

UCL Historical Bibliography Bibliography Trip to the Bibliography Room, 10 March 2011 Julianne Nyhan, Teaching Fellow in Digital Humanities

For me, the trip to the Bodleian bibliography room was interesting from a number of perspectives.

I've been researching the history of the use and development of ordering systems in reference works for a while now. I'm especially interested in the way that alphabetical ordering was known and used in Antique times; used only occasionally and non-systematically in medieval times; and became so dominant after the invention of movable type that today it a quintessential feature of dictionaries.

Historians have identified various developments as being related, directly or indirectly, to alphabetisation's rise to power. These include the book revolution of the twelfth century; the emergence of research tools in the thirteenth century; economic factors such as the increasing availability of paper and competition among printers; and typographic standardisation. Tom McArthur has argued that the advent of movable type meant that the letters of the alphabet existed for the first time as tangible, individual, hard-metal objects. This prompted those involved with printing to think about the alphabet and alphabetisation in a new and more practical way. As they began to touch and re-order the letters, the advantages of the alphabetical system was impressed upon them, and gradually an awareness of this system spread from people involved in making fonts to people who thought and theorised about letters and words¹.

From a historical and theoretical perspective, I can see both for and against this argument. But, what about being able to evaluate this theory from an experiential and hands on perspective? I can never think myself into the mind of an early printer but I know from my DH research that the hands on perspective can give insights that are otherwise impossible. Despite having read a reasonable amount of book history and having visited various printing museums, I've never before had the chance to actually compose type by hand or use a letter press. Our time spent in the bibliography room certainly did enable me to think through McArthur's comments in a new way. But it has given me some completely unexpected insights too.

As I composed the type two quotations were at the foremost of my mind. The first was that bit from Bukowski's *a .45 to pay the rent*, where Duke remarks to his daughter 'that's what an avocado is: frozen sun. we eat the sun and then we walk around feeling warm.'² The completely new feeling of being able to reach out and actually touch a letter of Carlson 14pt type reminded me of this somehow. Not only could I touch letters but I could touch and arrange pieces of space too. Like Bukowski's frozen sun, it almost seemed as though those letters were frozen subatomic particles of thought, available to to endlessly reassembled and disseminated according to intellectual, scientific and technological variables. Having begun my University education in 1997, I have only ever used digital document preparation systems to write. One of the strongest impressions that Serry Turkle's *Simulation and its discontents* left me with was the mystery (or at least it seems like a mystery to me) of the complex interplay that exists between materiality, emotion and understanding. She describes an architect who, having completed a model with digital tools 'says he lies down on computer printouts, bringing his body into the world of the simulation'³. I had initially approached this outing from a historical perspective, hoping that it would help me grapple with some of my research questions. I had not expected that it

1 Tom McArthur. *Worlds of reference: lexicography, learning and language from the clay tablet to the computer*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p. 41-3

2 <http://www.1000000monkeys.com/snippet.html?branch=6094> (accessed 15.03.2011)

3 Serry Turkle *Simulation and its discontents*. (Cambridge and Massachusetts: MIT 2009) p. 49

would enable me to examine what is for me the utterly normal and every day act of using a computer to write with and through in an utterly new way. I had not expected it to help me see the extraordinary in the ordinary.