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Robin Kinross

Unjustified texts: perspectives on typography

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Robin Kinross

Unjustified texts
perspectives on typography

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for Paul Stiff (1949-2011), fellow writer

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... ranged-left and open-ended ...

Norman Potter, from a position statement for the School of Construction, Bristol, c. 1964

My position is that texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.

Edward Said, 'Secular Criticism', *The world, the text, and the critic*, 1983

The only way forward was to make a virtue out of the limitation: the boundaries of legitimate knowledge are endlessly challengeable, corrigible, movable, by God, by man, by woman. There is no rationality without uncertain grounds, without relativism of authority. Relativism of authority does not establish the authority of relativism: it opens reason to new claimants.

Gillian Rose, *Love's work*, 1995

An introduction: writing for publication

There is a presumption implied in this exercise of recycling what may be lesser writings on a topic that is itself already 'lesser', namely – typography (though the book's subtitle might have run on to 'graphic design, and design as a whole, with some dashes into architecture, and broad-brush cultural commentary here and there too'). In my defence: I have always tried to see typography in connection with the human world, and with the most important issues that can concern us; and I have always tried to write with full energy and seriousness, though appropriately, whatever the place of publication – magazine, academic journal, newspaper, company promotional publication, or photocopied circular.

Some further reasons for this collection: there is now a generation of people who know little of the things that we were caught up in even fifteen or twenty years ago. Our commentary from those times is scattered in hard-to-access publications. With this 'our' and 'we', I include a few colleagues who have made or wanted to make the same step of republishing their articles, and who have encouraged me in this venture. So there seems some point in this work of retrieval, even just on the level of documentary, whatever the status of these pieces as an unintended body of writing. And, in my case, much of what I have published has appeared in small-circulation journals; a few things have appeared only in languages other than English; and there are some texts that are published for the first time here.

After early forays into print in the school magazine, aged 16 or so (an article on jazz,¹ and a grim short story in the mood of Joseph Conrad's *The secret agent*), I began, after graduating from the course in Typography & Graphic Communication at the University of Reading, to pursue what must have been a deep urge for publication. That graduation happened in 1975. The next year, the then recently revived journal of the Society of Typographic Designers – *Typographic* – published a longish review I had written 'on spec' of Ruari McLean's book *Jan Tschichold: typographer*. McLean had been external examiner for our class at Reading, and I had written a final-year thesis on 'The idea of a new typography' in the work of Jan Tschichold, Max Bill and Anthony Froshaug. I was furious with Ruari

1. Somehow, in the mid-1960s and in my middle teenage years, already through with the Beatles and the Stones, and in a socially very confined English environment, I had found my way to such documents of deep human consolation, and liberation, as Miles Davis's *Kind of blue* and John Coltrane's *A love supreme*. Both discs were then quite recent: recorded in 1959 and 1964, respectively.

McLean's book, and the review was of a Leavis-like severity. (F. R. Leavis had figured large among my contradictory guiding stars – others were William Empson and Perry Anderson – while doing a degree course in English literature, unsuccessfully, before going to Reading.) McLean's book was too reliant, and without proper acknowledgement, on Tschichold's self-praising anonymous autobiographical essay of 1972; as well as slipshod, it was too genial, and without the moral attack and sometimes crazy concern for detail that its subject had always shown. My review, as it was published, had been clumsily edited. For example 'I feel that' and 'I say' were inserted in front of two of the blunter judgements. This grated especially because, at that time, the first person pronoun was forbidden in my writing: in great contrast to this present latest piece. So I became as angry with the magazine's editor, Brian Grimbley, as I was with the book's author. Some heavy correspondence between the three parties followed, both in print and privately. Publication of the review in *Typographic* had been set up by Anthony Froshaug, whom I was then getting to know – a master for Grimbley, as he was for me. The fall-out from this incident ran on for some years afterwards. In fact, these events resonate still, because they seemed to set a pattern for my writing: the argument in print with people whom you may know as colleagues; the tussle with the copy-editor; and the peculiar occasion of a new book being thrown into play – and the ensuing scrum, as the author, the publisher, and the reviewers, jostle and struggle for possession. The review of McLean's *Jan Tschichold* is not included here. A review of a further edition of that book is; it is a calmer and perhaps more interesting piece.

When Rob Waller started *Information Design Journal*, the first real platform for my writing came into existence. Rob had been a typography student at Reading, the year above me, and on graduating had gone to the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University, to work as a theoretically informed designer (and vice versa). There, at Milton Keynes, he was spreading what we thought of as 'Reading values', chief among which was just this conjunction of theory and practice. Yet his decision to start this journal of the then almost unheard-of praxis of 'information design' was a personal declaration of independence, outside the nest, even if continuing much that he had learned as an undergraduate. (Later he returned to the Reading fold, by writing a PhD there, while continuing his work at the Open University.) At that time – 1979 – and two years overdue, I was finishing an MPhil thesis at Reading ('Otto Neurath's contribution to visual communication, 1925–1945: the history, graphic language and theory of Isotype'), and had also begun, almost by default, to teach part-time in the department. I wrote two book reviews for the first number of IDJ, and was also, in time for that first number, appointed 'book reviews editor'.

IDJ became a good platform because I was part of the inner circle of the journal, and could publish almost what I liked, unfettered by officious copy-editing. Most of my contributions to IDJ have been outside the main flow of

information design. But, in the situation of a sometimes desperate lack of decent material, the stuff I submitted was welcomed. When in 1989, after a period as joint editors, Rob Waller handed over editorship of the journal to Paul Stiff, this situation of welcoming acceptance continued, and intensified. Paul and I had overlapped as undergraduates at Reading, and we had once made plans for starting our own journal.

In these years of postgraduate work and its aftermath, I latched on to the just starting Design History Society. This was formed officially in 1977, at the instigation of the architectural historian Tim Benton, at a conference at Brighton. The DHS was, for a time, a path out of what have always seemed to be the confines of typographic history. By contrast, the Printing Historical Society, formed in 1964, seemed too antiquarian, too focused on mere technics; it had a strong base at Reading, and two prime movers there in the persons of Michael Twyman (founder and head of the Department of Typography) and James Mosley (Librarian of the St Bride Printing Library, and part-time lecturer at Reading). Through the Design History Society I met people interested in all the other parts of the field of design, and for a time this Society's *Newsletter* (typewritten, small-offset printed, and redesigned by Ruth Hecht, in a project I supervised while she was an undergraduate at Reading) was a possible place for publication. When in 1988, after some long-drawn-out manoeuvring, the DHS started its *Journal of Design History*, I became, in the journal's first years, its most frequent contributor.

In 1982, I left Reading to live in London and do freelance editorial and design work – trying to maintain the ideal of theory and practice, jointly pursued – and began to write more in earnest. For a time (1984–6) I also taught history of graphic design part-time at Ravensbourne College of Art & Design: an experience that made me resolve to stay away from formal (routinized, monitored) education. There now occurred what seems, in retrospect, a chain of events.

Starting work on the task in January 1983, I wrote some entries (eleven: more than a reasonable portion) for *Contemporary designers*, a 'who's who' work of reference. After the book had appeared in 1984, I began to agitate for payment from the publisher. The sum due was miserable. My only lever of influence was my typewriter. I wrote a review of the book for the *Design History Society Newsletter*, and then submitted another, different review – an interesting literary exercise, which I would do a few times again – to *Designer* (journal of the then-named Society of Industrial Artists and Designers: the SIAD). The first paragraph of that review ran: 'Authors should not review their own books, and so neither should contributors to large (658 pages) works of reference. But then who could review such a book sensibly? Who better than someone who has had a glimpse of how it was compiled, struggled with the job of writing 400 word "evaluative essays" on the complete works of several designers, and who further has no financial interest in the book (or at least, not until the publishers get round to paying).' The

parenthetical clause was cut by the magazine's editor or sub-editor; but the review got me into *Designer* as a regular contributor. In March 1986, with the publisher still not paying, I wrote to them again: 'If nothing happens by Friday 21 March, I will make the matter public – I don't suppose I am the only still-unpaid contributor – with letters to *Industrial Design*, *Design*, *Designer*, *Designer's Journal*, the *Design History Society Newsletter*, and *Art Monthly*.' The next week a cheque arrived.

Just then, the middle 1980s, *Designer* was quite a lively publication, enjoying a period of flourish in the golden years of 'the eighties': there was lots of business to write about, and the magazine even had a 'financial section', printed on pages carrying a pink tint (after the *Financial Times*). The whole thing – the magazine and its topic – was altogether interesting. This flourish in the life of a professional society's bulletin was the creation of the editor Alastair Best, an experienced and literate journalist, who had read English at Cambridge, had memories of Leavis and was a Pevsnerite, much involved with architecture. He liked my writing. I knew this for sure when he once phoned on receipt of copy, to say how pleased he was: the piece was a caustic put-down of an overweening design-world figure. *Designer* – the SIAD – was also a chronically bad payer, and Alastair once showed his colours by sending me a cheque drawn on his own bank account; it bounced on first presentation.

I can remember vividly – it would have been 1987 – picking up the phone to hear, for the first time, the voice of Simon Esterson. He had seen my pieces in *Designer* – he was also part of that London circle of design-meets-architecture – and he asked if I would be interested in writing for *Blueprint*. Simon was the designer and one of the founding directors of *Blueprint*, and he played an editorial role on it too, commissioning pieces in his own spheres of activity and interest. I went to the offices of the magazine, at 26 Cramer Street in Marylebone, London W1, in what seemed a short-life occupation, but which in fact went on for years. There I was informally interviewed by Simon and the magazine's editor, Deyan Sudjic. I felt the door opening when Deyan laughed at a story I told (about a Dutch designer friend who wanted to write a book on Frank Sinatra). The first commission was immediately announced – I suppose now that this was what prompted the invitation: to write a piece about MetaDesign, Erik Spiekermann's graphic design practice in Berlin. I had just been to visit Erik in Berlin, and had already published (in *Information Design Journal*, the year before) a review of his 'typographic novel', *Ursache & Wirkung*; so it wasn't a difficult task.

Now my eyes were opened to the habits of journalism. When Simon Esterson read my copy for the MetaDesign article, he asked 'where are the quotes?': the staple ingredient of magazine writing. At first I thought it was a dumb question. This lack of quotations from the subject perhaps betrayed my academic upbringing – though the Leavis and Empson approach required much quotation and intense consideration of verbal art;

certainly it showed a confidence in my own voice as a writer. In magazine articles, quotes from the subject tend towards mere ventriloquism, in the service of what the writer wants to say. I suspect them: they can be confectations, plucked out of their context, tidied up, and changed in their meaning by their new situation within the journalist's prose. But in this case Simon was making a good point; he had spoken with Erik Spiekermann on the phone, and so knew first-hand about Erik's special powers of speech, and command of demotic English. Later (in IDJ, 1993) I made up for this lack by publishing a question-and-answer interview with Erik, in which my contribution was half-finished mumbles, with Erik in unstoppable flow. Just then, in the late summer of 1987, *Blueprint* was in some sort of race with *Designer's Journal*: who would publish a piece about MetaDesign first? I am not sure who won; but it can only have been by some days. Another insight into the practice of quick journalism came when I saw that the *Designer's Journal* writer (William Owen) had incorporated without acknowledgement passages from my review of *Ursache & Wirkung*.

After this article, I began to contribute to almost every issue of *Blueprint*, was put on the list of 'contributors', and became part of a loose group of writers associated with the magazine. We would see each other at the frequent parties that Peter Murray, the magazine's publisher, would throw in interesting locations, different each time, and with thoughtfully chosen wine. I suspected that these good parties were also a way of diverting contributors' attention from the company's shockingly slow payments. One always had to nag for cheques, which were anyway well below the proper rates for the trade. I remember Peter Murray and Deyan Sudjic rather sheepishly welcoming perhaps their star columnist to one of these receptions with an envelope: obviously containing a last-ditch cheque. But I felt I was part of some sort of intellectual scene, in conversation with writers (Jan Abrams, Brian Hutton, Rowan Moore, come to mind first) who were way beyond the hack journalists in powers of thought and expression, and in their intellectual reach, and yet were resisting the trap of full-time teaching.

The paradox of *Blueprint* in this, its first phase of existence, was intimately bound up with its subject. It was riding the waves of the extraordinary activity of the 1980s, of Britain under the governments of Margaret Thatcher – of deregulation, of Americanization, of the design boom. This provided the subject matter, and the advertising revenue. And yet the magazine was produced by some sharp people, who were able both to document these events and to put them into critical perspective. The magazine's large pages were often brilliant in their effects (photography, illustration). Simon Esterson and his assistant, then successor, Stephen Coates, had found a formula that carried very well the discovery of metropolitan life of that time in London: confidence and toughness; the feeling of relation to the other great world-cities, on which special issues were regularly produced. We all had qualms about the magazine's reliance on imagery: of the designers' own body and apparel (at an extreme in Phil Sayer's cover mugshots), of build-

ings as stage scenery, unexplained by plans. We wondered whether anyone read the words.

As a contributor to *Blueprint*, I learned much about compressed expression, speedily done. One wrote to a given length, with 100 words as the basic unit. Then when the pages had been designed, you were asked, or allowed, to come to the office. The copy editor (Vicky Wilson) would present you with the task of losing say 22 lines. On the paper proof, you then crossed out less necessary sentences or portions of sentences. Then you wrote captions to pictures. The design of the pages required that the captions run to an exact number of lines, no more, no less. My attempt was always to put the content I was losing from the main text back into the captions. And sometimes one had to spin out a caption to fill the required length, so then it was also a chance to say fresh things. All this one did at short notice, in two or three hours, often in the evening. For a home-worker, unused to offices and not (then) familiar with the Macintosh computers that they used at *Blueprint*, this was part of the challenge. Rick Poynor, who came then to work as assistant editor on *Blueprint*, once remarked to me that writing to length so exactly is one of the real buzzes of the business. I agree, and like to think that this simple craft or skill in writing is as with improvising musicians who can play seemingly effortless and varied successions of choruses, bringing the piece to a finish just as the licensing laws require the venue to close.

In 1990, Wordsearch Ltd, the publisher of *Blueprint*, launched a magazine about graphic design, called *Eye*. The idea had been mooted at Cramer Street for some time, years even. When it seemed that the project was being shelved, the intended editor, Rick Poynor, already *Blueprint*'s graphic design specialist, had even taken steps to join one of the competing magazines. In its first years, *Eye* was 'the international review of graphic design', with text in English, French and German. Before the name was settled on, research had been done on how the word 'eye' was received in continental European countries: there were doubts about how this assembly of letters would play, phonetically, in Italy. After some issues had been put out, it became clear that the great trouble and expense of producing text in three languages was not worth it: there was just a handful of subscribers in France, for example. Peter Murray joked that, but for *Eye*, he would have his helicopter by now. So first the French and then the German text was dropped.

I had switched from writing for *Blueprint* to becoming a regular contributor to *Eye*: with a sense of loss, because I had enjoyed the wide scope and the frequency and urgency of *Blueprint*. *Eye* was confined to 'graphic design' and always seemed too careful and sometimes even just precious. This was perhaps a reflection of Rick Poynor's great thoroughness; certainly it was a function of the magazine's relatively leisured schedule, and its high production values. Rick was on a mission, to create a culture of critical discussion of graphic design. I can respect this attempt, even now; but by then my own missionary zeal for graphic design had waned. I had had some zeal

ten years previously, within the design history discussions, and in occasional encounters with art historians. But by 1990 I no longer really believed in the activity of graphic design or its critical discussion, though I was happy to play some variations on increasingly familiar personal themes. I enjoyed arguing with Rick, always marvelled at his fluency and cogency in discussion, and always remembered that he was the person at *Blueprint* who struggled to get a proper system for paying contributors.

In its trilingual period, the main copy-editor on *Eye*, chosen for his multilingualism, had that bleaching attitude towards text, very common in the newspaper and magazine trade, whereby all idiosyncrasies and subtleties of verbal expression are wiped out, regularized. Professional journalists must get used to such treatment, but I could not bear it. After one piece of mine had been published like this, I sent an annotated photocopy to the magazine. Two issues later, I wrote an anonymous letter to Rick at the magazine, pointing out that the German version of something I had written was a richer text than the English original. This was a piece in the issue (no. 5) that had dropped French text. I wrote this letter in the voice of an outraged post-structuralist, who suspected that this was a move against French thought, and who cursed the work of the Cranbrook school (recently published in *Eye*) as 'renegade' in its reported deviation from the path of deconstruction. Five years later, in 1996, I encountered a real-life French poststructuralist (G rard Mermoz) who really did hold this opinion about the North American corruption of deconstruction: we had some exchange of views in the correspondence columns of *Emigre* magazine.

In 1992, despite a short engagement with a 'left-wing *Private Eye*' – the magazine *Casablanca*, which I had joined in a wish to escape from typography, and in the considerable political confusion of that time, post-1989 – my energies turned away from magazines and towards books. Resigning from the editorial group of *Casablanca*, exhausted, after its first two issues, I decided to put my energies into writing calmer material, with some prospect of making work of lasting value. In the autumn of that year my book *Modern typography* was published. When in 1993 I wrote two feature articles for *Eye*, on Edward Wright and Karel Martens, it felt like a signing off. These were both subjects dear to my heart, and whose work embodies values that live despite, and in opposition to, the consistent thread of nullity and false fronts in design culture. I was becoming sick of finding these tropes of opposition and lament being churned out so often in my writing.

The work of writing, editing and publishing books, on which I then began to concentrate, is difficult. Achieving anything in this world often seems impossible. With plentiful evidence of one's own mistakes and muddles now enshrined in print, one becomes kinder in assessing other people's efforts. Having published what seemed an endless succession of merciless book reviews, I began to be glad of the chance to celebrate 'contributors' – a word that Norman Potter used with special emphasis; he wasn't thinking of the people whose names appear on the imprint pages of magazines –

especially if they hadn't had much public notice. I hope that these pieces of appreciation bring some leavening to this collection.

Making this selection of pieces has been hard. I have selected to avoid too much repetition, and in favour of those pieces that have some function of imparting information, rather than just opinions. In a curious way, the writing that seems to survive best is that which is most of its moment – reporting on things that had just happened. The pieces are grouped here loosely by genre and mood, rather than by any strict system of order.

It seems best to let the themes of this collection speak for themselves, rather than attempt a grand summary here. I have added a note after each piece, giving information about the context of writing and publication. The question of payment, which I have emphasized in this introduction, could have been mentioned also in these notes. And it would be another way of categorizing these writings: those done for a fee, those not. One could not hope to make a living from this kind of writing – for that you need to write for newspapers and large circulation magazines, to be very productive, and to be prepared to write on any subject – but the question of payment is important, as a token of power. The fee gives some greater latitude to the editors of the publication: your words have been bought and are now at the disposal of the editor and sub-editor. A fee encourages the writer to fashion sentences that are worth buying, that play small tricks, that show off. I know this by contrast: from the relief, after a period of doing mostly paid journalism, of then writing without this pressure. Then one can find considerable satisfaction in exact description: passing on information or an experience without the need to amaze a reader.

In preparing the texts for this book, I have gone back, wherever possible, to the words I wrote, rather than to the words as they appeared in print. Sub-editors can certainly improve an article; and they can certainly damage it. Some of the *Blueprint* subs were especially good at writing titles (sharp titles went with the typography of the magazine) and two of these I have gladly retained. But in these pages, for the most part, and for better or worse, are the words as they came off a heavy Adler typewriter (to 1986), Amstrad PCW (to 1990), Macintosh SE/30 (to 1997), PowerMac 7300/200 (to date). I have standardized orthography, but otherwise made only minimal changes. Pictures have been included with the pieces only where necessary to the sense of the text.

The editor of a magazine or journal is a writer's first reader. One writes in the first place for that person. I am glad to thank the people who suggested or accepted these pieces, and especially those I have mentioned in the course of this introduction. In preparing this book, two readers have helped decisively with the choice and ordering of the pieces: Françoise Berserik and Linda Eerme. I thank them now formally, but very warmly too.

Large and small letters: authority and democracy

Hierarchies

Forget for a moment the precedence of speech and say that in the beginning was a single set of characters: ideograms becoming letters and numerals. In Greek and Roman antiquity these were developed into the familiar forms we know in English as ‘capitals’ (or in other languages as ‘Großbuchstaben’, ‘majuscules’, ‘kapitalen’ ...). The word brings with it the suggestion of being at the head (‘caput’ in Latin): the chief city of a country or the crowning feature of an architectural column. One might suppose that the application of the word to these letterforms is connected with this latter sense, for capital letters were to be found, most publicly and formally, in inscriptions placed ‘at the head of’ columns in built structures. Columns of stone and of text: the analogy with architecture is here, as elsewhere in typography, hard to resist.

The capital letters of Rome and its empire entered into the consciousness of Western cultures as *the* forms for letters. Think of the first letter of the alphabet and you probably think of two diagonals meeting at a point, with a cross-bar. Try to describe the lowercase ‘a’ in words, and you are in trouble, even before getting to the problem of whether it is a two- or single-storey form. Nicolette Gray once observed that the lack of a positive term (in English) for this other category of letters supports the idea that capitals are the essential forms.¹ And now that metal type is almost extinct, ‘lowercase’ may need to be explained: capitals (or majuscules or large letters) were kept in the upper of a stacked pair of cases, the minuscules or small letters lived below. That the old terms live on may be due to the upstairs/downstairs class distinction that attaches to the two kinds. Certainly for traditionally-minded people there are capitals – proper letters – and then, as a secondary matter, these other forms. This view was clearly expressed in one of the gospels of traditionalism, Stanley Morison’s *First principles of typography*. Writing about title-pages, he insisted on capitals for book title and

1. Nicolette Gray, *Lettering on buildings*, Architectural Press, 1960, p. 53.

author's name, adding: 'As lower-case is a necessary evil, which we should do well to subordinate since we cannot suppress, it should be avoided when it is at its least rational and least attractive – in large sizes.'²

The most celebrated and influential public letters of Roman antiquity were proportionately square capitals, as on the Trajan column. At the same time another set of forms was in use: rustics. These letters were distinguished by narrow proportions and more flowing strokes. Rustic letters were used in less prominent situations and for less formal messages. For private, ephemeral communication there were free scripts, rather formless to our eyes. The coexistence of different forms for different purposes has persisted. Whether or not capitals are seen as the essential forms of letters, they are still generally accepted as the most suitable variety for public declarations, or in displayed text. Small letters are for quieter, more intimate uses: from one person to another.

This broad distinction may be true, but the matter becomes complicated by the fact that, for a millennium or so, we have been using large and small letters together, and this is where the game of 'upper or lower?' really starts. For typographers who are not traditionalist nor postmodernist, the difficult issue is not whether to set a whole word in capitals – the need for that may rarely arise – but whether to set its first letter with a capital. What are the conventions that help us to decide?

Rules of style

Capitalization could begin to become an issue from the time when texts were printed. With this multiplication in identical copies, the transcription of languages began to be standardized. Although manuscript production could be, and was, highly organized, the process of writing a text allowed a certain indeterminacy about how the language was to be orthographically 'dressed'. The very nature

2. Stanley Morison, *First principles of typography* (1930), 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, p. 14. The arguments in Britain in the early 1960s over road-sign alphabets raised this question very publicly: seriffed capitals versus upper- and lowercase sanserif. The victory for the latter seemed to be a landmark for the late arrival of modernism in this country.

of printing, as a succession of distinct processes (copy preparation, composition, proofing, machining) encouraged a more detached attitude to the product, and allowed a much greater ability to control consistency of 'dress'. It took some centuries after Gutenberg for the issue of consistency to emerge clearly, in manuals laying down rules of style. But by the end of the eighteenth century, in the major Western languages, the wildest variations in spelling and capitalization had been brought to cultivated order.

The conventions for presenting printed language are specific to a language-community at a particular time; but within the community there may be subgroups following different practices. To take just the English language as printed in the late twentieth century, rules for capitalization may be outlined as follows. We agree that words should have initial capitals at the start of sentences and when they are proper names. The first category is clear; the second is not. There may be no argument over 'London', 'Mary' or 'Easter'. But what about 'Marxism', 'Gothic' and 'God'? The question of whether the deity (Deity) should be capitalized points to the strong cultural pressures at work here. Logic can only go so far. Even in a largely secular community, we still hesitate to set 'god' (a concept that can be disbelieved) and not 'God' (an undisputed primary being).

English-language practice shows some significant differences with that of comparably developed languages. The French seem more reasoned in their approach to capitalization. Thus in setting titles of books, say in a bibliography, the standard French style is 'first word and proper names only': *The life and adventures of Robinson Crusoe*; while an unenlightened English-language text would have *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. Applying this system to titles of periodicals brings some problems: one has *Illustrated London news* or *The guardian*, both of which may look odd. So perhaps this category of title should be regarded as a proper name and capitalized throughout.

The German case

German orthography is different and requires lengthier discussion. Like the history of its speakers – one is inclined to say – German is especially problematic. In all the politically and culturally various communities that constitute the German-speaking world, nouns are

314 Declination des unbestimmten Pronomens.

selbes *) und Femin. selber, auch der Pl. Nom. ir selbe Parc. 12725. — Im Neuhochdeutschen haben sich außer dem nur schwach und mit vorgesehstem Artikel stehenden derselbe, dieselbe, dasselbe, die Formen selber und selbst als unveränderliche Adverbien festgesetzt, sie sehen wie Comparativ und Superlativ aus, sind aber keine, denn sonst müßten sie auch in der früheren Zeit vorgehanden gewesen seyn. Vielmehr ist selbst aus dem Gen. Masc. selbes (Der gemeine Mann spricht an vielen Dingen selbst statt selbst), selber aber entweder aus dem Nom. Masc. mit Kennzeichen, oder dem Gen. Femin. und Pl. entsprungen. Dieses anschaulicher zu machen, muß eine in den Syntax gehörige Regel zur Hülfe genommen werden.

Die ältere Sprache bedient sich des Wortes selbst sehr oft, um es sowohl dem persönlichen als dem possessiven Pronomen hinzuzufügen, und die reciproke Beziehung recht bestimmt auszudrücken. Steht es bei einem persönlichen (substantiven) Pronomen, so wird es adjectivisch construirt, z. B. er haßt sich selbst (sich selban) er spricht mit sich selbst (mit imo selbemo)**). Steht es aber bei einem Possessivum, wo wir uns heute seinerstatt des Wortes eigen zu bedienen pflegen) so wird umgekehrt selbst substantivisch construirt und stets in den Gen. gesetzt, das Possessivum hingegen entweder a) als Adjectiv mit dem Substantiv verbunden manan der Gen. selbes (selbemo)

1 Jakob Grimm, *Deutsche Grammatik*, 1st edn, 1819. (Same size.)

capitalized. In one doubtful respect this makes life easier. Evangelists and card-carrying atheists will treat 'Gott' (god) and 'Hund' (dog) equally, for purely grammatical reasons. Yet there are many fine judgements to be made over what exactly is a noun, especially when in another context the same word might be an adjective or a verb. See the long lists of rules and exceptions concerning this question in any manual of German orthography. Or consider such silly sentences as 'Ich habe in Moskau liebe (Liebe) Genossen (genossen)', where the capitals tell the difference between what has been found in Moscow: comrades (capital G) or something more intense (capital L).

The convention of capitalizing nouns in German seems to have been formally instituted in the eighteenth century. As in other lan-

kennen, kenden erweislich, da henden auch auf bewunden (9^b) reimt und so verhält es sich mit einer menge ungenauer reime in Roth. fragm. und kaiserchr., die durch herstellung scheinbarer niederd. formen genau werden würden. Ein näheres studium der freieren reimkunst kann aber grundsätze an hand geben, nach welchen sich mancher zweifel zwischen hoch- und niederd. form in diesen gedichten lösen wird. Ähnliche dunkelheit, doch geringere, schwebt über Heinr. v. Veldecks werken, den die mittelh. dichter selbst als den gründer ihrer meisterschaft ansehen, und dessen êneit (oder ênêd im reim auf vârhêd 4^a 102^a) mir die hauptquelle mittelh. sprache scheint. Dichtete er in niederd. sprache und wurden seine arbeiten nachher in hochd. umgeschrieben? oder bequemte er sich selbst zum hochd. so, daß er eigenheiten der angeborenen mundart dabei freien lauf ließ? Anders und in näherer beziehung auf unsere buchstabenlehre ausgedrückt lautet dieselbe frage so: sind eine menge ungenauer reime in Veld. werken in genaue niederdeutsche zu verwandeln? oder als ungenaue hochd. beizubehalten? Beiderlei anlicht läßt sich vertheidigen. Dafür daß der dichter in reiner muttersprache dichtete, redet 1) seine herkunft aus westphalen, sein aufenthalt am clever hof, wo er die êneit be-

2 Jakob Grimm, *Deutsche Grammatik*, 2nd edn, 1822. (Same size.)

guages, words were then heavily but rather indiscriminately capitalized. (One imagines that this was sometimes affected by the arbitrary factor of what was available in the typeset at that moment.) While in other countries the rationalization of that time was towards a minimum of capitals, in German the opposite direction was followed. Some enlightened voices spoke out against this convention. The most famous of these were Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, who formulated the criticisms that were to emerge again in the twentieth century: the German language was written and printed in ugly scripts that were hard to read, especially for foreigners, and it suffered from irrational, wasteful capitalization. In his *Deutsche Grammatik*, Jakob Grimm practised a reformed orthography, using capitals just at sentence openings and for proper names. While

Schon war der raum gefüllt mit stolzen schatten
Die funken sprühten in gewundnen dämpfen
Es zuckten die gewesnen widerscheine
Bei edlen holden die urnächtig frühen.
Ihr zittern huschte auf metallnen glänzen
Begierig suchten sie sich zu verdichten
Umrington quälend uns und wurden bleicher..
So sassen machtlos wir im kreis mit ihnen...
Wo ist des herdes heisse erdenflamme
Wo ist das reine blut um uns zu tränken?
Nebliche dünste ballet euch zu formen!
Taucht silberfüsse aus der purpurwelle!
So drang durch unser brünstiges beschwören
Der wehe schrei nach dem lebendigen kerne.

- 3 Stefan George, *Der Stern des Bundes*, Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1914.
(Same size.)

the first edition of this text (1819) was set in blackletter with all nouns capitalized, the next (1822) and succeeding editions used roman type with this reduced use of capitals (figures 1 & 2). Later, in the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (first volume 1854), Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm took this further, using capital letters only at the start of paragraphs; within paragraphs sentences were marked off only by full points and a slightly increased word space.

The Grimms were philologists and wrote in a spirit of gentle rationalism. As conducted a hundred years later, the argument took on sharper overtones. A reform of orthography and of letterforms was embodied in the work of the poet Stefan George (1868–1933) as part of a larger project of a simplification and aestheticization

of life. (The architect Adolf Loos's lowercase preferences would be another contemporary instance of the attitude.) The later books of George's verse, designed under his direction, use a specially modified sanserif typeface and capitals only for opening words; punctuation is also simplified (figure 3). Early, pre-humanist and pre-capitalized German literature may have provided some inspiration here.

Some of these arguments were made by others at this time for quite different reasons: those of business efficiency. Walter Porstmann's book *Sprache und Schrift* (1920) proposed a total abolition of capital letters, together with the use of a phonetically more accurate orthography and modified punctuation (figure 4). Porstmann had written a doctoral dissertation on measuring systems and had a scientist's sense of good order, but this book was aimed at the world of administration. His ideals were exactly those of the Taylorist theories of conveyor-belt production, then at the height of their influence: 'quick, clear, positive, fluent, economical'.³

These arguments were quickly taken up by modernist typographers in Germany and incorporated into their more aesthetically and also socially conscious vision. *Sprache und Schrift* was cited as the source for the single alphabet argument, as developed by (among others) Moholy-Nagy, Herbert Bayer and Jan Tschichold. In 1925, the Bauhaus cut its expressionist roots in conservative Weimar and moved to industrial, Social-Democratic Dessau. And, confirming this shift, capital letters were now abolished at the school (figure 5). In the heightened atmosphere of Germany at that time, the social-political implications of 'Kleinschreibung' (lowercase typography) began to emerge clearly.

The debate over 'Kleinschreibung' can be traced in the pages of *Typographische Mitteilungen*, the journal of the Bildungsverband der Deutschen Buchdrucker (educational organization of German letterpress printers). The extent and seriousness of concern with the question among printers – not just typographers – is suggested by a poll that was carried out by the organization, announced in a special issue on the theme in May 1931. Members were asked to

3. Walter Porstmann, *Sprache und Schrift*, Berlin: Verlag des Vereins Deutscher Ingenieure, 1920, p.84.

ain laut — ain zeichen
ain zeichen — ain laut

dieser Satz, dem es an einfachheit nicht fehlt, sei als leitstern für die schrift der stahlzeit aufgestellt. er ist eine selbstverständlichkeit. er bedarf keiner erläuterung; er harrt bloss der tat.

grosstaben

zählen wir einen deutschen text ab, so finden wir innerhalb hundert staben etwa fünf „grosse buchstaben“. also um fünf prozent unseres schreibens belasten wir die gesamte schreibwirtschaft vom erlernen bis zur anwendung mit der doppelten menge von zeichen für die lautelemente: grosse und kleine staben. ain laut — tsvai zeichen. wegen fünf prozent der staben leisten wir uns hundert prozent vermehrung an stabenzeichen. — hier ist der erste hieb beim schmieden der neuen schrift anzusetzen. dieser zustand ist unwirtschaftlich und unhaltbar.

bedeus*) schreibt über die grossen staben:

„in der zeit des finstersten mittelalters, in der zeit des verrohens und des unwissens, wie sie weder früher noch später je wiederkehrte, griff die unsitte des gross-

- 4 Walter Porstmann, *Sprache und Schrift*, Berlin: Verlag des Vereins Deutscher Ingenieure, 1920. (Same size.)

read the articles carefully and then vote for the approach that they supported:

- (1) capitals for sentence openings and proper names;
- (2) complete abolition of capitals;
- (3) continuation of the present rules.

The result was a clear majority for the first option: 53.5 per cent of the 26,876 members who voted; with 23.5 per cent and 23.0 per cent for the second and third approaches. The organization then adopted this moderated ‘Kleinschreibung’, as a campaigning policy. But the argument was soon forgotten, displaced by an intensification of the blackletter/roman debate. And when the National-Socialist party seized power in 1933, the burning typographic issue was the matter of letterforms, not orthography.

The discussion in *Typographische Mitteilungen* did produce one unambiguous statement of the political associations that could be attributed to lowercase. An editorial statement in the special issue concluded: ‘write small! no letters with powdered wigs and class-coronets / democracy in orthography too!’⁴ So lowercase was adopted by people who felt that egalitarian principles should extend to letters. For example, Bertolt Brecht habitually wrote and typed ‘small’ in his letters and diaries.

This debate was resumed in Germany after 1945. As after the First World War, the context was a society starting again from zero: basic assumptions were open to question.⁵ Socially critical writers such as Günter Grass and Hans Magnus Enzensberger went lowercase in their poems, and capitals were dropped for much internal communication at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (figure 6). But, despite some persuasive advocacy of the moderate reform, German-language orthography remains out of step with all other Latin-alphabet languages.

Meaning and articulation

The German debates raise the problem of upper- and/or lowercase in rather extreme forms: a process that helps to illuminate the issues. The argument put by Porstmann, and taken up by Moholy-Nagy, Bayer and the other new typographers, was ‘one sound, therefore one alphabet’: we pronounce ‘Dog’ and ‘dog’ identically, so why write them differently? And – to raise a slightly different question – if we can manage with only one set of numerals, why do we need two sets of letters?

In reply one might pose another question. If written language must follow speech, then should not every word be an exact transcription, responding to regional dialects and even personal idiolects? You say ‘tomarto’, I say ‘tomayto’. And if I came from Tasmania or Singapore, then further spelling adjustments might be necessary; and all spellings would have to be continually reviewed, to make sure that pronunciation had not changed. But written lan-

4. *Typographische Mitteilungen*, vol. 18, no. 5, 1931, p. 123. The contrast with Stanley Morison’s view (note 2) could hardly be greater.

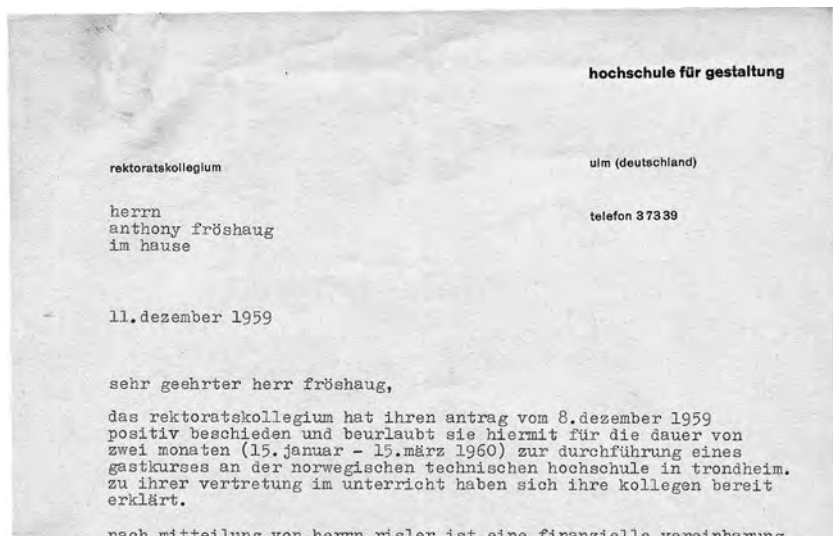
5. See, for example, the articles for and against ‘Kleinschreibung’ in the ‘Sprache und Schrift’ issue of the journal *Pandora*, no. 4, 1946.



- 5 A letter from the Kreis der Freunde des Bauhauses to Naum Gabo (28 July 1928). Note all-capitals in the heading, all-lowercase in the letter itself: a common thread of 'one-track' joins them. (Reduced to 52% of original size.)

guage does not merely transcribe the spoken. It is a fabricated system with an independent existence and its own conventions. If this unsettles the single-alphabet view, it does not prove a need for capital letters.

The argument must then back out of the dead end of sound-transcription and concentrate on the visual forms of text and what they mean. Let us agree that a requirement to capitalize all nouns is indefensible. But why stop short at proper names and sentence openings? Concerning the first category, the defender of capitals would say that it can actually make all the difference, in some contexts, to know that 'Reading' means the town in Berkshire or Pennsylvania, while 'reading' means the activity you are now engaged in. Or that 'END' is not 'end', but the group campaigning for European nuclear disarmament. Capital letters are part of the typographic repertoire and can articulate text in many ways, including those still undiscovered. Consider how clumsy a British or Canadian post-



- 6 An internal letter from the HfG Ulm: Tomás Maldonado to Anthony Frøshaug (11 December 1959). Lowercase tended to be used at the HfG for internal communications, upper- and lowercase for external communications. (Reduced to 52% of original size.)

code is when set just in lowercase (especially with capital-height numerals).

The justification for capital letters to open sentences would follow this last line of argument. It is not so much that capitals give meaning here, more that they give subtle assistance to the reader's assimilation of text. We may not be able to measure it, but reading does seem to be made more comfortable by seeing sentences demarcated by initial capitals. The advocates of a radical 'Kleinschreibung' recognized this when they suggested the mid-positioning of full points or oblique strokes, to make up for the loss of the capital. The tendency for capital letters to stick out of text too noticeably has long been countered by the practice of designing forms that are just short of ascender-height, and by the development of small (x-height) capitals. But this close-grained typographer's view has hardly been noticed in a debate dominated by philologists and visionaries.

Seen in this more complex light, the absolute demand for lowercase seems mistaken: a product of utopian thinking in extreme conditions, but not a real option now, except in special cases. There are, however, still reforms to be fought for, in the German-language countries above all. Even in relatively enlightened English-language communities, capitalization often seems to go too far: in bibliographical lists or in display setting, where every noun is capitalized, if not whole words. We are still under the sway of a traditionalist-authoritarian view, which demands obedience to the 'three-line whip' of capitalization. The opposing attitude, which values informality and equality, and which sees small letters as the norm and capitals the exception to be deployed carefully and meaningfully, is not yet widely shared. A further push towards letter-democracy is still required.

Octavo, no. 5, 1988

This was commissioned by the editors of the design group 8vo's magazine *Octavo* for a special 'lowercase' issue.

Eric Gill

Fiona MacCarthy, *Eric Gill*, Faber & Faber, 1989

Eric Gill (1882–1940), though primarily an artist and designer (he would have refused both terms), was also a lesser example of those loud, self-contradictory sages, who figured prominently in English culture of the first half of the twentieth century. One thinks of G. B. Shaw, H. G. Wells, or (closer to Gill) Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton. Active in several fields, they had strong views on everything. Celebrities in their own time, they have generated a succession of biographies, which become increasingly candid. Great men some of them may have been, but, one often feels, quite unbearable to know.

Fiona MacCarthy's *Eric Gill* is the fourth full-length study. The books by Robert Speaight (1966) and Donald Attwater (1969) were respectful accounts by younger contemporaries of Gill, from within or on the fringes of his social-religious orbit. Malcolm Yorke's *Eric Gill: man of flesh and spirit* (1981) was written by an artist-academic of a younger generation. More about the work than the life, Yorke's new information was a detailed description of Gill's erotic and anatomical drawings, said to be unsafe for publication.

MacCarthy's book is a simple biography. Indeed, advocates of Gill's work – one awaits a Peter Fullerish revival of interest – may feel that she gets too much absorbed in the life. The lead story of her text is the account of Gill's sexual activities. One knew, or could have guessed, that there had been a string of infidelities, put up with by his infinitely suffering wife, Ethel Mary. Now we know the names. Here the biographer's task was simple enough: a trip to Los Angeles to read Gill's diaries, in which he noted these occasions, along with much mundane description ('haircut 8d. '), and the facts of his professional life, necessary for invoicing clients and making tax returns. But these affairs were not, except in a few cases, matters of the heart. The picture that we are given is of a mildly pathological character: a voyeur-patriarch, trying to keep jealous tabs on his extended family. There were incestuous episodes (sisters and daughters), experiments with prostitutes, even with a dog.

Gill announced his difference immediately, in his dress. His standard garment came to be a pre-modern, penis-freeing smock, the rationale for which he advanced in several essays and pamphlets. And his attitude to women was quite consciously medieval. He wanted them simple and undecorated, covered-up in public, and confined to domestic and agricultural activities. Despite himself, he did fall for the provocation offered by several modern or 'new' women of his acquaintance. As MacCarthy points out, the missionary trait ran in the Gill family – a grandfather and a brother served in the South Seas. For Eric, 'missionary' can be understood in every sense of that word. His saving graces seem to have been a sense of humour and a canny realism: he could compromise and admit mistakes, at least in public.

Do these revelations matter? Do they affect our understanding of the work? 'It all goes together', Gill used to proclaim, and one can – more than Fiona MacCarthy does – make connections. At one point she remarks that his large public sculptures are 'overwrought and ponderous, they have a certain deadness'. On largely photographic evidence, I would agree – and extend the judgement to the small sculptures, most of the wood engravings, some of the drawings. The overworking in these things seems to belong with the unpleasantly obsessional in him: the essentially Calvinist (despite his Catholic conversion) drive for perfect order. Thus his very assured, instinctive 'line' – which seems bound up with his sexuality – gets polished to death. What is still alive are the things that were made in a hurry, particularly the less formal drawings. He was endlessly repetitive in his writing, but the *Autobiography* (done in a rush, just before he died) and the *Essay on typography* still bear reading. His correspondence is lively, especially the postcards.

Gill's lettercutting and his typefaces are another matter. There his obsessions, his energies, the material, and the task, do all come together. It was lettercutting that (in 1903) let him escape from the drudgery of an architectural apprenticeship, into the independent life of the 'workman'. Then, towards the end of the 1920s, it was type design that took Gill into useful engagement with mass-production, despite his previous rejection of it. Most typographers would now dismiss his first typeface, Perpetua, as a failure. Rather than anything Gill wanted, it was an attempt to prove Stanley Morison's dog-

ma that good types had first to be cut in metal, not just drawn; the design process was a messy improvisation. But with the next types, Gill Sans and Joanna, his impulse to over-polish found a proper object. Typefaces have to be worked intensively, in a process of proposal and adjustment that involves several people, not least the draughtsmen who make the finished drawings. MacCarthy skates over these matters. But, as the sardonic chronicler of the British design establishment, she does better than previous biographers in sketching the conditions of Gill's design work: his relations with clients, with apprentices, and the peculiarities of the workshop life.

Eric Gill is a gift to the strongly literary-biographical culture of his country: and despite his taste for theological-philosophical argument, he was very English. After some time in his company, the Continent seems far away, and the USA even further. He was a 'character', an English eccentric. He couldn't stop producing, from instinct and from necessity (he charged only artisans' fees, on principle). His doings can be documented in great detail. It makes an engrossing, depressing tale. Such biographies have their uses, but the more interesting and more difficult task would be to relate the life of Gill to the culture that nourished him and which he in turn – under protest – sustained. This would be a study of retardation, of a protracted adolescence in despite of the modern world: a larger pathology.

Blueprint, no. 54, February 1989

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