Ode to Typography

Pablo Neruda
Letters, long, severe, vertical, made of pure line, erect like a ship’s mast in the middle of the page filled with confusion and turbulence algebraic Bodoni, complete letters, lean as greyhounds, subject to the white rectangle of Geometry; Elzevirian vowels cast in the minute steel of the printshop by the water, in Flanders, in the North of the canals, ciphers of the anchor;
Aldine characters firm as the marine stature of Venice, in whose mother waters, like a leaning sail, navigates the cursive curving the alphabet: the air of the oceanic discovers bent down forever the profile of writing.

From medieval hands to your eyes advanced this N, this double 8, this J, this R of regal and rain.

There they were shaped like teeth, nails, metallic hammers of language.
they beat each letter,
erect it,
a small black statue

on the whiteness,
a petal

or a starry foot
of thought taking the form
of a swollen river,
rushing to a sea of people
with all
the alphabet

illuminating the outlet.

The hearts of men
became filled with letters,
messages, words,

and the passing or permanent wind
raised mad or sacred books.
Beneath the newly written *pyramids* the letter was alive, the alphabet burning, the vowels, the consonants like *curved* flowers.

The paper’s eyes, which looked at men seeking their gifts, their history, their loves; extending the accumulated treasure; spreading suddenly the slowness of wisdom over the printer’s word like a deck of cards; all the secret humus of the ages, song, memories, revolt, blind parable, suddenly were fecundity, granary,
Letters, letters that traveled and kindled,

letters that sailed and conquered,

letters that awakened and climbed,

letters that liberated,

letters dove-shaped that flew,

letters scarlet in the snow;

punctuation, roads, buildings of letters,

and Villon and Berceo, troubadours of memory faintly written on leather as on battle drum, arrived at the spacious nave of books, at the sailing typography.
Yet the letter was not beauty alone, but life, peace for the soldier; it went down to the solitudes of the mine, and the miner read the hard and clandestine leaflet, hid it in the folds of the secret heart and above, on earth, he was different and different was his word.

The letter was the mother of the new banners; the letters begot the terrestrial stars and the song, the ardent hymn that unites peoples; from one letter added to another letter and another, from people to people went bearing its sonorous authority, and welling in the throats of men it imposed the clarity of the song.
But typography,
let me 
celebrate you 
in the purity 
of your 
pure profiles, 
in the retort 
of the letter O, 
in the fresh 
flower vase 
of the Greek 
Y, 
in the Q of Quevedo, 
(how can my poetry 
pass 
before that letter 
and not feel the ancient shudder 
of the dying sage?),
in the lily 
multiplied 
of the 
v of victory, 
in the E 
echeloned 
to climb to heaven 
in the Z 
with its thunderbolt face, 
in the orange shaped P.
Love

I love
the letters
of your hair,
the
U of your glance,
the
S of your figure.

In the leaves
of the young springtime
sparkles the diamantine
alphabet;
emeralds
write your name
with the fresh initials of 
dew.

My
love
your hair
profund
as jungle or dictionary
covers me
with its totality
of red language

In everything,
in the wake
of the worm,
one reads,
in the rose, one reads,
the roots
are filled with letters
twisted
by the dampness of the forest
and the heavens
of the Black Isle, in the night,
I read, read
in the cold firmament
of the coast,
intense
diaphanous with beauty
unfurled,
with capital
and lower case stars
and exclamations
of frozen diamond;

I read, read
in the night of austral
Chile, lost
in the celestial solitudes
of heaven,
as in a book

I read,
all
the adventures
and in the grass

I read,
read
the green, the sandy typography

I read
the ships, the faces
and the hands,

I read
your heart
where

entwined
the provincial
initial
of your name
and
the reef
of my surnames,
I read your forehead, your hair, and in the jasmine the hidden letters elevate the unceasing springtime until I decipher the buried punctuation the poppy and the scarlet letter of summer: they are the exact flowers of my song.

But, when writing unfolds its roses, and the letter its essential gardening, when you read the old and the new words, the truths and the explorations,
I beg a thought for the one who orders type, and raises them, for the one who sets

for the linotypist and his lamp like a pilot over he waves of language ordering winds and foam, shadow and stars

in the book:

man and steel once more united against the nocturnal wing of mystery,
sailing, perforating composing.

Typography,

I am only a poet and you are the flowery play of reason,

the movement of the chess bishops of intelligence.
You rest neither night nor winter, you circulate in the veins of our anatomy and if you sleep, flying during some night or strike or fatigue or break of linotype, you go down anew to the book or newspaper like a cloud of birds to their nest.

You return to the system, to the unappealable order of intelligence.

Letters continue to fall like precise rain along my way. Oh, letters of all that lives and dies, letters of light, letters of moon, letters of silence, letters of water,
I love you,

and in you
I gather
not only thought
and combat,
but your dress,
senses,
and sounds:

A

of glorious avena,

T

of trigo and tower,

and

M

like your name
of manzana.

—Pablo Neruda
Ode to Typography
Pablo Neruda 1964, translated from the Spanish version by Carlos Lozano
Greg Dodds
2003
Fonts used: Garamond, ITC Garamond Bold