

6 THE PROCRUSTEAN BED

¶ It is obvious that, with letters of different widths and words of different lengths, it is not possible to get a uniform length in all the lines of words on a page. But by sacrificing even spacing between letters and words short lines can be made to fill out to the same length as long ones. When the measure, i.e. the width of a page, is very wide in proportion to the size of type to be used, the sacrifice of even spacing is not noticeable; on the other hand when the measure is very narrow unevenness of spacing becomes obvious. Now uneven spacing is in itself objectionable — more objectionable than uneven length of lines, which is not in itself objectionable. We make no objection to uneven length of lines in blank verse or in a handwritten or typewritten letter. On the other hand, uneven length of line in a page of prose is not in itself desirable.

¶ A very wide measure is objectionable because it involves too much movement of the eye & head in reading, & also because unless the lines be separated by wide spaces (leads), there is danger of doubling, i.e. reading the same line twice or even three times.

¶ A very narrow measure, i.e. narrow in relation

to the type, is objectionable because the phrases and words are too cut up. Practised readers do not read letter by letter or even word by word, but phrase by phrase. It seems that the consensus of opinion favours an average of 10-12 words per line. But a ten-word line is a short one from the point of view of the compositor, i. e. with such a short line even spacing is impossible unless equality of length be sacrificed — or, vice versa, equality of length cannot be obtained without the sacrifice of even spacing. But even spacing is of more importance typographically than equal length. Even spacing is a great assistance to easy reading; hence its pleasantness, for the eye is not vexed by the roughness, jerkiness, restlessness and spottiness which uneven spacing entails, even if such things be reduced to a minimum by careful setting. It may be laid down that even spacing is in itself desirable, that uneven length of lines is not in itself desirable, that both apparently even spacing and equal length of lines may be obtained when the measure allows of over fifteen words to the line, but that the best length for reading is not more than 12 words, & that therefore it is better to sacrifice actual equality of length rather than evenness of spacing, though a measure of compromise is possible so that

apparent evenness of spacing be obtained without unpleasant raggedness of the right-hand edge. In other words, working with the 10-12 word line you can have absolute even spacing if you sacrifice equal length, but as this will generally entail a very ragged right-hand edge, the compositor may compromise and, without making his spacing visibly uneven, he can so vary the spaces between words in different lines as to make the right-hand edge not unpleasantly uneven. In any case it is clear that the 10-12 word line and even spacing between words are in themselves of real & paramount importance, while the equality of length of lines is not of the same importance, and can be obtained in a page of 10-12 word lines only by the sacrifice of more important things. In fact, equal length of lines is of its nature not a *sine qua non*; it is simply one of those things you get if you can: it satisfies our appetite for neat appearance, a laudable appetite, but has become somewhat of a superstition; and it is generally obtained at too great a sacrifice. A book is primarily a thing to be read, and the merely neat appearance of a page of type of which all the lines are equal in length is a thing of no very great value in itself; it partakes too much of the ideas of those

who regard books as things to be looked at rather than read. It is the same sort of superstition as that according to which all Christian churches should be 'gothic' ; it is a medievalism. But whereas the medieval scribe obtained his neat square page by the use of a large number of contractions (by this means words were made on the average very much shorter ; and obviously short words are more easily fitted in than long ones) & by the frank use of line-fillings — i.e. he boldly filled up a short line with an ornamental flourish or illuminated device — the modern printer obtains his square page only by the sacrifice of one of the most important constituents of readableness, even spacing between words. Moreover, however neat and square the medieval page looked, it was not actually so ; the scribe always allowed a slight give & take ; in fact his methods were both humane and rational. The modern printer's methods are, of course, not expected to be humane ; his irrationality is the more to be deplored, ¶ Appeal to the precedent of the first printed books is not relevant in this matter of even spacing between words, or of equality in length of lines ; for the early printers admittedly did no more than imitate what seemed to them to be the more important parts of

medieval practice without criticism, & were more concerned with their marvellous new power of multiplying books than with questions of typographic rationality. Moreover, the common practice of contraction, also inherited from the medieval scribe, helped still further ; & it would be a good thing typographically if, without any reliance upon medieval or incunabulist precedent, modern printers allowed a more frequent use of contractions. The absurd rule that the ampersand (&) should only be used in 'business titles' must be rescinded, & there are many other contractions which a sane typography should encourage.

¶ Another matter, closely connected with even spacing & complementary to it, is the question of close spacing. We have become accustomed to wide gaps between words, not so much because wide spacing makes for legibility as because the Procrustean Bed called the Compositor's Stick has made wide spacing the easiest way out of the difficulty caused by the tyrannical insistence upon equal length of lines. But reasonably close spacing is in itself a desirable thing. Provided that words are really distinct from one another, they should be set as close as possible. Distinctness assumed, closeness makes for that conti-

nuous flow which is essential to pleasant reading ; and pleasant reading is the compositor's main object. ¶ Here, of course, it is obvious that by coupling the word 'pleasant' with the word 'reading' we are inviting much controversy. The readable may seem to be a measurable quality, verifiable by eyesight tests & rational exposition ; and this may be so ; but the pleasantly readable is obviously a much more difficult matter, and involves consideration of the whole business of human loves and hates. This cannot be altogether escaped, and the printer must simply do his best to steer a good course among conflicting temptations. On the other hand, the industrialist will simply do what his customers demand. His work will reflect their quality even more than his, and that quality, at its best, will be what strict utility compels, and, at its worst, what the foolish sensuality of undisciplined minds will swallow. On the other hand the responsible artist, the printer who elects to stand outside industrialism, who regards the job of printing as a sculptor regards the job of stone-carving, or a village blacksmith the job of working iron, regards himself & his customer as sharing a joint enterprise, namely, the production of good books ; and the terms good, lovely, pleasant,

beautiful, mean for them not merely what will sell, or what can, by cunning advertisement, be made to sell, but what the widest culture & the strictest discipline can make them mean. The discovery, then, of what is meant by 'pleasantly readable' involves more than questions of eye-strain, important tho' that question is; it involves first and last a consideration of what is holy. Here indeed we are outside the bounds of the industrial world and all its advertised humility. Outside that world the term holy loses its exclusively moral significance; it ceases to mean simply ecclesiastical legality or devotion to social 'uplift'; it means what is reasonable no less than what is desirable, the true no less than the good. To discover the 'pleasantly readable' the printer & his customer must discover the bounds of the virtue of haste (how far is mere quickness of reading desirable?), the bounds of the virtue of fancifulness (what are the limits beyond which legitimate self-expression becomes indecent self-advertisement?) and other such lesser things. Above all they must collaborate to discover what is really pleasant in human life.