

# “Transitional” Typefaces: The History of a Typefounding Classification

Craig Eliason

*Transitional* is a term often used to describe the design of certain printing types. Some value the term for offering a finer-grained distinction between the venerated categories of *old-face* and *modern* forms of roman text types. Meanwhile, others reject it, often with the rationale that it implies a historical development that the facts do not bear out. Still, the misgivings of these naysayers have not prevented the frequent use of *transitional* by classifiers of type design for many generations. How did a potentially ill-conceived term take hold? The historical context of *transitional*'s emergence sheds light on the success of its entry into the parlance. Although arguably inaccurate and even inherently problematic, the *transitional* label for type designs fitted the paradigms of cultural history current at its emergence.

To make my case, I outline a trio of connected terms in type classification—*old-face* (or *oldstyle*),<sup>1</sup> *transitional*, and *modern*—and then take a closer look at examples of each. I then look at some problems that arise with the term *transitional*. Finally, I discuss the historical context of the term's emergence: when it was introduced, what changes were taking place in the type world at that time, and what models for cultural development were current in the broader world.

## What Is Transitional Type?

“The ‘transitional’ types... make an historical approach to type inevitable. One cannot talk of a transition without knowing what went before it—nor what became of it.”<sup>2</sup> Acknowledging this guidance from type historian James Mosley, our first task is to discern the previous and subsequent styles that the transitional style purportedly links. In the world of type design history, the previous style is the one often called *old-face* or *oldstyle* and the subsequent style is called *modern*. Thus, *transitional* describes a letterform that shares features with both the old-face letter and the modern letter. To explore the relationships among these three terms, it will be useful to analyze exemplary typefaces for each.

Different writers have expressed differing spans for the scope of what falls under the old-face class, but in the broadest sense of the word, old-face letters are the forms characteristic of

1 A word about terminology: In the twentieth century, American writers more often employed the term *oldstyle*—in one word, in two, or hyphenated—as a descriptor of old-face designs like William Caslon's. Meanwhile, British authors more often considered *old-face* and *oldstyle* distinct: For them, *old-face* properly described the revived style of the first William Caslon, and *oldstyle* a more recent and lighter variation thereof. Because *oldstyle* can denote two different designs, I have chosen to use *old-face* here.

2 James Mosley, “New Approaches to the Classification of Typefaces,” *British Printer* 73, no. 3 (1960), 93.

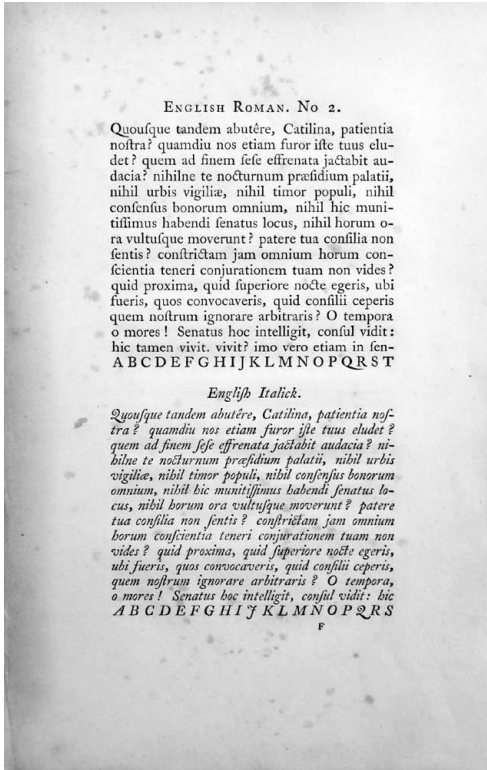


Figure 1 (left)  
William Caslon type. *A Specimen of Printing Types by William Caslon, Letter Founder.* (London John Towers, 1766). Photograph by Nick Sherman.

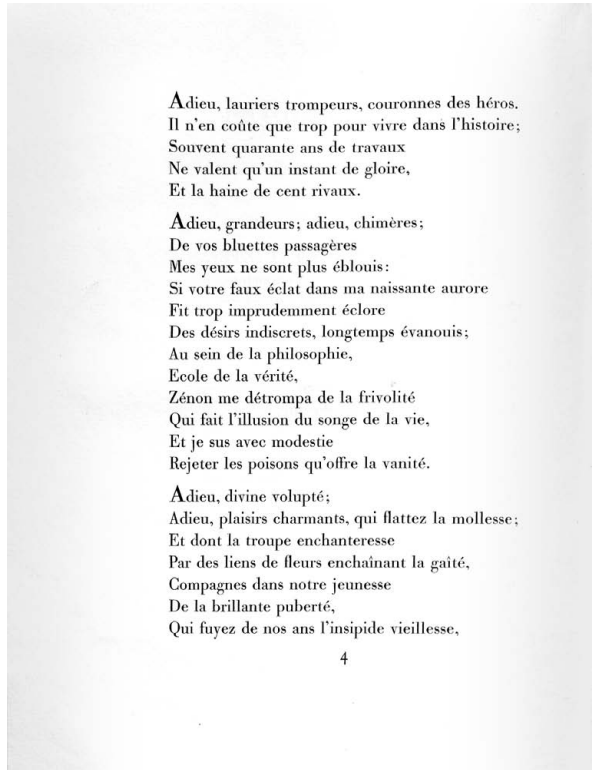


Figure 2 (right)  
Giambattista Bodoni type. Frederick II, King of Prussia, *Épître au marquis d'Argens du 23 septembre, 1757* [Epistle to the Marquis d'Argens of September 23, 1757] (Montagnola di Lugano, Officina Bodoni, 1924). Courtesy James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota.

roman printing types from the Renaissance to the mid-eighteenth century. Of course, there was no need to *label* them as old-face before the arrival of modern types as an alternative, any more than there would be reason to refer to guitar music as *acoustic* before the arrival of electric guitars. The label is a retronym. Thus, the old-face design of type dates back to the sixteenth or even fifteenth century, but the old-face *label* for these designs comes from the nineteenth century.

As an example of old-face types we can use Englishman William Caslon's. In the 1720s, Caslon cut a series of fonts based on Dutch models (see Figure 1). These Caslon types proved very popular over the ensuing half century, particularly in England and America. They fall incontrovertibly into the old-face category—indeed, they were likely the first to be so named, as we will see.

Closer to the turn of the nineteenth century, letterforms like Caslon's were eclipsed by the crisp, high-contrast style most often associated with Giambattista Bodoni of Parma (see Figure 2). However, even with the arrival of this new style of type, we still do not see contemporary references to an *old-face* and *modern* distinction. Producers of what we call *modern* typefaces saw their designs not as an alternative to be offered alongside the older style, but rather simply as the appropriate way of forming letters, which superseded that older style.<sup>3</sup> The supersession was celebrated by Caleb Stower in 1808:

3 Justin Howes describes the understanding of “perpetual improvement” in type design of this era in the light of Enlightenment views of progress. Justin Howes, “Extreme Type: Progress, ‘Perfectability,’ and Letter Design in Eighteenth-Century Europe,” *Typography Papers* 7 (2007): 61–70.

The great improvement which has taken place of late years in the form of printing types, has completely superseded the Elzevir shape introduced from Holland by the celebrated Caslon, near ninety years ago. Every one must observe, with increasing admiration, the numerous and elegant founts of every size, which have with rapid succession been lately presented to the public.<sup>4</sup>

This changeover was also documented, albeit with much less enthusiasm, by typefounder Edmund Fry in 1828. Fry lamented that:

the Baskerville and Caslon imitations, all completed with Accents, Fractions, &c., were, in consequence of this revolution, laid by for ever; and many thousand pounds weight of new letter in Founts ... were taken from the shelves, and carried to the melting-pot to be recast into Types, no doubt, in many instances, more beautiful; but ... [none] equal in service, or really so agreeable to the reader, as the true *Caslon*-shaped Elzevir Types.<sup>5</sup>

So the new letter design *replaced* the old rather than joining it. Only following the mid-nineteenth-century revival of types of the older design did the letterforms we now see as old-face and modern meet simultaneously in the same arena. Only then did the necessity of the differentiating labels arise.

Specifically, the revival of that Caslon face, mentioned by Stower and Fry, is what triggered the old-face/modern distinction. The style of Bodoni and his followers was joined by Caslon's design when the latter was relaunched in the 1840s. In 1887 Talbot Reed gave this account of this revival:

In the year 1843, Mr. [Charles] Whittingham, of the Chiswick Press, waited upon Mr. Caslon [descendent of the firm's founder] to ask his aid in carrying out the then new idea of printing in appropriate type "The Diary of Lady Willoughby," a work of fiction, the period and diction of which were supposed to be of the reign of Charles I [1600–49]. The original matrices of the first William Caslon having been fortunately preserved, Mr. Caslon undertook to supply a small fount of Great Primer. So well was Mr. Whittingham satisfied with the result of his experiment that he determined on printing other volumes in the same style, and eventually he was supplied with the complete series of all the other founts. Then followed a demand for old faces, which has continued up to the present time.<sup>6</sup>

---

4 Cited in David Chambers, ed. *Specimen of Modern Printing Types 1828* (London: Printing Historical Society, 1986), 11.

("Elzevir" was the family name of renowned Dutch printers of the seventeenth century.) The totality of this supersession can be measured in Alexander Lawson's observation that the 1805 specimen from the Caslon firm (then run by descendants of the aforementioned type-cutter) does not include a single old-face exemplar.

Alexander S. Lawson, *Anatomy of a Typeface* (Boston: Godine, 1990), 175.

5 Chambers, *1828 Specimen*, 7. Emphasis in the original.

6 Talbot Baines Reed, *A History of the Old English Letter Foundries* (London: Elliot Stock, 1887), 255. Worth noting here is that this demand, which may have been continuous, was also primarily for specialized application. G. W. Ovink reminds us that throughout the nineteenth century, "the bulk of text printing was executed in didones, and their Fraktur-counterparts for the German-speaking countries. ... [Alternatives like oldstyle types] were always used consciously, by self-willed printers or publishers, in opposition to the normal, viz. the didones. Hence they are to be found in texts of a historical, literary or artistic nature if they are themselves historical (Caslon, Old Style, Elzévir etc.)." G. W. Ovink, "Nineteenth-Century Reactions Against the Didone Type Model - 1," *Quaerendo* 1, no. 2 (1971), 21.

Figure 3

John Baskerville type. *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old Testament and the New, with the Apocrypha* (Birmingham: John Baskerville, 1769). Courtesy University of St. Thomas Libraries.

Anno Dom. 31. S. M A T T H E W. Anno Dom. 31.

hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you;

45 That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

46 For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?

47 And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?

48 Be ye therefore perfect, even as your father which is in heaven is perfect.

C H A P. VI.

1 Of alms, 3 prayer, 14 forgiveness, 16 fasting, 19 our treasure, 24 and against worldly care.

**T**AKE heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.

2 Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not found a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do, in the synagogues, and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

3 But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth:

4 That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret, himself shall reward thee openly.

5 ¶ And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues, and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

7 But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.

8 Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;

10 Thy kingdom come; thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven:

11 Give us this day our daily bread;

12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors:

13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

14 ¶ For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:

15 But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Ver. 8 Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, &c.] Be careful not to give your alms openly, out of ostentation, to be seen and commended by men; for then this praise will be considered as a recompense, and you will have no reward in the Kingdom of heaven.

Note on the Sixth Chapter.  
Ver. 34 Take therefore no thought for the morrow, &c.] Be not too eagerly No. CXVI.

16 ¶ Moreover, when ye fast, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;

18 That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy father which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

19 ¶ Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:

20 But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:

21 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

22 The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.

23 But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!

24 ¶ No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

25 ¶ Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?

26 Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?

27 Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

28 And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they toil not, neither do they spin;

29 And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

30 Wherefore, if God so clothe the grafs of the field, which to-day is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?

31 Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithall shall we be clothed?

32 (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

33 ¶ But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.

34 Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for what shall we eat, and what shall we drink, and how shall we be clothed? these things shall come of themselves. Sufficient unto the present time are the present troubles of life, and the Almighty would not have you increase them by an unreasonable sollicitude for the future.

II A

ROW :

7 See, e.g., The Caslon and Glasgow Letter Foundry, *Specimen of Printing Types* (London: H. W. Caslon and Co, 1857). The Caslon specimen book immediately following Whittingham's experiment, issued in 1844, is preped by an advertisement notifying printers that "in addition to the contents of the following Modern Specimen, this Foundry includes the Works of the justly celebrated WILLIAM CASLON, by whom it was originally established. They consist of all sizes of Roman and Italic, of an improved Elzevir shape.... Specimens of the original Caslon Foundry may be seen in Chiswell Street; but, being nearly out of print, cannot be generally circulated" (emphasis in the original). In other words, the old design was not called "old face" at the very first announcement of its availability. H. W. Caslon & Co., *Specimen of Printing Types* (London: Caslon, 1844).

8 See Anonymous [Stanley Morison?], "John Baskerville and the Writing-Masters," *The Monotype Recorder* 23, no. 201 (1924): 2-7.

*Old face*, as Reed used here, was first used (as far as I am aware) in the specimen books of the foundries selling their revived Caslon.<sup>7</sup>

If Caslon is the quintessential old-face type and Bodoni the modern, our example of transitional types can be found in the work of John Baskerville, a Birmingham printer whose career is positioned in between Caslon's and Bodoni's dates. Inspired by letters that could be found in the copybooks of master writers,<sup>8</sup> Baskerville produced elegant types (See Figure 3). His fonts and his deluxe editions manifesting his innovations in printing techniques were somewhat ill-matched for the contemporary British printing trade, but they found many admirers in continental Europe and America.

---

Figure 4  
Caslon, detail of figure 1.

Quouſque tandem abutère, Catilina, patientia  
noſtra? quamdiu nos etiam furor iſte tuus elu-  
det? quem ad finem ſefe effrenata jaçtabit au-  
dacia? nihilne te nocturnum præſidium palatii,  
nihil urbis vigiliæ, nihil timor populi, nihil  
conſenſus bonorum omnium, nihil hic muni-

---

Figure 5  
Baskerville, detail of figure 3.

27 Which of you by taking thought can add  
one cubit unto his ſtature?

28 And why take ye thought for raiment?  
Conſider the lilies of the field, how they grow:  
they toil not, neither do they ſpin;

29 And yet I ſay unto you, That even Solo-  
mon in all his glory was not arrayed like one  
of theſe.

30 Wherefore, if God ſo clothe the graſs of  
the field, which to-day is, and to-morrow is caſt

---

Figure 6  
Bodoni, detail of figure 2.

Adieu, divine volupté;  
Adieu, plaisirs charmants, qui flattez la mollesse;  
Et dont la troupe enchanteresse  
Par des liens de fleurs enchainant la gaité,  
Compagnes dans notre jeunesse  
De la brillante puberté,  
Qui fuyez de nos ans l'insipide vieillesse,

### Visual Analysis

With our exemplary typefaces established, we can look more closely at their formal qualities to ascertain how the relationships between them encouraged the *transitional* label. To do so, we define and analyze four characteristics: contrast, axis, stroke construction, and serif shape. Throughout this discussion, readers can refer to the detailed illustrations of Caslon, Baskerville, and Bodoni in Figures 4, 5, and 6, respectively.

#### *Contrast*

Contrast may be defined as the difference between the thinnest and thickest strokes of a letterform. A high-contrast font has thinner thin lines relative to the thick lines, as compared to a low-contrast font, which has more even stroke widths. The standard account says simply that modern faces like Bodoni's have higher contrast than old-face fonts like Caslon's. If Baskerville is to exemplify a transition in this dimension, we might expect to find a higher contrast than Caslon and a lower contrast than Bodoni. But a more complex dynamic is at play in contrast analysis



Figure 7

Translation strokes. After Gerrit Noordzij, *The Stroke: Theory of Writing* (London: Hyphen Press, 2006).



Figure 8

Expansion strokes. After Noordzij.

than appears at first blush, as Gerrit Noordzij has pointed out.<sup>9</sup> The reason is that contrast is not a singular spectrum, but a relationship of two variables: the widths both of the thicks and of the thins. Positioning Baskerville as an intermediary design forces us to acknowledge this complexity. Compared to Caslon, Baskerville's difference in weight is better described as a lighter design: Its thins and thicks appear narrower than the corresponding parts in Caslon, but they remain in a similar proportion.<sup>10</sup> For their part, Bodoni's late designs retain the thin thins of Baskerville but resume the thick thicks of Caslon, resulting in their oft-noted high contrast. So perhaps Baskerville can be seen as a stepping stone in the development of contrast.

### Axis

Axis refers to the angles at which the thickening strokes reach their thickest point and the thinning strokes reach their thinnest point. Analysts of type picture a line running through the thinnest parts of a round letter as its axis. Like many later old-face types, Caslon displays a mix of axis in its letters, but most letters tend toward a back-inclined axis. This tradition in type design is based on writing with a broad-nibbed pen, held conventionally in the right hand. This angle can be seen in letters like /b/, with the preponderance of weight on the right side of the bowl tending above its midline. Likewise, if we imagine a clock face superimposed on capital /C/, we see it gets thickest at about the eight o'clock position. This diagonal lean of the axis is nearly expunged in Bodoni's upright modern letters. With few exceptions (e.g., the capital and lowercase /S/, the diagonal letters, the bottom of /g/), Bodoni strokes are thickest when precisely vertical and thinnest when exactly horizontal. The lower contrast of Baskerville may make its similarity to Bodoni less obvious, but the former shares this vertical axis with the latter. In both Baskerville and Bodoni, lowercase /b/'s right side is balanced above and below its midline. At the lower left corner of the letter, where Caslon's slanted axis dictates a thickening, Baskerville and Bodoni bowls connect to the stem with a hairline. The capital /C/ of the latter two both reach their thickest point at nine o'clock. In terms of axis, Baskerville would seem to have moved quickly toward what we find in modern typefaces.

### Stroke Construction

Stroke construction refers to the manner in which the thinning and thickening of strokes happen. This quality can be classified into the mechanics of the pen and its handling, which the type emulates. In *The Stroke*, Gerrit Noordzij has proposed a classification of stroke structure. Noordzij bases his analysis on the shape and movement of what he terms the counterpoint, which we can imagine as the writing tip of the pen. First, he identifies *translation*

9 Gerrit Noordzij, *The Stroke: Theory of Writing* (London: Hyphen, 2005).

10 Note that the lighter effect of Baskerville as printed is a consequence of factors beyond just the thickness of the lines of the printing sorts. More spacious side-bearings play a role, as do all sorts of variables in the printing process that might lessen ink spread.

as when “the contrast of the strokes is the result of changes in the direction of the stroke alone, because the size... and the orientation of the counterpoint is constant.”<sup>11</sup> For example, a translation stroke would occur if a broad-nibbed pen were held firmly while it wrote a letter (see Figure 7). In contrast, Noordzij identifies *expansion* as when “the contrast of the stroke is the result of changes in the size of the counterpoint.”<sup>12</sup> For expansion, we could imagine trading the broad-nib pen for a split-nib pen, which spreads out as we push down harder on the pen while writing, and the stroke is thereby thickened, no matter which direction it is traveling (see Figure 8).

Caslon’s old-face stroke construction is dominated by the translation model. Looking at lowercase /o/ and /c/, we can see the axis vary—the /o/’s is more upright—but in each case the thickening of the stroke is gradual and happens in concert with the changing direction of the stroke. Bodoni’s modern stroke construction is markedly different. The strokes abruptly thicken independent of their direction. So, for example, the overall shape of the lowercase /b/’s bowl is smooth and round, but the stroke jumps from thin to thick to thin as it completes its circular trip. The resulting shapes—such as an /o/ that looks a bit like an upright, white rounded rectangle centered in a black, rounded-diamond-shaped setting—defy translation logic. Attempts to reproduce their forms with a writing tool using simple strokes would require expansion, such as the split-nib pens splaying out on paper, or an engraver’s burin digging deeper into a copper plate. Both of these tools were eminent media for making letters in Bodoni’s day. Baskerville seems to split the difference, pulling away from translation but not so completely nor obviously as Bodoni does. So here again the *transitional* label would seem apt.

### *Serif Shape*

Serif shape refers not only to the overall shape of those small finishing strokes called serifs, but also to the way that they are joined to the main strokes that they terminate. Caslon’s serifs are heavy, where Bodoni’s are hairline-thin; Caslon’s are bracketed—that is, they seem to grow out of the stems—while Bodoni’s are perpendicular add-ons; Caslon’s lowercase ascenders have triangular serifs, like short pennants on thick flagpoles, and Bodoni’s are characteristically thin and rigidly horizontal. Baskerville’s serifs are more similar to Caslon’s, particularly in their bracketing, which lends to their Caslon-like triangular appearance.<sup>13</sup> However, Baskerville’s ascender serifs seem to be rising toward the horizontality of Bodoni’s—a characteristic that seems of a piece with Baskerville’s aforementioned more vertical axis. Thus in serif shape, Baskerville again seems to fit between the old-face and modern exemplars.

---

11 Noordzij, *The Stroke*, 26.

12 Ibid. Noordzij also recognizes a third structure, *rotation*, when “the contrast of the stroke is the result not only of changes in the direction of the stroke, but also of changes in the orientation of the counterpoint.”

13 Treatment of lachrymal (teardrop-shaped) terminals follows this same pattern: They are more abrupt—close to round balls—in Bodoni’s type. This shape is apparent in /a/ here, and also true of letters like /f/ and /r/, although in these cases the difference is more easily seen at font sizes larger than those examined here.

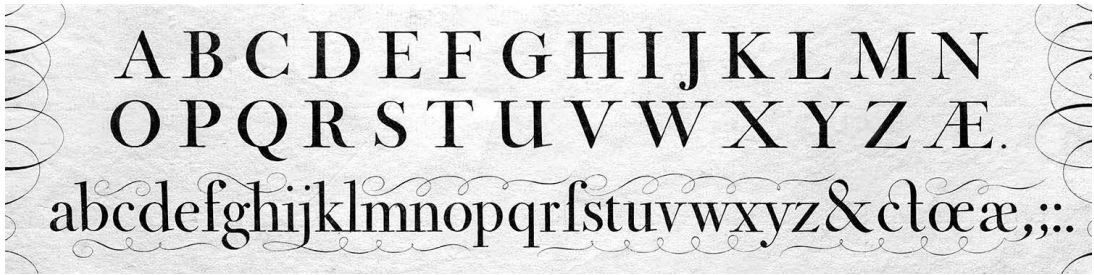


Figure 9

Letters by Abraham Nicholas. George Bickham, *Penmanship in its Utmost Beauty and Extent* (London: H. Overton & I. Hoole, 1731). Courtesy Letterform Archive, LetterformArchive.org.

- 14 Anonymous [Stanley Morison?], "John Baskerville and the Writing-Masters," 3.
- 15 In America, types of a similar but not identical style began to appear, starting in 1839 with types that were cast from punches imported from Alexander Wilson of Glasgow by a Boston typefounder. These types were known by American printers as "Scotch-face" types. In 1882, back in Edinburgh, Miller's old types were recast or updated for an edition of John Dryden books that had originally been published in 1808 (an archaism we might compare to the Caslon types revived for "Lady Willoughby"). The foundry, now called Miller and Richard, sold five sizes of the face to the Oxford University Press, where it was called Dryden, and subsequently sold them directly as Old Roman. The typeface was then sold by a New York foundry as Scotch Roman, and then, early in the twentieth century, other American foundries began to produce versions of it, many under that name. Beginning in 1906, the English Monotype Corporation produced a couple of adaptations of the design, first sold as Old Roman and eventually as Scotch Roman. James Mosley, "Scotch Roman," *Typefoundry*, <http://typefoundry.blogspot.com/2007/02/scotch-roman.html> (accessed June 24, 2010).

### What Is Wrong with "Transitional"?

From this visual analysis we can see some logic in considering Baskerville to be a transitional face between Caslon and Bodoni: Many of the ways in which it departs from Caslon's design appear in retrospect to be heading toward Bodoni's. But with further consideration, we can see that the orderly development in design implied by the *transitional* term is not without its problems. This simple, tripartite timeline gets troubled when we consider the sources of Baskerville's letterforms. A look beyond Baskerville to another frequently cited example of transitional style, Scotch Roman, complicates the picture. Finally, and most crucially, we consider how the teleological assumptions of the *transitional* term might be inherently problematic.

With the oldface-transitional-modern storyline, we might be tempted to see Baskerville as picking up from Caslon's design, changing it in ways that suited his own time, and thereby setting the stage for Bodoni's further alteration. But type design is by no means the whole of letterform design, and if we expand our vision beyond movable type, we can find precedents for Baskerville's designs that predate Caslon's. These precedents appear most remarkably in the written and engraved letters of late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth-century writing masters. This influence was noted as early as 1924, in an article in the *Monotype Recorder* (unsigned but perhaps attributable to the preeminent historian on staff, Stanley Morison). The article's author cites a couple of penmanship guidebooks and notes the resemblance of Baskerville's fonts to the latin alphabets therein (see Figure 9). "This is a similarity, of course, only to be expected," the Monotype writer notes, "since during the years 1730–5 Baskerville flourished as sign-writer, tombstone-cutter, and writing-master. Thus he shared with his colleagues the same models, [and] taught the same hands."<sup>14</sup> This broader perspective complicates matters: The design features of Baskerville's types that the *transitional* label imputes to his fixed historical position between Caslon and Bodoni actually derive from a time before that era. These older written and engraved models throw the simple *transitional* timeline into disarray.

Another challenge to the appropriateness of the *transitional* label comes from considering the chronology of other types to which the label is given. Scotch Roman offers a case in point. James

The first type of Roman characters was made at Subiaco in 1465 by the German printers, Sweynheim and Pannartz. It had little to recommend it; the letters were rudely cut, and of poor shape. But in 1470 Nicolas Jenson, French by birth, established as a printer at Venice, devised a Roman type which from that day to this has served as a model of excellence. The specimen of it here reproduced, Plate II, is taken from a fac-simile in Mr. H. F. Brown's able and interesting book on "The Venetian Printing Press," and even after this double process of reproduction, in which something of the sharpness of the type is lost, the beauty of the original may be discerned, while the close relation of the forms of the letters to those of the finer manuscripts may be seen by comparison of it with Plates III and IV.

Figure 10  
Farmer Foundry Scotch Roman type. *The Printing Art* 6 no. 5 (1906). Courtesy James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota.

Mosley has traced the design that came to be known as Scotch Roman back to the Pica No. 2 typeface sold by William Miller's foundry in Edinburgh, which can be seen in its 1822 specimen. By a century later, it was available in a wide variety of cuts from different foundries in both Europe and America.<sup>15</sup>

How does Scotch Roman compare formally with the trio of Caslon, Baskerville, and Bodoni as already analyzed? We can take the Farmer foundry version as exemplary and compare it using the four elements of our earlier analysis (see Figure 10). Scotch Roman's high *contrast* and resolutely upright axis are closest to the modern-face exemplar Bodoni. As for *stroke construction*, Scotch Roman's strokes generally jump in width without regard to the stroke direction, following the expansion model (perhaps in the curly leg of capital /R/ most of all); however, the abruptness is less extreme than Bodoni's and thus comes closer to the Baskerville precedent. In *serif shape*, Scotch Roman's serifs are thin and horizontal like Bodoni's but bracketed like Baskerville's.

Based on this analysis, we can see that Scotch Roman does not incontrovertibly fit into one of the classes of our tripartite scheme. Type historian Daniel Berkeley Updike (to whom we will return later) considered Scotch Roman a modern type, and other writers have echoed this classification.<sup>16</sup> But more commonly it has been assigned to the transitional category. I have found three American publications from the 1930s that use the term *transitional*: All three include Scotch Roman as exemplary.<sup>17</sup> Two American guidebooks from the late 1940s also call Scotch Modern transitional.<sup>18</sup> David Gates's 1973 book, *Type*, does the same.<sup>19</sup> In some of these sources, Scotch Roman is held up as a primary example of the transitional design. Would these circumstances not seem to beg an objection to the term transitional? If Scotch Modern is a primary exemplar, and the earliest model of it (Miller's Pica No. 2) appeared in specimen books only *after* the types of Didot and Bodoni were issued, is it sensible to give it a label implying that it transitions toward types that actually *predate* it? *Stylistically* these fonts are in between old-face and modern types, but *historically* they are not.

- 16 See, e.g., William Dana Orcutt, *The Manual of Linotype Typography* (Brooklyn: Mergenthaler Linotype Company, 1923), vii; Gordon Atkins, *The Classification of Printing Types* (Leicester: Apple Barrel Press, 1975).
- 17 Philip Van Doren Stern, *An Introduction to Typography* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), 60; Kurt H. Volk, *Using Type Correctly* (New York: Kurt H. Volk, Inc., 1935), 12; Hartley E. Jackson, *26 Lead Soldiers* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1937), 93. Even before the "transitional" term was invented, Scotch Roman had been described as "the link that connects the graceful old-style and the severe modern Roman." Edmund G. Gress, *The Art & Practice of Typography: A Manual of American Printing*, 2d. ed. (New York: Oswald Publishing Company, 1917), 180.
- 18 Eugene M. Ettenberg, *Type for Books and Advertising* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1947); Daniel Melcher, and Nancy Larrick, *Printing and Promotion Handbook: How to Plan, Produce, and Use Printing, Advertising, and Direct Mail* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949), 303.
- 19 David Gates, *Type* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1973), 20.

In addition to these complications tangling up our formerly simple timeline, the implications of the term *transitional* also conjure a more philosophical objection—one that might have been at the root of type designer John Hudson’s discounting of the classification. On the Typophile.com Internet forum, Hudson called the term “fantastical... as if Baskerville were somehow anticipating Bodoni and designing his own as an interpolation between the ‘Oldstyle’ and the as-yet-non-existent ‘Modern.’”<sup>20</sup> I name this objection *teleological*. As philosophers use the term, *teleological* signifies the appearance of something being attributed to its aim or purpose (or *telos* in Greek). Teleological accounts of history see history as an unveiling of an inevitable path toward a foreordained end. Such accounts probably reached their zenith in the teachings of German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel.

Hegel’s teleological framework and the concept of transitional categories have been insightfully criticized by architectural historian Willibald Sauerlander. In his 1987 article, “Style or Transition? The Fallacies of Classification Discussed in the Light of German Architecture 1190–1260,” Sauerlander observes that the conception of a transitional style in medieval architecture—moving from Romanesque to Gothic style<sup>21</sup>—arose during the nineteenth century, when the term in fact became central in a number of discourses about historical development.<sup>22</sup> “Probably the most telling examples of this nineteenth-century use of the term *transition* could be found in the treatment of the history of nature, where transitional forms played such a crucial role in the discussion of the origin and the development of species.”<sup>23</sup> Sauerlander contrasts the Darwinian model of continuous evolution—in which, you might say, everything is “transitional”—to Hegel’s almost laughably idealist notion of natural history:

It was none other than Hegel who saw the whole system of classification of beasts threatened by the existence of transitional species.... “Naturally, there are animals that are neither one thing nor the other; the reason for this is the weakness of Nature which does not remain true to a single concept and cannot adhere consistently to a predetermined idea.”... Now this statement may sound absurdly platonic or authoritarian to anyone reasonably habituated to the belief that the study of nature or of history has to do with fortuitousness of empiricism. But perhaps it is useful to keep Hegel’s statement in mind. Apodictic as it is, it reveals the inconsistencies between any system of classification—however subtle it may be—and the concept of evolution: classification being always normative, and evolution being always endless, continuous and not normative. The whole

20 John Hudson, “Typophile,” [www.typophile.com/node/37310](http://www.typophile.com/node/37310) (accessed June 2, 2014).

21 In the discipline of art history, the move from Romanesque to Gothic is the most frequent location for formal acknowledgement of a transitional style, although others exist. For example (and temporally more pertinent to our type discussion), decorative-arts historians talk about a transitional period between Rococo and Neoclassical style during the reign of Louis XVI. Monique Riccardi-Cubitt, “Louis XVI Style,” <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T052117> (accessed June 7, 2012).

22 Sauerlander found earlier uses of the term, but they were limited to discussions of rhetorical, literary, or musical composition. Willibald Sauerlander, “Style or Transition? The Fallacies of Classification Discussed in the Light of German Architecture 1190–1260,” *Architectural History* 30 (1987), 2.

23 *Ibid.*

conception of transitions in the history of nature, or the history of style, is the result of this unavoidable conflict between the norm of classification and the stream of evolution.<sup>24</sup>

Later in the article Sauerlander expands on the reasons why keeping Hegel's statement in mind could be salutary for the stylistic classifier: "The trouble is, surely, that we are looking for a neatness of classification which does not work with these often chameleonic medieval buildings" (for which I propose we could easily substitute "typeface designs"). He continues, "Perhaps we behave with our conceptions of 'transition'... rather like Hegel, who ascribed the intermediary beasts, which did not behave as they should according to the conception of the mind, to the weakness of nature."<sup>25</sup> The normative presumptions of the classificatory project are exposed by such ill-fitting specimens, and labeling them as *transitional* may only reinforce its flawed structure.

### Why "Transitional" Then?

With all these historical and philosophical objections to the "transitional" label, we now have to wonder how the term emerged in the first place. When was *transitional* first used in reference to type design? What was happening in the world of type that allowed it to gain traction?

In Daniel Berkeley Updike's 1922 magisterial study, *Printing Types: Their History, Forms, and Use*, we encounter what may have been the launching of the term, in a discussion of the very font used to publish the book itself:

Whence are derived the shapes of the characters in which you read the sentence before you; and whence comes the type in which this sentence is printed? The type of this book is a font *transitional* between the "old style" types of the school of Caslon and the English equivalent of the pseudo-classic types made at the beginning of the nineteenth century under the influence of Didot of Paris, Bodoni of Parma, and Unger of Berlin.<sup>26</sup>

Updike's original italicization of the word nearly seems like a christening. Indeed, although he also uses the word to discuss various late-fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century types that move from gothic to roman forms, he employs it quite consistently to describe the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century fonts like Baskerville. He even refers to the latter as a *class* of types, to which he also assigned estimable examples from William Martin, an English follower of Baskerville, and fonts from the Didot foundry before it developed into the leading producer of modern types in Paris.<sup>27</sup>

---

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 8.

26 Daniel Berkeley Updike, *Printing Types: Their History, Forms, and Use*, 2d. ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 1:38. Emphasis in the original. In Volume 2 of his study, he resumes characterization of the book's font itself, again calling it "in design transitional between old style and modern face," and revealing it to be Oxford, a font available from American Type Founders and descending from a design originating with Binny and Ronaldson over a century prior. Ibid., 2:231.

27 Ibid., 2:242, 2:123–4, 1:227–8.

Following Updike's publication of *Printing Types*, the use of the term *transitional* to describe type designs picked up speed, although its referents were broader than Updike's had been. Paul Beaujon (the pen name of Beatrice Warde) described Fournier le Jeune's roman of 1742 as "the first of the 'transitional' faces" in a 1926 issue of the *Monotype Recorder*.<sup>28</sup> In doing so, she used scare-quotes around the label, perhaps indicating that it was a fresh and not-yet-fully-accepted term. In the 1930s, a handful of published references on type used the term, more often than not accompanied by a phrase that indicated its novelty. For example, one American introduction to typography from 1932 says not that Scotch Roman *is* a transitional face, but rather that it "is *known* as a transitional face."<sup>29</sup> Another, from 1937, refers to such types as "so-called Transition faces."<sup>30</sup>

By the time *transitional* emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, the terms *old-face* or *oldstyle* and *modern* had been established for generations. Examples of this two-part conception abound. An 1889 specimen book from a London printer presented all "book-work types" as either "Old Style" or "Modern." In 1911, a guide-book published in Chicago said bluntly, "Of the roman type-faces, we have the old-style and the modern," and Henry Lewis Bullen said the same in the pages of *Graphic Arts* magazine.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, just after the appearance of Updike's study, such a division of types into the two categories of oldstyle and modern was still common, as witnessed by the table of contents of the 1923 *Manual of Linotype Typography*, which assigns all of its text fonts to one or the other category.<sup>32</sup>

Why did the *transitional* descriptor arrive so much later than *old-face* or *oldstyle* and *modern*? The very likely reason is that the Baskerville typeface, which we have already taken to be a primary example of transitional types, was largely forgotten until its revival in the 1920s. After Baskerville's death in 1775, his widow sold his printing tools, including his punches and matrices used to produce type, to a French dramatist who took them to the continent. The typefounding equipment soon fell into obscurity, resurfacing at the Bertrand foundry in Paris over a century later; but by that point, it had been severed from knowledge of its English source.<sup>33</sup> In Bertrand's specimens, these types were called "elzevirs anciens," and they were used here and there in the years leading up to World War I. American typographer Bruce Rogers was the first to recognize their origins, and after the war he arranged for the French firm to cast a font for his new employer, Harvard University Press. He used the type for seven books between 1921 and 1927. John Dreyfus recounts the further history:

This rediscovery did not pass unnoticed during the great typographical revival of the nineteen-twenties. Interest in Baskerville's types was stimulated by the numerous recuttings, which for a time appeared yearly. In 1924

- 
- 28 Cited in Geoffrey Dowding, *An Introduction to the History of Printing Types: An Illustrated Summary of the Main Stages in the Development of Type Design From 1440 Up to the Present Day, an Aid to Type Face Identification* (London: Wace, 1961), 63.
- 29 Van Doren Stern, *An Introduction to Typography*, 60. Emphasis mine.
- 30 Jackson, *26 Lead Soldiers*, 93. Emphasis mine.
- 31 Harrison & Sons, *Printing Types* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1889); F. J. Trezise, *The Typography of Advertisements* (Chicago: The Inland Printer Company, 1911), 58–9; Henry Lewis Bullen, "Notes Towards the Study of Types II," *Graphic Arts* 1, no. 3 (1911), 202. Trezise acknowledges "that some modern type-faces contain characteristics peculiar to the old-style, and vice versa, to such a degree that even some printers are confused as to their classification," but it does not occur to him to allow a third category to accommodate such equivocations.
- 32 Orcutt, *Manual*, vii. See also J. L. Frazier, *Type Lore: Popular Fonts of Today, Their Origin and Use* (Chicago: J. L. Frazier, 1925), 13.
- 33 Alexander S. Lawson, *Anatomy of a Type-face*, 190–2.

came the Monotype Corporation's version, based on the 1757 Virgil.... The Bauer Foundry brought out a considerably less faithful copy in 1925.... The Stempel Foundry issued an excellent re-cutting in 1926.... By now Bertrand was receiving a number of demands for Baskerville type.... Finally, in May 1929, Bertrand produced a sixteen-page specimen devoted to *Les Caractères de Style—Le Baskerville*. On one of the founts shown in this specimen Linotype based their version, Stanley Morison having told their typographical adviser, G. W. Jones, of Bertrand's founts.<sup>34</sup>

In many ways, the Baskerville revival of the 1920s resembled the Caslon revival of the 1840s. In each case, the old type-founding equipment from the English originator was dusted off after generations of disuse and relaunched as a viable design. And for the purposes of my argument, there was also a common effect on nomenclature: Just as the Caslon revival necessitated the new labels *old-face* or *oldstyle*, the Baskerville revival accompanied the new concept of *transitional* typeface designs.

More broadly, Baskerville's revival was only part of a larger campaign to revive old designs for the modern printing industry, which was tied to a surging interest in the history of type design. Signs of such interest were already visible before 1885<sup>35</sup>—the point at which Linn Boyd Benton invented the pantographic punchcutter. This invention, James Mosley notes, enabled accurate reproduction of old types and set the stage for the equally revolutionary hot-metal casting and composing machines, including Linotypes and Monotypes. Mosley writes, "The types cut for composing machines have made familiar the names of printers and punchcutters which were known only to the scholars, and has encouraged an approach to printing types among the teachers of printing which is largely historical."<sup>36</sup> Perhaps purveyors of the cutting-edge technological change that hot-metal casting represented strategized to temper the radicality of their offerings by looking backward for design—or maybe they just turned to historical designs as available fuel for their accelerated programs of type production. The Arts-and-Crafts revivalism of William Morris's Kelmscott Press also is an often-cited factor in spurring type historicism leading up to this era. I propose that the addition of the *transitional* term, which turned the binary alternatives of *old-face* and *modern* into a narrative of development, underscored the historical character of type classification at a time when industry interest in type history was at its height.

This conclusion might be reinforced by returning to Darwin. In this period, the most prominent model for envisioning morphological development over time was surely that of evolutionary biology, as previously mentioned. By the time

---

34 John Dreyfus, *The Survival of Baskerville's Punches* (Cambridge, UK: University Printer, 1949), 34–5.

35 George Bruce's Son's 1882 specimen book strikes me as a pioneering effort to inject type history into the conversation of the printing industry. Scores of its pages serve simultaneously as specimens of Bruce's display types on offer and as a bibliography and rapid-fire lessons about typographical history. Text faces were shown off at the end of the book, in the setting of printer-historian Theodore Low DeVinne's *Invention of Printing*.

36 Mosley, "New Approaches," 93.

*transitional* was used for type design, over half a century had passed since Charles Darwin's publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859. But Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was still discussed and debated prominently—as witnessed by the famous Scopes Monkey Trial that took place in the 1920s. In these debates, naysayers often criticized the concept of human evolution from lower species by pointing out the “missing link” in the fossil record—that is, the lack of transitional forms between known species that would help reinforce Darwin's evolutionary account. But through the years, paleontologists *did* discover transitional fossils like *Homo erectus* in 1894 and *Australopithecus africanus* in 1920, which were hailed in turn as discoveries of the “missing link.”<sup>37</sup> Just as these discoveries of transitional hominids confirmed for Darwinists the rightness of their model of evolutionary history, we might see the labeling of transitional type designs as cementing the interwar historicist's picture of type history as evolutionary and progressive.<sup>38</sup>

My argument may be summarized in three points. First, the need for the *old-face/modern* classification arose not with the appearance of these different type styles, but only later (in the mid-nineteenth century) with their establishment as viable alternatives for each other. Second, calling a type style *transitional* implies a historical slot between old-face and modern types, but that simple timeline is problematic. One complication is that the transitional face Baskerville borrows heavily from writing styles that predate old-face types. Another is that the transitional face Scotch Roman dates from after the appearance of modern types. And beyond these problems in application, there may be a fundamental flaw in the notion of transitional style—a consequence of the inherent conflict between classification and evolution. Third, this use of *transitional* has nonetheless thrived since the 1920s, when D. B. Updike seems to have coined it in relation to type. Its coming to prominence in the ensuing years was doubtless fueled by the printing industry's surging interest in type history and revivalism generally, and by the rediscovery and multiple revivals of Baskerville's designs specifically. The category of transitional style served as a “missing link,” affirming the growing appreciation for the evolution of type design.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the University of St. Thomas, the Houghton Library at Harvard University, and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas for their support of the research presented here.

---

37 Donald R. Prothero, *Evolution: What the Fossils Say and Why it Matters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 126.

38 Again, Sauerlander's historiography of the term offers a parallel. He tells us that in the world of architecture, the concept of transitional style “had a special fascination” for nineteenth-century adherents of historical eclecticism. “It seemed to reveal architectural history... in movement, in the making, in evolution. Buildings thought of or seen as transitional seemed to be the fulfillment of the dream of aesthetic historicism. They were hailed as monumental witnesses of the continuous evolution and progress in architectural history.” Sauerlander, “Style or Transition,” 1–2.

Copyright of Design Issues is the property of MIT Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.