

GILLIS COPPENS VAN DIEST  
AS AN UNDERGROUND PRINTER

1566 to 1567



For the bibliographer of the Low Countries the 1960s were particularly significant. There appeared in rapid succession two publications of the utmost importance for the history of Dutch printing: the *magnum opus* of the Hellingas on typefaces in the incunabula of the northern and southern Low Countries came out in 1966,<sup>1</sup> and H.D.L. Vervliet's *Sixteenth-Century Printing Types of the Low Countries* was published two years later.<sup>2</sup> These are two standard works which will long condition our knowledge of typography, while the second has the great merit of having charted hitherto entirely unknown territory. The descriptions and the reproductions provide us for the first time with an insight into the development of the typefaces in use in the Low Countries during that period, in their different forms and numerous variants. Moreover, these data, above all with the help of methods developed in the Anglo-Saxon countries, open up new possibilities for bibliographical research on the basis of typographical evidence. Such a technique, which has so far been applied in Holland almost exclusively to incunabula and post-incunabula, can now also be used for the later sixteenth century.

Vervliet was one of the first scholars to avail himself of these possibilities and to use, in addition to ornaments and initials, an investigation into typefaces as a means of solving bibliographical problems of this period. He thus demonstrated that Plantin could not have printed his edition of *La théologie germanicque*, dated 1558 and a translation of the well-known *Theologia teütsch*, before 1579.<sup>3</sup> His answer to a question which had already prompted an official enquiry four hundred years ago was equally convincing: who printed the rebellious *Vermaninge aen de regeerders ende gemeynte van den vier hoofsteden van Brabant* in 1566? In May of that year the authorities in Antwerp, following the instructions of their superiors, started to investigate the origins of a pamphlet which had been distributed in the town on a large scale a little earlier.

<sup>1</sup> W. & L. Hellinga, *The Fifteenth-Century Printing Types of the Low Countries*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam 1966).

<sup>2</sup> H.D.L. Vervliet, *Sixteenth-Century Printing Types of the Low Countries* (Amsterdam 1968), hereafter cited as VPT.

<sup>3</sup> H.D.L. Vervliet, 'Typographica Plantiniana I. – Ter inleiding: de studie van het zestiende-eeuwse letterbeeld en het geval van "La theologie germanicque" (Plantin, 1558)', *De Gulden Passer*, 37 (1959), pp. 170-8.

Even then efforts were made to establish which of the various printers was using the typeface in question by comparing their types. As one might expect, there were several candidates, some of whom were outside the town. The investigation consequently foundered – an outcome which, we may assume, suited the city magistrates. But, on the basis of a single typographical detail, the shape of the letter w in the printed matter, Vervliet managed to demonstrate who the culprit was. It emerged that he was one of the printers who had indeed been questioned, but who had succeeded in throwing his interrogators off the scent: Gillis Coppens van Diest.<sup>4</sup>

These results show how important typefaces, as the reflection of the inventory of a particular press, can be for establishing the origin and the date of printed matter which appeared either anonymously or with a misleading imprint. Vervliet's *Printing Types* is of value not only as a fundamental study of a craft in which Antwerp and Ghent obtained an international reputation in the sixteenth century. The scope of the work is broader still: it is an essential point of departure and a necessary aid for anyone attempting to reconstruct the frequently secret history of many of the publications of those eventful years. As we know, printers tried to ensure themselves against the risks incurred by their clandestine activities by omitting all initials and other easily recognizable ornaments in the books and pamphlets of this category. But they did of course have to work with the cast types in their possession. And typefaces, even if they were almost invariably in use among several printers in this period, can, thanks to special characteristics or the combinations in which they appear, indicate the printing-press in question. Research based on these elements is often the only means of discovering who was responsible for all sorts of clandestine publications.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> H.D.L. Vervliet, 'Een onbekende tijdgenoot van Christoffel Plantin: Ameet Tavernier, lettersteker', *Antwerpen. Tijdschrift der stad Antwerpen*, 7 (1961), pp. 37-41.

<sup>5</sup> For the book in the Netherlands after 1540 and the Dutch book elsewhere in Europe, the use of this method is relatively recent. The quantity of applications of this method before the publication of Vervliet's *Printing Types* is also negligible, if we except the work of Dr M.E. Kronenberg. In addition to his studies mentioned in notes 3 and 4, see F. Isaac, 'Egidius van der Erve and his English printed books [in Emden]', *The Library*, 4th S., 12 (1931-2), pp. 336-52; C. Clair, 'On the printing of certain Reformation books [Steven Mierdmans in Antwerp and London]', *ibid.*, 5th S., 18 (1963), pp. 275-87; H. de la Fontaine Verwey, 'La première imprimerie [Goossen Goebens] à Sedan et le poète Charles de Navières', *Humanisme actif. Mélanges d'art et de littérature offerts à Julien Cain* (Paris 1968), pp. 215-22. The number then increased rapidly: R. Breugelmans, 'Quaeris quid sit Amor? Ascription, date of publication and printer of the earliest emblem book to be written and published in Dutch', *Quaerendo*, 3 (1973), pp. 281-90; W. Waterschoot, *De Poëtische werken van Jonker Jan van der Noot, I. Analytische bibliografie* (Gent 1975); J. Stellingwerff, 'De drukker van de Emden bedingen', *Uit bibliotheektuin en informatieveld. Opstellen aangeboden aan D. Grosheide bij zijn afscheid als bibliothecaris aan de Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht*, eds. H.F. Hofman, K. van der Horst & A.H.H.M. Mathijssen (Deventer 1978), pp. 199-208; D.E. Rhodes, 'The first Edition of Gildas (Antwerpen, Christoffel van Ruremunde?, ca. 1526-1527)', *The Library*, 6th S., 1 (1979), pp. 355-60;