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**THE IDEAL BOOK**  
**A PAPER BY WILLIAM MORRIS**

Read before the Bibliographical Society, London,  
June 19, 1893

L.C.C. Central School of Arts & Crafts, Regent St.  
1908

**B**Y THE IDEAL BOOK, I SUPPOSE WE are to understand a book not limited by commercial exigencies of price : we can do what we like with it, according to what its nature, as a book, demands of Art. But we may conclude, I think, that its matter will limit us somewhat ; a work on differential calculus, a medical work, a dictionary, a collection of a statesman's speeches, or a treatise on manures, such books, though they might be handsomely and well printed, would scarcely receive ornament with the same exuberance as a volume of lyrical poems, or a standard classic, or such like. A work on Art, I think, bears less of ornament than any other kind of book—NON BIS IN IDEM is a good motto. Again, a book that must have illustrations, more or less utilitarian, should, I think, have no actual ornament at all, because the ornament and the illustration must almost certainly fight. Still, whatever the subject matter of the book may be, and however bare it may be of decoration, it can still be a work of art, if the type be good and attention be paid to its general arrangement. ¶ All here present, I suppose, will agree in thinking an opening of Schœffer's 1462 Bible beautiful, even when it has neither been illuminated nor rubricated ; the same may be said of Schüssler, or Jenson, or, in short, of any of the GOOD old printers ; their works, without any further ornament than they



derived from the design & arrangement of the letters were definite works of art. In fact, a book, printed or written, has a tendency to be a beautiful object; and that we of this age should generally produce ugly books, shows, I fear, something like malice pre-pense, a determination to put our eyes in our pockets whenever we can. ¶ Well, I lay it down, first, that a book quite unornamented can look actually and positively beautiful, and not merely un-ugly, if it be, so to say, architecturally good, which by the by, need not add much to its price (since it costs no more to pick up pretty stamps than ugly ones) and the taste and forethought that goes to the proper setting, position, and so on, will soon grow into an habit, if cultivated, and will not take up much of the master-printer's time when taken with his other necessary business. ¶ Now, then, let us see what this architectural arrangement claims of us.

First, the pages must be clear & easy to read; which they can hardly be unless,

Secondly, the type is well designed; and

Thirdly, whether the margins be small or big, they must be in due proportion to the page of letter.

¶ For clearness of reading, the things necessary to be heeded are, first, that the letters should be properly put on their bodies, and, I think, especially that

there should be small whites between them. It is curious, but to me certain, that the irregularity of some early type, notably the roman letter of the early printers of Rome, which is, of all roman type, the rudest, does not tend towards illegibility: what does do so, is the lateral compression of the letter, which necessarily involves the over thinning out of its shape. Of course I do not mean to say that the above mentioned irregularity is other than a fault to be corrected. One thing should never be done in ideal printing, the spacing out of letters, that is, putting an extra white between them; except in such hurried and unimportant work as newspaper printing, it is inexcusable. ¶ This leads us to the second matter on this head, the lateral spacing of words (the whites between them). To make a beautiful page great attention should be paid to this, which, I fear is not often done. No more white should be used between the words than just clearly cuts them off from one another; if the whites are bigger than this, it both tends to illegibility and makes the page ugly. I remember once buying a handsome fifteenth century Venetian book, and I could not tell at first why some of its pages were so worrying to read, and so commonplace and vulgar to look at; for there was no fault to find with the type. But presently it was accounted for by the spacing; for the said pages were spaced like a modern book, i. e., the black & white

nearly equal. Next, if you want a legible book, the white should be clear & the black black. When that excellent journal, The Westminster Gazette, first came out, there was a discussion on the advantages of its green paper, in which a good deal of nonsense was talked. My friend, Mr. Jacobi, being a practical printer, set these wise men right, if they noticed his letter, as I fear they did not, by pointing out that what they had done was to lower the tone (not the moral tone) of the paper, & that therefore, in order to make it as legible as ordinary black & white, they should make their black blacker, which of course they do not do. You may depend upon it that a grey page is very trying to the eyes. ¶ As above said, legibility depends also much on the design of the letter ; and again I take up the cudgels against compressed type, and that especially in roman letter. The full-sized lower case letters, a, b, d, &c., should be designed on something like a square to get good results; otherwise, one may fairly say there is no room for the design. Furthermore, each letter should have its due characteristic drawing; e.g., the thickening out for a b, should not be of the same kind as that for a d; a u should not merely be an n turned upside down; the dot of the i should not be a circle drawn with compasses, but a delicately drawn diamond, & so on. To be short, the letters should be designed by an artist and not an engineer. As to the forms of

letters in England (I mean Great Britain) there has been much progress within the last forty years. The sweltering hideousness of the Bodoni letter, the most illegible type that was ever cut, with its preposterous thicks and thins, has been mostly relegated to works that do not profess anything but the baldest utilitarianism (though why even utilitarianism should use illegible types I fail to see), and Caslon's letter, & the somewhat wiry, but in its way, elegant old faced type cut in our own days, has largely taken its place. It is rather unlucky, however, that a somewhat low standard of excellence has been accepted for the design of modern roman type at its best; the comparatively poor and wiry letter of Plantin, and the Elzevirs, having served for the model, rather than the generous & logical designs of the fifteenth century Venetian printers, at the head of whom stands Nicholas Jenson. When it is so obvious that this is the best and clearest roman type yet struck, it seems a pity that we should make our starting point for a possible new departure at any period worse than the best. If any of you doubt the superiority of this type over that of the seventeenth century, the study of a specimen enlarged about five times will convince him, I think. I must admit, however, that a commercial consideration comes in here; to wit, that the Jenson letters take up more room than the imitations of the seventeenth century; and that touches

on another commercial difficulty ; to wit, that you cannot have a book either handsome or clear to read which is printed in small characters. For my part, except where books smaller than an ordinary octavo are wanted, I would fight against anything smaller than pica ; but at any rate, small pica seems to me the smallest type that should be used in the body of any book. I might suggest to printers that if they want to get more in they can reduce the size of the leads, or leave them out altogether. Of course this is more desirable in some types than others ; e.g., Caslon's letter, which has long ascenders & descenders never needs leading, except for special purposes. ¶ I have hitherto had a fine and generous roman type in my mind ; but after all, a certain amount of variety is desirable, & when you have once got your roman letter as good as the best that has been, I do not think you will find much scope for development of it. I would therefore, put in a word for some form of gothic letter for use in our improved printed book. This may startle some of you ; but you must remember that except for a very remarkable type used very seldom by Berthelette (I have only seen two books in this type, Bartholomew the Englishman, and the Gower of 1532) English black letter, since the days of Wynkin de Worde, has been always the letter which was introduced from Holland about that time (I except again, of course, the modern imitations of



Caxton). Now this, though a handsome and stately letter, is not very easy reading; it is too much compressed, too spiky, & so to say, too prepensely gothic. But there are many types which are of a transitional character and of all degrees of transition; from those which do little more than take in just a little of the crisp floweriness of the gothic, like some of the Mentelin or quasi Mentelin ones (which, indeed, are models of beautiful simplicity); or, say, like the letter of the Ulm Ptolemy, of which it is difficult to say whether it is gothic or roman; to the splendid Maintz type, of which, I suppose, the finest example is the Schœffer Bible of 1462, and which is almost wholly gothic. This gives us a wide field for variety, I think, so I make the suggestion to you & leave this part of the subject with two remarks: first, that a good deal of the difficulty of reading gothic books is caused by the numerous contractions in them, which were a survival of the practice of the scribes; and in a lesser degree by the overabundance of tied letters; both of which drawbacks I take it for granted would be absent in modern types founded on these semi-gothic letters. And, secondly, that in my opinion the capitals are the strong side of roman, and the lower case of gothic letter; which is but natural, since the roman was originally an alphabet of capitals, & the lower case a deduction from them. ¶ We now come to the position of the page of print on the paper,

which is a most important point, and one that till quite lately has been wholly misunderstood by modern, and seldom done wrong by ancient printers, or indeed by producers of books of any kind. On this head, I must begin by reminding you that we only occasionally see one page of a book at a time ; the two pages making an opening are really the unit of the book ; and this was thoroughly understood by the old book producers. I think you will very seldom find a book, produced before the eighteenth century, & which has not been cut down by that enemy of books (& of the human race), the binder, in which this rule is not adhered to : that the binder edge (that which is bound in) must be the smallest member of the margins, the head margin must be larger than this, the fore larger still, and the tail largest of all. I assert that, to the eye of any man who knows what proportion is, this looks satisfactory, & that no other does so look. But the modern printer, as a rule, dumps down his page in what he calls the middle of the paper, which is often not really the middle, as he measures his page from the headline, if he has one, though it is not really part of the page, but a spray of type only faintly staining the head of the paper. Now I go so far as to say that any book in which the page is properly put on the paper, is tolerable to look at, however poor the type may be—always so long as there is no “ornament” which may spoil the whole

thing. Whereas any book in which the page is wrongly set on the paper is intolerable to look at, however good the type and ornaments may be. I have got on my shelves now a Jenson's Latin Pliny, which, in spite of its beautiful type and handsome painted ornaments, I dare scarcely look at, because the binder (adjectives fail me here) has chopped off two-thirds of the tail margin. Such stupidities are like a man with his coat buttoned up behind, or a lady with her bonnet put on hind side foremost. ¶ Before I finish this section I should like to say a word concerning large paper copies. I am clean against them, though I have sinned a good deal in that way myself; but that was in the days of ignorance, and I petition for pardon on that ground only. If you want to publish a handsome edition of a book as well as a cheap one, do so; but let them be two books, & if you (or the public) cannot afford this, spend your ingenuity & your money in making the cheap book as sightly as you can. Your making a large paper copy out of the small one lands you in a dilemma even if you reimpose the pages for the large paper, which is not often done, I think. If the margins are right for the smaller book, they must be wrong for the larger; and you have to offer the public the worse book at the bigger price. If they are right for the large paper, they are wrong for the small, and thus spoil it, as we have seen above that they must do; and that seems

scarcely fair to the general public—from the point of view of artistic morality—who might have had a book that was sightly, though not high priced. ¶ As to the paper of our ideal book, we are at a great disadvantage compared with past times. Up to the end of the fifteenth, or, indeed, the first quarter of the sixteenth centuries, no bad paper was made, and the greater part was very good indeed. At present there is very little good paper made, & most of it is very bad. Our ideal book must, I think, be printed on hand-made paper as good as it can be made; penury here will make a poor book of it. Yet if machine-made paper must be used, it should not profess fineness or luxury; but should show itself for what it is. For my part, I decidedly prefer the cheaper papers that are used for the journals, so far as appearance is concerned, to the thick, smooth, sham-fine papers on which respectable books are printed, & the worst of these are those which imitate the structure of hand-made papers. ¶ But granted your hand-made paper, there is something to be said about its substance. A small book should not be printed on thick paper, however good it may be. You want a book to turn over easily, and to lie quiet while you are reading it, which is impossible, unless you keep heavy papers for big books. ¶ And by the way, I wish to make a protest against the superstition that only small books are comfortable to read. Some small books are

tolerably comfortable ; but the best of them are not so comfortable as a fairly big folio, the size, say, of an uncut Polyphilus, or somewhat bigger. The fact is, a small book seldom does lie quiet, & you have either to cramp your hand by holding it, or else to put it on the table with a paraphernalia of matters to keep it down, a table-spoon on one side, a knife on another, & so on, which things always tumble off at a critical moment, and fidget you out of the repose which is absolutely necessary to reading. Whereas, a big folio lies quiet and majestic on the table, waiting kindly till you please to come to it, with its leaves flat and peaceful, giving you no trouble of body, so that your mind is free to enjoy the literature which its beauty enshrines. ¶ So far, then, I have been speaking of books whose only ornament is the necessary and essential beauty which arises out of the fitness of a piece of craftsmanship for the use which it is made for. But if we get as far as that, no doubt from such craftsmanship definite ornament will arise, and will be used, sometimes with wise forbearance, sometimes with prodigality equally wise. Meantime, if we really feel impelled to ornament our books, no doubt we ought to try what we can do ; but in this attempt we must remember one thing, that if we think the ornament is ornamentally a part of the book merely because it is printed with it, and bound up with it, we shall be much mistaken. The

ornament must form as much a part of the page as the type itself, or it will miss its mark, and in order to succeed, and to be ornament, it must submit to certain limitations, & become architectural; a mere black and white picture, however interesting it may be as a picture, may be far from an ornament in a book; while, on the other hand, a book ornamented with pictures that are suitable for that, & that only, may become a work of art second to none, save a fine building duly decorated, or a fine piece of literature. ¶ These two latter things are, indeed, the one absolutely necessary gift that we should claim of art. The picture-book is not, perhaps, absolutely necessary to man's life, but it gives us such endless pleasure, and is so intimately connected with the other absolutely necessary art of imaginative literature that it must remain one of the very worthiest things towards the production of which reasonable men should strive.

¶ Printed at the L.C.C. Central School of Arts & Crafts, Regent St. W. Set in type by Leonard Jay. Instructor: J. H. Mason. Finished February, 1908.



















