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Unjustified texts

perspectives on typography

Het tijdperk 1914—1918 was de inleiding tot de scheppingsroes
der volgende jaren.

In Parijs schilderen Picasso en zijn genoten meesterwerken.

In Berlijn wordt „der Sturm“.

In Leiden ontstaat „de Stijl“.

De Schilders fabriceren niet langer geportretteerde natuur, maar
experimenteeren met vorm en kleur (Picasso, Mondriaan), of gaan uit
op onderzoek naar de psychologische betekenis van een lijn, een
structuur (Klee).

Een schilderij van Mondriaan is geen wandversiering, maar is een oproep
tot lerensvernieuwing.

Hangen wij het op in onze kamer, dan schept het daar nieuwe ruimte-
wetten en alles wat willekeurig is, elk meubel, dat niet simpel en alleen
zichzelf is, maar meer wil schijnen door versiering, misstaat en moet
het veld ruimen.

Picasso, Klee en vooral Mondriaan openen ons de ogen voor zuiverder
ruimtevormen, hun werken stellen eisen.

Dese eisen kunnen we afwijzen en wij kunnen ze aanvaarden, maar
wij kunnen er niet aan voorbijgaan.

Vreemd: een doek met enkele kleurvlakken, rood en geel, met enkele
lijnen beheert niet alleen een wand, maar heel een ruimte — al wat
onzuiver is, wat niet eerlijk is en klaar, moet verdwijnen.

We gaan nadenken over het wezen van de tafel en de stoel, het over-
bodige gaat ons hinderen, we gaan ons bezinnen op de functie der dingen.

De functie van de stoel in de ruimte.

De functie van de stoel als zitmeubel.

Een nieuwe bouwkunst ontstaat,
Een functionele architectuur, los van het conventionele.
la maison est un outil à demeurer, zegt le Corbusier.

Nieuwe vormen voor nieuwe mensen.
De gebonden kunsten ondergaan alle de invloed van de vrije kunsten,

open oog

editor: too obviously a swipe at the hand that was feeding us. It is reinstated here. A note of acknowledgement ran as follows: 'Some of the ideas put forward here were first raised for me in discussions in the seminar room at the Department of Typography, University of Reading, England (c. 1978); further help was given by Jane Howard, Paul Stiff, and Erik Spiekermann.'

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: serifed 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

selbes^{*)} und Femin. selber, auch der Pl. Nom. ir selfe
Parc. 12725. — Im Neuhochdeutschen haben sich außer
dem nur schwach und mit vorgesetztem Artikel stehenden
derselbe, die selbe, dasselbe, die Formen selber
und selbst als unveränderliche Adverbien festgesetzt, sic
sehen wie Comparativ und Superlativ aus, sind aber
keine, denn sonst müßten sie auch in der früheren Zeit vor-
handen gewesen seyn. Vielmehr ist selbst aus dem Gen.
Masc. selbes (Der gemeine Mann spricht an vielen Orten
selbs 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 selb sehr
oft, um es sowohl dem persönlichen als dem possessiven
Pronomen hinzuzufügen, und die reciproke Beziehung recht
bestimmt auszudrücken. Steht es bei einem persönlichen
(Substantiv-)Pronomen, so wird es adjektivisch construit
z. B. er häft sich selbst (sich selban) er spricht mit sich
selbst (mit imo selbmo) **). Steht es aber bei einem
Possessivum, wo wir uns heute seinerstatt des Wortes
eigen zu bedienen pflegen) so wird umgekehrt selb sub-
stantivisch construit und stets in den Gen. gesetzt, das
Possessivum hingegen entweder a) als Adjektiv mit dem
Substantiv vorhanden manan der Man solche

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 (genos-
sen)', 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-

fennen, künden erweislich, da henden auch auf bewun-
den (9b) reimt und so verhält es sich mit einer menge
ungenauer reime in Roth. fragm. und kaiserchr., die
durch herstellung scheinbarer niederd. formen genau wer-
den würden. Ein näheres studium der freieren reim-
kunst kann aber grundsätze an hand geben, nach wel-
chen sich mancher zweifel zwischen hoch- und niederd.
urform in diesen gedichten lösen wird. Ähnliche dun-
kelheit, doch geringere, schwebt über Heinr. v. Vel-
decks werken, den die mittelh. dichter selbst als den
gründer ihrer meisterschaft ansehen, und dessen éneit
(oder éned im reim auf währéd 4^a 102^a) mir die haupt-
quelle 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 mnndart dabei
tragen lauf ließ? Anders und in näherer beziehung auf
mtere buchstabenlehre ausgedrückt lautet dieselbe frage
so: sind eine menge ungenauer reime in Veld. werken
in genaue niederdeutsche zu verwandeln? oder als un-
genaue hochd. beizubehalten? Beiderlei ansicht läßt
sich vertheidigen. Dafür daß der dichter in reiner mut-
tersprache dichtete, redet 1) seine herkunft aus westphalen,
sein aufenthalt am clever hof, wo er die éneit be-
wahrte, und 2) kein hochd. verlangte. Er heben

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 typecase 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 unächtig Frühen.

Ihr zittern huschte auf metallnen glänzen
Begierig suchten sie sich zu verdichten
Umringten 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?
Neblige dünste ballt euch zu formen!
Caucht 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.

grossstablen

zählen wir einen deutschen text ab, so finden wir innerhalb hundert stablen 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 stablen. ain laut — tsvai zeichen. wegen fünf prozent der stablen 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.

b e d e u s *) schreibt über die grossen stablen:

„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.

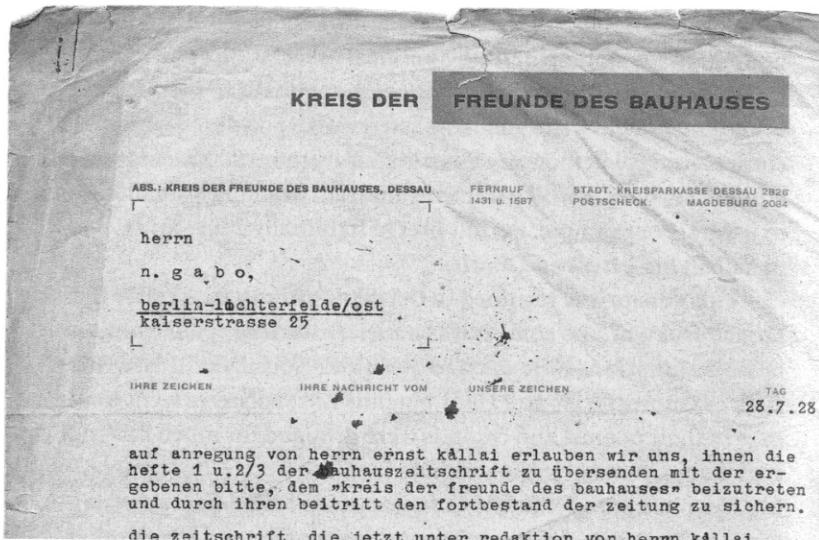
Meaning and articulation

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-

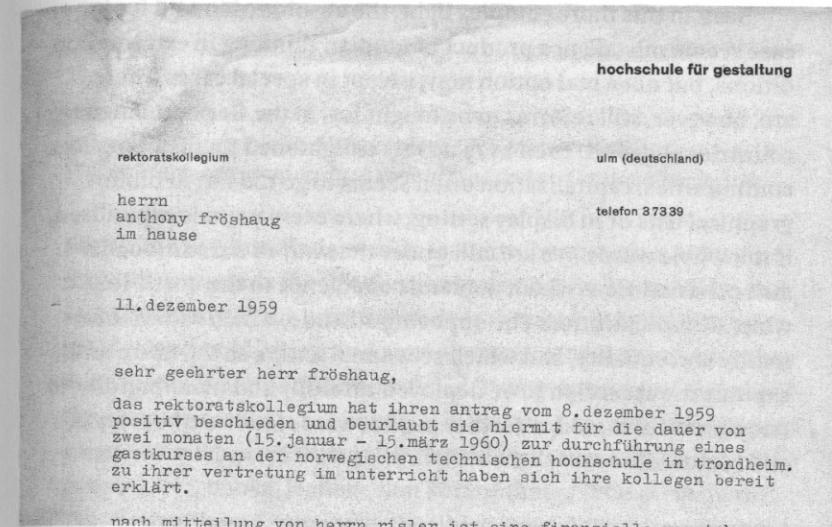
4. *Typographische Mitteilungen*, vol. 18, no. 5, 1931, p. 123. The contrast with Stanley Morison’s view (note 2) could hardly be greater.

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-caps 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 Froshaug (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 lower-case 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.

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

Black art

Sebastian Carter, *Twentieth century type designers*, Trefoil, 1987
Walter Tracy, *Letters of credit: a view of type design*, Gordon Fraser, 1986

More than five hundred years on from its first practice, some mystery still surrounds the 'black art' of printing. And now, when the secure identity of the printing trade is threatened by instant printers, desktop publishers, and women compositors, the mystery has been displaced and further confused. Typographers feel this every time they are asked what exactly it is that they do. 'Oh, newspapers?', someone will hazard (this is the first connotation of print for many people). 'No, books, leaflets, that sort of thing.' 'You print them?' 'No, design them.' 'You make the illustrations?' Then one tries to explain the function of editorial and visual decision-taking that should intervene – or may happen by default – between the writing of a text and its composition and multiplication as printed pages. The other familiar conversation is of insiders talking together: the obsessive discussions of the visual forms of text matter, of line-lengths and letterspacing. Between these two worlds, of the reader and of the designer of text, the gap may sometimes feel impossibly wide, and yet each depends on the other.

This gap can be traced to the essential workings of printing. Although the labour of producing manuscript books may be, and was, divided up, writing is a unitary process. Printing, however, consists of two stages – composing the text and then multiplying it – and those performing these separate tasks may well know nothing of each other. The process of writing with a pen is easily comprehended and practised. The business of assembling the characters to generate printed words belongs, however, to the realm of the machine, and has never been very easily accessible: this has been ensured by the barriers of cost, religious and political censorship, and the closed shop. Another twist to the mystery is added by the fact that these characters must be mirror images of the letters they engender.

The history of the typographer is a story of emergence. At first