

# A Note on the Type

J. G. Ballard's 1974 novel *Concrete Island* culminates in a scene of writing. Speeding along the M4 outside London, architect Robert Maitland crashes his Jaguar through a guardrail and into a vast triangle of waste ground beneath an intersection of overpasses, finding himself injured and unable to climb the steep embankments to rescue. As night falls he manages to ignite the engine of the mangled Jag with the car's cigarette lighter, but the brief, intense blaze fails to halt the rush of traffic overhead. Left to sleep in the charred hulk of the automobile, Maitland awakens to notice a retaining wall across the island: "The rain-washed concrete shone brightly in the sunlight like an empty noticeboard. A message scrawled across it in three-foot-high letters would be legible to drivers on the motorway."<sup>1</sup> Desperately in need of writing instruments, he harvests the blackened, burnt rubber terminals from the engine's distributor caps, using them to mark out "in wavering letters"

on the concrete: "HELP INJURED DRIVER CALL POLICE."<sup>3</sup>

Soon, storm clouds gather and it begins to pour, and Maitland is forced to take cover, fashioning a crude shelter in the crumbling remnants of a basement doorway. Bruised and feverish, he gazes down:

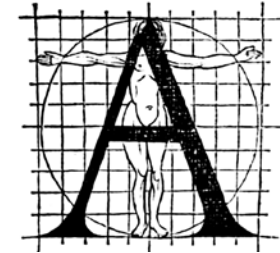
*A small printing shop had once been here, and a few copper-backed letterpress blocks lay around his feet. Maitland picked one up and examined the cloudy figures of a dark-suited man and a white-haired woman. As he listened to the rain he thought of his parents' divorce; the uncertainties of this period, when he was eight years old, seemed to be replicated in the negative image on the letterpress plate, in the reverse tones of this unknown man and woman.*<sup>2</sup>

It is a brief, reflective moment, and when Maitland emerges following the storm he notices that the letters of his hand-scrawled message have been "reduced to black smudges." Delirious with fever, he finds that "the rounded smears were exactly those of a windshield wiper," and wonders: "Was he still trapped inside his car? Was the entire island an extension of the Jaguar, its windshield and windows transformed by his delirium into these embankments? Perhaps the windshield wipers had jammed... and were tracing

some incoherent message on the steaming glass."<sup>3</sup>

This scene of writing and erasure, interrupted by the interlude in the basement print shop, traces the contours of western typographic history—from the marks made by the human hand and the mechanical reproduction of text and image made possible by the printing press, to a vision of an automated, machinic writing that exceeds both human agency and comprehension. So too, the contraction of the island in Maitland's mind to the space of the crashed Jaguar is mirrored by its expansion in Ballard's narrative to encompass the recent history of Great Britain: as he explores the overgrown rubble Maitland discovers the remains of a churchyard, Edwardian houses, an air-raid shelter, and a postwar cinema. Similarly, the shattered body of the Jaguar echoes Maitland's own, just as the inhabitants he soon encounters—a radical hippie dropout named Jane Sheppard and a brutish former acrobat known only as Proctor—double his riven psyche. The scene itself is doubled, too, when Maitland attempts to trick a reluctant Proctor into spelling out a rescue message on the retaining wall under the pretense of teaching him to write his own name: "Already the wavering letters of his first alphabet had become strong and well-formed. Using both hands he

struck at the concrete slope, slashing his A's and X's side by side." Maitland traces out words for Proctor to copy, but soon enthusiasm gets the best of him and he begins to mix up the letters "into an indecipherable mass," eventually rubbing out the message and refusing to go on.<sup>4</sup>



From  
Geoffroy  
Tory,  
*Champ  
Fleury*,  
1529

The failure of Maitland's writing lesson, read off against the earlier episode in the ruins of the printshop, foregrounds what remains "uncertain" and "indecipherable" in the mechanization of human language. For, the writing lesson is the lynchpin of all western typography. Beginning in the fifteenth century, humanist handwriting, secured through a pedagogy of imitation and a disciplining of the body, transformed the hand into a writing machine.<sup>5</sup> While lowercase roman letters emerged from this prosthetic pen-in-hand imitating the "litterae antiquae" of Carolingian manuscripts, capitals traced their origins to the letters engraved on classical roman monuments, the work of stone carvers wielding the simple machines of hammer and chisel. Geoffroy Tory's 1529 *Champ Fleury* was one of a

number of Renaissance treatises that subsequently sought to delineate the proportions of the ideal Roman capital “according to the human body and face,” thus submitting both typography and the body to the logic of geometry and the instrumentality of the grid, compass, and rule. With the invention of the printing press the humanist’s bicameral script was further adapted to mechanical reproduction through the cutting of punches and the casting of molds, a process that largely remained unchanged until the end of the nineteenth century, giving rise to the digitized roman fonts we use today.



Stanley Morison, 1889–1967, in a later portrait

In what follows I thus want to use Ballard’s narrative to reflect on one of the more curious episodes in recent typographic history—the controversy surrounding the creation of Times New Roman, perhaps the most ubiquitous of all typefaces. So the story goes, in 1929 an advertising request by *The Times* of London prompted a tirade against the paper’s outdated typography by Stanley Morison, imminent British typographer, type historian,

and advisor to the Monotype Corporation, leading to his appointment as “typographical advisor” to William Lint-Smith, the manager of *The Times*.<sup>6</sup> A series of trials followed in which sample pages of the paper were set in a variety of existing faces, but Morison was dissatisfied and decided that a new, supremely legible, economical, modern, and decidedly English typeface was needed. A special committee was convened, and at a meeting on January 28, 1931, two approaches were approved: a thickened version of Eric Gill’s Perpetua, and a “modernized Plantin.”

Focusing his energies on this second option, according to Morison he “excogitated” the design of Times New Roman, “pencilled the original set of drawings, and handed them to Victor Lardent, a draughtsman in the publicity department of Printing House Square [where *The Times* was located] whom he considered capable of producing an unusually firm and lean line.”<sup>7</sup> It was from these finished drawings that the final metal punches, in both text and titling sizes, were cut by Monotype after a large number of revisions and refinements. In the interim the matter of the change of the paper’s masthead to an all-caps roman was resolved, and thus, on October 3, 1932, Times New Roman debuted in the pages of *The Times* to universal acclaim. Released for general

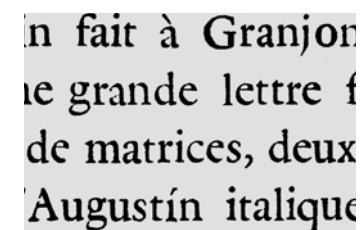
use the following year, it has become in subsequent decades one of the most recognizable typefaces of all time.



However, with Morison’s death in 1967 his biographers almost immediately began to identify inconsistencies in the official account of his role in the design of Times New Roman.<sup>8</sup> Although he could render hand-drawn “comps” for the creation of layouts, Morison was not a draftsman, and it was unlikely that he had “pencilled” the forms and given them to Lardent to redraw. Later, in *Printing The Times* (1954), Morison recounted a decision “to modify the normal Plantin,” suggesting that existing metal types had been used as a starting point. When questioned in January 1968 Victor Lardent was unable to recall specifics, but did tell biographer James Moran unequivocally that Morison had *not* given him any drawings, but instead had “handed him a photographic copy of a page from a book printed by Plantin to use as a basis.”<sup>9</sup>

The precise nature of this “photographic copy” has subsequently become the source

of considerable speculation. Was it merely a type specimen of Monotype Plantin? Or perhaps it was a photographic reproduction of a much older, original page of Robert Granjon’s Gros Cicero type, first cut in the sixteenth century, or a later impression of it, as typographer Walter Tracy has argued?<sup>10</sup> Measurements from the first metal types for Times New Roman bear a close mathematical resemblance to those for Monotype Plantin, and the speed with which the initial designs were completed would suggest some form of preexisting model, since Renaissance print samples provide only rough outlines to work from, requiring considerable, time-consuming refinement and recasting.<sup>11</sup>



Detail from *The Monotype Recorder* 21 (1932)

Sample impression of Robert Granjon’s Gros Cicero type

Still, this ur-form of Times New Roman—and who was really responsible for it—has remained elusive, and Morison’s own remarks in a 1937 letter to the American type historian D. B. Updike only served to cloud the issue: “It is my one effort at designing a fount. I wish it could be redesigned, but it seems to be doing its job day by day in *The Times*. It has the merit of looking as if it had not been

designed by anyone in particular.”<sup>12</sup> Who designed Times New Roman, then? Morison himself does not seem entirely sure, and the doublings that trouble the accounts of its creation would seem to require a lost original of uncertain agency, a “photographic copy” whose adaptation would appear to be designed by no one in particular. Indeed, Tracy, in his summary assessment of Times New Roman concludes that its “chief defect” lies in that it “lacks the insignia of true creation,” precisely what Morison finds to recommend it.<sup>13</sup>



William Starling Burgess, 1878–1947, in an undated portrait

Fast-forward to 1994, when the question of the origin of Times New Roman gained new traction thanks to Mike Parker, a former director at Linotype and co-founder of Bitstream, one of the first digital type foundries. In his article “W. Starling Burgess: Type Designer?” in the journal *Printing History* Parker made the radical suggestion that the original drawings for the font were in fact created in the early 1900s by the American yacht designer, aviation pioneer, and engineer William Starling

Burgess.<sup>14</sup> Parker described the “discovery of an ancient set of pattern letters” among “the remnants of the Lanston Monotype Machine Company of Philadelphia,” which had been purchased by the Canadian printer and typographer Gerald Giampa, and documentation tying the designs, designated Series 54, to Burgess.

Although Giampa, citing a vague “bond of confidentiality,” had withdrawn access to the archive, Parker explained that he had uncovered evidence to corroborate a rumor that had circulated in the “drawing office at Mergenthaler Linotype in the 1960s and ’70s” that “Times Roman had been designed by a naval architect in Philadelphia who had committed suicide.”<sup>15</sup> What followed was a highly detailed set of speculations relying heavily on Burgess’s biography and second-hand information suggesting that in 1904 Burgess had drawn and commissioned Series 54 from Lanston Monotype, the American counterpart to the British Monotype Corporation for use by his design firm. Although work on the face had already begun, Burgess, in Parker’s account, was soon distracted by a new-found interest in aviation and, following a 1918 fire in his Boston offices, found himself unable to pay for the completion of the project, and Series 54 was shelved.

According to Parker, in 1923 Lanston then attempted to sell Series 54 to a fledgling *Time* magazine under the name Time 54, even going so far as to create a trial setting and masthead design, but its development was also never completed.

TIME  
TIME

And so it only remained for the drawings and pattern letters to make their way, in 1931, from Philadelphia to the Monotype Works in Salfords outside London and into the hands of Stanley Morison, then out of his depth and struggling with the design of a “modernized Plantin” for *The Times*.

Parker provides neither reproductions of the original drawings he claims to have seen, nor any independent evidence. Instead, he relies on an elaborate set of formal comparisons using digitized versions of Monotype Plantin, Lanston Series 54, the Lardent drawings, and Monotype Times New Roman alongside photographs of what he claims are original brass Lanston pattern letters, a capital “B” and lowercase “f” stamped twice in their lower left corners with the numerals 54 and 362, Monotype’s series numbers for both Lanston 54 and Times New Roman.

It was a bold claim, made on the scantest of evidence, which occasioned a reply in the pages of *Printing History* by four respected figures in the field: attorney and printer Harold Berliner, Morison biographer Nicolas Barker, type designer Jim Rimmer, and president of the Printing Historical Society John Dreyfus.<sup>16</sup>

In a measured, if rather blistering, rebuttal the four respondents dismantled Parker’s argument, sweeping aside its fog of irrelevant details, remaining careful to avoid attributing “dubious motives” to Parker himself. Berliner finds no trace of the “bond of confidentiality” that Giampa cited as the reason for his withdrawal of the archive, nor any drawings marked Series 54 in the Lanston holdings at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.



Parker’s Time 54 masthead comparison

Double-stamped Lanston Series 54 pattern letter reproduced by Parker

Barker, in turn, questions Parker’s appeal to digitized versions of typefaces and, after close scrutiny of the test setting of Time 54 and the trial *Time* masthead reproduced in Parker’s essay, shows that neither could have been produced as early as he claims.

Reviewing the accepted pre-history of Times New Roman and citing extant memos from the Monotype type drawing office in 1931, Barker concludes that the “photographic copy” handed to Lardent by Morison must have been an image of a later printing of Granjon’s Gros Cicero type, likely Max Roose’s *Index Characterum Architypographiae* of 1905.<sup>17</sup> The proof, he argues, is the appearance of the lowercase “a” in the final design, a remnant of the substitution of an “a” from another font when Granjon’s original types were acquired by the Plantin-Moretus Museum in Antwerp and used to print Roose’s *Index*, which then served as the model for Times New Roman.<sup>18</sup>

Mike Parker, 1929–2014, c.1970s

Gros Cicero, Plantin, and Times New Roman

## Roman Roman Roman

Perhaps most damning, Barker further suggests that the photographs of the double-stamped pattern letters in fact depict patterns for Times New Roman from 1961, onto which the numerals “54” had been added after the fact.<sup>19</sup> Rimmer, quoted at length in a letter to Dreyfus, reveals that the fragmentary “Burgess Italic” that Parker also reproduced in his essay was in fact drawn by *him* at Giampa’s

request to accompany a 1993 revival of Time 54, for which a “cloudy outline” and digital files were supplied. Moreover, Rimmer states that Giampa had also given him a set of punches identical to the “54” that appears on the double-stamped pattern letters.



One might assume that these detailed counterarguments would have finally put Parker’s claims to rest, but to the end of his life he never wavered. Instead, he proceeded to develop Giampa’s “Burgess” into a full-fledged typeface in six weights, renamed Starling, which was commercially released in 2009. To accompany the release Parker’s tale regarding the “true” origin of Times New Roman was largely taken as fact, and a number of press outlets picked up the story, including the *Financial Times*.<sup>20</sup> With Parker’s death in 2014 his theory circulated once again, and today, no less an authority than Wikipedia includes a mention of Burgess in its entry on Times New Roman.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, a comprehensive biography of Burgess published in 2015 cites no “reference whatever in

extant Burgess letters, notebooks, autobiographical writings, or in his surviving library to typography or to the art and craft of type design.” “Nor, finally,” the author adds, “was Burgess, despite taking basic courses in mechanical drawing at Harvard, a proficient draftsman.”<sup>22</sup>

So the question remains, who designed Times New Roman? Parker, a typographic expert and respected industry veteran, could hardly be described as a crank or a dupe. Giampa, meanwhile, who died in 2009, is a shadowy figure whose motives remain obscure—financial gain? character assassination? legitimate historical recovery? As recounted in the *Financial Times*, a 2000 flood destroyed any remaining evidence in the Lanston Monotype archive that Giampa had purchased, and supposed original documents reviewed by Parker in the Smithsonian in 1996 are reportedly contaminated and no longer accessible. A 1941 bomb blast near Monotype’s London offices had also destroyed many of the original records concerning Morison’s work on Times New Roman.<sup>23</sup> Still, surely an authority like Parker must have seen *something* that convinced him, and the persistence of the Burgess story and its grudging acceptance within design history points, at the very least, to an unresolved need to come to terms with its creation.

This detour into the gentlemanly world of typographic controversy is traversed by a complex series of doublings that locate the development of Times New Roman firmly within the “body machine complex” of the early twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> Naval architect, aviation pioneer, and later co-designer of the Dymaxion car with Buckminster Fuller, Burgess doubles Morison, authority on the mechanization of typography and a railroad enthusiast who rode on the footplate of a Gresley A1 Pacific locomotive all the way to Edinburgh and enthusiastically attended the departure of the high-speed Flying Scotsman on its first non-stop trip along the London and North Eastern Railway.<sup>25</sup>



Burgess and Fuller in *Modern Mechanix Magazine*, October 1933

Like J. G. Ballard’s Maitland behind the wheel of his Jaguar, both were men whose “intimacy with machines” is of a piece with a culture of locomotion in which agency is uncertain, and the human body, no less than the type body, is submitted to new disciplinary regimes—the timetable, machine work, and the grid—that are shadowed by the spectre of the automaton.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, in a promotional pamphlet published by *The Times* in conjunction with the debut of the new redesign of the paper Morison explained that the need for the new typeface was a response to the dramatic changes in reading habits occasioned by the acceleration of human transport:

Beatrice Warde, 1900–1969, in an undated portrait

*It is evident that there must be changes in typography as long as our social habits are open to variation. When it was founded, The Times was largely read in coffeehouses; in the nineteenth century it came to be read in trains; to-day it is largely read in cars and airliners. Reading habits, dependent on social habits, will not remain constant. Neither must newspaper typography remain constant.*<sup>27</sup>

Who better, then, to have designed Times New Roman than an architect-engineer and future car designer? Or perhaps “Burgess” might simply stand for the uncertainties that obtain in the collision of bodies and technologies whose contours the writing scenes in Ballard’s *Concrete Island* circumscribe, and which lie at the very heart of typographic history, from the humanist pen and the printing press straight through to the TextEdit software that this essay is being written in—the “no one in particular” whose authorship Morison takes as “the chief merit” of Times New Roman.

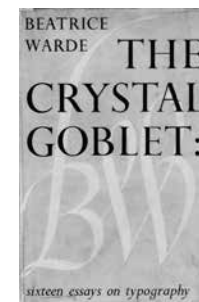
By way of conclusion this question of agency suggests one more doubling, and a silence that thus far marks a glaring absence from any account of Stanley Morison: the figure of Beatrice Warde.<sup>28</sup>



Former librarian for ATC, the American Type Founders Company, and ex-wife of Frederic Warde, director of printing at Princeton University, Beatrice Warde joined the Monotype Corporation in London in 1927 as editor of its house journal, *The Monotype Recorder*, and was soon promoted to head of publicity, a position she held until her retirement in 1960. Warde’s initial appointment had come thanks to an article she had written for the typographic journal that Morison edited, *The Fleuron*, in which she had unraveled the question of the origins of the typeface Garamond, having tracked down the original sixteenth-century punches in Europe. It was an impressive piece of typographic detective work, published by Warde anonymously under the pseudonym Paul Beaujon. Monotype, it

was said, had been shocked when a woman arrived to take the job.

Warde and Morison would become lifelong friends and close colleagues, and it was to her that he sent a cable announcing the committee’s approval of the decision to change the masthead of *The Times*, the final element in the paper’s conversion to Times New Roman: “DIRECTORS AND ALL EDITORIAL EMINENTISSIMI UNANIMOUS ROMAN HEADING.”<sup>29</sup> Morison, who famously disdained the use of first names, addressed his letters to Warde at this time “Dear P,” and it was thus as Paul Beaujon—a male moniker that seems to have been something between an open secret, an inside joke, and a mark of respect—that Beatrice Warde came to join the fraternity of men who led the typographic renaissance that began after World War I, although she was still unable to attend meetings of the Double Crown Club.



Warde’s other great contribution to the theory of typography is the essay “The Crystal Goblet, or Printing Should

be Invisible,” first delivered as a lecture in 1930 and still read by every undergraduate design student, in which she advocates for the transparent quality of good typography. The essay could easily serve as a brief for Times New Roman, now so commonplace that one contemporary commentator has stated that, “To look at Times New Roman is to gaze into the void.”<sup>30</sup>

Recalling the “negative image” of the “unknown man and woman” that occasions Robert Maitland’s reverie in the ruined printshop in *Concrete Island*, it is tempting to imagine what Beatrice Warde’s role in the development of Times New Roman might have been, and the status of the still-elusive “photographic copy” that Lardent claims to have been handed by Morison. As an accomplished type scholar and researcher Warde most certainly knew her way around an archive, and as an American and former librarian at ATC she had industry connections in the States. Her ex-husband, Frederic, we know, attended the Lanston Monotype School in Philadelphia to learn how to work the machinery.<sup>31</sup> As a publicist at Monotype, Warde would also, no doubt, have had regular dealings with the publicity department at *The Times*, and could have recommended Victor Lardent—whose primary occupation was the drafting of advertisements—for his “unusually firm and lean line.”

Beatrice Warde, *The Crystal Goblet: Sixteen Essays on Typography*, 1955

Could “Paul Beaujon”—that doubly-gendered vanishing mediator—have been the source of the “photographic copy” that served as the model for Times New Roman? That, we cannot know. After all, invisibility, Warde insisted, is the sign of good typography, just as every type designer knows that the spaces between letters—the counterforms—are just as important as the marks on the page. So too, the questions and doublings that persist around the design of Times New Roman point to the collision of bodies and technologies that shape the development of modern letterforms—and the lapses and failures that attend them.

*Auto Body Collision is typeset in Helvetica Autospaced and Monotype Times New Roman Seven. The work reproduced incorporates letterforms including Times New Roman and Arial Condensed Light.*

- 1 J. G. Ballard, *Concrete Island* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), 62.
- 2 Ibid., 65.
- 3 Ibid., 67.
- 4 Ibid., 151–52.
- 5 See Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
- 6 For the account that follows see James Moran, *Stanley Morison: His Typographic Achievement* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1971), 123–38; Nicolas Barker, *Stanley Morison* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 268–71, 283–302; and Stanley Morison, *A Tally of Types* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1999), 105–9.
- 7 Morison, *A Tally of Types*, 105.
- 8 The uncertainties regarding Morison’s version of events described here relies on the discussion in Walter Tracy, *Letters of Credit: A View of Type Design* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2003), 194–210.
- 9 Moran, *Stanley Morison*, 128. Here, Moran is paraphrasing Lardent.
- 10 Tracy, *Letters of Credit*, 196–202.
- 11 Ibid., 196–97.
- 12 David McKitterick, ed., *Stanley Morison and D. B. Updike: Selected Correspondence* (New York: The Moretus Press, 1979), 185.
- 13 Tracy, *Letters of Credit*, 210.
- 14 Mike Parker, “W. Starling Burgess: Type Designer?,” *Printing History* 16, nos. 1–2 (1994): 52–87.
- 15 Ibid., 52.
- 16 Harold Berliner, Nicolas Barker, Jim Rimmer, and John Dreyfus, “Starling Burgess, No Type Designer,” *Printing History* 19, no. 1 (1998): 3–22.
- 17 Ibid., 15.
- 18 See <http://typophile.com/node/53050> and Hendrik D. L. Vervliet, *The Paleotypography of the French Renaissance: Selected Papers in Sixteenth-Century Typefaces* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 226–27.
- 19 Berliner et al., “Starling Burgess, No Type Designer,” 18.
- 20 Joel Alas, “The History of the Times New Roman Typeface,” *The Financial Times*, August 1, 2009, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a2fa033e-7ca1-11de-a7bf-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3XJ4bKQdT>.
- 21 Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Times\\_New\\_Roman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Times_New_Roman).
- 22 Llewellyn Howland III, *No Ordinary Being: W. Starling Burgess: Inventor, Naval Architect, Poet, Aviation Pioneer, and Master of American Design* (Jaffrey, NH: David R. Godine, 2015), 65.
- 23 Alas, “The History of Times New Roman Typeface.”
- 24 See Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 25 Barker, *Stanley Morison*, 268, 295.
- 26 Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 17–18.
- 27 Stanley Morison, *Printing The Times: A Record of the Changes Introduced in the Issue for October 3, 1932* (London: The Times of London, 1932).
- 28 The historical account that follows relies on Simon Loxley, “The Doves and the Serpent: Stanley Morison and the Wardes,” in *Type: The Secret History of Letters* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2004), 123–35.
- 29 Barker, *Stanley Morison*, 296.
- 30 Matthew Butterick, *Typography for Lawyers* (Houston: Jones McClure Publishing, 2010).
- 31 Loxley, “The Doves and the Serpent,” 126.