GERRIT NOORDZIJ

The mannerist writing-book and Stanley Morison
In honour of Johann Neudörffer

MORISON'S BOOK

This article assesses Stanley Morison, Early Italian writing-books, Renaissance to Baroque, edited by Nicolas Barker, Edizione Valdonega, Verona, The British Library, London, 1990. That work is a specimen of critical bibliography, 'the science that identifies, separates and classifies details of the physical construction of surfaces and single sheets, tablets, books, and all other materials to which signs, alphabetical and otherwise, are applied' (Stanley Morison, 'The classification of typographical variations', in Letter Forms, typographic and scriptorial; Two essays on their classification, history and bibliography, edited by John Dreyfus, 1968).

THE PROBLEM OF THE EDITOR

On 14 January 1923 Morison wrote to Updike for the first time about his intention to deal with sixteenth-century Italian calligraphy. In the introduction to the published book Nicolas Barker tells the story of the conception through seven decades which in 1963 has become his own story. In 10 pages he evokes all the classics of our book-shelves; from the stimulator Peter Jessen and the great obstructer Edward Johnston to Martino Mardersteig, the smart publisher and dedicated printer of the book.

In the eight chapters establishing the second part, Barker deals in detail with the chronology of the works of Arrighi and Tagliente. The forensic precision of these investigations ensures the lasting value of the book as a bibilographic tool.

Stanley Morison's table of contents is a clear set of labels. The pioneer, The inventor, The developer, The theorist and, finally A wind of change, should give Fanti, Arrighi, Tagliente, Palatino and Cresci a distinct place in the reader's mind.

Of one serious obstacle the editor is aware: 'One complaint I must forestall. Why are there not more illustrations? I can only say that this, Morison's book, is not the right vehicle for what is needed, a generous and well-informed set of reproductions of the main examples of the works of the Italian writing-masters. That would need a different book, and a different text, written and interlocking with the illustrations. The reader must judge,
but I hope with some sympathy for the belief that illustrations post hoc would not have been possible on a larger scale than those printed here.’

So collect your sympathy for the editor’s belief and pile up around you the picturebooks that could compensate for the lack of illustration. Minimally you should have the following set at hand:

- Oscar Ogg, *Three classics of Italian calligraphy*,
- Cresci, *Essemplare*,
- Alfred Fairbank & Berthold Wolpe, *Renaissance handwriting*,

*Early Italian writing-books* was not written from scratch. Several paragraphs have been transferred verbatim from earlier publications such as the essay on Horfei, in *Letter Forms*. New to me is its stylistic extravagance. Morison is always ready to argue with passion, but here his exclamations tend to rave.

Perhaps Morison would have smoothed the expression of his emotion, would he have edited the text himself. In the present situation the editor is responsible for preserving the wording of the draft. In his introduction Nicolas Barker seems to refer to this: ‘The text was, they [Carla Marzoli and Martino Mardersteig] said, a classic and should be treated as such; let there be no more delay in the interests of never-to-be-achieved perfection; the work as Morison left it should now be published as a tribute to his memory.’

Even this was easier said than done.

There is a chance that the reader will meet the usually formally dressed gentleman Stanley Morison here in his sleeves.

The English book supposes knowledge of Italian, some understanding of Latin and a notion of German and French. In instances like this the well-educated English reader might not understand the author instantaneously: ‘he was, as Casamassima truly says, ‘piuttosto un dilettante, un orecchiente che huomo di vera cultura’.’

**BASICS**

I became ‘writing-master’ of the Royal Academy of The Hague with the extravagant desire to be clear in my teaching. I wanted to disclose writing without imposing aesthetic preferences and to cultivate metaphysics only in our affection for the subject. Because I demanded the same precision from the professional literature I retained three books on the technique of writing: Johann Neudörffer, *Eine gute Ordnung* ... [Fundamentals of writing] (Nuremberg 1538), Gerard Mercator, *Literarum Latinarum* ... [Ratio Scribendi] (Louvain 1540), and Jan van den Velde, *Spieghel der schrijfkonste* ...[Part 3: Fonde-mentboeck] (Rotterdam 1605).