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Word and Place in Irish Typography

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Undisciplined Disciplines

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Toponomic typography, or place-name typography, is not, in any sense a formal discipline. It is, however, common for typographers to find themselves setting the names of locations and settlements within a diverse range of projects. Wayfinding solutions, public transport information material and road signage are but some examples of the instances in which the designer is required to represent and visually interpret those words which mean so much to so many.

Before addressing this subject it is important to state that the potential scope is obviously far too broad to be dealt with in a single essay. Therefore, I intend to investigate the common methods of place-name representation in an Irish context and how these names most often take form in the environment they name. First, it will be argued that mass-transportation necessitates the designation of place through signage systems. From this, I will then consider two typefaces which currently define the Irish landscape: those used on our roads and railways. Finally, I will review a recent attempt to improve upon the standards of toponomic typography within the Irish road network. Throughout, my focus shall be the "identity" imposed upon these typographic examples, as well as considering the functional and social implications of their design.

I begin at Euston Station in London. Here, oddly enough, we find the words Dublin and Belfast wedged among a long list of British towns and cities. The list is embedded in the cornerstones of two entrance lodges

facing out onto the busy Euston Road. These buildings are, more or less, all that survives of the original Euston — the world's first capital-city railway terminus. By the time these destinations were inscribed the station was already thirty years old and the London and North Western Railway had developed links across the English midlands and into Wales. (1) Andrew Jackson, *London's Termini,* Newton Abbot, David & Charles, 1985, pp. 42-43 One of these links extended all the way to Holyhead in Anglesey, where steamboats would ferry passengers across the Irish Sea to Dublin. As far as the L&NWR directors were concerned these cities, later to become the Irish and Northern Irish capitals, were simply two more destinations within the United Kingdom and therefore in no way uncomfortable inclusions in this British listing.

The active dimension here is not, however, political. Within their context, these names present a challenge to mid-nineteenth-century concepts of space. Implicit in this arrangement is a whole new world of possibility. Dublin, for example, could now be reached in less than eleven hours, down from the thirty-eight hours that it took in 1817 when the mail coach was the only option. (2) Charles George Harper, *The Holyhead Road: The Mail-Coach Road to Dublin,* London: Chapman and Hall, 1902, p. 16 The letterforms, apparently unexcited by such a turn of events, stubbornly ignore this. Their classical proportions are clearly referenced from the mileposts which began appearing on Britain's roads in the 1750s. (3) Ibid. p. 10 To a contemporary audience this style must have carried connotations of tradition and establishment. The railways, however, were far from traditional and only just established.

It is difficult to exaggerate the extent to which the locomotive altered the travelling public's perception of space. When steam replaced animal power, motion was liberated from its previous organic limitations. While long-distance travel was not a new phenomenon, the capacity and speeds at which railways operated transformed the experience. Writing in his book The Railway Journey: the Industrialization of Space and Time in the Nineteenth Century, Wolfgang Schivelbusch is convinced that this shift was absolute and profound. "Motion," he states, "was no longer dependent on the conditions of natural space, but on mechanical power that created its own spatiality." (4) Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: the Industrialization of Space and Time in the Nineteenth Century,* Berkley: University of California Press p. 9

Overnight land-traffic replaced the waterways as the primary link along the capitalist supply chain. Places that were previously inaccessible were suddenly opened up to industry as well as travel. An 1838 report by the Railway Commissioners to Ireland mused that if railways were to be established nationwide, the surface of our country would, as it were, shrivel in size until it became not much bigger than an immense city and

yet by a sort of miracle every man's field would not only be found where it always was, but as large as it ever was! (5) Railway Commissioners to Ireland, *Reports of the Commissioners appointed to consider and recommend a general system of railways for Ireland,* Quarterly Review no. CXXV, vol. LXIII (1838): p. 22 Of course, the railways did not literally alter space but rather the traveller's experience of it.

Ireland's political and geographic relationship to Britain ensured the early arrival of this revolutionary mode of transport. (6) Kevin O'Connor, *Ironing the Land,* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999, p. 5 By 1846 the Dublin to Drogheda Railway was already recording passenger numbers of 1,111,142, substantially more than those travelling on the London to Birmingham route during the same period. (7) George Bentinck, *Railways in Ireland,* London: George Woodfall and Son, 1847, p. 8 While certain passengers might never have visited places such as Clontarf, Malahide, Skerries or Balbriggan their names would all have become familiar sights. Similarly, as the rest of Ireland opened to the railways over the following decades, with 3000 miles of track laid by 1894, (8) O'Connor*, Ironing the Land,* p. 93 hundreds of other unvisited place-names would have been revealed through their station signage. Within this new spatial configuration these station signs were more than just helpful architectural details, but marker points guiding a disoriented population along their route. I am not suggesting that this development was a particular product of the railways. As mentioned above, mileposts had been functioning in much the same way for centuries. However, by creating a truly mobile population and accelerating the pace of movement the railways necessitated the use of such systems to support and reinforce their project of expansion. Signage, then, had begun to replace, as well as to facilitate, spatial contact.

From rail, to road, to air, this dizzy mixture of acceleration and alienation has permeated through every successive transport revolution. (9) Rebecca Solnit*, Wanderlust: A History of Walking,* New York: Viking, 2000, p. 257 Our present day negotiation of space is rarely reliant on our own internalized knowledge but instead on the information design which has been deployed to support us in our passage through the unknown. Anthropologist Marc Augé takes up this theme in his book Non-Places: Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity. Here, the "non-place" is defined as the exact opposite of the anthropological place; an "organically social" entity, which is to say, an unconscious construction. (10) Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity* London: Verso, 1995, p. 94 "The link," Augé writes, "between individuals and their surroundings in the space of non-place is established through words, or even texts." (11) Ibid In this scenario the relationship between person and place becomes (in some instances)

entirely text based. We see this enacted on high-speed rail networks, motorways, and airports.

    If we are living in a society whose flow of movement functions through the support of words and texts on signage identifying place, then it follows — at least to some degree — that this signage must help to create those places. Typographic choices would therefore impact upon the formation of a place's identity. Obviously, these choices are based on a wide range of factors and not solely concerned with identity. I would argue that whatever a design's motivation, its connection to, or position within an environment will ultimately contribute to how that environment is perceived. Writing about place-identity, urban designers Georgia Burton Watson and Ian Bentley state that:

> The concept of identity enables design issues to be debated in social and political terms, in ways which people seem to recognise as relevant to their own everyday lives. We have found that when we get beneath the surface of what users say when they talk about a place's identity, they usually have in mind some sort of meaning the place has in terms of their own identity: how the place affects the way they conceive of themselves. (12) Ian Bentley, Georgina Burton Watson, *Identity by Design* Oxford: Butterworth-Heinewmann, 2007, p. 3

From this viewpoint, the impact of those sign-based words and texts becomes indisputably significant. Populating and controlling our interaction with the physical environment they are also relating an identity of their patron and their designer's choosing. An identity which, according to Burton Watson and Bentley, eventually contributes to our sense of self.

    At this point I would like to explore how mass-mobility in modern Ireland gives form to these sign-based words, and directly consider what identity is being expressed through their typographic arrangement and style. By focusing on Ireland as a singular unit I inevitably ignore the regional and the local, which both offer, in the area of toponomic typography, abundant examples of individual and communal creativity. Unfortunately, these examples must be set-aside for the present as they do not independently support mass-mobility. It is the self-contained national signage systems of Ireland's road and rail networks which provide the most complete and comprehensive examples of how typography and place intermingle.

    Though these systems operate independently of one another they share the legal requirement to offer their content in Irish as well as English. The Official Languages Act 2003 states that all signage produced by national institutions must present the Irish text before its English

translation, which should not appear in any way more prominent than the former. (13) *The Official Languages Act 2003* Dublin: Government Publications Office, 2003 This leads to a duality of naming, with words sitting upon words, both pointing to the same thing. Although it is technically illegal to emphasize English over Irish, clear distinctions have been drawn between the two. As we shall see, they are made to look different.

It has been suggested that presenting a 'national' language in visual form, giving it body so to speak, was one of the contributing factors to the development of the concept of nationhood and indeed sustains it even today. (14) Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964 p. 193 In his book Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson has attributed this development to what he terms "print-capitalism." In Anderson's view this expanding economic force established a "new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation." (15) Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities London*: Verso, 2006 p. 44 Viewed in this way, applying a visual fixity to place-names would not only help build a place's identity but also assist in the spatial expression of state. In other words, as happens elsewhere, typographic homogeneity draws together space and, of course, place. I would argue that the ubiquity of Ireland's two infrastructural typefaces does just that.

The typefaces in question are CIE 2000, found on railways, and Transport, found on roads. Let us first consider CIE 2000, which is, to my knowledge, Ireland's only commissioned corporate typeface. It is the product of the combined efforts of two men: Tyrone Pardue and Tony Fahy. Pardue runs Pardue Associates, based in Safety Harbour, Florida. In 1996 Pardue was commissioned by CIE, the state's public transport operator, to overhaul the company's identity. "I realized early on in the project," Pardue comments, "that the best way to solve the problem of the two languages and a great way to unify all the operating companies in a subtle way was to design a custom typeface." (16) Pardue Associates, Who We Are, 2010, accessed 1st September 2010, http://pardueassociates.com/new/who_we_are He attributes the design of this face to Fahy, whom he describes as "one of the finest type designers today." (17) Ibid

With its sharp, swishing terminals and voluminous curves, CIE 2000 seems to be an attempt to present the appearance of an efficient, integrated public transportation network in a country that, until recently, was in the midst of an unprecedented economic boom. Indeed, at the time of the typeface's creation the company was about to benefit from a record programme of investment. (18) Iarnród Éireann, *Moving into the Future* Dublin: CIE, 2007, p. 3 Here we see a face which endeavours to walk a fine line between being firmly Irish and being modern in its aspirations. Unfortunately, I would say that it fails on both counts. Place-names

appear in upper and lower case on station signs positioned at intervals along the platform. The English name is set in bold above its oblique Irish counterpart. In both cases the text is black on a white background. Ultimately the shape of the words, key to their recognition, is weakened through the over-emphasis on curves. (19) Bruno Munari, *Design as Art* London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2008, p. 66 Both bold and oblique, these place-names look harsh and heavy, as though they are being held against their will. The typeface may have unified all the operating companies in a 'subtle' way but it was not subtle in its unification of space. Tellingly, CIE 2000 is being silently phased out, to be replaced by a far more understated sans-serif face. On the new signage the Irish text is set in orange with the English in black. This new system presents a sense of clarity and ease that CIE 2000 lacked. It seeks to be informative rather than representational, and while this might not be entirely possible, it is certainly admirable.

Although there are 2288 kilometres of railway versus 662 kilometres of motorway in operation in Ireland, road signage is displayed and encountered far more frequently. (20) Irish Rail, 2010, accessed 30th September 2010, http://www.irishrail.ie/about_us/our_infrastructure.asp. NRA (2009), National Route Lengths 2009, Dublin: NRA, p. 3 In any case, the future seems tipped in the motorway's favour, with eighty-nine percent of infrastructural spending has been committed to road building since 2005. (21) Frank McDonald, 'Expert says State must invest more in high-speed rail' *The Irish Times,* 24th January, 2011 While the quality of the Irish motorway network marks an improvement in road standards, no effort has been made to develop the accompanying signage. As mentioned above, Transport, used on Britain's roads since the 1960s, directs the Irish motorist along their route. Though the face has never been commercially available, (22) Phil Baines, "A design (to sign roads by)," *Eye 34, vol. 9* 1999: p. 28 it has found its way onto Irish road signage with, it must be added, some alterations, which we shall return to. As in the case of the railways, place-names are shown in both languages. Bilingual road signage is, unsurprisingly, a highly contentious topic. Wales, Ireland's closest bilingual neighbour, also uses Transport. In this instance, Welsh sits over the English; both languages appear in upper and lower case with no differentiation between the two. Ireland has engineered another solution. Since 1989 a capitalized Transport Heavy has been used for the English version of the name and an oblique upper and lower case version of Transport Heavy has been used for the Irish. This solution is the direct result of the then Minister for Transport, Pádraig Flynn's 1988 Road Traffic Signs Regulations. In the explanatory note the amendment states:

'These Regulations provide that place-names on all informative signs provided after 1st January, 1989 shall

be shown in italic letters in Irish and in Roman letters in English and where the spelling of a place-name is similar in both languages an Irish inscription in italic letters only need be shown on the sign.' (Ireland 1988)

It is worth noting that Transport's original designers Jock Kinnear and Margaret Calvert only ever developed two weights: Transport Medium and Transport Heavy. Therefore, in order to meet Flynn's legalisation it was necessary to produce a bastardized version of the face. While developing this "italic" the Irish Department of the Environment also introduced certain idiosyncratic characters including the upper case A, N and M, as well as the lower case a, i, and with some variation the u. These alterations were presumably undertaken in an effort to offer a sense of handwritten script, suggesting "Irishness." The lower case i, it should be noted, has been, until recently, dot-less. Although accurately referencing historical models, the dot's absence hampered legibility. Regarding the use of upper case letters for English place-names, Kinnear was quite adamant that all words should appear in both upper and lower case. (23) Joe Moran, *On Roads* London: Profile, 2009, p. 64 With all-capitals and a stylised oblique, the Irish changes directly disregard and contradict the intentions of Transport's designers. Commenting on this, information designer Gareth Reil states:

> Even if this re-design of the type were well executed, it is inappropriate to create stylised letter shapes. Unusual letter forms are likely to inhibit readability of place names. Moreover, in common usage Irish is set in contemporary typefaces and this should be reflected in signs. (24) Garrett Reil, "Old Irish Meets Modern European," May 2009, accessed 2nd September 2010, http://garrettreil.ie/design-research-blog_ files/letter-confusion-in-the-design-of-the-irish-type.php

Reil, rather than just criticizing, has attempted to produce an alternative system, one that he hopes will meets the needs of bilingualism as well as the demands of legibility at high speed. To this end he has produced the typeface Turas in conjunction with NCAD, which, aptly enough, means 'journey' in Irish. Reil started by testing the US typeface Clearview, but found Irish names became too wide. He then began working on a test typeface based on Frutiger's proportions, believing it to be "clearer" than Transport with a higher x-height and more open letter shapes. This face was dropped in preference for a face bearing a larger x-height, at eighty-two percent of the capital size, thus creating what Reil describes as an "almost "upper-case" lower-case design."25 Rather than setting the languages in separate faces the colour yellow has been applied to Irish. On finalising his design, Reil embarked on a miniature promotional road show, giving a speech to Engineers Ireland, as well as addressing

the government at an Oireachtas Joint Committee. Despite the interest and the apparent momentum it seems unlikely that Ireland will make any move to alter its road signage system, especially at the end of a large period of expansion. Strategically Turas points in the right direction for the future of typography in Ireland, offering a solution primarily concerned with application and usage. As Reil himself puts it:
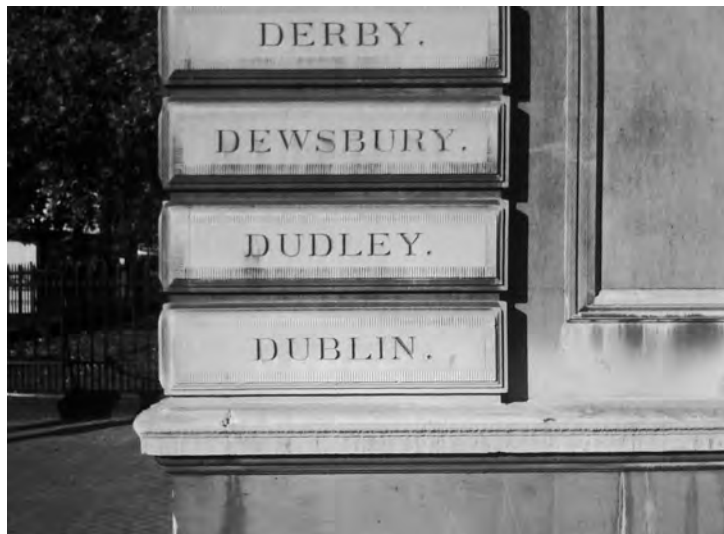
> [We] would finish with a research-driven, well-designed, efficient road sign system for Ireland. We would have visual expression of the language and its importance but also a visual expression of the importance of research and design and our knowledge economy, rather than something that was handed down and co-opted from a separate use. (26) Garrett Reil, "Irish Language: Discussion with Conradh na Gaeilge," 23rd September 2009, accessed 4th September 2010, http://debates.oireachtas.ie/DDebate.aspx?F=TOJ20090923.XML&Ex=All&Page=2

By focusing on the "visual expression" of his face, Reil points, of course, toward the values that it could project. In his view, not only would Irish be granted a viable form, but Ireland itself would be perceived as an economy which values research and design as well as knowledge. That the typographic design of place-names might be capable of such projection is not as ridiculous a statement as it might at first appear. One needs only to consider the well-executed strategies employed by the London and Berlin transport authorities to witness the potential of identity-through-typography. (27) Mary-Ann Bolger, *Design Factory: On the Edge of Europe* Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2009, p. 122 Even Transport, as found in its original form on Britain's roads, has been noted as an efficient and powerful touchstone of connection. The late Paul Stiff described the system as exemplifying "the role open outward facing design can play in civic life," calling it the product of an era where designers sought to "make the world a better place." (28) Paul Stiff, "The way ahead," *Eye 78,* vol.10 2011 p. 42 What is striking is that place-names, and their typographic expression, are now essential elements in our daily visual experience. They point not just to place but also to identity. Paradoxically, we may draw from the above examples that by avoiding an explicit emphasis on identity the resultant solution is likely not only to be functional but also respected and in some rare cases genuinely admired.

In conclusion, I have argued that mass-mobility necessitates the designation of place through information design. Here, words and texts are seen to facilitate spatial movement. Through repeated visual contact, this typography comes to affect and contribute to a user's perception of his or her environment and ultimately reflects upon his or her self-perception. Spread across expansive transportation networks, place-

naming typography may even function as an expression of the State. The addition of what is ultimately a secondary language to the mix, in this case Irish, only complements the process. It is inconsequential that the majority of users will ignore the text; its mere visual presence reinforces a sense of national unity. The identity of place-naming typography may or may not be primary to the designer's concerns but ultimately those letterforms, serif or sans-serif, bold or italic, black or orange, will be understood as being representational of something, somewhere for someone. However, if the original aims are commendable then, with dedicated effort, the eventual outcome is likely to reflect its initial guiding principles •

Destination names on Euston Station's Entrance Lodge (Image: Author)

CIE 2000
REGULAR
Design by Tony Fahy

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNO
PQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmno
pqrstuvwxyz
1234567890

A Northern Irish road sign with the names Dublin
and Belfast both set in upper and lower case,
unaltered Transport. (Image: Author)

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