

MRS EAVES

A TYPEFACE DESIGNED BY

Zuzana Licko

BASED ON THE DESIGN OF

BASKERVILLE

EASY HILL, BIRMINGHAM
MARCH 8, 1750

- 1 Dear Voltaire,
Here is something for you to enjoy, made terrible for sure, these twofold complaints struck dumb out of luck or this is the worst temporarily converged. O please convince me this is just another pretty song swept up in the lap of Mrs. Eaves. Say it is not quite me crying all velvety and ancient and set precisely in the loins of the kitchen sink; say it is her pressed completely into every morning I see grinning through the humble lace of candle light for sure. Tell me, shall I put on my finest waistcoat and wade through the rivers held open by brasses, or shall I lay down in a fresh bed of italics and wait? I must admit that none of this comes as natural as falling backwards into the preface of splendid books, and I know I'll faint today seeing the sun come alive in a fresh pot of ink. I would even go so far as to eat from the eye of absolute proportion and guzzle the voyage down the sight of another world for her I would. What other sort of thing could arrive this way I ask?
- 2 I want to travel through eight acre days where I place on the shoulder of her "R" a few slight touches, where a tingle down the arms of her "E" might send the library of her pleasure into any of my hands. So I said to her, "Sarah, please listen to the gentle breeze as I pronounce these words... ()"

To carry

- 3 To carry on with my thoughts, I must ask you for what comes next: You say, "Most animals that couple, taste pleasure only by a single sense, and as soon as the appetite is satisfied, everything is extinguished. You are the only animal who knows what kissing is."
- 4 Yes, yes, and because her lips press to mine between the finest flannel, I can no longer imagine the salvers and bread trays racing with the enamel of cream-colored horses bouncing through the smoking rooms of all the other silly men. Please listen to these instructions my most honorable Voltaire: Look to your *Philosophical Dictionary* and use it like a handsome man for me. Tell me!
- 5 My friend, give me a sign completely asleep with your lies.
- 6 My dear friend, please excuse my need cut clean into mathematical heights.
- 7 Seriously, there is an alphabet of buttons sewn directly to my heart. Let me explain: I want to dazzle her face in a fury of letters read clearly as a landm(i)a(n)r(e)k. But I am just a man, a more or less tender thing, yet I will make letters for her to wear like the widest broaches! Yes, broaches! The arrangement with that other man is such a fatigued promise worn sacred, so am I the traitor kicking against thorns in the middle of the night? O the confines of mahogany walls! Nonetheless, I am the metal of sixty-seven books kept quaint in the craters traveling around her sexy little secrets (and mine). I'll put a shiny apple in the housekeeper's quarters.

May I ask

- 8 May I ask you to go into your kitchen and find a knife, now tell me, do these words spread like the seeds in a cheap jam? Do I have your word that your eyes are not bells slapped around by the Marquis de Sade? Whatever the case, I shall eat my own words, distasteful as they may be; and turning to her I'll say, "This is the lamp-black named between us." My face, crowned, a shield bearing horns, and a few letters in a blinding lunar phase.
- 9 Prepare yourself: I'm running through a grassy field of letters masquerading as perfection, as the famous transition, and she with all my affection woven deep
into stars.

Sincerely,
John Baskerville

A Note on Baskerville's Letter to Voltaire

- 1 This letter is fictional, yet incorporates a relevant vocabulary and historically accurate information. The content was originally generated by visually translating a letter written in French by Voltaire. A translation of this nature relies on the visual characteristics of an unknown language to provide a point of departure for intuitive free-association. The date of the letter (1750) is important for two reasons: 1) As Baskerville was setting up his printing and type business, Mrs. Eaves moved in with him as a live-in housekeeper, eventually becoming his wife in 1764; and 2) Baskerville, although not known to be well-versed in literature, was quite fond of Voltaire's writing, and constantly quoted him in public.
- 2 This admiration eventually prompted a correspondence wherein Baskerville expressed a serious interest in printing Voltaire's work. By focussing on the two points above, the resulting letter is meant to reveal an impression of Baskerville as his passions for both Mrs. Eaves and fine printing entwine.

Brian Shorn

SOURCES

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 Hutchinson, James, *Letters*, NEW YORK, VAN NOSTRAND REINHOLD CO., 1983.
 Voltaire, *Voltaire: Selections*, Introduction by Aurélien Digeon and Édouard Fannierre, LONDON, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1925.
 Voltaire, *The Portable Voltaire*, Edited by Ben Ray Redman, NEW YORK, THE VIKING PRESS, 1949.

- 1 I CAN'T REMEMBER when I first encountered a type specimen that had been printed by letterpress, or even if this experience preceded my knowledge of phototype technology. However, I do remember vividly being shocked by the great difference between letterpress type and phototype, especially when comparing specimens of what was supposedly the same typeface design.
- 2 What impressed me was not so much the fact that there was a difference; it's expected that different technologies will yield different results. What surprised me was that this difference was so uniquely uniform. Phototype font revivals consistently had an uncanny polished tightness, as though they sought to reproduce the original lead typefaces in some previously unattainable perfection, sometimes with such tight spacing that letters would practically touch; a very difficult task in lead. Perhaps it was their newly-found achievability that made these characteristics desirable at the time. Rarely did designers seek to capture the warmth and softness of letterpress printing that often occurred due to the "gain" of impression and ink spread.
- 3 Digital font revivals merely extended the quest for perfection introduced by phototype. This evolution is particularly strange in light of the fact that the development of type manufacturing technology has increased freedom of expression by reducing the mechanical restrictions on the form of type. One might imagine that these technological developments would in fact have also increased the variety of interpretations on the past, instead of reducing them. Ever since then, I have contemplated trying my hand at reviving an old favorite in a manner that challenged the common, preconceived method of interpreting the classics.

When selecting

- 4 WHEN SELECTING a typeface for revival, I recalled reading in various sources that Baskerville's work was severely criticized by his peers and critics throughout his lifetime and after. From personal experience, I could sympathize.
- 5 One recurring criticism of Baskerville's type addressed its "sterile" quality. D.B. Updike, in his book *Printing Types* of 1922, wrote: "As we look at Baskerville's specimen-sheets, the fonts appear very perfect, and yet somehow they have none of the homely charm of Caslon's letter. It is true that the types try the eye. Baskerville's contemporaries, who also thought so, attributed this to his glossy paper and dense black ink. Was this the real fault? The difficulty was, I fancy, that in his type-designs the hand of the writing-master betrayed itself, in making them too even, too perfect, too 'genteel,' and so they charmed too apparently and artfully—with a kind of finical, sterile refinement."¹
- 6 Much of the criticism Baskerville received for his work was fueled by type snobbery and professional jealousy, as is illustrated in the following passage from the book *Letters* by James Hutchinson:
- "There's the story that Benjamin Franklin, in a letter to Baskerville, told him of a practical joke that he, Franklin, had played on a critic of Baskerville's types. The critic said that Baskerville's types would be 'the means of blinding all the readers in the nation owing to the thin and narrow strokes of the letters.' Franklin gave the critic a specimen of Caslon's types with Caslon's name removed, said it was Baskerville's and asked for a specific criticism. The critic, an author whose book was printed in the same Caslon face, responded at great length about the faults he felt were very apparent in the type. Before he had finished, he complained that his eyes were suffering from the strain of reading the text."²

Sadly, because

7 Sadly, because the proliferation, and consequently the assimilation, of new typefaces occurred at a much slower pace in his time than it does today, Baskerville missed the good fortune, which many “envelope-pushing” type designers enjoy today, of having his work appreciated during his lifetime.

8 **B**ASKERVILLE’S WORK has in retrospect been classified as the ultimate transitional typeface, being pivotal between old style typefaces and the modern typefaces that followed. Similarly, from a practical standpoint, Baskerville has achieved the status of a respected text face consistent with today’s reading preferences. This illustrates once again that readers’ habits do change in time and are influenced by repeated exposure to particular typefaces, more so than by any measurable physical characteristics of the typefaces themselves.³

9 In my rendition of this classic typefaces, I have addressed the highly criticized feature of sharp contrast. To a great degree, the critics were wrong; it did not prevent Baskerville from becoming assimilated as a highly legible text face, and in fact, the high contrast between stems and hairlines became quite desirable, as is apparent in typefaces such as Bodoni, which followed in the lineage.

10 However, the criticism did make me wonder about possible alternatives. Thus, I was prompted to explore the path not taken. After all, the sharp contrast evidenced in Baskerville was new at the time of its creation due to recent developments in printing and paper-making technologies.

11 In his pursuit of perfect printing, John Baskerville developed ultra-smooth and brilliant white papers, as well as intensely black printing ink. In fact, as

D.B. Updike

D.B. Updike suggests in the previous quote, the contrast achieved through the use of these papers and inks probably contributed to the criticism of his work more than the design of his typefaces.

12 Ultimately, it may have been merely the fascination of meeting these technical challenges that made his pursuit so desirable at the time, and its proliferation in our era is merely a perpetuation that remains largely unquestioned.

13 An aspect of Baskerville’s type that I intended to retain is that of overall openness and lightness. To achieve this while reducing contrast, I have given the lower case characters a wider proportion. In order to avoid increasing the set-width, I reduced the x-height, relative to the cap-height. Consequently, Mrs Eaves has the appearance of setting about one point smaller than the average typeface in lower case text sizes.

14 I realize that certain aspects of this revival probably contradict Baskerville’s intentions, but my point in doing so is to take those elements from Baskerville that have become familiar and thus highly legible to today’s reader, and to give these my own interpretation of a slightly loose Baskerville that may be reminiscent of a time past.

Zuzana Licko

1. Updike, D.B., *Printing Types: Their History, Forms and Use*, Cambridge, HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1922.

2. Hutchinson, James, *Letters*, NEW YORK, VAN NOSTRAND REINHOLD CO., 1983.

3. As Josiah Henry Benton observed in his paper on Baskerville, which he presented to the Boston Society of Printers on February 24, 1914, “The [BASKERVILLE] types themselves were cut upon principles which might well be followed today by those who would introduce into their making a geometrical exactitude.” Ironically, compared to the “geometrical exactitude” that certain modern designs attained, Baskerville’s type no longer appears as geometric as Benton suggested.

THE ROMAN

A B C D E F G H I
J K L M N O P Q R
S T U V W X Y Z

a b c d e f g h i
j k l m n o p q r s
t u v w x y z
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

THE ITALIC

A B C D E F G H I
J K L M N O P Q R
S T U V W X Y Z

a b c d e f g h i
j k l m n o p q r s
t u v w x y z
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

A B C D E F G H I
J K L M N O P Q R
S T U V W X Y Z
a b c d e f g h i
j k l m n o p q r s
t u v w x y z
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

TE AARDVARK
Deconstructivist theorists
 HERO GOOGGLES
We be freeky and flippy
 SUPER SCHOOL
I find energy sticky
 AMBIENT LAVA LAMP
Scruffy Poetry sprees
 THINK VANILLA
Affinity with happy gifts