

The Crystal Goblet, Or Printing Should Be Invisible

Imagine

that you have before you

a flagon of wine.

You may choose your own favourite vintage for this
imaginary demonstration, so that it be a deep shimmering
crimson in colour.

You have two goblets before you.

One is of solid gold, wrought in the most exquisite patterns.

The other is of crystal-clear glass, thin as a bubble, and as transparent.

Pour and drink; and according to your choice of goblet, I shall know whether or not
you are a connoisseur of wine.

For if you have no feelings about wine one way or the other, you will want the sensation
of drinking the stuff out of a vessel that may have cost thousands of pounds; but if you are
a member of that vanishing tribe, the amateurs of fine vintages, you will choose the crystal,
because everything about it is calculated to reveal rather than hide the beautiful thing which it
was meant to contain.

Bear with me in this long-winded and fragrant metaphor; for you will find that almost all the vir-
tues of the perfect wine-glass have a parallel in typography.

There is the long, thin stem that obviates fingerprints on the bowl.

Why?

Because no cloud must come between your eyes and the fiery heart of the liquid.

Are not the margins on book pages similarly meant to obviate the necessity of fingering the
type-page?

Again: the glass is colourless or at the most only faintly tinged in the bowl, because the con-
noisseur judges wine partly by its colour and is impatient of anything that alters it.

There are a thousand mannerisms in typography that are as impudent and arbitrary as
putting port in tumblers of red or green glass!

When a goblet has a base that looks too small for security, it does not matter
how cleverly it is weighted; you feel nervous lest it should tip over.

There are ways of setting lines of type which may work well enough,

and yet keep the reader subconsciously worried by the fear
of 'doubling' lines, reading three words as one, and so
forth.

Now the

man who first chose glass

instead of clay or metal to hold his wine

was a 'modernist' in the sense in which I am going to

use that term.

That is, the first thing he asked of his particular object was not 'How

should it look?' but 'What must it do?' and to that extent all good typogra-

phy is modernist.

Wine is so strange and potent a thing that it has been used in the central ritual of
religion in one place and time, and attacked by a virago with a hatchet in another.

There is only one thing in the world that is capable of stirring and altering men's minds to
the same extent, and that is the coherent expression of thought.

That is man's chief miracle, unique to man.

There is no 'explanation' whatever of the fact that I can make arbitrary sounds which will lead a
total stranger to think my own thought.

It is sheer magic that I should be able to hold a one-sided conversation by means of black marks on
paper with an unknown person half-way across the world.

Talking, broadcasting, writing, and printing are all quite literally forms of thought transference, and
it is the ability and eagerness to transfer and receive the contents of the mind that is almost alone
responsible for human civilization.

If you agree with this, you will agree with my one main idea, i.e. that the most important thing about
printing is that it conveys thought, ideas, images, from one mind to other minds.

This statement is what you might call the front door of the science of typography.

Within lie hundreds of rooms; but unless you start by assuming that printing is meant to convey
specific and coherent ideas, it is very easy to find yourself in the wrong house altogether.

Beatrice Warde (1955)

IMAGINE THAT YOU HAVE BEFORE YOU A FLAGON OF WINE. YOU MAY CHOOSE YOUR OWN FAVOURITE VINTAGE FOR THIS IMAGINARY DEMONSTRATION, SO THAT IT BE A DEEP SHIMMERING CRIMSON IN COLOUR. YOU HAVE TWO GOB- LETS BEFORE YOU. ONE IS OF SOLID GOLD, WROUGHT IN THE MOST EXQUISITE PATTERNS. THE OTHER IS OF CRYSTAL-CLEAR GLASS, THIN AS A BUBBLE, AND AS TRANSPARENT. POUR AND DRINK; AND ACCORDING TO YOUR CHOICE OF GOBLET, I SHALL KNOW WHETHER OR NOT YOU ARE A CONNOISSEUR OF WINE. FOR IF YOU HAVE NO FEELINGS ABOUT WINE ONE WAY OR THE OTHER, YOU WILL WANT THE SENSATION OF DRINKING THE STUFF OUT OF A VESSEL THAT MAY HAVE COST THOUSANDS OF POUNDS; BUT IF YOU ARE A MEMBER OF THAT VANISHING TRIBE, THE AMATEURS OF FINE VINTAG- ES, YOU WILL CHOOSE THE CRYSTAL, BECAUSE EVERYTHING ABOUT IT IS CALCULATED TO REVEAL RATHER THAN HIDE THE BEAUTIFUL THING WHICH IT WAS MEANT TO CONTAIN. BEAR WITH ME IN THIS LONG-WINDED AND FRAGRANT METAPHOR; FOR YOU WILL FIND THAT ALMOST ALL THE VIRTUES OF THE PERFECT WINE-GLASS HAVE A PARALLEL IN TYPOGRAPHY. THERE IS THE LONG, THIN STEM THAT OBVIATES FINGERPRINTS ON THE BOWL. WHY? BECAUSE NO CLOUD MUST COME BETWEEN YOUR EYES AND THE FI- ERY HEART OF THE LIQUID. ARE NOT THE MARGINS ON BOOK PAGES SIMILARLY MEANT TO OBVIATE THE NECESSITY OF FINGERING THE TYPE-PAGE? AGAIN: THE GLASS IS COLOURLESS OR AT THE MOST ONLY FAINTLY TINGED IN THE BOWL, BECAUSE THE CONNOISSEUR JUDGES WINE PARTLY BY ITS COLOUR AND IS IMPATIENT OF ANYTHING THAT ALTERS IT. THERE ARE A THOUSAND MANNER- ISMS IN TYPOGRAPHY THAT ARE AS IMPUDENT AND ARBITRARY AS PUTTING PORT IN TUMBLERS OF RED OR GREEN GLASS! WHEN A GOBLET HAS A BASE THAT LOOKS TOO SMALL FOR SECURITY, IT DOES NOT MATTER HOW CLEVER- LY IT IS WEIGHTED; YOU FEEL NERVOUS LEST IT SHOULD TIP OVER. THERE ARE WAYS OF SETTING LINES OF TYPE WHICH MAY WORK WELL ENOUGH, AND YET KEEP THE READER SUBCONSCIOUSLY WORRIED BY THE FEAR OF 'DOUBLING' LINES, READING THREE WORDS AS ONE, AND SO FORTH. NOW THE MAN WHO FIRST CHOSE GLASS INSTEAD OF CLAY OR METAL TO HOLD HIS WINE WAS A 'MODERNIST' IN THE SENSE IN WHICH I AM GOING TO USE THAT TERM. THAT IS, THE FIRST THING HE ASKED OF HIS PARTIC- ULAR OBJECT WAS NOT 'HOW SHOULD IT LOOK?' BUT 'WHAT MUST IT DO?' AND TO THAT EXTENT ALL GOOD TYPOGRAPHY IS MODERNIST. WINE IS SO STRANGE AND POTENT A THING THAT IT HAS BEEN USED IN THE CENTRAL RITUAL OF RELIGION IN ONE PLACE AND TIME, AND ATTACKED BY A VIRAGO WITH A HATCHET IN ANOTHER. THERE IS ONLY ONE THING IN THE WORLD THAT IS CAPABLE OF STIRRING AND ALTERING MEN'S MINDS TO THE SAME EXTENT, AND THAT IS THE COHERENT EXPRESSION OF THOUGHT. THAT IS MAN'S CHIEF MIRACLE, UNIQUE TO MAN. THERE IS NO 'EXPLANATION' WHATEVER OF THE FACT THAT I CAN MAKE ARBITRARY SOUNDS WHICH WILL LEAD A TOTAL STRANGER TO THINK MY OWN THOUGHT. IT IS SHEER MAGIC THAT I SHOULD BE ABLE TO HOLD A ONE-SIDED CONVERSATION BY MEANS OF BLACK MARKS ON PAPER WITH AN UNKNOWN PERSON HALF- WAY ACROSS THE WORLD. TALKING, BROADCASTING, WRITING, AND PRINT- ING ARE ALL QUITE LITERALLY FORMS OF THOUGHT TRANSFERENCE, AND IT IS THE ABILITY AND EAGERNESS TO TRANSFER AND RECEIVE THE CONTENTS OF THE MIND THAT IS ALMOST ALONE RESPONSIBLE FOR HUMAN CIVILIZATION. IF YOU AGREE WITH THIS, YOU WILL AGREE WITH MY ONE MAIN IDEA, I.E. THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING ABOUT PRINTING IS THAT IT CONVEYS THOUGHT, IDEAS, IMAGES, FROM ONE MIND TO OTHER MINDS. THIS STATE- MENT YOU MAY HAVE IN THE FRONT OF YOUR MIND FOR A LONG TIME OF TY- POGRAPHY. WITHIN HUNDREDS OF YEARS; BUT UNLESS YOU START BY ASSUMING THAT PRINTING IS MEANT TO CONVEY SPECIFIC AND COHERENT IDEAS IT IS A USELESS COURSE IN THE WRITING OF ANYTHING.

BEATRICE WARDE (1955)

OR PRINTING SHOULD BE INVISIBLE

CRYSTAL GOBLET

THE CRYSTAL

Imagine that you have before you a flagon of wine. You may choose your own favourite vintage for this imaginary demonstration, so that it be a deep shimmering crimson in colour. You have two goblets before you. One is of solid gold, wrought in the most

exquisite patterns. The other is of crystal-clear glass, thin as a bubble, and as transparent. Pour and drink; and according to your choice of goblet, I shall know whether or not you are a connoisseur of wine. For if you have no feelings about wine one way or the other, you

will want the sensation of drinking the stuff out of a vessel that may have cost thousands of pounds; but if you are a member of that vanishing tribe, the amateurs of fine vintages, you will choose the crystal, because everything about it is calculated to reveal rather than hide the

beautiful thing which it was meant to contain. Bear with me in this long-winded and fragrant metaphor; for you will find that almost all the virtues of the perfect wine-glass have a parallel in typography. There is the long, thin stem that obviates fingerprints on

the bowl. Why? Because no cloud must come between your eyes and the fiery heart of the liquid. Are not the margins on book pages similarly meant to obviate the necessity of fingering the type-page? Again: the glass is colourless or at the most only faintly tinged in the bowl, because the connoisseur judges wine partly by its colour and is impatient of anything that alters it. There

are a thousand mannerisms in typography that are as impudent and arbitrary as putting port in tumblers of red or green glass! When a goblet has a base that looks too small for security, it does not matter how cleverly it is weighted; you feel nervous lest it should tip over. There are ways of setting lines of type which may work well enough, and yet keep the reader subconsciously worried

by the fear of 'doubling' lines, reading three words as one, and so forth. Now the man who first chose glass instead of clay or metal to hold his wine was a 'modernist' in the sense in which I am going to use that term. That is, the first thing he asked of his particular object was not 'How should it look?' but 'What must it do?' and to that extent all good typography is modernist. Wine is so strange

and potent a thing that it has been used in the central ritual of religion in one place and time, and attacked by a virago with a hatchet in another. There is only one thing in the world that is capable of stirring and altering men's minds to the same extent, and that is the coherent expression of thought. That is man's chief miracle, unique to man. There is no 'explanation' whatever of the fact that I can make arbitrary sounds which will lead a total stranger to think my own thought. It is sheer magic that I should be able to hold a one-sided conversation by means

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