

# Avant-garde Typography in Literature

## An Exhibition curated by Jesse Rossa

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Typography has been used for thousands of years to elucidate and expand upon the narrative of a literary text. From the "shape poems" of the ancient Greeks and the Elizabethans to the well-known playfulness of E.E. Cummings, how a text looks has been as important as what it "means." This exhibition presents a brief overview of various forms of typographical artistry and innovation.

John Hollander. "Swan and Shadow." From *Types of Shape*. New York: Atheneum, 1969.

In an interview with Paul Devlin in 2003, Hollander (1929- ) described his method for creating these shape poems: "I would think of the representation of some object in silhouette—a silhouette which wouldn't have any holes in it—and then draw the outlines, fill in the outlines with typewriter type (elite-or Courier in MS Word later on) and then contemplate the resulting image for anywhere from an hour to several months. The number of characters per line of typing would then give me a sort of metrical form for the lines of verse, not syllabic but graphematic (as a linguist might put it). These numbers, plus the number of indents from flush left, determined the form of each lines of the poem. The contemplation led to a decision about what the poem would decide for itself about what the object depicted in and by the poem's own form really 'meant'."

Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, 1998 {facsimile}. Originally printed and published by Aldus Manutius in Venice in 1499, the *Hypnerotomachia* is one of the most beautiful and mysterious of Renaissance texts.

## Typography of Dramatic and Theatrical Works

Attempts to present an avant-garde play on the page poses some interesting challenges. The avant-garde theatre of Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) and Sarah Kane (1971-1999) as written can only hint at the stagecraft and physical presence of the actors. The illustrated edition of Ionesco's play is a wonderful translation of the playful spirit of the theatrical work.

Sarah Kane. *4.48 Psychosis*. London: Methuen, 2000.

Samuel Beckett. "Cascando." From *The Grove Centenary Edition, Volume III: Dramatic Works*. New York: Grove Press, 2006.

Eugène Ionesco. *The Bald Soprano*. New York: Grove Press, 1965.

## Painting a Picture with Type

In the works of Jackson Mac Low (1922-2004), one can see his preoccupation with sound as influenced by John Cage. Robert Creeley said of his work, "It is the genius of his art to make poetry again enactment, to make its materials--words and syntax, and all the human echoes each must carry--a resonating, perceptive pattern reaching far beyond the enclosure of imagined subjects or intent."

Of all the works displayed here, those of E.E. Cummings (1894-1962) are perhaps the best known and best loved. His gentle and playful voice was well served by his typographic innovations. A painter as well as a poet, he once said he used typography "to paint a picture" with some of his poems.

Jackson Mac Low. "The Bluebird Asymmetries." From *Representative Works 1938-1985*. New York: Roof Books, 1986.

E.E. Cummings. (one fine day). From *W*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1931.

## Shape Poetry/Calligrammes

The tradition of "shape poetry," or presenting a visual image with words, is an ancient one despite its reputation as a modern

development. Several poems included in *The Greek Anthology* were written to be presented on objects such a votive copy of an axe-handle or a statue's wings and even an egg. Displayed here is "The Axe" by Simias of Rhodes, who was active circa 300 B.C.

Many poems in Elizabethan-era England were printed in shapes. Perhaps the most famous was "The Altar," by George Herbert (1593-1633), in the shape, of course, of an altar. A somewhat less-known poet was Mildmay Fane, the Second Earl of Westmorland (1601-1666), a friend and patron of Robert Herrick. His volume *Otia Sacra*, published in 1648, contains many poems experimenting with form (and it must be noted that all type was hand-set letter by letter in seventeenth-century printing).

Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, first published in 1918, are perhaps the most emblematic of shape poems. The author described the poems as "an idealisation of free verse poetry and typographical precision in an era when typography is reaching a brilliant end to its career, at the dawn of the new means of reproduction that are the cinema and the phonograph."

Simias, "The Axe." From J.M. Edmonds, trans. *The Greek Bucolic Poets* (Loeb Classical Library). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912.

Guillaume Apollinaire. "Cœur couronne et miroir." From *Calligrammes*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1962.

George Herbert. "The Altar." From *The Works of George Herbert*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941.

Mildmay Fane, Second Earl of Westmorland. "Eucharistia." From *Otia Sacra*. Delmar: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975. {facsimile}

## Typography and the Novel

Innovative uses of typographical style in novels also have a long and rich history. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) was once referred to by the Italian novelist Italo Calvino as the "undoubted progenitor of all avant-garde novels of our century." The fluidity of time and narration are remarkably modern-seeming-both Joyce and Woolf acknowledged Sterne's influence. Displayed here, the character Parson Yorick dies in the first book and his demise is marked by a black page (although he continues to appear in the rest of the novel).

Following the explosion of modernism in the first part of the twentieth century (notably T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" in its fragmented shards turning on end the notion of linearity), contemporary authors have pushed the form of the novel even further. In *House Mother Normal*, by the British author B.S. Johnson (1933-1973), the denizens of a nursing home speak through various interior monologues as divided into sections, complete with statistics at the beginning of each section. The Scottish writer Alasdair Gray (1934- ) has also incorporated clever usage of typographical styles, as evidenced in his second novel *1982 Janine*. William Gass (1924- ), the novelist, essayist and philosophy professor, published his experimental novella *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife* in 1968. With the advent of the Internet in the 1990s (not to mention computer-aided typesetting), the novels of Mark Z. Danielewski (1966-) have taken the form to new extremes. The labyrinthine structure of *House of Leaves* mirrors its conceit of a house larger inside than out, just as the dizzying symmetries of *Only Revolutions* spiral in on themselves both textually and literally.

Laurence Sterne. *Tristram Shandy*. New York: Everyman's Library, 1991 {first published 1759}.

B.S. Johnson. *House Mother Normal*. New York: New Directions, 1971.

Alasdair Gray. *1982 Janine*. New York: Viking, 1984.

William Gass. *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife*. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1968.

Mark Z. Danielewski. *House of Leaves*. New York: Pantheon, 2000.

Mark Z. Danielewski. *Only Revolutions*. New York: Pantheon, 2006.

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