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Gerrit Noordzij: Master of many crafts

We have known each other for over 20 years, Gerrit Noordzij and I. In those years I saw him grow and develop, but hardly change. One day he appeared at my place where at that time I did book design, editorial jobs and production supervision. He wanted to find out whether there was any possibility of our working together. There was not, unfortunately. The idea was attractive enough then, although one must wonder in retrospect whether it would have worked. He was in his late twenties and had just lost his job with Querido's – then as now one of Holland's leading publishing houses – after some obscure conflict. Those were days of full employment, and Gerrit did not appear to be overmuch concerned. His job, as Querido's designer, had its frustrations; one that particularly vexed him was the firm's refusal to let him indent paragraphs. The reason for this curious idiosyncrasy was to be found in piety. The house had been established in the 1920s by Emmanuel Querido, a highly picturesque, old-fashioned publisher of great acumen and strong personal opinions. Among the strong advocates of 'little Mr Querido' (as he used to describe himself) were flush paragraphs, which he consistently practised. As late as the mid-1930s this somewhat unusual typography was a hallmark of any Querido book. During the war Querido was killed in a German concentration camp and when in 1945 his successors – many of whom had worked with Querido before the war – re-established the business, flush paragraphs had become the fashion in run-of-the-mill book production, whereas careful young typographers,

under strong British influence and orienting themselves on Stanley Morison and Oliver Simon, had become conscientious indenters. It is rather typical of Gerrit Noordzij's character that he tried again and again, in each trial page, to introduce indented paragraphs, only to find himself defeated by the adamant refusal of his superiors to tolerate them.

Our first meeting had little result, apart from a liking for each other. As a slightly older colleague, I may have given him some well-meant advice but I don't think he acted on it, which seems just as well. He soon went off to Germany, where he had some contacts. His wife, who is German-born, also thought, not unjustly, that their very primitive Amsterdam apartment was hardly a fit place for having children. They spent 1959 in Germany, where he had some rather unexpected successes without much follow-up, as often happens to freelancers working in foreign countries. He even got an opportunity to organise a 'course for principals' at the 'Meisterschule' in Stuttgart, in which ways of briefing typographers when entrusting them with the design of a book and similar matters were to be taught. The concept never came to life, however, because an attractive opening for him arose in Holland before it could be started. In the summer of 1960 Noordzij became teacher of lettering and allied subjects at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts at The Hague.

His career so far had been fairly straightforward, apart from the rather amazing fact that he had had almost no formal training in typography or practical printing. After secondary school he was brought up to be a book-binder, but hardly used this ability in later life. But he did and does use a few other talents, among them a keen intelligence, a sharp eye, an open mind with a virtually unlimited interest for things graphic, a gift for teaching, and great dexterity. At the Academy he interpreted his mandate as having to teach his students all aspects of calligraphy, letter drawing, and typography in a broad sense. As a teacher he is simultaneously severe and easy-going, and successful in forming his students without casting them in his own mould.

For some 15 years he has been living with his wife (who, being gifted with at least ten green fingers, grows an amazing variety of plants) and their two teenage sons (who take care of an everchanging crowd of animals) in a roomy nineteenth-century farmhouse in the heart of Holland, in the small village of Tuil on the river Waal. There Noordzij lives and works. Whatever he wants to do with his hands he succeeds in doing: he draws lettering with pencil, pen, and brush, does some painting and photography, writes with the broad nib on paper and parchment, engraves with the burin, and handles the stonemason's mallet and chisel to work stone, from slate to granite, making tombstones, tablets, and the like. Being the handyman he is, he has rigged up a headline setter of his own design for which (of course) he makes his own master patterns, simply on 35 mm film. He owns a pantographic engraving machine –

bought cheaply from one of the old-established German type foundries – on which he intends to engrave large-size Monotype matrices, an offset proofing press he uses for letterpress and intaglio only, and his latest acquisition, a sophisticated letterpress proofing press. This was a gift from the neighbours across the river at Zaltbommel, Van de Garde, one of the finest printing houses in Holland. But Noordzij has no leanings toward becoming a private press operator: whenever there is some printing or experimenting to do, the neighbours are willing and able, both in letterpress and offset, with hot Monotype and Monophoto setting.

In connection with the engraving machine, there was a charming little incident at Frankfurt, where we had driven together to collect the machine. We were shown a similar machine by two engravers, solid elderly German craftsmen, who showed some slight mistrust toward the two amateurs who had come to see them. Gerrit asked them how exactly they tackled the basic designs. They told him that these are engraved with a burin into thin copper, and gave him a piece of material and a tool at the same time. Gerrit at once drew a lovely arabesque into the metal and said: 'Like this, you mean?' 'That's right,' said the man, with some surprise and obvious relief, and turning to his colleague added: 'This one may start at once tomorrow morning.' This reaction to the man is typical: Gerrit is never an amateur, but always the craftsman, even if he does a thing for the first time.

He strongly dislikes leaving his house on the river, is not a traveller – unless to discuss with his colleagues at ATypI meetings, wherever they take place. When his friends want to see him, they'll have to go to his house. So we now sit together in his work-room and talk about what he did recently and longer ago, what he is going to do, and about his philosophy. It is by no means a formal interview: we ramble from subject to subject, with quite a lot of 'italic conversation'.

'Yes – typographically I'm practically self-taught. After having learnt book-binding, I took some lessons in calligraphy from Piet van Trigt at The Hague Academy, for about half a year. In 1954 that was. I soon got some small commissions from Stols: book jackets. Stols was easing himself out of his publishing business: he had been nominated UNESCO professor in Mexico. So one day he gave me some manuscript and told me not only to make a jacket, but do the typography as well. I said: "Typography – what's that?" "You'll soon find out," he said, and I did. So it started, with trial and error. In 1956 I joined Querido, who had an opening, because Theo Kurpershoek had left to take up teaching. Rather frustrating, as you know. After that, the year in Germany: small jobs for Kröner, then for Cotta, a contact with Gotthard de Beauclair, who was then designer-in-chief for Insel. For him I did the title and head- and tail-pieces for the Insel Almanack, and suddenly found myself a person of some standing. In

the Insel Almanack you were in good company: even Eric Gill had done them. Then, in 1960, I got an appointment at The Hague, and became a colleague of my former writing master, Van Trigt.'

'I have a knack for provoking statements. I'll never tire of telling anybody that all letters are written letters. It can't be the other way round, like Morison says. Writing is primary to typesetting; that's obvious. What else did Gutenberg do? And as to designing printing types, I don't care for a statement like Sjoerd de Roos's "I should be happy to design a typeface as good as Jenson's". That's nonsense, and unnecessary, too: Jenson is there, so why repeat it? That's why I think Jan van Krimpen and W.A. Dwiggins are the really great type designers of our age: they designed the types they somehow needed. As Dwiggins puts it (in Paul Bennett's chapter in the second volume of *Postscripts on Dwiggins*): "I say: What would I like to set this Ms in would be a letter like so and so ... and there not being any such letter I proceed to evolve one ... They all seem to come in terms of book faces, and in terms of common or garden varieties with roots in the ground." JvK was even more consistent; he worked out a number of varieties on one basic and completely original idea. In 1925 there was no such type as Lutetia: he made it. Romanée roman is an improvement on it (and it hardly goes with Van Dijck's italic for which it was intended) and Romulus roman again an improvement. The sloped roman is of course an error, but Romanée italic is again an improvement. The work culminates in Spectrum, and then the hand-cut 14-point size. I rather like to think that JvK designed Spectrum, Rädisch, the punch-cutter, made it, and Monotype finally spoilt it – and even so it's excellent. But all these kinds of type design go back to the roots, to writing. I worked that out in my theory about expansion and translation, first laid down in Fernand Baudin's *Dossier A-Z*. The practical applications of these changes of contrast are a stupid little job for the computer: they did that for me in Hamburg. The whole thing is formulated in rather blunt extremes, a kind of schoolteacher's dogmatics. The reality is of course more subtle than that.'

'The book jackets I do now are worked out using my own photographic method. I make a sketch, usually with a brush, and then draw an alphabet, which I put on 35 mm film. That I do quickly: a roman lower-case does not take more than three days. A sans serif would be different: it would take at least three months. You have to apply very sensitive differences in weight to achieve the illusion of all weights being equal. Spacing is a highly sensitive operation. For caps I put marks on the verge of the film, but lower-case should be justified far more tightly, so then the system does not work properly: you have to space lower-case by eye.'

'When making inscriptions in stone my method is hardly different: I write the inscription on the virginal surface with a stiff broad brush and then cut the

letters. At the Academy I taught the trick to a number of sculptors, and it works fine. I sometimes combine both processes. The numerals for the Kapsenberg calendar 1978 were first cut in stone and then used in printed form; 6 and 9 are one and the same sign – obviously – used one way up or the other.'

'Teaching good handwriting is easier than you might think. Basically, it is what the ATypI Committee on Education is really about. We have done it here, right in this small village, at the primary school. It started more or less by accident. Our children were quite young then, and we had a visit from the newly appointed headmaster, who asked how we had taught our sons such "grown-up", even beautiful, handwriting. As a matter of fact, we never taught them, they just saw it and imitated it. I don't think they have some "special gift" either. Anyway, the "Tuil Script" we developed afterwards just happened. For one day a week I taught writing at the village school, for one year. It's a small school, there are three teachers, and in each room two forms are taught. It did not work in the first and second forms; the lady who was teaching these children found the experience confusing for the children and not least for herself. But all the others enjoyed it, and Wim Frankhuizen, one of the teachers, has been continuing it on his own ever since. He has built up quite a reputation. There were curious difficulties: the basic thing is visual form, but "form" is a fairly difficult concept for these children, who may suffer from a considerable poverty of language. Writing is presented to them as a kind of game, with clearly stated rules and criteria, not unlike playing-blocks; one of the rules is not using wooden and plastic blocks in the same building. From the teaching profession we often hear the objection that our script is unfit for writing quickly and that it is based on the broad nib, which people consider an antiquated tool. Both objections are nonsense. As for speed of writing, the ability to cope with overfast dictation should not be an aim in the way handwriting is taught. As to the broad nib, we don't aim at renaissance beauty, but at creating word images, and the broad nib is an excellent tool for that. A word image is not a row of letters, let alone a smear of ink. A good word image means that all white elements have equal worth; they shouldn't all be equal, but they must be balanced. The same goes for black. It isn't too difficult to open children's eyes to such things. For instance, we make them outline white space in a newspaper column; a number of children quickly discovered that in books there is usually less white space between words, and they then look better. There you are! Once, they were shown some of Michelangelo's handwriting "from a famous artist and scholar nearly 500 years ago". The children were quite satisfied and found that "he wrote nearly the same way we do".'

'I have no objection whatever to writing with a ballpoint, but I think it a poor instrument for children who have still to learn writing – certainly the cheap ones, which have an unsteady ink flow. Then you have to press the tool,

and when you press you squeeze, and squeezing disturbs the steering mechanism of the hand. But once they've mastered steering their hands, they will write well, with chalk on the blackboard, with a felt-tipped pen on paper, or with a finger on a moist window, or with whatever.'

'No, I am not particularly afraid that modern techniques will undermine the notion of typographic quality – provided the notion was there to begin with. I agree that these notions are often weak in buyers of printed matter and even in master printers. But it should and can be taught to students in design. The other day a number of my students attended a one-day seminar on phototypesetting, and they told me (I wasn't there) that a question was put forward in the audience about small caps. The answer from the lecturer had been that these can be simply created by reducing capitals. Nobody had protested, but they had felt like "bursting into hollow laughter".'

'I like to do things my own way. I did a couple of postage stamps the last few years, always a difficult matter. The General Post Office make their demands, and then Enschedé's, the printers, make theirs: they'll usually tell you that gravure is the best technique for your design to be executed in – purely a technical and economic advice, mainly because perforating may be done on the press at one go. My latest stamp, the Unie van Utrecht,* was plate-printed, on my rather forceful demand, because I wanted to engrave it myself in steel, and I did. It was a lot more expensive to print, but what is printed is not a reproduction, but my own engraving, even though they made mouldings of it. For the new low-value series, with numerals only, I didn't get the assignment (there was a limited competition on invitation) and they did not get beyond the stage of sketches.'

'The Unie-rijksdaalder† coin was, to me, a venture into an unknown area. Here you encounter unexpected technical limitations, though less limiting than you might expect. The technical experts of the Royal Mint know their business, though they are not too design-conscious. I wasn't allowed to do anything about the lettering around the Queen's effigy, though nobody had ever noticed that the lettering on the 1 cent, 5 cent, 10 cent, and 25 cent coins is different, and less poor, than on 1 guilder and 2.5 guilders. Everybody thought they were identical.'

'In a way, the development of offset lithography has brought us full circle, back to before Gutenberg. Isn't it curious that any book should be typeset –

* The Unie van Utrecht is a treaty concluded in 1579 between the then practically sovereign provinces of the Netherlands against Spain. It is considered to be the beginning of the Netherlands as an independent state and in commemoration a postage stamp and a special coin were issued in January 1979.

† Rijksdaalder is the name of a coin of 2.5 guilders.

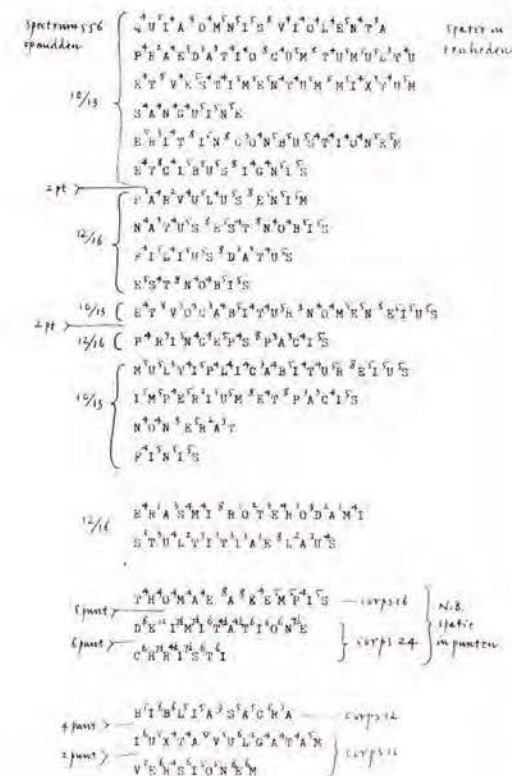
QUIA OMNIS VIOLENTA
PRAEDATIO CUM TUMULTU ET
VESTIMENTUM MIXTUM
SANGUINE
ERIT IN CONBUSTIONEM
ET CIBUS IGNIS

PARVULUS ENIM
NATUS EST NOBIS
FILIIUS DATUS
EST NOBIS

ET VOCABITUR NOMEN EIUS
PRINCEPS PACIS

MULTIPLICABITUR EIUS
IMPERIUM ET PACIS
NON ERAT
FINIS

ISAIAH PROPHETA, 9



Want elke schoen die dreumend stamp, en elke mantel, in bloed gewenteld, zal verbrand worden. Want een kind is ons geboren, een zoon is ons gegeven en men noemt hem Vredevorst. Groot zal zijn heerschappij zijn en eindeloos de vrede. Jesaja 9/4, 5, 6

Werkwijze van Gerrit Noordzij bij het spatiëren en justeren van tekst, gezet met het systeem Monophoto 1000, een fotografisch zetsysteem met 96 eenheden op een vierkant, dat de loden Monotype verving

either hot metal or by photocomposition – when it is much simpler and cheaper to reproduce the manuscript? I just finished a small book on mowing with scythe and sickle (also on how to maintain and sharpen the tools). I wrote it with my own hand in my own daily handwriting, and drew the figures with the same pen. It will come out this spring. The first sentence, by the way, states that the book will make 100,000 lawn mowers redundant. Everybody with a lawn of 50 square yards thinks he needs – and so owns – an electric or motor mower. Isn't that sheer nonsense?

'Still, I'm no antagonist to modern techniques, not a "nostalgist", but I do insist on quality. As early as 1973 I developed a system of optical spacing of caps, not unlike David Kindersley's, making use of the Monotype unit system.'

'Since our friends across the river are using a Monophoto 1000 – next to

their big battery of hot Monotypes that are still in daily use – I enjoy experimenting with it and finding out its possibilities and limitations. It's a wonderful machine, though relatively slow. But its possibilities are immense and the quality is quite good – provided you aim at quality, as they do and I insist on. I just made a Monophoto type specimen for them: in it we show a number of possibilities (on film) and also explain how to tackle certain things. The 96-unit system is very flexible and enables you to be as subtle as you like; yet, by clearly realising what actually happens, you may be more efficient – quicker, that is – without visibly losing quality. For instance, you may find that a 15-unit space would be ideal, but that involves four touches: 1+2+4+8. You may save the keyboarder three of them by specifying 16 units. Nobody will see the difference. What is possible, particularly with small caps, means an extension of typographic options you never dreamed of: large-size small caps are in fact caps that are slightly heavier – highly welcome in many cases. And what you can do without any complicated make-up is really unbelievable. They are now toying with the idea of taking a 3000, a Lasercomp. If they do, that will mean an immense gain in speed, which is important from an economic point of view, but also in quality of form, as each size is programmed separately, thus giving us back the different set values we are so painfully missing in photocomposition. The definition of the ray (its diameter is one thousandth of an inch) seems amply sufficient – I can't see "steps" in the oblique strokes, and my eye is sharp and my instruments are excellent. Apart from that, it's nonsense of course showing the shortcomings by means of a magnifying glass in a thing meant to be looked at through the naked eye.'

'There is really nothing wrong with modern techniques – as opposed to many types of machinery – if only you apply the standards of good typography and good printing. I enjoy taming the machines and making them work for me as I think good.'

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