

To Hide or to Highlight: The New Traditionalists vs. The New Typography

In the early 20th century there arose two distinct approaches to the integration of new technologies of book production, such as the Monotype and Linotype typesetting machines, into book design practices. On one side were the New Typographers, self-proclaimed Modernists aligned with institutions such as the Bauhaus who felt that typography should shed its traditional trappings in order to better suit the demands of modern life. On the other side were the New Traditionalists, perhaps best exemplified by Stanley Morison, who argued that typographers must adopt the new machines but be grounded in past practices or else risk jeopardising the reading experience.

The core point of contention was whether the typographer should take an active role in directing the attention of the reader. The New Typography was based on the premise that modern readers were so overwhelmed by the volume of print material being produced that it was necessary for typographical designers to assist the reader in determining which information was truly important. Opposed to this, the New Traditionalists' position was symbolised by Beatrice Warde's "crystal goblet" – readers should not be aware of the reading interface because they should be able to commune with the author's text with as little outside interference as possible.

The New Traditionalists were successful in arguing that the New Typography was unsuitable for texts intended for continuous reading (i.e. novels) because they made the case that it was suitable (and indeed preferable) for ephemeral texts. One wants an advertisement to get the reader's attention but, for texts that 'really matter,' typographers should try to hide their own presence as much as possible. As a result, not only do current novels continue to resemble historical models, new interfaces for the reading of literature are being positioned within this tradition of transparency.

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Dr. Jon Bath
Manager, Humanities and Fine Arts Digital Research Centre
University of Saskatchewan
College of Arts and Science
Arts 145
(306)966-1429