

## HOW I WHY I LETTERPRESS

I got into letterpress because I wanted pages that were hand-made. I'd had a book of drawings & poems published and it opened the window for me to typography and book design. When I retired from carpentry life, I had lots of unpublished work and a training to make things myself. The classes I took at SFCB really hooked me. I realized how beautiful it would be to sculpt my own books, and that many of the skills of woodwork were applicable. Things had to be fitted and measured, squared-up and shimmed.

That was the practical level. The other dimension is more complex to talk about. All my life I'd been in love with the expressiveness of ink. And felt the intoxication of the imaginative poets who played with the graphical powers surrounding their language. Blake, Patchen, the Chinese painter-poets, Walt Kelly. . . I never felt I was an *artist*, but I did constantly draw in the margins and even in the midst of any poem I wrote. I made a vow when I was 19 to always be present in the line of ink as it came from the pen, whether in words or figures. But I also had a strong reaction to the way the typography of poetry was done. I loved ee cummings and all the other avant-garde poetry that used the page imaginatively. But I had a bias against our alphabet. It seemed so clunky compared to the Chinese or Egyptian ideograms. I longed for the word & the image to fuse, and was jealous of how the Asian scripts were so redolent with the pictographic origins of the words. Sometimes I wrote in gibberish and tried to make it emotionally transmissive. But when my first book was published & they asked me what font I preferred, it sent me into a period of developing a taste where there hadn't been anything conscious before that . . . except perhaps impatience. I came up with Garamond for that book, finding myself siding with the serifs in that argument. But when I got my own press and began to acquire type, the study took me like a gust of wind. I burrowed into the history, tried to feel why I responded to certain shapes of G or A, what the great type-founders had been hoping for in their designs. It has led me to regain a love for the pure graphical beauty possible in our letterforms. And with that, to try to make pages of poetry that can be expressive of meaning and beautiful in themselves...without resorting to illustration. Or, when accompanying it with graphics, to try for a line quality that seems to dovetail with the type. I still like my handwriting better than any of the fonts, but that's another dimension.

Typesetting with lead is alchemical at its root. We patiently work on the rugged primal stuff of existence, letters and spaces made of lead & tin & copper, building the emptiness around words with the heaviest elements, and hoping that after the long work we end up with something a little golden. It's also a severe editing experience. The lead says: *too many words. Cut this down, stop blathering.* It may be cold and solid, but it has the effect of a crucible, melting off the dross.

Then there's the power of the press itself as an editor. My presses are sixty to a hundred years old. They've printed hundreds of thousands of pages. When I put a forme on the press and start pulling proofs, the word that comes to me is *publish*. This is really publishing something, imprinting it, leaving one's imprimatur, a deep impression, something that will last maybe for centuries. It gives one pause . . . is this pile of words truly worthy of it? My press is not impressed. It's my horse, my good friend, but it has its own say. *Uh, you really want to print that?* And maybe I'll pull the forme off and do some rewriting.

I've tossed three book-collections so far that just couldn't stand up to the eye of my press.

Sometimes people want to see my interest as an antiquarian's fetish. . .they think it's like collecting old tools or cars. I do have a little of that fascination, and like a lot of letterpress people, my eyes have gotten sharp at antique stores when old printing gear turns up. But it's not for quaintness that I do this. When I was a carpenter, I looked for old handsaws and chisels, because I had discovered that the steel was better, that their handles were more friendly to the grip. That's one thing about

the old presses, they are wonderful tools, & will be so for hundreds of years after I'm dead. But using old craft processes when the industrial methods have leapt far beyond them in speed and ingenuity, is simply to free them of the production yokes and allow them to be tools of art. Just as it is with handloom weaving, or thrown pottery. I see letterpress as akin to other kinds of printmaking, and no one suggests that being interested in lithography, etching, or woodblock cutting is quaint.

Most people have word-processing as second nature now, and are used to a big list of 'fonts' on their computers . . . and probably have played around with them until they find the ones they like. Graphic designers in printing now are working entirely on their screens with amazing software to produce printed material that would astonish any printer in 1910. But when people come to my shop and see how typesetting is done, and put their hands on the old presses, they have a rush of feeling about the language, the alphabet, the elemental real shape of things that is in stark contrast to the lack of tactile sensation in computer graphic work. It's like returning to the old village, to the old countryside . . . those trees and brooks are still there, they still look wonderful and would be very happy if you were to walk alongside them.

When you work with a typeface for a few days, the letterforms get animated. I find myself talking to them a little. Asking why this 'r' is sitting in the 'a' box, or how the hell that little Cloister Oldstyle 'G' wound up in Bembo? In the old days, a single type was called a sort. If you ran out of a letter and were ticked-off and stumped about how to get a re-supply in time to finish a job, you were said to be 'out of sorts'. Dingbats and all the other little figures, ornaments, fleurons, swashes and darts, clearly have personalities. Some are like chipmunks, quick and intrusive, others dreamy or romantic, some are digressive, some emphatic. Once you open the gate beyond simple punctuation, there's no stopping them. They're like tiny stage directors, rushing up to say, '**Louder, more feeling**' or *'bush, this is secret'*...

Depth of impression is an interesting debate in letterpress. The new boutique presses that are catering to wedding-invite trade are into deep-impressed papers. They show their wares on the website with angled photos that show the shadow in every letter's declivities. When I started doing this, there were still some old printers around who debated with the younguns online. They had been taught to just kiss the page, because it saved wear on the typefaces, and it meant that a book page could be read on both sides without distraction. But the new breed were saying: *we don't care about saving type wear, because we're mostly using photopolymer plates and because we only do short runs of few words, so what if things wear out a little.*

I like a slightly visible impression, to suggest the engraved or sculptural sensations of relief printing; and by contrast to remind the reader of the beauty of paper. But the boutique style can be repulsive; it's like patting oneself on the back, and making the demonstration so obvious that it becomes kitsch. Any artisan has that temptation: to stylize and call attention to technique and surfaces and fine materials. As well as its companion: to make the obvious point of *disdaining* refinement & working with the lowliest stuff in the least considered way.

I guess that's pretty obvious too.