
Laudatio for Professor Hermann Zapf

Frank Mittelbach

Honored Professor Zapf,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

A Laudatio, according to the dictionary¹, is a “celebratory speech within the framework of a ceremony in which someone’s accomplishments and services are honored.” The dictionary further informs me, as someone who has never learned Latin, that there is a relationship to *laudare* (which means praise) and to *laudes* (which means the singing of praises).

Now, I doubt that my singing would be appreciated, so I will restrict myself to praise. It gives pleasure to praise as it also gives pleasure to be rightly praised, and this right Professor Zapf has earned in all areas in which he has worked.

Now, many proverbs advise that one should avoid too much praising and in view of the fact that in a concert hall one is not allowed to cough, and during a eulogy one is not allowed to yawn, I am well advised not to bore anyone here with too many details.

Speaking of praise, I should perhaps begin with DANTE, the German T_EX users organization, or more exactly with its members, or even more exactly with the great majority of T_EX users in the entire world. Their affinity and love for typography is the reason that brings us together here today. It is their wish to honor Professor Zapf for his considerable contribution to twentieth century typography, and particularly for his influence on digital typography.

The species “T_EXie” is a strange beast. In the age of Microsoft Word and Co, its members steadfastly refuse to deal with the computer as they should, cobbling together text with mouse-clicks and pull-down menus. Rather they garnish their text with strange, useless signs like the backslash, fancy brackets, and incomprehensible commands. And all that to avoid widows, orphans² and other obscure things.

These ladies and gentlemen speak of badly kerned fonts, of high-quality composition, throwing around words such as quad, leaving the rest of the world bewildered: “What do these people want?”

With my word processor, everything is much faster and simpler, and I can see right away what it looks like!”

“Yes,” answers the devoted T_EXie, “that’s exactly why it looks like *that*.”

Fanatics? Crackpots? People that time has passed by? — After all, T_EX was created more than twenty years ago. Can such a dinosaur of the computer age still have any relevance? Can one still take its champions seriously in the age of WYSIWYG³ and multimedia?

One can and one should. The rules of typography also hold true for text that has not been set in lead. Promoting these rules is even more important nowadays than in the past, because with ‘desktop publishing for all’, the knowledge of both the compositor and the typographer is under threat unless software takes over some portion of these tasks.

Even though T_EX is now middle-aged, its roots are firmly anchored in the foundations of typographic quality. Many may be astounded — but even after such a long time there is hardly any other computer program whose typesetting quality approaches that of T_EX, let alone surpasses it.

There are many reasons for this. The most important is probably that Professor Knuth was able to build on the friendship, the knowledge and the help of such notables as Hermann Zapf, Charles Bigelow and Richard Southall. Their capacity for passing on their deep typographic knowledge, and ideas for its realization in the computer, have had a decisive influence on T_EX as we know it today. Their cooperation helped to place T_EXnow, after twenty years, among the best typesetting programs.

Donald Knuth started the T_EX project with the goal of developing, in approximately half a year, a computer program with whose help his secretary would be able to typeset his books (in particular, of course, *The Art of Computer Programming*). This was his reaction to, in his opinion, the terrible deterioration of quality of his and other people’s books through the increased use of computers in publishing.

As we know, that half-year became about ten years. As Don had to learn, typography can’t be compressed into a computer program in half a year — actually, not even in ten years! But during this time, with knowledgeable help, a framework could be built that still nourishes us today. During these years, Don changed from a computer specialist into an apprentice of the black arts, and I think we

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¹ Duden, Deutsches Universalwörterbuch, Mannheim 1989

² Editor’s note: The German terms, Schusterjungen (cobbler boys) and Hurenkinder (children of whores), are much more colorful than the English.

³ What you see is what you get

can justifiably thank his masters during that time, that he learned so well.

But I promised at the beginning to keep this speech short, so I should not digress any further from my Laudatio, but finally devote myself to the theme.

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There are many biographies about Hermann Zapf and I dare say that there is no contemporary book on the topic of typography of our time—at least none that one can take seriously—in which his name is not mentioned. That is not really surprising: With more than 170 different fonts to his credit, including Palatino, Saphir and Optima, he is not without reason considered the most important font designer of our century.

I therefore want to limit myself here to a few bibliographical highlights and then turn to some areas usually not mentioned in short biographies of Hermann Zapf.

Hermann Zapf was born in 1918 in Nürnberg (Nuremberg). According to his own autobiography⁴, from early youth he was interested in technology and planned to become an electrical engineer, a career he could not take up because of political conditions.

Instead, he began his typographic career in 1934 as an apprentice to a photographic retoucher. His autodidactic study of typography led in 1938, after he finished his apprenticeship, to his first Fraktur font, “Gilgenart”, which was designed for Stempel AG. After the turmoil of war, from 1948 to 1950 he worked as an assistant professor at the Werkskunstschule⁵ in Offenbach, and from 1947 to 1956 as an artistic leader for Stempel AG, after that from 1956 to 1974 as a consultant to the Mergenthaler Linotype Company. During this time some of Hermann Zapf’s best known fonts were created, for instance Palatino (1948) or Optima (1952).

In 1974 he was awarded the Gutenberg Prize of the City of Mainz. The Laudator, Giovanni Mardersteig, placed Hermann Zapf’s accomplishments into the contemporary process of transition from lead type to electronic setting and film setting.

Right back in the early sixties, Hermann Zapf began to develop ideas for using the computer profitably in typography. But until the eighties these ideas fell on deaf ears, at least in Germany; even at the Technical University of Darmstadt, where he

taught typography between 1972 and 1981, he could not interest anybody in research in this direction.

Research institutions in America were more open-minded. In 1976, Hermann Zapf was appointed Professor for Computer Typography at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where he taught until 1987.

In 1980, Hermann Zapf began his collaboration with Don Knuth on the Euler project at Stanford. The results of this project, a collection of beautiful scripts for mathematical typesetting, were made publicly available in 1985. Unfortunately, at least in my eyes, these beautiful fonts have not yet been distributed as widely as they deserve to be. But even if the direct success of that project seems small, the work still had wide-ranging implications, not least on the development of METAFONT84, which was created during that time.

Hermann Zapf made use of his experiences and results from the years of teaching in the United States, in his collaboration with URW in Hamburg, in the development of a suite of programs which collectively have become known under the name “hz-Program”.⁶ These programs expanded on the ideas that had been developed by Don Knuth and Michael Plass for the production of high-quality line breaking, adding new dimensions such as microtypographical changes to individual letters for evening out the spacing in a line or by using “Kerning on the Fly”. As far as I know, these algorithms are now licensed for the program InDesign, which is perhaps, from the point of view of the T_EX world, the first time a competitor for high-quality (automatic) computer typesetting needs to be taken seriously.

But the development of T_EX is not terminated either. Work such as that of Professor Zapf stimulates others around the world to experiment with extensions of T_EX, all with the aim of improving the quality of documents typeset by computer. I hope that this development will continue into the future in a positive manner; certainly the enthusiasm of those involved is a necessary prerequisite, but it also requires knowledge about the inherent values of typography and of people like Professor Zapf who have passed such knowledge on to us.

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As the last task in *The T_EXbook*, Don Knuth sent us T_EXies on our way with the following: “Final exhortation: GO FORTH now and create *masterpieces of the publishing art!*”

⁴ Select <http://www.fontexplorer.com/FontStore> and follow link to “Font Designers” and then select the “official homepages of Hermann Zapf”.

⁵ Art school

⁶ Peter Karow: *hz-Programm*, Mikrotypographie für den anspruchsvollen Satz [Microtypography for fastidious typesetting], Gutenberg-Jahrbuch 1993, Mainz.

For many of us this goal remains far in the future, but we have all learned to recognize and love good typography. And so, with an honorary membership in DANTE, we want to express our thanks to Professor Zapf for his priceless services to the art which to us is both precious and cherished.

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