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The truth about the serif

Of old typography could be distinguished from handwriting. This illusion is reflected in all what has been said and written about type and its design. All this accumulated wisdom has become useless. It is even a dangerous obstacle for our approach of typography. Typography is now something else then then what it was supposed to be in our books. It is different in every detail. You have only to drop a word and there is a new subject for a new study. Examples can be found in previous issues of *Letterletter*. Just say *Bodoni* (*Letterletter* 9) or *numeral* (*Letterletter* 10) and you have a new entrance to writing. This time the theme is *serif*.

I have tried to clear the subject from worn conceptions. In a short-sighted view this could be seen as a break with the tradition of writing; all our classic teachers are put aside for a new illusion. In a wider view the same operation might appear as an attempt to restore the conception of writing that has been obscured for a while by type foundries, composing-rooms and piles of romantic literature.

Anyhow, *Letterletter* is highly practical because it is strictly theoretical. If you would still be unfamiliar with this characteristic of theory you might find an example in the typeface of these pages.

Letterletter

1 1

nothing than the truth

Usually serifs are considered in relationship with the terminals of the letters in Roman inscriptions. For me stone cutting is an entirely different subject that might be treated in a lapidary number of *Letterletter*. If you cannot wait that long, take a chisel and invent the story of stone cutting yourself. At the scaffold the tools and the stone demand an approach that cannot be invented at the desk of a scholar.

When something has to be done all our books are leaving us alone. The theories of *Letterletter* do not offer a substitute for work either but they have the practical advantage of being invented in the workshop. Good theory drags us to a new point of view from which reality exposes its relevant aspects. Our classics are not relevant. They have all been written from an irrelevant point of view in an attempt of embracing the subject without ever touching it. If I would be mistaken in this judgement you might be so kind to show me where I am wrong. But even then our classics will remain irrelevant in an even more essential aspect; everything they pretended to observe from their discutable point of view cannot be observed anymore, because its reality itself has disappeared. We have to invent a new truth anyhow.

Letterletter 11 is about the serif in type design and its story begins in northern France and the southern Netherlands. It is a story from the end of the Middle Ages; about 1000 year after the last Romans had left the scene.

Writing on television

Television has a bad reputation for its destructive effects on reading and writing. It is hard to believe that its powers can be domesticated in the service of writing. I got a chance to try when *Teleac*, a non profit producer of educational programmes for Dutch television, asked me to write the script for a course on writing, *calligraphy*, and to present the subject for the camera as the protagonist of myself.

The principles of design applied in techniques and scripts will be exposed in a course of 8 weekly emissions in February and March 1991. I have obtained the cooperation of some colleagues for the introduction of different aspects of writing.

The universal validity of the principles of writing is demonstrated by Han Yunyong in Chinese calligraphy.

Lida Lopes Cardozo: stone cutting, glass engraving & left handed writing.

Petr van Blokland: type design.

Nina Everts: typography.

Henk van Leyden: lettering for traffic systems.

Henk Drost: punch cutting.

Children of Tuil: elementary handwriting.

Little known manuscripts are shown by the University Libraries of Leiden and Amsterdam. The origin of the broad pen is shown in a hieroglyphic book hand of more than 3000 years old.

The most exciting adventure was a demonstration of gilding a manuscript under studio conditions. The ventilators of the studio maintained a draft of air just a few millimetres above my desk blowing the goldleaf away. When the ventilators were switched off I had to work in a hurry because the temperature climbed quickly. If you are ever invited to work under such conditions you might talk with me first.

The course is supported by the publication of a book written, designed and abundantly illustrated by Frank Blokland.

A reliable introduction of writing in 8 sessions of 30 minutes has to be restricted to the essential aspects of writing: design and technique. There is nothing about aesthetic preferences or about history. The old manuscripts are simply presented as the work of old colleagues.

The course addresses a general audience. Everything has been put as simple as possible, without simplifying the subject. We aimed at the highest standards of design and education.

Much time has been lost with the excursions. Editors of television programmes are convinced of the boring stupidity of their products; they are equally sure of distraction as a remedy. With the help of many friends I have tried to use the imposed interruptions for showing the impact of writing on everyday life in a civilised world.

Calligraphy is often recommended as the art of violating the rules of the game in *natural* movements. This abuse makes me reluctant to use the word. In our course calligraphy is upgraded again to a *cultural* discipline.

The end of the story will be told in Letterletter 12.

Letterletter & the world

In Letterletter 4 I have discovered an important reason to say nothing about serifs. By consequence Letterletter 11 is entirely dedicated to serifs. You will appreciate the logic.

The dimensions of the mental image of writing in the same Letterletter 4 introduces an analytical model for the study of writing. The suggestion has been taken up by Albert Jan Pool, type director of Scangraphic. In the chapter on typeface classification of the *Scangraphic Digital Type Collection*, Edition 4/1990, he has transformed the theory into a practical introduction to type design.

Letterletter 8, *The Grammatical Polyglot*, offers another approach of the same idea in *Essay sur la grammographie* together with a German translation. The French text has now been published in *L'écriture: le cerveau, l'œil et la main*, edited by Colette Sirat, Jean Irigoien and Emmanuel Poulle (proceedings of the international symposium of Centre National de la recherche Scientifique, Paris, Collège de France).

The participation of printers, typographers and scholars in the discussion of writing is an important objective of ATYPI. Within a few hundred years the subject of writing might even reach schools and teachers. These expectations are encouraging me to continue *Letterletter*.

Geographic hint for beginning scholars: Jenson came from the *Burgundian* side of the Alps.

The Book of Armagh

Page 3 is page 1 of the *Gospel of Matthew* in the Book of Armagh. The lines which made the puzzle in Letterletter 8 and 9 have been taken from the right column. I thank Max Caflisch for the suggestion to show the lines of the puzzle in their original setting and the Library of Trinity College, Dublin, for providing the picture.

You will recognize the picture at first sight as a typical specimen of insular writing. The puzzle, with its second sight, draws our attention to the performance of the writer. Beyond the archaic shapes of exotic letters that complete cursive hand appears which we like to believe a Florentine invention of the fifteenth century. The puzzle attacks this belief by forcing you to see a flawless humanistic cursive that has been written 700 years before its assumed invention.

The Irish cursive italicises the timeless question: *What do I see when looking.*

Σκαριφάομαι

The words *scrape*, *score* and *scratch* (Dutch: *schreef*, German: *Schraffe*) and Latin *scribere* (Dutch: *schrijven*, German: *schreiben*) might well have a common root related to the Greek stem: *skarifa*, but it is only by the accidental effect of a few sound shifts that they coincided again in the Dutch word *schreef*.

Schreef is the simple past tense of *schrijven* (to write) and also the scratch made by carpenters and metal workers as a guide for cutting. In punch cutting a *schreef* is first of all the initial scratch on the blank punch marking the terminal of the stroke of a letter. This initial part of the work is common to all metal workers and it can be described in common language. In punch cutting the meaning of the word was extended to the terminal itself and finally restricted again to the protruding parts of the terminal (English: *serif*) so that a letter with cold terminals (*schreven*) is now referred to as a letter without *schreven* (sans serif) which, of course, does not mean a stroke 'without terminals' but a letter without protruding terminals. In common Dutch the typographic expression *schreefloos* (sans serif) would be as absurd as a shape without outline. The word *schreefloos* only received a meaning in typographic Dutch. It has been introduced in the Enschedé typespecimen of 1932.

According to English publications the word *serif* has come into use in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Such information has to be founded on the oldest written records but the word must have been imported much earlier. If Caxton would not already have brought it home from Flanders, where he had been living for thirty years, the next great occasion might have been the seventeenth century when English typography relied on supplies from the Dutch Republic. I could not imagine an adoption of the word in the eighteenth century when the leading position in the world had been taken over by English type founders. The 'artist' Caslon was the last great imitator of Dutch design. Later generations of English punch cutters had little reason to look for examples in the Low Countries; they had John Baskerville to imitate.

So much knowledge of Dutch language should be sufficient to assess speculations about the origin of the word *serif*. The history of a word and its meaning can be used to obstruct discussion. My home made etymology of the word *serif* should not be understood as the 'real' meaning of the word. The actual meaning of a word can only be learned by trying it in contemporary conversation. Often the same word has a different 'real' meaning in different cultural and social circles. Foreign languages cannot take direct benefit of the fact that a Dutch craftsman considers any intentional scratch as a *serif*. However, understanding design could gain a lot if we could forget for a while the distinction between serif and sanserif type. With some attention for the scratch the terminals of all kinds of strokes can be studied beyond the blunt distinction between sans serif typefaces and common typefaces.

This distinction has been invented to avoid the study of writing by strewing simplicity over the subject. But I do not feel at ease with this kind of simplicity. In fact it does not make things easier. Conventional distinctions are conspicuous and they do not allow orderly escape from the triteness. Even universities conform to it. If you would like to study the history of handwriting in Holland you could find an opportunity at the university of Leiden. For the history of typography you would have to go to Amsterdam; in Dutch scholarship the distance between handwriting and typography is about 30 kilometers. If, however, you would prefer to study writing without a preoccupied restriction to handwriting or to writing with prefabricated characters there is no place where to go. The real simple solution would be to stay at home and to bridge artificial distances by reading *Letterletter*.

The distinction between handwriting and typography is a silly commonplace. We do not need a university to emphasise it. The common sense of a child is sufficient to understand the difference. The same degree will do for the distinction between sans serif typefaces and common typefaces.

If the child survives in us we will arrive at amore interesting question: what do these different things have in common?

A great ideal

When I was still very young I have read an interview in a Dutch printer's magazine with the type designer Sjoerd de Roos. His greatest ideal was devising a typeface that would be like the roman of Nicolas Jenson. I tried to imagine how it would be of having a great ideal that has been realised 500 years ago. I do not have such a convenient ideal and Jenson did not either. Fascinating in the typeface of 1470 is the ideal Jenson has been after rather than what he has achieved. For this interest the reconstruction of one letter could do.

The outline drawing is my interpretation of Jenson's punch. I added the full point to the m because it is one of the most jovial points in type design I know. My point, however, is in the serifs.

Jenson interpreted handwriting. The example had lozenges as footings. Jenson could have copied this shape faithfully in his punches, but the extra work would not have paid. On the press the load of ink would have distorted the lozenge into a shape that would differ very little from a distorted rectangle. For the punch cutter, however, the difference is important: rectangular footings are cut much easier than lozenges.

The old type designers did not bother about so called bracketed serifs. They had to live with the filling of ink in the corners of their letters. In this respect (of course not in any other respect) that bastard Rockwell is a more faithful interpretation of Jenson's roman than Bruce Rogers' elegant Centaur.

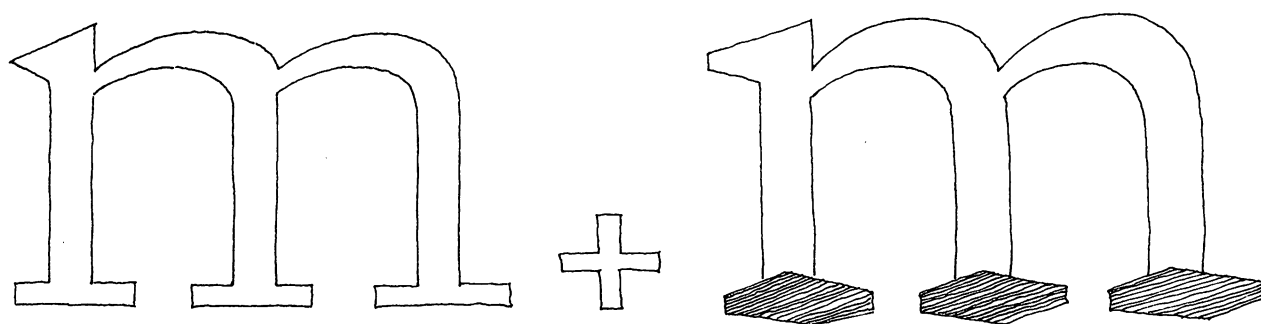
In the old days big sizes were cut for special occasions. Only in the area of jobbing printing serifs with rounded joints might have been common for a while (chiefly the seventeenth century). For this feature I have three more or less suitable explanations which is too much.

1. The corner-filling ink spread was found very beautiful and designers anticipated that effect in their punches. In a big size the effect of ink spread is relatively small; if you are fond of it you have to design it. Garamond seems to have rounded outer corners of his typefaces in big sizes only occasionally; they might have been intended to look like enlargings of the *printed* small sizes.

2. Jenson's approach looks very bare on such a big size as 18 point. Designers might have been tempted to decorate the big shape a little, as it is tempting for me to smooth a big outline drawing. (A steel punch of 18 point is at least as big as a drawing of 20 centimetre. If you don't believe me, try.)

3. The gab about the classic shapes of capitals might finally have reached the punch-cutters too as it has happened eventually to the designers who worked for the pantographic punch engraving machine. However, body sizes for text composition as mechanical reductions of big drawings are a novelty of the century of the composing machine. In this regard typefaces with bracketed serifs are a sideway in the development of type design.

I have already weakened the third explanation. It would fit to the time when everybody was eager to hear stories about a typography which could be independent of handwriting. When the connection of type design with handwriting was given up designers were cut off from inspiration. It was compensated by imitation of old typefaces. In fact Stanley Morison and his fellows propagated second-hand design. The great ideal was imitation, be it of Jenson, as in the case of De Roos, or of Garamond, as in the case of Tschichold and Morison himself. Even if we would still believe this worn propaganda we should yet not impose this enlightened view on design on the humble craftsmen of old who just tried to render handwriting decently in type. The choice between the first and the second explanation is to you; for your convenience I have already done with the third one.



Lo, your heritage

A theory is a provocation. It attacks established theories in an attempt to refute them. Quite often the attack fails and then the new theory is refuted itself. Recently this has been the fate of a theory of nuclear fusion and of a new approach of immunity deficiency (aids). In both instances there is no reason for satisfaction about the failure. There is, however, a lot of satisfaction in the damage it has done to the authority of scientific magazines. The censorship of magazines is a serious obstacle for progress in science. A theory does not need the approval of an editor; it only demands criticism. If it survives a test we have to devise a more severe test and so on until the theory has to be given up for a better one. Otherwise the theory is a myth.

The test requires criteria and these are difficult to formulate in humanistic studies. The discussion is often dominated by affections and speculations which can be exchanged against any other opinion.

The Italian humanists said that they were guided by antiquity. This fact (that they said so) is sufficiently documented. But there is no proof available of what they said. The extremely remarkable fact that the Italian authors never mentioned the Burgundian culture, which makes all their stories unworldly unrealistic, is a strong argument for the sceptic. But it is not a reliable proof either. Because the decision cannot be left to a magazine or to scientific authorities I am looking for facts which can be examined in empirical observations. The moving counterpoint meets this scientific condition for the material aspects of the question at least.

The drawing shows two vectors, *a* and *b*.

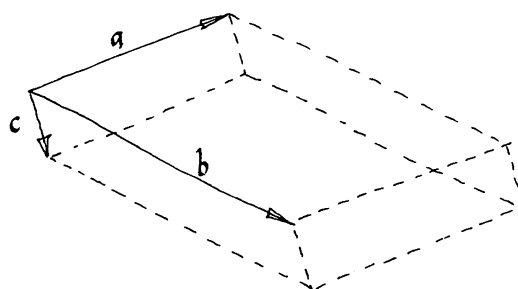
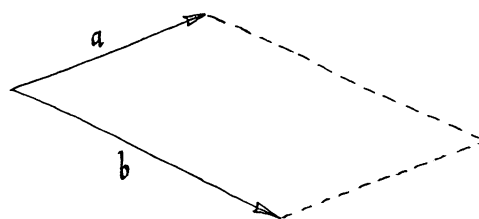
We might consider *b* as a stroke drawn with pen *a*. (We do not have to; we might as well consider *a* as the translation of the direction *b*. In this ambiguity is the power of the theory of writing. It is the condition of our grip on type design by enabling us to *depart* from handwriting.) When I want to simulate the stroke of a small pen, I have to consider its thickness as well. It is expressed in a third vector, *c*, perpendicular to *a*. This construction is founded on a simplified analysis of the recessed terminal.

I have repeated this simple shape in the serifs of a typeface digitized with Ikarus M. I have used the resulting theoretical typeface (completed with an italic) for this issue of Letterletter.

To compare my design with Jenson's roman from

1470 I have reproduced at actual size the first page of *De bello Gallico*, printed by Jenson in 1471, from the copy in the Plantin Museum, Antwerp. For this occasion my Ruit should be shown in a Latin text as well. I have chosen the first verses of Psalm 127 (Hebrew numbering) and of Genesis 1.

The confrontation should prove that Jenson could reduce the lozenge of the recessed terminal to a rectangular shape without giving up the calligraphic example. Any attempt to copy his model more faithfully would have lost its effect on his press.



ecce hereditas Domini

ABCDEFGHIJKLM-
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ &
abcdefghijklmnpqrst
vwxyz;
1234567890?
ABCDEFGHIJKLM-
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ &
abcdefghijklmnpqrstu
vwxyz;
1234567890?

CANTICVM GRADVVM SALOMONIS
Nisi Dominus aedificaverit domum
in vanum laboraverunt qui aedificant eam.
Nisi Dominus custodierit civitatem
frustra vigilavit qui costodit.
Vanum est vobis ante lucem surgere,
surgere postquam sederitis;
qui manducatis panem doloris:
cum dederit dilectis suis somnum.
PSALMI IVXTA LXX / CXXVI

heluetiis diuidit. iis rebus fiebat : ut & minus late uagarentur : & minus facile finitimis bellū inferre possent: qua de causa hoīes bellandi cupidi magno afficiebantur dolore . p multitudine autē hominum: & p gloria belli: atq; fortitudinis angustos se fines hīe arbitrabātur: q in lōgitudinē milia passuū ducēta quadraginta: in latitudinē centum octoginta patebant. his rebus adducti & auctoritate Orgentorigis p moti constituerūt: ea quā ad pficiscendū ptinerent parare. iumētorum & carroꝝ q̄ maximū numeꝝ coemere: semētes q̄ maximas facere : ut in itinere copia frumenti suppeteret. cum proximis ciuitatibus pacem & amicitiam confirmare: ad

IN PRINCIPIO CREAVIT DEVS CAELVM & TERRAM TERRA autem erat inanis et vacua et tenebrae super faciem abyssi et spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas. 3 Dixitque Deus: fiat lux et facta est lux. 4 Et vidit Deus lucem quod esset bona et divisit lucem ac tenebras. 5 Apellavitque lucem diem et tenebras noctem. Factumque est vespere et mane dies unus.

6 Dixit quoque Deus: fiat firmamentum in medio aquarum et dividat aquas ab aquis. 7 Et fecit Deus firmamentum divisitque aquas quae erant sub firmamento ab his quae erant super firmamentum. Et factum est ita. 8 Vocavitque Deus firmamentum caelum. Et factum est vespere et mane dies secundus.

9 Dixit vero Deus: congregentur aquae quae sub caelo sunt in locum unum et appareat arida. Factumque est ita. 10 Et vocavit Deus aridam terram congregationesque aquarum appellavit maria. Et vidit Deus quod esset bonum. 11 Et ait: germinet terra herbam virentem et facientem semen et lignum pomiferum faciens fructum iuxta genus suum cuius semen in semet ipso sit super terram. Et factum est ita. 12 Et protulit terra herbam virentem et adferentem semen iuxta genus suum lignumque faciens fructum et habens unumquodque sementem secundum speciem suam. Et vidit Deus quod esset bonum. 13 Factumque est vespere et mane dies tertius.

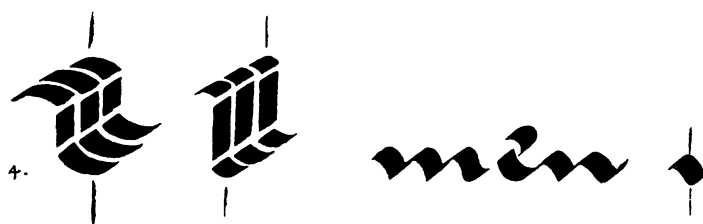
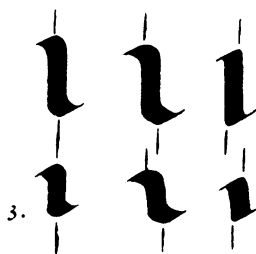
History from scratch

The terminals of a straight pen-stroke are symmetrical about a point; they can be exchanged. For this story it does not make difference if you turn my pictures upside down.

A stroke starts and ends parallel with the counterpoint as demonstrated in the 12 terminals of the 6 strokes in figure 1. This movement of the pen gives a sharp finish to the stroke. It accentuates the terminal of a stem when it makes a sharp angle with the main part of the stroke (2b). Otherwise the terminal is suppressed (2a). Since more than 4000 years the main stream of our civilization has been accentuating the terminals of stems. Curves are beginning and ending in nothing which is characteristic for the suppressed terminal. If you would insist on considering the terminal as an element with a suppressed terminal you might call it a curve to avoid confusion. Beyond the distinction between stems and curves the suppressed terminal is restricted to decorative swashes. In this regard j is an impossible letter as all type designers know by experience. The y is impossible in any respect. Together with the diacritical marks the letters j and y are a typographic disaster. In silent eloquence the old typesetters complained the existence of such 'improvements' by showing their typesets in Quousque tandem abutere &c. This text is not spoiled by our improvements of the alphabet.

The balance of the stem is controlled by the width of the terminal (3). In a balanced stroke the top of accentuated terminals is lying on the axis of the stem. Longer terminals are pulling the stroke anti clockwise. This is why type designers will always give such letters as a and t a slight slant if they have to make the impression of standing upright. In a stem with shorter terminals the axis is overshadowed by the long diagonal of a parallelogram.

The seven centuries between the in-



vention of reading and the invention of printing the Middle Ages have coined the Western civilization. Before it became solidified in metal type the development of writing can be understood as the continuous consolidation of reading by reducing the white shapes in the word. In respect to the size of writing the weight of the strokes was increased. I have indicated this increasing weight with parallel strokes. To keep the top of the terminal on the axis of the stroke I had to increase the width of the terminal curve as well.

Figure 4 shows that this treatment reduces the straight part of the stem considerably. Many cursive hands of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries seem to compensate this effect on the balance of the stem with backward slant. These scripts are neglected in the general history of writing, perhaps because the study of real writing might sweep away our official history.

Diplomatics is a remarkable exception. This branch of the history of writing is thriving by organizing courses in 'deciphering' the real documents of our ancestors. In its overall effect cultural history obscures the development of civilisation. My small collection of matchbox labels contains a few thousands of splendid wood engravings cut at the end of the nineteenth century. Art historians specialised in this period could tell me everything about the French Salon of that time but nothing about the matchbox world we all come from.

Figure 5 is a theoretical compensation of the backward pressure which is executed by the terminals of heavy stems. By slanting the straight part of the stem I could obtain a better balance of the black spots in the stroke. Figure 6 is a more satisfying alternative: only the terminal has been recessed; the stem is kept in its upright position. Both theoretical possibilities have found practical application in the history of writing. In Beneventan writing (7) the straight part of the stem can only be recognized in an analysis of the stroke. The Burgundian approach (8) had a better outlook; its invention of the recessed terminal has become permanent in the serifs of roman type.

Figure 9 shows the characteristic stem of roman type together with the choreographic description of the characteristic Burgundian stem. This swirl is the basic pattern of type design. It is the scratch from which a new history of typography can be written.

The talkative picture

It is the problem with a picture that it tells more than thousand stories. When you have figured out the right story it is often the wrong one.

From a distance the pictures of this page make a pattern of alternating density. This is a nice story for a designer but it is not the story I have in mind. I want the pictures to be watched closely and this was one reason to write the indices small. (The other reason is obvious.)

The story I want the next column of pictures to tell is about the terminals of the letters. In fig. 1 the terminal is just turning away from the stem; fig. 2 and fig. 3 have been written with recessed terminals. From this point of view figures 2 and 3 are belonging together and not, as might be expected from a few other points of view, figures 1 and 3.

Figure 4 supports the intended point of view; 4a and 4c may have the curved top and the proportions of the letter in common, but this feature is superseded by the pattern of terminals which distinguishes 4b and 4c from 4a.

There is an academic rule that one must not depart from his conclusion. At many occasions I have asked for an alternative, but I have never got an answer. I cannot imagine how something should ever come out of my mind which I would not have in mind first. Perhaps it is only a rhetoric trick to hide the fact that you have something special in mind. Of course, you could tell your audience that you had found your splendid idea after a lot of thinking about a problem and everybody might enjoy such lies. Yet it might be better rhetoric to start with the beginning conjecture just as the geometers have always done with their theses. The thesis comes down from heaven. Only afterwards it is laid down on a foundation of observations. *Science is reversed architecture: the roof is built before the house.*

This time I am late with my conclusion but here it is: Roman type has its origin in Burgundian handwriting. Under the shelter of this roof I am selecting the facts which should make the impression of supporting the fantastic construction.

What I am showing in figure 2 has been called *textura*, *textualis quadrata* or *Gothic book script*. In typography other names have been used as well such as *black letter*, *old English* and *Dutch text*. In my view this script is closely connected with the fifteenth century cultural genius which inspired the Burgundian countries Flanders and Brabant. By calling this spirit *Burgundian* I do not suggest that it

should have been restricted to the south-western Netherlands. Its writing and its language had their origin in northern France and its duchess came from England. Yet Burgundy was the focus of a cultural attitude, a style of life, which is still proverbial Burgundian.

For the crowded Burgundian text (fig. 2) the recessed terminal is a clever invention which saved this book hand from magnificent illegibility. The open countershapes of the old-fashioned text script (fig. 1) did not require such an invention. I do not see a substantial difference in legibility between fig. 1 and fig. 3. The necessity for the introduction of recessed terminals in the Burgundian text script is absent in the humanistic text script. Only the Burgundian example explains the occurrence of the Burgundian solution in a script where it has nothing to solve. I did not have to manipulate the originals too much to arrive at the convincing illustration of this explanation in fig. 4.

Perhaps the recessed terminal does not seem to be very important for the study of humanist handwriting if the study of handwriting is separated from the study of typography. Only a minority of the manuscripts I have seen have been written in this 'Burgundian' style. It looks like a rather unimportant aberration which could be neglected.

The scene changes dramatically when typographic writing is taken into consideration. In 1470 Nicolas Jenson showed a typeface that can be looked at as the typographic interpretation of the text script of fig. 3. It superseded all attempts of rendering in type the script of fig. 1. Jenson's peculiarity became the standard of the typographic text script which is called *roman*.

History has made the Burgundian humanistic hand the most important script of mankind. This could be a reason to study it.

uanum est uobis
ante lucem surgere
surgere postquam sederitis
qui manducatis panem doloris
1. cum dederit dilectis suis somnum

uanum est uobis
ante lucem surgere
surgere postquam sederitis
qui manducatis panem doloris
2. cum dederit dilectis suis somnum

nisi Dominus / canticum graduum

uanum est uobis
ante lucem surgere
surgere postquam sederitis
qui manducatis panem doloris
cum dederit dilectis suis somnum

3. cxxvi psalmi iuxta lxx

4. ^ami ^bmi ^cmi

The voice of a real scholar

Martin Steinmann
Die Nomenklatur der
Paläographen

Man muß wohl zwei Arten von Bezeichnungen unterscheiden: Einmal die Namen für Schriftarten. Das sind, bildlich gesprochen, die großen Herren, denen die Gelehrten mit Scharfsinn und Eifer dienen. Die Unterscheidung und Benennung von Schriften ist ein elementarer Teil jeder Schriftgeschichte. Sie ist aber nicht nur an sich schwierig, sondern hat auch gewichtige Folgen: Ob etwa eine Schrift karolingische oder romanische Minuskel oder Carolingo-Gothica heiße, das beleuchtet sie von ganz verschiedenen Seiten her und läßt sie je nachdem als dekadente Spätform, als eigenständige Erscheinung oder als zukunftssträchtigen Versuch erscheinen—immer die selbe Schrift, wohlverstanden. Und wo, wie so oft, jede Zuordnung etwas für sich hat und keine vollkommen paßt, da streiten sich dann die Fachleute und erfinden am Ende gar neue Namen, welche ein altes Problem verdecken und dafür ein paar andere aufwerfen. Frei nach Goethe: 'Mit Worten läßt sich trefflich streiten, mit Worten ein Salat bereiten'.

Die bescheidenen Brüder der Schriftarten sind die einzelnen Buchstabenteile. Wer sich mit ihnen abgibt, kommt leicht in den Ruf eines Pedanten und Kleinkrämers, und wissenschaftlicher Ruhm läßt sich dabei schwerlich erringen. Zudem hat sich seit langem herumgesprochen, daß in der Bestimmung

As a scholar of great repute he wants to be represented in the leading magazine about writing. With this solid argument the Swiss palaeographer Martin Steinmann (University of Basel) has delivered the definite article on the nomenclature of writing. The article exploits the subtlest subtleties of German language to their full extent. An English translation would still demand from the reader that complete knowledge of German which would allow him to read the original text as well.

To bridge the gap between reading and understanding the author has commissioned the editor with the illustrations. History will show (if we can guide its course into the right direction) that our humble cooperation has laid the foundation for the authoritative comic strip on writing.

I have left out one sentence which I did not like. After all I am
THE EDITOR.

von Alter und Herkunft auf Einzelformen kein Verlaß sei, daß sie nur allzu leicht in die Irre führen. Manche Einzelheiten sind ja auch eher technischer Natur, sie hängen viel mehr von der Sorgfalt des Schreibers ab als von Zeit und Ort der Niederschrift, und sie können sich in ein und dem selben Dokument wandeln. Es sind die Gestalter von Drucktypen, welche das minutiöse Detail festlegen müssen und ihm gerne einen Namen gäben. Von einem Bibliographen stammt die reichhaltigste Nomenklatur für Schriftformen, welche ich kenne: Philip Gaskell, *A nomenclature for the letter-forms of Roman type*, in: *The Library*, 5th series, vol. 29, 1 (1974), S. 42-49. Leider ist sie englisch, und eine Übersetzung weithin unmöglich.

Die Schreiber selbst haben sich seit jeher weniger Mühe gemacht: Mit der Literatur der Antike und des Mittelalters haben sie zwar auch Fachwörterbücher überliefert, aber keiner teilt uns eine nennenswerte Zahl von Bezeichnungen für Buchstabenteile mit. Ob die tatsächlich keine Namen besessen haben? Offenbar galt Schreiben entweder als Handwerk, schriftlicher Fixierung weder würdig noch bedürftig, oder dann bei den Gelehrten als dienende Tätigkeit, keiner genauen Beachtung wert. Wer weiß schon alle Teile der Schuhe zu benennen, auf die er täglich tritt?

Bei den modernen Gelehrten stehen die kunstreichen Kalligraphen ohnehin in einem zweifelhaften Ruf: Die aufwendigsten Handschriften haben oft den schlechtesten Text. Nicht nur die Handschriften übrigens: Auch das seit langem teuerste Produkt eines deutschen Verlages, das Evangeliar

Heinrichs des Löwen im Facsimile (Ladenpreis DM 34.000,—), prangt mit einem Fehler auf dem Rücken. *Evangeliarium* heißt es dort statt *Evangelarium*, in Gold auf dunkelblaues Leder geprägt.

Dennoch müssen zuweilen einzelne Buchstaben besprochen werden, und das geht schwerlich ohne eine Bezeichnung der Teile. Nun sind Buchstaben bekanntlich abstrakte Formen. Aber mit geometrischer Terminologie, mit Punkt, Gerader, Dreieck und Kreis ist ihnen nicht beizukommen. Noch weniger mit dem Jargon, den Kunstkritiker vor abstrakten Gemälden entwickelt haben. Ganz nüchtern kann man mit An-, Auf-, Ab- und Deckstrichen beginnen, mit Bögen, Ober- und Unterlängen. Aber die machen allein noch keine Buchstaben, denn das

Ganze ist bekanntlich mehr als die Summe seiner Teile. Und da kommt plötzlich Leben in die Schrift: Die Lettern werden zu Personen, haben Köpfchen mit Zungen, Schenkel und Füßchen, einen geraden Rücken und dicken Bauch. Das g zeigt sich gar mit Maske. Auch wenn sie kursiv laufen, Vagabunden sind unsere Buchstaben nicht: Sie wohnen im a, teils ein-, teils zweistöckig und mit Balken gestützt. Das Haus besorgen die Frauen—man erkennt sie an den Schleifen im Haarstrich. Die Männer gehen derweil einem unheimlichen Gewerbe nach: Sie bilden Knoten, legen Schlingen, führen keulen- und dolchförmige Schäfte. In strenger Ordnung treten sie auf, dunkel, stachlig, dornspitzig und mit Haken. Die Paläographen als friedliche Leute gehen dem Volk lieber aus dem Weg. Wer wollte es ihnen übel nehmen?

