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Conventions of Typography Related to Traditional Poetry

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Poetry is a distinctive type of text characterised by its layout, which is determined by the poet, not by the designer. However, before printing, this text has to adapt to constraints related to printing and publishing rules as well as to costs. These constraints can directly affect the layout and this creates a tension between the original text and the final result. Clearly the layout of poetry can affect its intended meaning and how it is understood by its readers. In traditional poetry, where the text is characterised by regular meter and fixed poetic form, such difficulties occur. It is desirable, therefore, to establish printing and publishing rules which respect such fixed forms and regularity of text, whilst at the same time conforming to printing and publishing constraints. Unfortunately, books about typography and manuals of style have always treated this subject all too superficially, as this paper will show.

The earliest printer's manuals

According to Fishman (1974:859), 'tradition in the widest sense signifies consciousness of the past'; tradition, therefore, related to poetry involves its whole history. This history includes how traditional poetry uses stress and sound to measure and foreground what Bradford calls 'the principal structural characteristic of the poem: the line' (Bradford, 1997:16). In terms of the typography of poetry, its whole history is closely linked to the conventions which scribes adopted in order to commit poetic lines to the page. Up until the time that scribes start to put the poems on the page, poetry had always been transmitted orally. In the age of the printing-press, manuals were developed in order to involve printers in both technical and grammatical issues. In order to establish the typographical background of poetry it is important to understand the conventions poetry has used in the past. Printers' manuals are an interesting historical source because they describe the earliest working methods of the printer, although none are early enough to show the very earliest working methods. They were first produced in the seventeenth century. The very earliest printer's manual, called *Mechanick exercises: or, the doctrine of handy-works. Applied to the art of printing,* was written by Joseph Moxon in 1677. However, there is no mention of how poetry was set on the page in this work. The typographical approach is all related to prose. This lack of information about poetry is common to most earlier printers' manuals. John Smith's *Printer's grammar* (1755), John Johnson's *Typographia* or *The printers' instructor* (1824), Edward Grattan's *The printer's companion* (1846) Arthur Oldfield's *A practical manual of typography* (1890) and Charles Thomas Jacobi's *Printing*

(1890) only mention poetry when describing the work of the compositor. Some manuals do not mention poetry at all, such as Caleb Stower's *The printer's manual* (1817), T.C. Hansard's *Typographia* (1825), Charles Henry Timperley's *Printer's manual* (1838), the American manual of printing: *Typographia: or the printer's instructions* written by Thomas Adams and published in 1844, Thomas Lynch's *The printer's manual* (1859) and Thomas Mackellar's *The American printer: a manual of typography* (1870). There are exceptions, such as W.H. Tickle's *The printers' manual* (1828) in which poetry is mentioned in the section on 'capitalization'. Here, Tickle lists the situations in which capitals should be used. Situation number nine states: '9. At the beginning of every line of poetry' (Tickle, 1828:20). Another exception is found in the *Manuel typographique* written by Pierre-Simon Fournier in 1764. Here he shows a condensed typeface which he created especially for poetry. In the description of the characteristics of this condensed typeface, he states the importance of shortening the lines in order to avoid turnover lines:

> Another advantage of thus compressing the letters laterally against one another is that verse lines of ten or twelve syllables are not too long for the page, and there is no need to make two lines of them, or, as it is called, *turn them in*.
> (Translated from French into English in Carter, 1973:170)

He emphasizes that the excess of turnover lines creates blocks of white on the page which are reinforced by the blank space already left by lines which do not extend the full width of the page, which a common characteristic of poetry. He says that these blocks are offensive to the eye. He stresses that 'the new type prevents this eyesore' (Carter, 1973:170).

The twentieth-century manuals

By the twentieth century manuals of style had developed from these printers' manuals. They were useful not only to printers, but also to authors. However, during this period of development, some of the printer's manuals and manuals of style gave a similar lack of information about poetry: Henry Kenyon Stephenson's *Printing* (1941), Thwaites's *Printers publishers authors handbook* (1948), James Jarret's *Printing style for authors, compositors and readers* (1960) do not mention poetry at all.

In 1893, Horace Hart wrote a manual for compositors and readers called *Hart's rules*. This work developed into the manual of style of The Oxford University Press, *The Oxford guide to style*. In the *Hart's rules* editions from 1893 until the late twentieth century, more space is gradually devoted to poetry, although the greatest space is still related to how to quote poetry within prose texts. The field of prose is without doubt the main focus of interest. However, some manuals of style from the twentieth century and some books about editing do mention poetry in more detail, such as R.A. Hewitt's *Style for print and proof correcting* (1957), Marjorie Skillin and Robert Gay's *Words into type* (1974), Judith Butcher's *Copy-editing* (1992), *The Chicago manual of style* (1993) and Ritter's *Oxford guide to style* (2002). Books or articles about typography, composition and historical aspects of writing and typography have also devoted some space to poetry such as De Vinne's *Correct composition* (1902), Bernard Newdigate's *On printing poetry* (Thorpe, 1950), Oliver Simon's *Introduction on typography* (1945), Norman Hidden's *The poet's guide* (1979), Jan Tschichold's *Asymmetric typography* (1967), Hugh Williamson's *Methods of book design* (1956), Ullman's *Ancient writing and its influence* (1963), Ruari McLean's *Manual of typography* (1980), Robert Bringhurst *The elements of typographic style* (1992), M.B. Parkes' *Pause and effect: punctuation on the west* (1992) and

Hochuli and Kinross's *Designing books* (1996). These works provide only a fragmented overview of how poetry has been treated over the decades. Because their main focus of interest is prose, it is interesting to consider why such books on typography have never given much information relating to the typesetting of poetry.

Poetry and prose: the differences

Poetry has been dealt with in a similar way to drama and musical notation. Special sections within the above books have been devoted to these topics. According to Oliver Simon, 'printing of poetry is more complex than printing of prose, and any rules must allow for many exceptions.' (Simon, 1945:48). Prose is a kind of text which adapts flexibly to rules of composition, styles of publishing houses and sizes of pages because the original manuscript does not have any special importance in relation to the shape of the text. The handling of beginnings, headings and paragraphs, for example, normally conform to rules which govern the final shape of the text on the page, together with grammar and syntax.

Conversely, poetry deals with texts in which the author's manuscript does have a special importance. Moreover, poetry, according to Richard Bradford (1997:15), 'supplements the use of grammar and syntax with another system of organization: the line'. Hence, poetry is concerned with pre-determined breaking lines, specific groups of lines (stanzas) and the relationship between the lines (rhyme) which dictate the shape of the text.

This shape is commented on A. R. Braunmuller (1993:47):

Non-semantic physical attributes – an unjustified right-hand margin, capitals at the start of each line – signal formal properties of the text. In turn, these formal features stipulate conventional relations among writer, text, and reader; they tell us how we are expected to regard the text. These texts are poetry, or at least verse, and must be read as such because of their margins and their capitals.

How the designer, printer or editor deals with the author's manuscript (a text presented by the author, whether literally, a manuscript, a typescript or a computer print-out) is a crucial point. The shape of a text in prose is not necessarily defined by this manuscript, and the editor is the person who takes the decisions about how to set this text on the page. It is understandable, therefore, that manuals have been made to guide this job. By contrast, the shape of poetry is basically defined by the author's manuscript, which partly explains why manuals do not deal with a text which comes with its own rules.

In poetry, according to Stillman (1966:viii), 'the line is a unit of language in a poem' and it is 'the unit that is the distinctive feature of poems', according to Bradford (1996:3). In prose, the line is a simple typographic line. It is important to point out again the difference between a 'poetic' line and a 'typographic' line. In the former, the line is of special importance as it is determined by its author, and in the latter it has been determined by type size available and line length rather than by its author. *The Chicago manual of style* (1993) touches on this point when it explains the difference between 'prose' and 'poetry' from a typographical point of view. According to this manual, prose is a text in which the length of a line is determined by the designer, unlike poetry, where 'the length of line is determined by the author'. Bernard Newdigate (1869-1944) from the Shakespeare Head Press, also refers to line-endings in poetry saying that 'jagged ends of the verse are a condition which no printer's

ingenuity can control' (Thorpe, 1950:22). However, he still prefers to have some control within such a text; he suggests that printers can control spacing between words in order to make the line longer or shorter. Since such books are dedicated to discussing an area which gives editors more control than authors, it is logical and understandable that they focus on prose issues mainly because they clearly cannot suggest typographical rules for unpredictable forms of poetry. However, when the layout of a text is determined by a person who is not involved in the production of the book, in this case, the poet, his decisions impact on the editor's typographical choices.

The line length is one such typographical choice which is an essential part of written and printed poetry, but there are a number of other typographical features, such as indentation, the alignment of the poem on the page, the use of capital letters and the blank spaces within the poem which are also significant in defining the typography of poetry. Models and rules which poets have followed throughout the centuries are found in the traditional forms of poetry. Such traditional forms can be seen in *traditional stanza forms* such as terza rima, rhyme royal or Spenserian stanza, and *traditional poem forms*, such as the Shakespearean sonnet, the Spenserian sonnet and the ballade.

It has been seen how printers' manuals, manuals of style and books about typography do relate to poetry in an inconsistent way. They include comments on several useful features. In order to look closely at these features, the following section will concentrate on rules and prescriptions within the twentieth-century material identified in the previous section, as these provide a fuller source of information than manuals from the previous centuries.

Advice for typesetting poetry within twentieth century manuals

Common suggestions and rules

The twentieth-century manuals and the books about typography show how poetry has been, or can be, set on the page, without explaining especially why such procedures are recommended. There are two ways in which suggestions and rules are written: some authors advocate rigid methods of displaying poetry on the page, whilst others are more flexible in their approach. For example, as regards the use of capital letters, De Vinne (1902) argues that the poem *must* use the capital letter at the beginning of each line. Simon (1945) is basically of the same opinion, however he says that the poet's manuscript has to be respected. Hart and Ritter (2002:445) are also flexible because they suggest 'do not automatically impose capitals at the beginnings of lines'. They remind their readers that this is a tradition from Greek and Latin poetry and that modern verse is often written with lower case letters at the beginning of lines.

They suggest following the original manuscript. R. A. Hewitt (1957:96) in a section called 'Without exceptions', states that printers should 'capitalise the first word in each line of poetry in English'. He claims that there should be no exception to this rule 'unless the poet has ultra-modern ideas'.

One of the features most often commented on relates to page layout. Most of the books listed in the introduction discuss the alignment of the poem on the page (*Chicago manual of style*, 1993; Simon, 1945; Williamson, 1956; Hart, 1983; Ritter, 2002; McLean, 1980; De Vinne, 1902; Bringhurst, 1992; Tschichold, 1967). Some are concerned with the balance of facing pages (McLean, 1980 and Newdigate in Thorpe, 1950). Others discuss the importance of the shape relating to rhythm (Simon, 1945; *The Chicago manual of style*, 1993;

Williamson, 1956 and Hidden, 1979). The margins and orientation of the page and page size are considered by Newdigate (Thorpe, 1950) and McLean (1980) and the type size is discussed by Williamson (1956), Simon (1945) and Butcher (1992). Another common area of interest relates to turnover lines. As poetry is a text which is characterized by a group of lines whose line endings are determined by the poet, some of the works mentioned in the introduction recommend avoiding turnover lines (Simon, 1945; Williamson, 1956; De Vinne, 1904; Newdigate in Thorpe, 1950; Skiling, 1974; Mclean, 1980 and *Chicago manual of style*, 1993). Some authors agree in avoiding turnover lines but also suggest following the original manuscript (Butcher, 1992 and Ritter, 2002), whereas De Vinne recommends breaking the lines, when they are too long, to avoid lines extending into the margins and in order to retain the central shape. Some works specify that if there are turnover lines, they must be indented (Skiling, 1974). Some works even specify the size of this indentation (Hart, 1983 and Ritter, 2002).

A further feature which is often discussed within manuals and books about typography is the treatment of poetical quotations within prose texts. This is frequently referred to in these works, but it is not integral to this research. Its treatment shows once more how such books are concerned with issues relating to prose rather than to poetry.

Indentation is commented on by the majority of sources which advocate using it for rhyming lines (Simon, 1945; Skillin and Gay, 1974 and Hart, 1983). However, the recommendation to follow the original manuscript is also found (Hart, 1983 and Butcher, 1992). Although De Vinne feels that it is important to follow the shape which has been determined by the poet, rhyming lines should in addition be intended to match each other to ensure clarity of expression. However, he comments that 'sonnets are sometimes indented artificially in the copy without regard to their rime' (De Vinne, 1904:149), although he does not explain what he means by 'artificially'. Newdigate does not see any reason to indent rhyming lines within sonnets. His position seems to be a little ambiguous because he is clearly not referring to the sonnet when he states that 'there is a good deal to be said in favour of beginning the lines flush on the left, regardless of rhyme or metre' (Thorpe, 1950:22).

Other features relating to poetry mentioned in the works listed in the twentieth century manuals are: page breaks, space between stanzas, division of texts, titles, line numbering, margins, balance, word spacing and page breaks. However, they are not widely discussed.

Variations in suggestions and rules

These works single out many topics for prescriptive treatment. However, none of them in particular clarify precisely why they have been selected or why they have been treated in greater detail than others. For instance, Newdigate (Thorpe, 1950), McLean (1980) and Hochuli and Kinross (1996) point out the importance of paying attention to the balance of the facing pages. However, Simon (1945) and *The Chicago manual of style* (1993) bear no mention of facing pages at all.

This variation may have resulted from differing cultures, differing periods, and different experiences of working with various types of books. Printers, typographers, publishers and publishing houses, historians, and people with a wealth of editorial experience were the authors of these books from the beginning to the end of the twentieth century. In fact, it is not easy to compare differing stances, mainly because these works are not similar in terms of the importance they give to poetry.

There is also a variation in terms of space devoted to poetry. Sometimes whole sections, sometimes paragraphs and sometimes only few lines are related to poetry. At times, a whole section is devoted to poetry, yet at other times references to poetry are spread throughout the book. For instance, De Vinne (1902 and 1904) points out general topics relating to composition such as capital letters, running heads and breaking lines, yet only occasionally includes the genre of poetry. He does not mention poetry within every topic, but only in cases where he considers it important to demonstrate its special characteristics. Poetry is mentioned in Williamson (1956) in a chapter that deals with principles of text design. He devotes few pages to this. McLean (1980) devotes one page and one illustration to issues related to setting poetry in his chapter about the parts of a book. Bringhurst (1992) discusses verse with reference to poetical quotations, but he also recommends that the typographer must be aware enough to make the units of verse (the stanza and its articulation) clear to the reader. Tschichold (1967:46) is another writer who mentions poetry only briefly: he devotes few lines to this. In his opinion: 'poetry is only perfectly set when it is set like a list' (which it can be assumed to mean that it is aligned on the left). He explains that:

> It is no accident that verse is set to align on the left. If lines of verse were set symmetrically centred, they would be much harder to read because the eye would continually search for start of the lines. (Tschichold 1967:44)

In this brief comment, Tschichold shows that he prefers to align text on the left rather than centrally, selecting from two options only. However, he is ignoring the use of indentation, which is a commonly found third option for setting line beginnings in poetry.

Butcher (1992) has included a chapter entitled 'Literary material' in which she merely mentions poetry together with other topics such as quotations, plays, anthologies and collections of essays. She does not mention poetry in the 'Special subjects' chapter, as she does with music and law. *The Chicago manual of style* discusses six topics relating to poetry in three paragraphs within a chapter section entitled 'Text other than prose'. When Simon (1945) wrote about the setting of a text, he devoted few pages to text and examples. Ritter (2002) devotes one page to the setting of poetry and four more to quotations, punctuation, ellipses, sources, foot- and end-notes and prosaic notations. Skillin and Gay (1974) devote one page to positions, indentation and scansion, discussing issues relating to lay out, rhymed lines and symbols to indicate stressed syllables. Hochuli and Kinross (1996:52) devote few pages to poetry; those which are included are heavily illustrated and focus on layout, including centring the poem visually on the page and balancing facing pages. It is a brief text; however, they specify that 'line-breaks, indents, line space, lines that begin with capitals or with lowercase will be stipulated by the author and respected by the typographer'. This quotation shows which features they consider to be characteristic of poetry.

Similarities in suggestions and rules

Despite the differences found in these works, the similarities which persist among these sources are meaningful. *The Chicago manual of style,* McLean and Williamson agree with Oliver Simon in his *Introduction to typography* (1945) that the choice of typeface provides a solution to the problem of turnover lines because smaller or narrow typefaces allow a verbally longer line. Simon again is not alone in suggesting that typeface influences the appearance of the rhythm of the poem. Williamson (1956) and others support this view. Simon,

Williamson, De Vinne, Newdigate, Skiling, Mclean, Hart, *Chicago manual of style* and Ritter also suggest that turnover lines should be avoided. With respect to breaking stanzas, Simon and Butcher suggest not separating rhyming lines. Simon also states that each poem is like a new chapter and following this idea, Williamson, McLean and *The Chicago manual of style* maintain that each poem should begin on a new page. In Simon's opinion, in poetry the words should always have the same space between them, and this is also accepted by Hart, De Vinne and Ritter, with Hart and Ritter specifying the size this space should be. This is not the case for Newdigate. For him, the printer can adjust the word and letter spacing in order to accommodate the whole poetic line in one typographic line, if this is necessary. The idea of following the manuscript in the case of capitalization of each line is recommended by most of the authors; however, Simon and Williamson are concerned about the incidence of 'possible confusion if initial capitals were not used invariably at the beginning of each line' (Simon: 1945:50).

Conclusion

The irregularity and occasional superficiality of prescriptions show that there is no consistently serious study concerning the nature of printed poetry in these references. As poetry is not especially mentioned, and manuals of style and books about typography devote only one paragraph to this subject, poetry is seen to be a text without its own characteristics.

This is surprising because, for instance, if poetry was printed in a sequence of linear lines following each other, as in prose, the message and the meaning could be quite different to that of the same text with each poetic line on a new typographic line. Since traditional poetry has meter, rhythm and poetic lines, the difference between this and prose is visually revealed by its typography. Therefore, it would be expected that manuals of style and books about typography would cover this subject. However, it is clear from this research is that very little has been written about this topic. This means that the conventions of typography related to poetry are an area rich in possibilities yet to be explored.

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