Paul C. Gutjahr and Megan L. Benton,
"Reading the Invisible,
Illuminating Letters: Typography and Literary Interpretation.

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Megan L. Benton is Associate Professor of English and director of the Publishing and Printing Arts Program at Pacific Lutheran University. She has written on luxury books and fine press books in early-twentieth-century America. Their combined interests in typography led them to edit a collection of essays by several scholars about the place of typography in literary interpretation, from which this extract is taken.

Every time you use a word processor, you can choose which font your text will appear in. Some of these fonts, or what we should technically call typefaces, have long histories in printing and publishing. One of the most commonly used, Times New Roman, was designed by Stanley Morison and Victor Lardent for The Times newspaper in 1931. It was largely based on another typeface called Plantin, designed in 1513, which in turn was based on Gros Cicer, a typeface from the sixteenth century. The practice of designing, choosing, and studying type is called typography.

Most readers pay very little attention to typography, unless it’s either particularly striking—for example on a poster, or so badly used as to make the text difficult to read. But Gutjahr and Benton argue in this essay that, whether we attend to it or not, typography is one of the features of books (and other printed matter) that shapes how they are read and therefore has an impact on their meaning.

In some cases, writers maintained a great deal of influence over the typesetting of their works, and actively attempted to make the typography serve their purposes. Samuel Richardson (1689–1761), for example, was a printer as well as a novelist, and the decisions he made about which typefaces to use in his novels (especially Clarissa) form part of his authorial intention. Just as McKenzie (p. 45) showed James Joyce (1882–1941) making the pagination of his novel Ulysses significant, so Richardson—on another essay in Benton and Gutjahr’s collection shows—the typography of Clarissa significant for its meaning.

Benton and Gutjahr borrow from Johanna Drucker, a historian of the book and of graphic design at the University of California, Los Angeles, the distinction between "marked" and "unmarked" texts. Marked texts draw attention to their typography and
They too have names, faces, personalities, jobs they are good at and others they are not, benefactors and detractors, ancestors and offspring. All thanks to computers, most of us now have at least rudimentary skills in manipulating type to suit our purposes, what sophomore writer has not discovered that an eight-page labor can be stretched to ten with a quick switch to fourteen-point type? With modern word processors and desktop-publishing software we make a myriad of typographic decisions each time we produce a text, or we tacitly approve the decisions we allow the software to make for us. But both as writers and as readers, we often fail to notice, much less fully consider, the role of type and typography in making a text not only visible but meaningful.

In fact, too often our own experience at the keyboard leads us to conflate writing and typography so that the latter seems to disappear as a discrete and independent function. It is an easy and natural confusion, since when we create personal documents—a term paper, a letter, instructions to the babysitter, and so on—writing and typography are virtually synonymous: the form given the text by its writer is the form that the reader receives. In the larger world of professionally published texts, however, the distinction is profound. There a book's content and form are not created simultaneously by a single person. As a familiar truism in the publishing world reminds us, writers don't write books—they write texts. A book is created when a text is transformed by print, when it is literally shaped into a material object whose visual and tactile features render it perceptible and accessible to others.

For most readers this formal, intermediate presence of print is so familiar and conventional that it is indeed virtually transparent and so unseen and unpondered; we see only text on the page. But it is impossible to read the words on a page without also reading, albeit usually on a subconscious level, the visual text of the page itself. "Typography in all literature as musical performance in composition," writes the post-typographer Robert Bringhurst. Just as we can hear music only by listening to a particular performance of it, we can read a text only by reading a typographic presentation of it. Typography, too, in what Bringhurst calls "an essential act of appreciation, full of endless opportunities for insight or obtuseness."3

This is a bold assertion. It interjects typography into an already crowded and contested arena: that complex thing that we call the "text." It also leads straight into the thorny question of who or what produces meaning in a text. The author's unique visions and expressions: Transcendent, universal truths? Language itself? Or a typographer's mediating perceptions of some combination of these elements, as Bringhurst asserts? Perhaps even the typography itself, an independent kind of Visual language in its own right, employed but not finally controlled by a designer's sensibility? The essays in this volume contain that type and typography are indeed an intrinsic part of the text that a reader encounters when he or she reads a book.

Scholars have long recognized that a book is much more than simply text. In recent decades a great deal of fruitful thinking and research has revolved around closer scrutiny of the "book" as a communication of social, cultural, economic, technological, aesthetic, and commercial as well as literary and linguistic forces. Beginning with the 1958 landmark work by Lucien Febvre and

Footnote:
1 Beatrice Ward (1900-69) was the assistant librarian to the American Type Founders Company, a historian of typography, and a typeface designer.
Henri-Jean Martin, La Peinture au livre (translated into English as The Coming of the Book) states that there is a great deal to be learned by looking at the visual culture of books through a historical and social lens. He argues that the materiality of the book is a product of historical and cultural forces, and that understanding this materiality is essential to understanding the history of ideas. This view has been influential in the field of book history, and has been taken up by scholars working in a variety of disciplines.

In the essay "Reading the Invisible," the author discusses the importance of understanding the materiality of books as a way of understanding their role in shaping cultural and intellectual life. By examining the physical and visual elements of books, such as their design, production, and distribution, we can gain insight into the historical and social contexts in which they were produced.

The essay argues that the materiality of books is not merely an aesthetic or visual concern, but is integral to their function as tools of communication and expression. The material properties of books, such as their size, shape, and color, are not only useful for conveying information, but also for shaping the reader's experience and engagement with the text. By understanding the materiality of books, we can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical processes that have shaped them.

The essay also highlights the importance of considering the materiality of books in the context of other forms of media, such as digital and electronic texts. The material properties of books are not exclusive to the print medium, but are also relevant to other forms of communication.

In conclusion, the essay argues that the materiality of books is a crucial aspect of their role in shaping culture and history, and that understanding this materiality is essential to understanding the broader historical and cultural contexts in which books have been produced and consumed. By examining the material properties of books, we can gain a deeper understanding of the role that books have played in shaping our cultural and intellectual life.
qualities of the actors. The words may be Hamlet's, but the uniquely inflected body and voice are Branagh's or Olivier's. The body and the voice make a difference. Type and typography make a difference.

To better understand the role of type in literary interpretation one must examine both the apparent strategies behind its selection and arrangement and the tactics it may provoke or enable in readers' responses. Typography is an interpretive act, but one that must in turn be evaluated. Is it insightful, or obscure? Consistent or dissonant with the linguistic data? "Transparent" or obtrusive? To answer these questions, the wise reader must look at that which purports to be there. To perceive typography's interpretive powers we must learn to see and read the invisible.

An ordinary reader, untrained in its forms and methods, develops an "eye" for typography as the music lover cultivates an "ear" for detecting a particular musician's performance of a score. Alfred Knopf certainly believed so. He also vigorously contended that yes, ordinary readers can readily learn to see what writers choose to be transparent. No matter how clear its glass, a window is perfectly visible when one simply alters one's gaze.

"This collection is devoted to exploring both the typographic strategies of those who produce books and the interpretive tactics of readers who make sense of a text's presentation. It is important for both books and the interpretive tactics of readers who make sense of a text's presentation. It is important to clarify, however, that none of the included essays is written on typographic theory or analysis and to clarify, however, that none of the included essays is on typographic theory or analysis and to clarify, however, that none of the included essays is on typographic theory or analysis and to clarify, however, that none of the included essays is on typographic theory or analysis and to clarify, however, that none of the included essays is on typographic theory or analysis and to clarify, however, that none of the included essays is on typographic theory or analysis."

...this new per se. Like Chartier, Trefil, and Badaracín (and many other scholars working in this rich new shakes and cultural meanings. Each author begins as we hope our readers may begin, with a curiosity about the particular visual and physical printed forms of a specific text or genre. In each case that curiosity led to a closer inspection of the invisible not only visible but iluminating. We hope that these case studies will encourage readers to look for these patterns in the details of the letters. We believe these essays provide helpful models of that process of discovery and insight. Because these essays are intended to introduce literary scholars, both experienced and beginning, to the interpretive layers of typography, they neither assume nor require that reader be well versed in typographic procedures, or theory. Only a very brief and simple introduction to the nature, structure, and evolution of type itself is needed here. Fig. 5.5 illustrates this evolution."

...in this case the presence or absence of traits, the contrast between thick and thin strokes; and so on— to broader periods of cultural history: renaissance, baroque, neoclassical, romantic, realist, modernist, and the like (see Fig. 5.6). This scheme emphasizes the intimate relationship between type and the cultural elements in which it is used and used, a relationship that we too contend is fundamental to our understanding of typography.

Written language is of course a vast subject, spanning many cultures and millennia. The parameters of this volume are more manageable: the essays of only printed productions of texts in its English language. They therefore do not directly deal with manuscript traditions that produced the advents of Western mechanical printing in the mid-fifteenth century, or with recent electronic editions (although the visual dimensions of each are highly significant and worth of precisely the kind of study we advocate here). Although these momentous shifts in the technology of textual production make easy boundaries, it is important to note that letterforms and page layout conventions typically...
humanist letterforms. We now call "roman," letterforms associated with the great scholarly and linguistic discoveries of the Renaissance. By 1500 an alternative letterform developed by Italian Renaissance calligraphy masters was captured in a type style we call "italic." These three basic styles have remained foremost in Western book production for 500 years. They quickly came to organize broad cultural and ideological as well as nationalist connotations; blackletter, for example, became associated with religious and especially Protestant texts, while roman and italic types prevailed for secular literary and scientific works.10

In many ways, letterforms are the most immediate and visible link between writer and reader. But letters are neither as immediate—without mediation—as nor as intellectually visible as one might think. These essays remind us all that type enters a powerful role in the interpretive process whether or not that influence is apparent to us. We hope that by helping to make that "invisible" typographic presence visible to the reader’s eye, the book will also help readers understand how a printed text’s typographic meaning and literary meaning are essentially intertwined. They may confer or subvert, clarify or complicate each other, but they cannot finally be disentangled. No one can fully read a text’s literary content without also reading its typographic form.

Notes

Roger Chartier (b. 1945) is Directeur d’Études at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, Professeur in the Collège de France, and Arnemberg Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania. He has been a pioneer in the French histoire du livre tradition of studies of book history and print culture, which tends to pay attention less to the details of particular books, and more to the circulation of books in society. His essay on “Communities of Readers” is reprinted below (p. 251). In this essay, he uses the example of Don Quixote to explore both how early modern books were printed and how they made the printing and circulation of books into one of their themes. In this way, he shows that the production, circulation, and reception of books are not “extrinsic” to the content of literature, but rather an integral part of it.

Don Quixote is an early novel written in Spanish by Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616) and published in two volumes, a decade apart, in 1605 and 1615. It recounts the adventures of Quixote, a retired Spanish gentleman who is addicted to reading romances and works of chivalry. So absorbed is he in these stories that his reason is impaired and he sets out to become a knight-errant in search of adventure, having recruited his horse Rocinante as his squire. After many adventures, he regains his sanity on his deathbed.

A written publication of the two volumes of Quixote’s adventures, a spurious second part was published, entitled Second Volume of the Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha; by the Licenciado (doctor) Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda. When he published the authentic second volume, Cervantes included a number of references not only to the first volume, but also to this spurious continuation. Chartier traces some of these references in his essay, as well as examining an episode in which Don Quixote visits a printing shop and sees books being produced.

We tend to think of literary works as the products of an author’s imagination and skill, and of books as the vehicles that allow us to experience the author’s vision. But in the literary world, literary works emerge from the labor of multiple agents, including the author, the publisher, the printer, the compositor, the proofreader, and others, who combine to produce books that are not accidentally material objects, but essentially...