

Moxomenon

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Joseph Moxon, Mechanick Exercises. Vol. 2 (1683–84), the first known manual of printing

i.

J. M. begins his book,
 Every thought taken up from the block with a roll
 Of the ball and inked on the form,
 A *Craft* of the Hand which cannot be taught by Words:
 “I thought to have given these *Exercises*
 The title of *Doctrine of Handy-Crafts* but when I considered
 The true meaning of the word I found the Doctrine
 Would not bear it, therefore I shall not undertake
 That with the bare reading any shall be able to . . . ”
 Is it not plain we cannot be taught
 Anything but knowledge? he writes, I use to write
 With Pen and Ink lest afterwards
 I might be troubled with recollections,
 But who knows the theory and practice which best please
 God as far as words are concerned.

ii.

I was a hospitable reader in those days,
 And I accepted everything
 With providential and enthusiastic resignation.
 I believed everything, even errata
 And poor illustrations,
 Luxuriesced in the private and useless,
 The unreclaimable as accomplishment or vocation.
 I had dreams where Mary would talk about the d e n h t h—
 “Go around the denhth,” she cried—that word
 Is what I remember best from the dream. I look it up
 And find a quote in the dictionary from Chaucer,
 A couplet rhyming “brethren” with “endenhther,”
 Maybe “endenhtherèd”? and a note: “Note
 How well Chaucer uses the word!” or something
 Along those lines, there’s definitely a !, and when
 I wake up I don’t remember what “denhth” means but it’s something to do
 With hedges or the layout of the house, like “curtilage,” “windrows,” it was

a very spatial dream.

Moxon writes like that. Like squares in the sand for
Meno's slave—an omen of memory, not instruction.
Reading him is like watching someone read,
You can stand it only when watching a lover, then *they're* the one
To get antsy and make you stop when you could happily
Watch them all day! the tip of their nose, their adorable downturned face.
People are so complicated if you think about them, so
Uncomplicated if you don't. Is it thinking's fault
Then? That doesn't bode well, whatever boding is.

iii.

Every day J. M. remembers it,
The Great Fire, the scalding smoake he inhaled
Trying to save what he could, his stock of globes and instruments
Lost, the Signe of *Atlas* on Ludgate-Hill destroyed.
Not even a Royal Hydrographer
With all his unsold copies of "A Book of sea-plats
Containing the Scituation of all the *Ports, Havens, Creeks, Capes,*
Rocks, Sands and *Shoalds* in all europe" had water enough
To beat that. And so he has turned into one of those
Old men behind the hotel desk in stylish white glasses
And an old-fashioned sleeveless red cardigan
Telling vain young guests about growing old while
They wait for a taxi, you know the kind I mean? talking
About the day when you look in the mirror and realize you're losing
Your looks, the "terrible disappointment," he says, softly,
Holds out stiff wrists at the ends of his
Blighted arms—"Look at these! I've played amateur classical piano
My whole life but with hands like this my repertoire

Stops at, oh, 1850"—like that,
But 1666,
And "Life is a pure flame,"
And "at the last fire all shall be crystallized & reverberated
Into glasse," hence the turn to All Trades
Which use *Forge* or *File*, translation to Russell Street Westminster,
Essays towards a real character and a philosophical language.
I have collected all the hard words together,
He says, Extasis, Exolution, Liquefaction, Transformation,
Credycels, Inlepturgie, Isopleurs,
Globes both Celestiall and Terrestriall, Spheares, Mapps
And Sea-Platts, The Mariner's Mirror, *Catoptricks*
To Delineate confused Appearences, the most
Exact and perfect Waggoner in the English Tongue
Yet extant in any Language whatsoever wherein all old errors
Are rectified, the Bodies exactly made, Usefull for all
Painters, Engravers Architects &c. and all others

That are in any waies inclined to Speculatory
 Ingenuity, and surely you must not think
 You can make its nature clear to anyone or make anything else
 Clear by speaking in this way, but only
 That the same question must be put to you again;
 The same holds true for written words: you might
 Suppose they understand what they are saying,
 But if you ask them what they mean by anything
 They simply return the same answer over and over
 Again, the orthography false to its native
 Pronunciation, the words altered into other words
 By a little wrong spelling, and consequently the sense
 Made ridiculous, the purpose of it
 Controvertible, and the meaning of the author irre-
 Trievably lost to all that shall read it in after times.
 I cannot tell you now
 What I thought then, I do not
 Altogether remember, but now I know
 Writing is a Machine Invented
 Upon mature consideration of Mechanick Powers
 And deducted from Geometrick Principles, he continues,
 Losing himself (and long since us) in

iv.

The euphorics of precision: "For Example,
 Letter-cutting is a Handy-Work
 Hitherto kept so conceal'd among the Artificers
 Of it, that I cannot learn one hath taught
 It any other; But every one that has used it, Learnt it.
 If it be *A*
 You would Cut: This *Counter-Punch*
 Is easie to make, because it is a Triangle; and by measuring
 The Inside of the Angle of the *A* in the Draft
 Of Letters, as you were taught, §. 12. ¶. 6.
 You may make on your Standing *Gage-Plate* a *Gage* for that Angle.
 Having by your *A-Gage* fitted the Top-Angle and the Sides
 Of this *Counter-Punch*, you must adjust its Height by one of the three
Face-Gages mentioned, *viz.* By the Ascending *Face-Gage*; for *A*
 Is an Ascending Letter. By Adjusting I do not mean,
 You must make the *Counter-Punch* so high, as the Depth
 Of the Ascending *Face-Gage*; because in this Letter here is to be considered
 The Top and the Footing, which strictly, as in the large Draft of *A*, make
 Both together five sixth Parts of a thin Space: Therefore
 Five sixth Parts must be abated in the Height of your Counter-Punch, and
 it must
 Be but four thin Spaces, and one sixth part of a thin Space high,
 Because the Top above the *Counter-Punch* and the Footing below make five
 sixth Parts of a thin Space, as aforesaid.

Therefore,
 To measure off the Width of four thin Spaces and one sixth Part of a thin
 Space, lay three thin Spaces, or, which is better, the Letter e, which is
 three thin Spaces, as aforesaid;
 And . which is one thin Space and one sixth part of a thin Space,
 Upon one another; for they make together, four thin Spaces, and one sixth
 part of a thin Space; and the thickness of these two Measures
 Shall be the Heighth of the *Counter-Punch*, between the Footing
 And the Inner Angle of *A*. And thus,
 By this Example, you may couple with proper Measures
 Either the whole Forty two, which is the whole Body,
 Or any number of its Parts, as I told you before.
 Therefore use the *Sliding Gage* (§.12. ¶.4. and *Plate 10.* at B.)
 And move the Socket *c c* on the Beam *a a*, till the Edge of the Shoulder of
 the Square of the Socket at the underside of the Beam stands just the
 Width of . . . ”

v.

Even someone blindfolded would know from this conversation
 That J. M. is handsome and still has lovers but
 Melancholy; it is hard to picture him outdoors
 For all his sundials and sea-charts. Seven years
 After the Fire *hee was aground* (*Meaning*
As these Defendants conceived and apprehended in a low
Condition) and also that he could not (as yett)
Either build or pay the rent, not long afterwards there's
Mr. Moxon's Recipe for Ink. To a quart of rain-water
Put 5 Ounces of Galls moderately pounded. Stir ym
Up every day for 14 dayes together. Then put in 2 Ounce
& and half of Copperas and half an Ounce of gum.
Do not put in the gum and Copperas till after ye 14 days probatum est
A little gum gives it a gloss, & boyling makes thick,
 Then at Hooke's, *Will. Aubrey, Merret, Moxon, &c. here to see comet*
But misssd it. drank 2 bottles claret. Shewd them repository,
 Then the Royal Society, Pepys, John Evelyn, Ashmole's *Astrologers' Feast*
restored
 By *Mr. Moxson* and held at the Three Cranes in Chancery-Lane,
 Watch him now recollecting things in order, as one must
 Recollect so much of his copy as he thinks he can
 Retain in his memory till he have *composed* it,
 As commonly is five or six words, or sometimes a longer
 Sentence. And having read, he falls a spelling
 In his mind; yet so, that his thoughts
 Run no faster than his fingers: For as he spells A,
 He takes up A out of the *A Box*,
 As he names n in his thoughts he takes up n
 Out of the *n Box*, as he names d in his thoughts
 He takes up d out of the *d Box*; which three letters set together

Make a word, viz. And; so that after
 The d he sets a *Space*: Then he goes on
 To the next word, and so composes on, placing the second
 Joynt of his thumb over the moving *Cheek* of the *Stick*—
 This shows how any serious endeavor
 Of the mind would, of necessity, take it into
 Somber moods. Deschamps says about something
 So ugly that it is beyond all power of imagination, “No
 Painter is so ‘merencolieux’ that he would be able to paint it.”

vi.

All right then. So much for the genuine art of speaking
 And its opposite. My night-sky desk
 Returns into view; the attention turns
 To the painting above it, I did not know
 One could be so terrible with a little blue and green.
 Today went well but I hated it, I don’t know why.
 The sheets of cloud in the evening sky
 Are morning sheets—rumpled, slept in, not just slept in either, glowing
 With late-morning light while you make two coffees and wonder
 How this will all turn out—but it is in fact evening,
 Everybody has left the party and the ones
 You wanted most to see are the ones who didn’t come, or even call.
 I am myself again and Moxon’s
 Book mere undercoating to the moment.
 I let it happen; I want it to happen;
 These opinions have just been stirred up
 Like a dream, a recipe for recollection,
 Not memory, and as for wisdom, the reputation
 For it without the reality. True,
 We are probably poor specimens, you
 And I, we must at all costs find someone
 Who will in some way make us better. But how?
 Young people are nearly invisible to me now, as I remember
 People my age were to me when I was theirs;
 Contemporaries and wraiths, that’s it,
 Except for a few souls younger than oneself who come across
 Like recent émigrés from another country and a few much older
 Who seem naturally to associate with one, who make one forget
 That one is younger than them and remember that one is not
 The gold standard of one’s time. “You play amateur classical piano,
 Too, right?” the old man asks you, “can you work the pedals for me?”
 I think somehow this is no longer like the other cases.