Whoever cut the punches for the so-called Gutenberg Bible, in 1456, was sure to have an excellent model of the textura. Models for that formal bookhand were there all over the place. The unsigned copy he made was so close to his handwritten model, whatever it was, that he is to this day suspected of forgery. Since we may never really know who printed the first Bible, let us move to safer ground.

The following year, in Mainz, on 14 August 1457, Fust and Schoeffer completed a Latin Psalter. At the end of one copy appears the first colophon in a printed book. Colophon is a Greek word which means ‘finishing stroke’. It refers to a tradition the early printers took over from the medieval manuscript books, where it was customary for the rubricator to sign his name and sometimes to give details of the place, the date, etc. in a separate paragraph at the end of the text. This is what it says in Latin at the end of the Mainz Psalter (as translated by Alfred Pollard and cited by W. Turner Berry and H. Edmund Poole in their Annals of Printing): ‘The present book of the Psalms decorated with beautiful capitals and sufficiently marked out with rubrics, has been thus fashioned by an ingenious invention of printing and stamping without any ploughing of a pen, and to the worship of God has been diligently brought to completion by Johan Fust, a citizen of Mainz, and Peter Schoeffer of Gernsheim, in the year of the Lord 1457 on the Vigil of the Assumption.’ So much for medieval anonymity and for typographic forgery.

It is well known that during the following centuries punches have been cut to match all kinds of formal handwriting styles as closely as could be. In the 1560s and 1580s however, Robert Granjon, Hendrik van den Keere, Ameet Tavernier, Philippe Danfrie et al. were cutting punches after the most informal contemporary handwriting style. These types were called “‘civilité’” after La civilité puérile by Erasmus which was set in that typeface and eventually became a bestseller. Matthieu Rosart was still cutting a civilité in Brussels as late as 1771. Palaeographers would call it a gothic cursive. Its contemporaries called it Kurrent und Kanzlei, cursive and secretary, cor-
siva e mercantesca, bâtard et commune courante. It is not always remembered that in spite of their technical brilliance the civilité types were failures on at least two counts: first, they did not sell; second, they were scarcely used for the intended purposes, namely: as body-letters, as national typefaces and scripts. The first to cut punches for the commune courante, i.e. for the everyday cursive script, was Robert Granjon, Lyons 1557. He wanted to call it the ‘Lettre Françoise’, the French script, and thus to emulate the Hebrews, Greeks and Romans, ‘who took such care of their own languages, that they scrupled and thought it a shame to use letters found out by any people but their own’—as translated by Harry Carter from the French of Granjon. This was in keeping with the French Renaissance mentality as expressed by Joachim du Bellay in his Deffense et illustration de la langue française just as it had been in keeping with the Italian Renaissance two centuries earlier when Petrarc, Boccacio, Poggio et al. decided that Italian was to replace Latin in written communication. The lettera antica, a truly Latin script, seemed more suitable for their modern ‘volgare’ than the lettera moderna which they rejected as gotica, meaning barbarian, illiterate, uncivilised, non-Italian. They got away with it because they were in charge, they were themselves the Establishment. Anyone who wanted to deal with them had no other choice but to master the lettera antica or italic hand. As a matter of fact, the Libretto di Conti di Maddalena Pizzicarola in Trastevere,—the little register or ledger of Maddalena the pork-butcher girl in Trastevere,—at the beginning of the sixteenth century, gives ample evidence that, then as now, lots of people had no dealings with the Establishment if and when they could do without. The majority of the people who could write at all, wrote their own version of the local mercantesca without bothering about the cancellaresca or for that matter other local versions of the lettere mercantile: the veneziana, the fiorentina or any other exotic style. In France, by the time of Granjon and his followers, his ‘lettre française’ seemed calculated to avoid anything reminiscent of Italy and popery. It was accordingly adopted by the Reformers for their hymnals and courtesy books for children. The funny thing is that it was revived by Joris-Karl Huysmans, a famous French writer of the end of the nineteenth century. In his fiction, A rebours [Against the grain], the hero, Monsieur des Esseintes, felt that this typeface with all its spikes, projections and curlicues had exactly the satanic look he needed for a unique copy to be privately printed for him of Les Diaboliques by Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly (Diaboliques meaning ‘she-devils’). This is admittedly as far as the civilité could go astray in the space of one generation from the initially intended purpose and from a tradition more than two centuries old. It should not be forgotten that in spite of the devious course of these so-called civilité types, every single punchcutter of some standing tried his hand at this bedevilled letterform. For