TACTIL, VARIABLE POINT: “A text should persevere past its end, inside of the back cover, as if it were her collarbone, vulnerability, pillowcase and bridge. And when the life of the book dwindled to a single page, as it now does, we could have learned if it is true that one can love only one thing at a time, making I love you definitionally impossible.

Tactil was not used because preliminary calculations suggested that the author was striving — intentionally or not — to recreate the physical world. That is, Henry’s heart leaned when on the unsafe wooden bridge he confessed himself to Sophy. And we could have learned if it is true that there was much of it, which is to know neediness or, however unlikely, love. We would never have known, only that there was much of it, which is to know very little.

TRANS-1, 10 POINT: This typeface — conceived of by independent typographer Leopold Shunt, as the moon set on the final night of his wife’s life — disintegrates over time. The more a word is used, the more it crumbles and fades — the harder it becomes to see. By the end of this book, utilitarian words like the, a and was would have been lost on the white page.

Henry’s recurrent joys and tortures — bathwater, collarbone, vulnerability, pillowcase, bridge — would have been ruins, unintentional monuments to bathwater, collarbone, vulnerability, pillowcase and bridge. And when the life of the book dwindled to a single page, as it now does, you held your palm against the inside of the back cover, as if it were her damp forehead, as if you could will it to persevere past its end. God would have been nearly illegible, and I completely invisible. Had Elena been used, Henry’s last words would have read:

ELENA, 10 POINT: This typeface — conceived by independent typographer Clara Sevilla to create Tactil, a good example of the early interface types. The size of a letter corresponds to how hard the key is pressed. Air-conditioning blows its story over the keys, as does the breath of a bird on the silt, as does the moonlight whose infinitesimally small exertion also tells a tale. Even when there is nothing applying pressure to the keys, a text is still being generated — an invisible transcript of the world without witnesses. And if one were to hammer the keyboard with infinite force, an infinitely large nonsense word would be produced.

If this book had been typeset in Tactil, Henry’s various I love yous could have been distinguished between narcissistic love (“I love you”), love of love rather than love of another (“I love you”), and traditional, romantic love (“I love you”). We could have learned how Henry’s heart leaned when on the unsafe wooden bridge he confessed himself to Sophy. And we could have learned if it is true that one can love only one thing at a time, making I love you definitionally impossible.

Tactil was not used because preliminary calculations suggested that the author was striving — intentionally or not — to recreate the physical world. That is, tree was typed with the force to make the word as large as a tree. Pear, cumulus and Band-Aid typed to make the words to the scale of a pear, a cloud and a Band-Aid. To print the book in this way would have required bringing another world into existence, a twin world composed entirely of words. We finally would have known the sizes of those abstract ideas whose immeasurability makes us, time and time again, lose our bearings. How does existentialism compare to a tree? Orgasm to a pear? A good conversation to a cumulus cloud? The mending of a gnarled heart to a Band-Aid?

But even if logistics had permitted, this typeface still would have been rejected, because as a quantitative, rather than qualitative, measure, it could have been quite misleading. That is, Henry’s love for Sophy may have been the size that it was because of hate, sympathy, jealousy, neediness or, however unlikely, love. We would never have known, only that there was much of it, which is to know very little.

TRANS-2, 10 POINT: This typeface also refreshes continuously, but unlike Trans-1, words are replaced by their antonyms. Now autumn begins exists only for long enough to bring later spring ceases into existence, which instantly disappears to make room for presently dry riverbed persists, which dies so that never flowing water perishes can live. It was Bely’s intention, with Trans-2, to illuminate the poverty of language, its inadequate approximations, how a web is made of holes, how the river of words flows always away from us.

TRANS-2, 10 POINT: This typeface also refreshes continuously, but unlike Trans-1, words are replaced by their antonyms. New autumn begins exists only for long enough to bring later spring ceases into existence, which instantly disappears to make room for presently dry riverbed persists, which dies so that never flowing water perishes can live. It was Bely’s intention, with Trans-2, to illuminate the poverty of language, its inadequate approximations, how a web is made of holes, but instead, we see the string connecting those holes, and caught in the net is the shadow of meaning. This typeface frequently freezes in place, fixed on words that cannot be refreshed. What, after all, is the opposite of God? The meaning is liberated from the words by the typeface’s inability to translate them. These nonexistent antonyms are the reflections of the words we are looking for.
Now autumn begins
for, the non-approximations, like watching
a solar eclipse in a puddle. The
antonym of God’s non-existent antonym is
closer to God than God will ever be. Which,
then, brings us closer to what we want to
communicate: saying what we intend,
or trying to say the opposite?

TRANS-3. 10 POINT: This typeface also
refreshes continuously, but unlike Trans-1
and -2, words are replaced by themselves.
Now autumn begins exists for only long
enough to bring now autumn begins into
existence, which instantly disappears to
mean what it does, but what it did.
black cape of a fleeing dream, it will never
world changes, but like chasing the long
pace with language, to change as the
girl in Wales. This typeface tries to keep
moment, when cried by a palsied school-
thousand years before, or at the same
meant one hundred years before, or one
again, and was entirely unlike what it
meant when uttered by Stephen
Wren in Cincinnati at 10:32:34 on April
14, 2000, was quite different from what
Wren in Cincinnati at 10:32:34 on April
14, 2000, was quite different from what
meant one second later when he said it
again, and was entirely unlike what it
meant one hundred years before, or one
thousand years before, or at the same
moment, when cried by a palsied school-
girl in Wales. This typeface tries to keep
pace with language, to change as the
world changes, but like chasing the long
black cape of a fleeing dream, it will never
catch up. Now autumn begins will never
mean what it does, but what it did.

AVIARY, VARIABLE POINT: One of the more
unorthodox typefaces of the end of the
twentieth century, Aviary relies on the
migration of birds. The typsetter, who is
preferably an ornithologist, tattoos each
word onto the underside of a different
bird’s wing, according to its place in the
flock. (The first word of this book, Elena,
would have been tattooed onto the wing of
the natural leader. The last word, free, onto
the wing of the bird who carries the rear.)
Alexander Dubovich, Aviary’s creator, said
his inspiration was a copy of Anna Karen-
ina that fell from the shelf and landed
spread, text-down, on the floor.

Among many other reasons, this type-
face was not used because the order of
birds in a flock shifts regularly. The nat-
ural leader never remains the leader, and
the bird in the rear always moves forward.
Also, Aviary is only coherent when the
birds are in flight. When perched in trees,
or collecting the thrown scraps from some
kind park goer; or sleeping on the sills of
high apartment windows, the birds are in
disarray, and so would be the book. It
could exist only in flight, only between
places, only as a way to get from here to
there. Or there to here.

POINT: There are 237, 983 words in this
book. The same number of people were
alive in Iceland at 22:13:36, April 11,
2006. The designer of this typeface, Bjorn
Jaagorn, devised to give each person a
word to memorise, according to age. (The
youngest citizen would be given Elena,
the oldest free.) In an annual festival, the
people of Iceland would line up, youngest
to oldest, and recite the story of Henry’s
tragic love and loss, from beginning to
end. As citizens died, their roles in the
recitation would be given to the youngest
Icelander without a word, although the
reading would still proceed from
youngest to oldest. It was the hope of the
citizens of Iceland that the book would
cycle smoothly: from order to disorder,
and back to order again. That is, let our
fathers and mothers die before their chil-
dren, the old before the young.
Iceand, 22:13:36, April 11, 2006, was
not used because life is full of early death,
and fathers and mothers sometimes out-
live their children. The editor’s concern
was not that the book would become a
salad of meaning, but that hearing it once.

REAL TIME, REAL WORLD, TO SCALE: This
typeface began organically, with the pop-
ularisation of e-mail. Such symbols as :) came
to stand for those things that words
couldn’t quite get at. Over time, every idea
had a corresponding symbol, not unlike
the drawings from the dark caves of early
man. These symbols approximated what
a word described better than a word ever
could. (A picture of a flower is closer to
the flower it describes than flower is.)
Here, for example, is how the final con-
versation between Henry and his brother
would have read in such symbols:

And here is the scene on the unsafe
wooden bridge, when Henry confesses
himself to Sophy:

The evolution continued. The typo-
graphical symbol for flower (          ) became
a sketch of a flower, then an oil painting
of a flower, then a sculpted flower, then a video
of a flower, and is, now, a real-time real-world
flower. Henry exists: he blinks, he inhales,
he tells his older brother, I love you more
now than I did before, he stammers, he
sways, he begs, Sophy, believe in me,
always.

This typeface was not used because of
the fear that it would be popularised, that
all books would be printed in real-time
real-world, making it impossible to know
whether we were living as autonomous
beings, or characters in a story. When you
read these words, for example, you would
have to wonder whether you were the
real-time real-world incarnation of some-
one in a story who was reading these
words. You would wonder if you were not
the you that you thought you were, if you
were about to finish this book only
because you were written to do so,
because you had to.

Or perhaps, you think, it’s otherwise.
You approach this final sentence because
you are you, your own creation. If you are a
slave to your own weaknesses, then you are
unconstrained. Perhaps you are com-
pletely free.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel Everything Is Illuminated,
which won the Guardian First Book Award, is published
by Hamish Hamilton, price £14.99 To order a copy
for £12.99 pls call Guardian book service on
08700667979.
This typeface was not used because of the fear that it would be popularised, that all books would be printed in real-time real-world, making it impossible to know whether we were living as autonomous beings, or characters in a story. When you read these words, for example, you would have to wonder whether you were the real-time real-world incarnation of someone in a story who was reading these words. You would wonder if you were not the you that you thought you were, if you were about to finish this book only because you were written to do so, because you had to. Or perhaps, you think, it’s I still love how the Guardian used to look before their 2005 redesign, using Miller, very industrial, bold and tightly spaced Helvetica, and surprising amounts of white space for a newspaper. Jonathan Safran Foer’s 2002 parody of pretentious font writing is still, perhaps appropriately, one of the few pieces of the way it used to look hanging around as a pdf. It’s still linked from an odd corner of the Guardian’s website that I’m not sure is supposed to still exist. The heading is the display optical. The Guardian’s banner used to be an attention-grabbing contrast of Garamond and Helvetica, created by David Hillman in 1988. The Garamond I’ve seen called ITC Garamond, and while close the ‘T’ isn’t quite the same “ custom redraw to match Helvetica’s x-height? ELENA, 10 POINT: This typeface-conceived of by independent typographer Leopold Shunt, as the moon set on the final night of his wife’s life-disintegrates over time. The more a word is used, the more it crumbles and fades—the harder it becomes to see. By the end of this book, utilitarian words like the, a and was would have been lost on the white page. Henry’s recurrent joys and tortures—bathwater, collarbone, vulnerability, pillowcase, bridge—would have been ruins, unintentional monuments to bathwater, collarbone, vulnerability, pillowcase and bridge.