The title of a book is merely the thing to know it by; we have made of the title page a showing-off ground for the printers & publishers. A smart title page will not redeem a dully printed book any more than a smart cinema will redeem a slum...

Eric Gill (1882-1940), *An Essay on Typography*, second edition, London, 1936; reprinted with a new introduction by Christopher Skelton, Lund Humphries, London / David Godine, Boston, 1988.

#### THE SHAPES OF LETTERS

The shapes of letters do not derive their beauty from any sensual or sentimental reminiscences. No one can say that the O's roundness appeals to us only because it is like that of an apple or of a girl's breast or of the full moon. Letters are things, not pictures of things.

Eric Gill, *Autobiography*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1940; reprinted with an introduction by Fiona MacCarthy, Lund Humphries, London, 1992.

is that of materialist triumph tempered by fancifulness and sloppiness, & that they are altogether without grace either in the physical or spiritual senses of the word.

¶ A book is a thing to be read — we all start with that — and we will assume that the reader is as sensitive as well as a sensible person. Now, the first thing to be noticed is that it is the act of reading & the circumstances of that act which determine the size of the book and the kind of type used; the reading, not what is read. A good type is suitable for any and every book, and the size of a book is regulated not by what is in it but by the fact that it is read held in the hand (e.g. a novel), or at a table (e.g. books of history or reference with maps or other necessarily large illustrations), or at a desk or lectern (e.g. a missal or a choir book), or kept in the pocket (e.g. a prayer book or a travellers' dictionary). ¶ On the contrary some hold that size of book and style of type sh'd be specially chosen for every book; that such & such a size is suitable for Shakespeare; such and such for Mr. Wells's novels, such and such for Mr. Eliot's poems; that the type suitable for one is not suitable for another; that elegant poetry should have elegant type, & the rough hacked style of Walt

A page from Gill's *An Essay on Typography*, 2nd edition, 1936, set in Joanna.