

## Off the Page: Jonny Hannah's Typeface Designs

“Imagine that you have before you a flagon of wine. You have two goblets before you. One is of solid gold, wrought in the most exquisite patterns. The other is of crystal-clear glass, thin as a bubble, and as transparent. Pour and drink; and according to your choice of goblet, I shall know whether or not you are a connoisseur of wine. For if you have no feelings about wine one way or the other, you will want the sensation of drinking the stuff out of a vessel that may have cost thousands of pounds; but if you are a member of that vanishing tribe, the amateurs of fine vintages, you will choose the crystal, because everything about it is calculated to reveal rather than hide the beautiful thing which it was meant to contain”— Beatrice Warde, *The Crystal Goblet or Printing Should be Invisible*. London, 1955.

The print historian Beatrice Warde famously stated that typography should relate to content, as a crystal goblet relates to wine; that is, it should be clear, transparent, and concerned with providing a lucid, transparent and humble window onto content. Any kind of wine glass, or typography, which would seek to draw attention to *itself*, was an aberration: a willful misappropriation of the ‘canon’ of typography, and a statement of the wrong priorities for wine! She continues: “There are a thousand mannerisms in typography that are as impudent and arbitrary as putting port in tumblers of red or green glass!” Jonny Hannah’s typography makes a gentle mockery of such prescriptives. His fonts and layouts *are* the gaudy, gold, exquisitely patterned goblet itself, in their celebration of the possibility that historically hybrid, anarchic, impatient, ‘itchy’, impure ‘almost-fonts’, which wobble, wave, shimmer, quiver and shimmy along with an impudent and arbitrary swagger, could better speak to the wonderful anarchy of language (and life), itself, than Warde’s somewhat austere and bloodless form of typography. Hannah puts the *fun* back into the *function* of text: restoring the alchemical qualities of language as raw material, by weaving fragments of typographic history into an irreverent and fiercely undisciplined series of glyphic gestures. His fonts do not invoke Warde’s “front door of the science of typography”, but a multiplicity of entrances, exits, and detours

The ‘beautiful thing’ which is revealed is to be found precisely *at* that shimmering *surface* of material language, not despite it, as Warde would suggest. This surface suggests the impossibility of an abstracted ‘scientific’ ideal of language-as-communication which Warde covets. The meaning of Hannah’s typography is not to be found in the content, as through a window onto a world beyond, but at the surface, where text *itself* becomes a content.

The typefaces he has designed for this purpose speak in a weird dialect of their/his own, with more than a touch of the absurd about them. Somewhere between a profligate circus vernacular and mischievous manuscripts, this cauldron of chaotic, unruly, undisciplined glyphs bounce irrepressibly off the page like a jazz ensemble. Hidden in these fonts is a collection of memories and

stories, or half-broken narratives. They simply won't sit still. Like small children sitting impatiently on their hands, they excitedly tell endless stories and 'tall tales' about near and far history, industry, street signs, pop-culture, Americana, Victoriana, ephemera, childhood utopias, music, performance, eclecticism, travels, other worlds, third dimensions, folk tales and oral stories, cultural memories and the everyday. These fonts are busy telling their own stories, in their own vernacular, about themselves. Their conspicuous presence; their resolutely un-modernist performativity is not a distraction from, but a complement to, the art of storytelling itself, which similarly digresses, wanders, deals in half-truths, and patches together random memories. By rebelling against their role as functional siblings to the image, Hanna's fonts become fully integrated into the field of imagery, which is energetically splayed across the extravagantly detailed pages (like modern-day, secular illuminated manuscripts), or endless stories with .

The impudent non-conformity of these typographic gestures becomes, in the end, an homage to the 'true' origins of typography, one drawn through the history of the handwritten word, with all its imperfections, made by imperfect humans, and before the invention of printing standardized the forms of written language, making possible the ideal of the 'crystal goblet'.

Warde is right one one sense: there *are* times when text should be invisible to content, but equally there are times when text should be a performer in its own right. In the case of Hannah's work, never mind the high modernist: 'What must it do?', this type is all about 'How should it look?'. Jonny Hannah's typefaces are theatrical virtuosos on the stage of both his imagination, and typographic history. Impudent and arbitrary, anarchic and absurd, they are for the connoisseur of creativity.

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