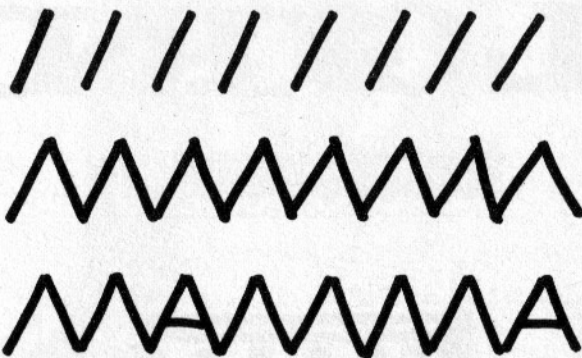


**BAR**

**ZEN**

## The Shape of Words

Not only does each letter of a word have a shape of its own, but all its letters taken together give shape to the word. We are of course referring to printed, or at least written, words; for the words we hear in speech or on the radio do not have a visual form. They have what might be called sonic form, but we are not dealing with this at the moment. When you read the word **MAMMA** you see at once that it has quite a different shape from the word **OBOLO**. The lines (straight or curved, upright or at an angle) and the blank spaces between one letter and the next all contribute to giving the word its overall shape.



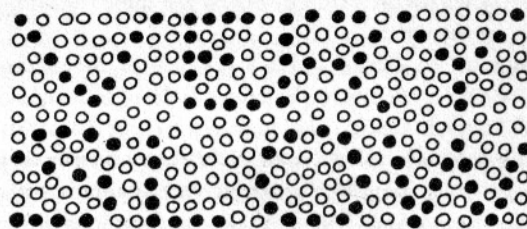
## Poems and Telegrams

It is certainly quite wrong to read a poem in a hurry, as if it were a telegram. Though some contemporary poems do in fact have as few words as the average telegram, their content is in many cases different. I say 'in many cases' because one does sometimes get telegrams that might almost be poems, and these one reads through quickly at first and then more slowly, realizing that some of the words can have more than one meaning, as in a poem. They are poems struck off at random. And I will go further and say that each text, however short, has its own 'reading time'. A poem only communicates if read slowly: only then does it have time to create a state of mind in which the images can form and be transformed.

The graphic designer can also operate in this field; where lettering and spacing must be calculated according to the effect required. Though it is commonly done, it is not right to use the same type faces for poems as for the reports of Board meetings. For rapid reading the type must be simple and clear, the spaces between letters and words exactly calculated, the space around each word sufficient to isolate it completely from its surroundings; while the letters and background must not be done in complementary colours.

Quick legibility is the quality required most of all for road-

# FAST



signs, yet on most of the signs we see the words have completely lost their shape. For example, the word HULL is shorter than the word LIVERPOOL, but we often see it drawn out to H U L L, so as to make it all of a length with LIVERPOOL. In this way our reading has been slowed down and the message retarded in the interests of a quite bogus aesthetic standard.

When we are sitting in an armchair reading a good book we need to slow down our reading speed, and a number of writers and artists have realized this need. One of the effects of the total lack of punctuation in the last chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses* is that it changes our reading speed. Klee once wrote a poem and filled the spaces between the letters with various colours. The result was that the words revealed themselves to the consciousness in slow motion. The Futurists composed their *tavole parolibere* according to this principle, while poems have also been written with one word on each page. The reading time of posters is often varied by the use of lettering

This is especially the case with words we are used to reading — or forced to read — every day: the names of newspapers, of big firms, foreign countries, film stars, the names dinned into us by assiduous advertisers, words that greet us wherever we look, such as 'sport', and the 'in' words of the moment, such as 'pop'. These we seize at a glance, without having to spell out each letter or syllable. That is, we recognize their overall shape, a thing we cannot do with unfamiliar words such as tetradecapodous or tryanlyonnonodont, especially when these are written in the tiniest print on a minute scrap of paper rolled round a medicine bottle, for example.

Some words, such as the names of well-known firms or products, are so familiar to us that if we block out most of the letters we can still read the name correctly at first glance and

**DAMO**

**IL GIORNO**

*toponomastica*

**MIAMI**

only notice afterwards that something is slightly unusual. But this can only happen if we preserve the general shape of the word.

An experiment anyone can make is to cut out the letters of a newspaper title, for example, and push these closer together until the upright stroke of one letter also does duty for the next. This gives a clearer idea of the shape of the word. One can go even further, and superimpose one letter on another, as in one of my illustrations I have made an M do duty also as an A in the word DAMO (the trademark of an ancient Roman brick factory).

Knowledge of the shape of words and the possibilities these offer for communication can be very useful to the graphic designer when he comes to make warning signs that have to be taken in quickly, like the ones on motorways, that one cannot stop to decipher.

**JAZZ**

of different sizes, and a single word in large letters following ten or twenty lines of small type will be read before the text that precedes it. Some posters and advertisements are read at two or three different speeds.

One can also eliminate the spaces between the words: it certainly slows up the reading. But at the same time it is very tiring to the eye.

In some publications that have artistic pretensions the printed text is lined up on the left while the right-hand margin is left ragged. This is done so as not to split the words and create time-gaps in the middle of them. Finally, a good designer could set a text with the reading time varying according to meaning and emphasis, just as a person changes speed in speech. To a certain extent, of course, this is already done with punctuation.

Responsible - 1/15/77