

# Merkel's Movable Types

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In 1836, the Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle declared in his novel *Sartor Resartus*: “He who first shortened the labour of Copyists by device of *Movable Types* was disbanding hired Armies, and cashiering most Kings and Senates, and creating a whole new Democratic world: he had invented the Art of Printing.” Four centuries after Gutenberg, Carlyle like no other Victorian understood the profound impact of the printing press on the circulation of ideas. As he was penning his novel, steam-powered presses made it possible to produce more copies of the same text quicker and cheaper than ever. Rising literacy rates, booming cities and better transportation systems also meant that texts became available to growing readerships. And more readers meant more opinions. As literary scholar Isobel Armstrong argued in her monumental *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (1993): “Rapid mechanical reproduction and dissemination of language can influence as never before in history because the printed word can belong to everyone.” “Type,” she explains, “is movable because printing removes language and places it and its effects beyond the control of the writer.”

Tellingly, 1836 is also the year of Robert Browning's chilling poem *Porphyria's Lover*. In sixty perfectly balanced lines, Browning delves into the mind of a man who strangles his mistress with her own hair: “and all her hair / In one long yellow string I wound / Three times her little throat around.” (ll. 38-40) No judgement is passed by the poet. It is entirely up to the reader to decide if this man is a raving lunatic, a cold-blooded murderer, a compassionate lover assisting in his beloved's death wish, or a romantic egotist desperately trying to preserve a moment of perfect intimacy. The poem is a seminal example of the so-called dramatic monologue, a quintessentially Victorian poetic genre experimenting with voices and perspectives, questioning the knowability of others and problematizing the moral valuation of their actions.

Fast forward to August 2015. At a press conference in Berlin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel responds to the surge of refugees into Europe from Syria, Afghanistan and other war-torn countries in the Middle East. “Wir schaffen das,” she says. “We can do this.” Since then, those three words have belonged to millions of people. They have been praised, criticized, ridiculed, quoted and dissected, twisted and turned, in the streets, in newspapers, on television and on social media, to the point of becoming so trite that even Merkel herself felt the need to distance herself from them. She had experienced the wild and unruly power of Carlyle's “movable types” on digital steroids.

On 12 January 2017, “Wir schaffen das” belonged as much to Ghent University and KU Leuven presenting Merkel with an honorary doctorate at The Egg in Brussels as it belonged to the furious protesters outside. And yet in their laudation, Vice-Chancellors Anne De Paepe and Rik Torfs invited the audience to filter out the noise of controversy and go back to the original utterance: “The more spontaneously the words *Wir schaffen das* were pronounced, the more insight they provide into your inner self”, they said to Merkel. “They reveal a straightforward, simple inclination towards that which is good.”

Like Porphyria's lover, we can remain unmoved by the suffering of fellow human beings: "And thus -we sit together now, / And all night long we have not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word!" (ll. 58-60) We can let criticism go viral and dissolve any attempt to help into endless debate. Or, like literature students, we can cultivate a sense of how interpretation takes place and explore the question of ethical responsibility that comes with it. With Carlyle, we can develop a deeper understanding of why language spirals out of control, and of how it can ultimately move even beyond truth and fact. Much like readers of Browning's dramatic monologue, we are left to judge for ourselves. As Merkel's honorary doctorate reminds us, that means that we have a choice.