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A Sense of the Present: Collecting Contemporary Private Press Editions

Judith A. Mistichelli

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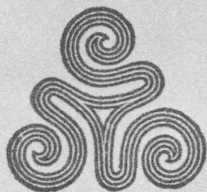


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Printed at The Spiral Press · New York

September 1947

Printer's Mark of The Spiral Press, New York. This is from Robert Frost, *A Masque of Mercy*, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1947. It is number 90 of an edition limited to seven hundred fifty-one copies. Courtesy of The Spiral Press.

THE COURIER

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*A Sense of the Present:
Collecting Contemporary Private Press Editions*

Judith A. Mistichelli

As a sequel to "Advice for a Novice Collector," by Mr. Henry Bannister in the last issue of The Courier (Vol. XII, 2) this picture essay presents some examples of modern fine books.

The books were part of an exhibit "More Class Than Cash: A Collection for the Novice Bibliophile," which appeared at the Bird Library in March, 1974. All the books shown are part of the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections at Syracuse University.

The exhibit was prepared by Miss Sonia K. Bigus and Miss Judith A. Mistichelli who were then graduate students in the School of Information Studies.

For the collector working within a limited budget, finely printed books from contemporary private presses are especially inviting. Not only are these books in a reasonable price range and more readily available than older rare materials, but also their aesthetic beauty gives testimony to a high degree of craftsmanship.

Reflecting the exhibitor's personal tastes, the books selected for this essay are distinctive editions of twentieth century poets and exemplify outstanding design and workmanship. They also demonstrate the extraordinary suitability of poetry to artistic expression in book design.

Perhaps the publisher best known outside of the world of private presses today is the artist Leonard Baskin. Two books in our exhibition were from his Gehenna Press which is considered to be one of the finest contemporary exemplars of the precepts of the private press, "emphasis on craftsmanship, creative beauty in design, interest in advancing the graphic arts and . . . care in the selection of subject matter, without being seduced by the snares of the marketplace."¹ Baskin has quipped, "people like me who care about printing – the architecture of the page – constitute the tiniest lunatic fringe group in the nation."²

¹Leiberman, Elizabeth Koller, ed. *The Check-Log of Private Press Names*. White Plains, Herity Press, 1962, p. 5.

²Roylance, Dale R. "Leonard Baskin's Gehenna Press," *Art in America* 54 (6): 56-59, Nov. 1966, p. 56.

Established in 1951, the Gehenna Press is presently located in Northampton, Massachusetts. Baskin has adopted two mottos which serve well to characterize the work of this press:

Humani nil a me alienum puto
Nothing human is alien to me.
Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re
Grace in style, strength in content.³

Deeply concerned with the human condition, Baskin emphatically voices his belief that the artist has a moral as well as aesthetic responsibility to impel man to use his own resources with good faith and good sense, and to be the master of his own fate.⁴

Baskin has expressed his credo of printing as follows:

...always endeavor to make a textual contribution which, as much as style, (or even more than style), is the *raison d'être* of the press. Toward that end, the Press is increasingly publishing works either unavailable or unprinted.⁵

The two items in the exhibit produced by the Gehenna Press, *Voyages, Six Poems From White Buildings* by Hart Crane and Wilfred Owen's *Thirteen Poems*, are fine representatives of Baskin's thought and artistic skills. In *Voyages* the superb wood engravings printed on exquisite hand-made papers reveal the combination of "savagery, melancholy, and gentleness"⁶ which marks Baskin's art. The colors employed for some of the illustrations, forest green and orange, provide a particularly effective contrast with the deep ivory paper chosen for the text.

Thirteen Poems by Wilfred Owen was conceived as a memorial to the poet who was killed in France on November 4, 1918. The poems within this selection relate to the horrors of war and the anonymity of human lives. Appropriate to the subject matter, the book is dramatically designed with large black print and orange-red titles. Ben Shahn's illustrations are composed with bold, heavy, deliberate strokes, with the exception of the sensitive portrait of Owen on the title page.

Baskin has been charged with an "elitist attitude" in a recent issue of *The Private Library*. Within an announcement of a new publication by the

³*ibid.* p. 59.

⁴Spence, Robert. "Leonard Baskin; the Artist as Counter-Decadent," *Art Journal* XXII (2): 88-91, Winter 1962-63.

⁵Quoted in Roylance, "Leonard Baskin's Gehenna Press," *Art in America* 54 (6), Nov. 1966, p. 56.

⁶*op. cit.*, Spence, p. 89.



THE GEHENNA PRESS

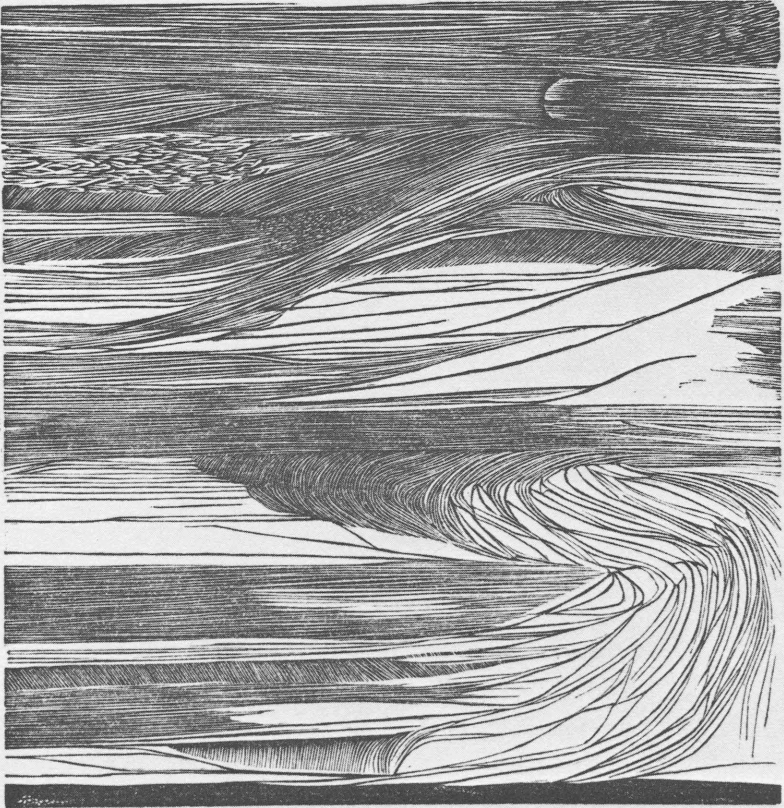
Printer's Mark, The Gehenna Press, Northampton, Massachusetts.
Courtesy The Gehenna Press.

Gehenna Press, the following statement is made: "The Gehenna Press has emerged from a mysterious self-imposed silence of some years. Even now the Press declines to send any information to *Private Press Books*, on the grounds that 'the over-whelming majority of presses listed are unworthy of the name.'"⁷

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⁷*The Private Library* 5(2): 116, Summer 1972.

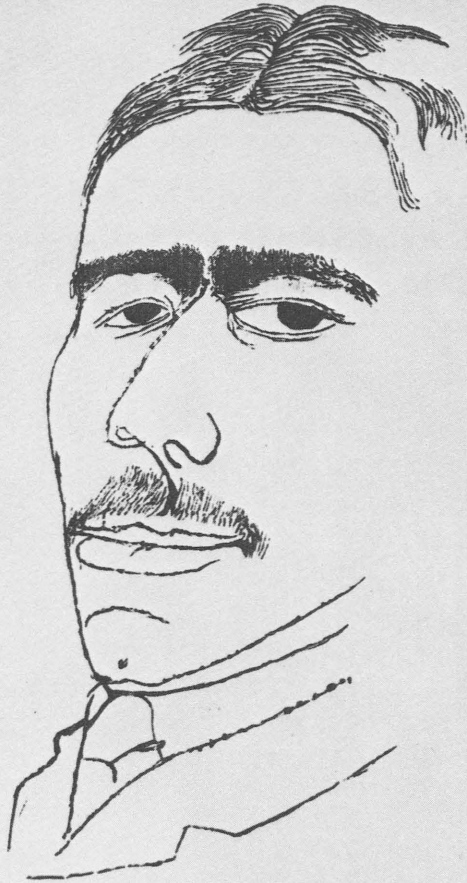
Bind us in time, O Seasons clear, and awe.
O minstrel galleons of Carib fire,
Bequeath us to no earthly shore until
Is answered in the vortex of our grave
The seal's wide spindrift gaze toward paradise.



Two wood engravings by Leonard Baskin from Hart Crane's *Voyages. Six Poems From White Buildings*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1957. This volume was designed, illustrated and printed by Leonard Baskin at the Gehenna Press. The Perpetua type is set by hand. The paper is hand-made Amalfi Italian. This is number 369 of an edition limited to nine hundred seventy-five copies. It is signed by Leonard Baskin.



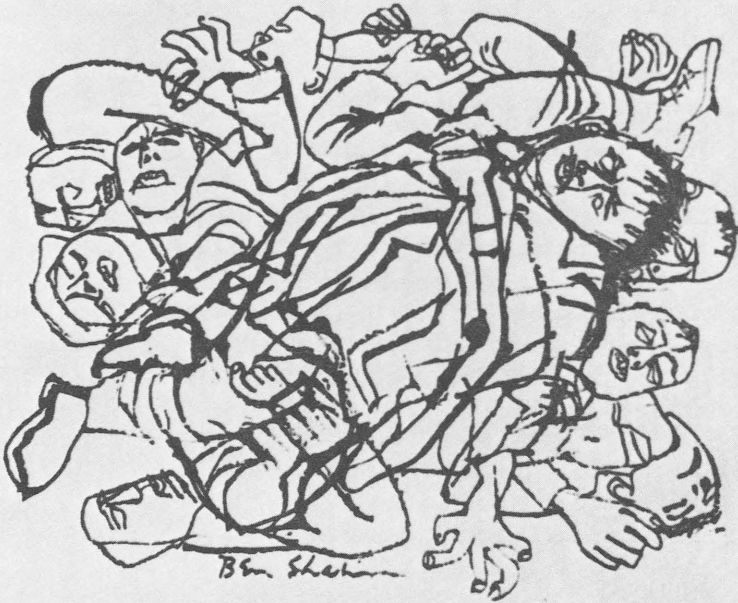
These illustrations are somewhat larger than actual size and do not show their careful placement on the original page, which is more than double the width of the engravings.



POEMS
WILFRED OWEN

Title page from *Thirteen Poems* by Wilfred Owen, Gehenna Press, Northampton, Massachusetts, 1956. This portrait of Owen was engraved in wood by Leonard Baskin from a drawing by Ben Shahn and printed from the block. This book is dedicated to the memory of Wilfred Owen. It is number 184 of four hundred copies. Courtesy The Gehenna Press.

Comforted years will sit soft-chaired
In rooms of amber;
The years will stretch their hands, well-cheered
By our lives' ember.



The centuries will burn rich loads
With which we groaned,
Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids
While songs are crooned.
But they will not dream of us poor lads
Lost in the ground.

Illustration by Ben Shahn from "Miners" in Wilfred Owen's *Thirteen Poems*, Gehenna Press, Northampton, Massachusetts, 1956. (See opposite page.) This edition was printed by Esther and Leonard Baskin and Richard Warren. The drawings have been printed by Meriden Gravure. Courtesy The Gehenna Press.

The Officina Bodoni, is considered a press of the highest importance. Established by Giovanni (Hans) Mardersteig in 1922 in Montagnola, Switzerland, the press was moved in 1927 to its present home in Verona, Italy. Born in Weimar, Germany, Mardersteig, whose given name was Johannes, chose to turn his back on the tyranny of Hitler and became an Italian citizen. The Officina Bodoni's hand-operated, flat-bed press, differing only slightly from Gutenberg's, was specially made to order in Leipzig.

In Mardersteig's operations, the paper is dampened before printing, so that the finest serif of the type will not be marred and the paper itself will not refuse the ink. Even the inking of the type is done by hand. This process, plus the subsequent binding, which is also done by hand — he has his own binder in his house — results in the most exquisitely made books to be found anywhere in the world today.⁸

Mardersteig, like Baskin, is devoted to the production of books with great literary as well as printing interest. An eminent scholar, he is writing a biography of Francesco Griffo, the fifteenth century Bolognese punch cutter who cut the typefaces for Aldus Manutius. The biography will be printed in Mardersteig's "Griffo" typeface. Although he is an authority on printing in the Italian Renaissance, his literary tastes extend to the modern: "I have been trying to print the works of the best poet of each country in the best possible way."⁹ Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Dylan Thomas are among his favorites.

Mardersteig's printing credo is as follows:

First, service to the author, searching for the form best suited to his theme.

Second, service to the reader, making Reading as pleasant and light for him as possible.

Third, the giving of the whole an attractive appearance Without imposing too much self-will.¹⁰

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⁸Sargeant, Winthrop. "Profiles. A Good Eye, Giovanni Mardersteig," *New Yorker* 46: 32-47, July 11, 1970, p. 32.

⁹*ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁰*ibid.*, p. 47.

This edition of Ezra Pound's Diptych was printed in Bembo type by Hans Mardersteig on the hand-press of the Officina Bodoni, Verona, for James Laughlin, Faber and Faber Limited, and Vanni Scheiwiller. The edition consists of 200 numbered copies on Pescia paper, of which Numbers 1 to 125 are for sale in the United States, Numbers 126 to 175 in Great Britain, and Numbers 176 to 200 in Italy, all signed by the author.

DECEMBER MCMLVII



A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading 'Ezra Pound', is written across the page.

This copy is Number

21

Colophon showing printer's mark of the Officina Bodoni, Verona, from Ezra Pound, *Diptych: Rome-London*, New York, New Directions, 1957. Autographed by Ezra Pound. Courtesy of New Directions Publishing Corporation and Officina Bodoni.

The Perishable Press limited, established in 1964 by Walter Hamady, a professor of art at the University of Wisconsin, is located in Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin. Hamady, himself a poet, leans toward the publication of the works of contemporary poets. In 1969 Hamady was awarded a Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship to study papermaking in Britain and France.

Toby Olson's *Maps* exhibits Hamady's hand-made Shadwell paper upon which most of his books are printed. It is, however, the binding of this particular book which is outstanding. Hand-bound by Douglas Cockerell and Son, in various shades of brown, it is accented by sienna leather spine upon which the title appears in gold letters.

Hamady should have a lasting effect on American private printing, for not only is the Perishable Press highly successful, his students at the University are also initiating their own presses.

A particularly appealing book is E. E. Cummings's *Christmas Tree*, published by Cummings himself in 1928. It is a wistful poetic tribute to remembered childhood enchantment. Printed with a holiday spirit in green type on fine ivory paper made in Spain, it is a real collector's item. The printer's mark is delightfully appropriate and imaginative.

Delightful is also the word for *Letters From and To the Ford Motor Company* by Marianne Moore and David Wallace. This collection of correspondence, published by the Pierpont Morgan Library, chronicles Ford's search for a name for a newly designed automobile. To alleviate "embarrassing pedestrianism," Miss Moore's help is solicited in designating a suitable candidate. Her fancy "piqued" she submitted such mellifluous choices as: Ford Silver Sword, Arcenciel, Mongoose Civique, Turbotorc, Magigravure, Pluma Piluma, and the glorious culmination, Utopian Turtletop!

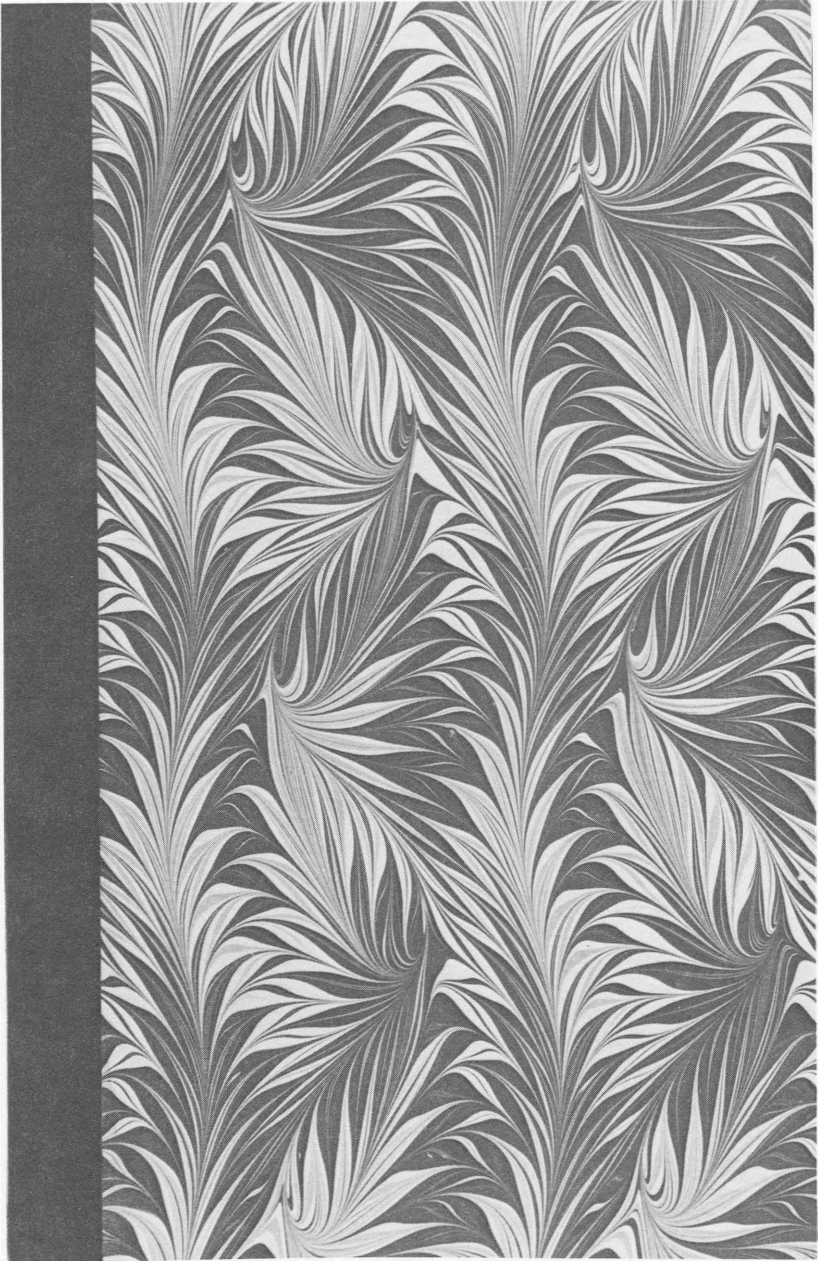
Ford Motor Company finally decided on "Edsel."

John Carter, in his *Taste and Technique in Book Collecting*, says, "There is always an agreeable element of uncertainty in collecting contemporary writers for a man must back his fancy, and only his grandchildren will know whether posterity's verdict looks like confirming or confounding it. In theory, therefore, it is ideal ground for the novice, encouraging individuality and minimizing expenditure."¹¹

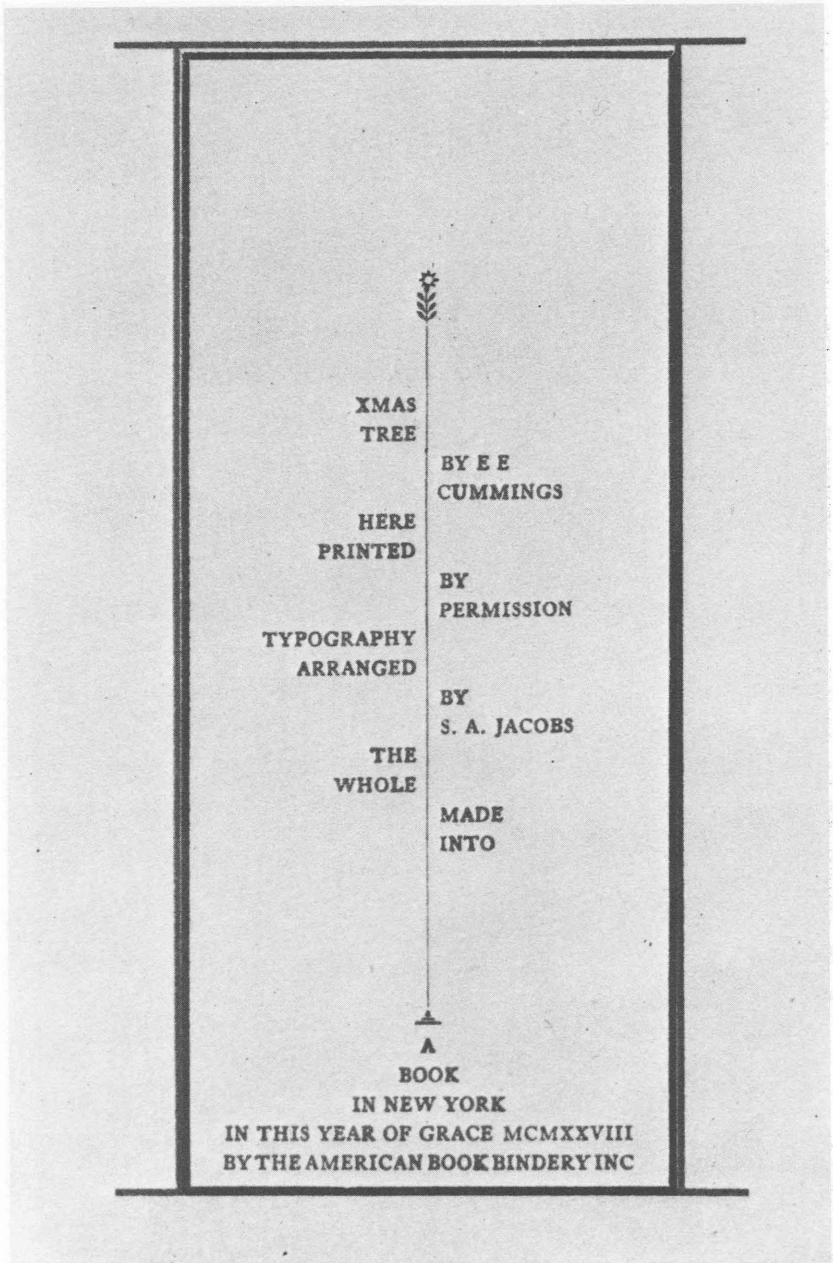
Several poets whose reputations are not yet firmly established are represented here: Richard Wilbur, Charles Bukowski, Gregory Corso, and Toby Olson. Some understanding of the work of such writers together with a weighing of potential against price is essential for the collector considering acquisition.

please turn to page 21

¹¹Carter, John. *Taste and Technique in Book Collecting*. London, Private Libraries Association, 1970. p. 47.



Cover of *Maps*, by Toby Olson, showing the hand binding (in shades of brown) by Douglas Cockerell and Son. Published by The Perishable Press, Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, in 1969, this edition was hand set in Palatino and Smaragd type and printed on Shadwell paper hand-made by the printer. This is number 114 of an edition of one hundred thirty-two copies. By permission of The Perishable Press limited & Shadwell Paper Mill.



XMAS
TREE

BY E E
CUMMINGS

HERE
PRINTED

BY
PERMISSION

TYPOGRAPHY
ARRANGED

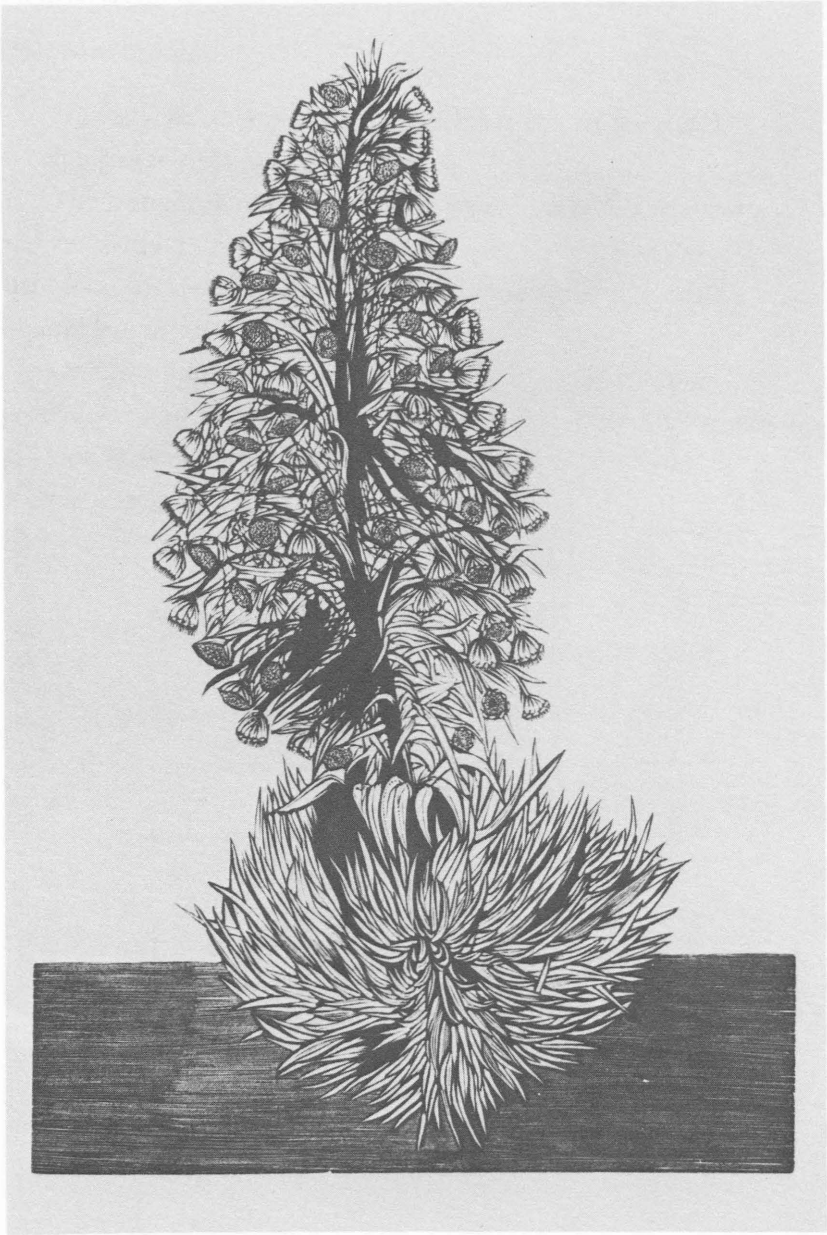
BY
S. A. JACOBS

THE
WHOLE

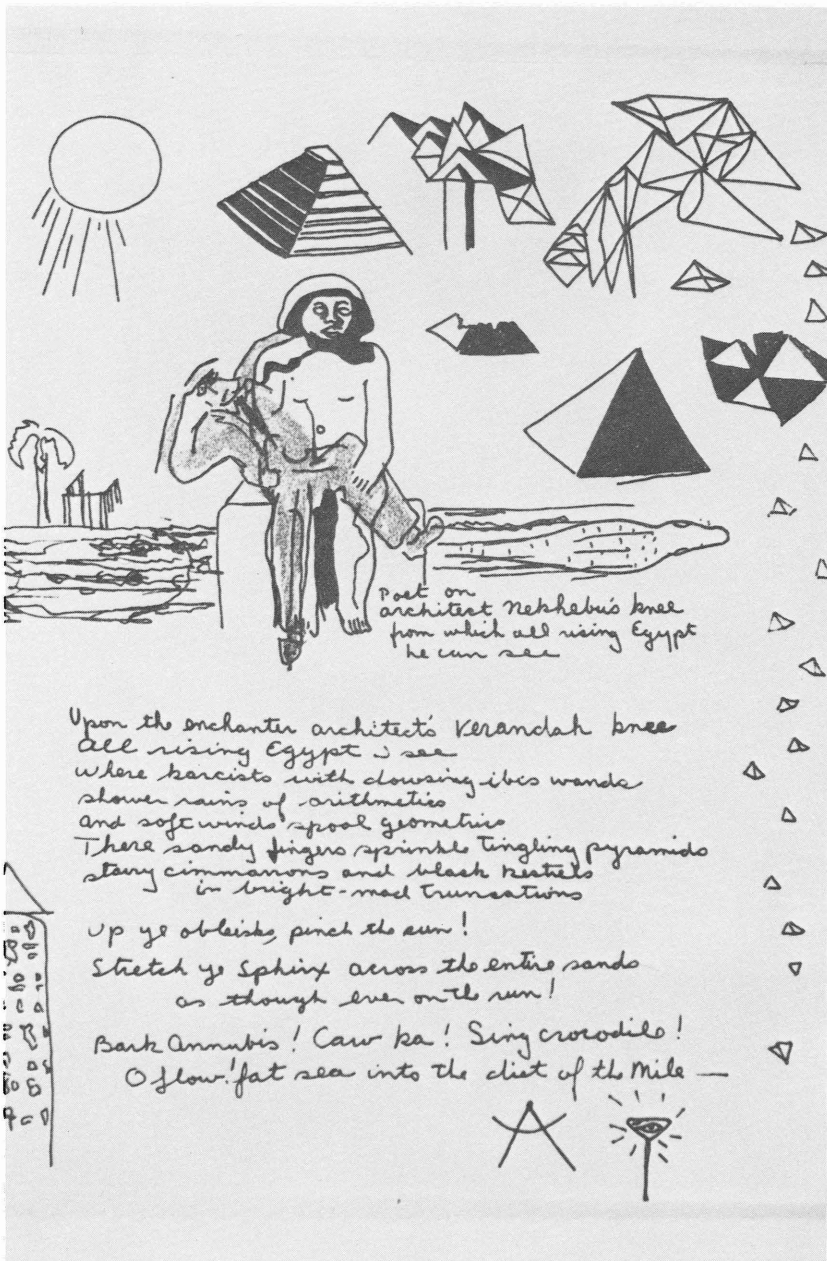
MADE
INTO

A
BOOK
IN NEW YORK
IN THIS YEAR OF GRACE MCMXXVIII
BY THE AMERICAN BOOK BINDERY INC

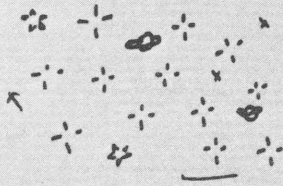
Colophon from E.E. Cummings, *Christmas Tree*, New York, E.E. Cummings, 1928.



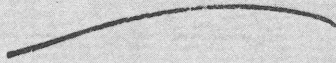
“The Silver Sword,” a wood-engraving by Leonard Baskin printed from the original block. From Marianne Moore and David Wallace, *Letters From and To the Ford Motor Company*, published by the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, 1958. This edition of five hundred fifty copies, four hundred of which were reserved for the Fellows of the Pierpont Morgan Library, was printed at the Spiral Press, New York. Courtesy The Pierpont Morgan Library.



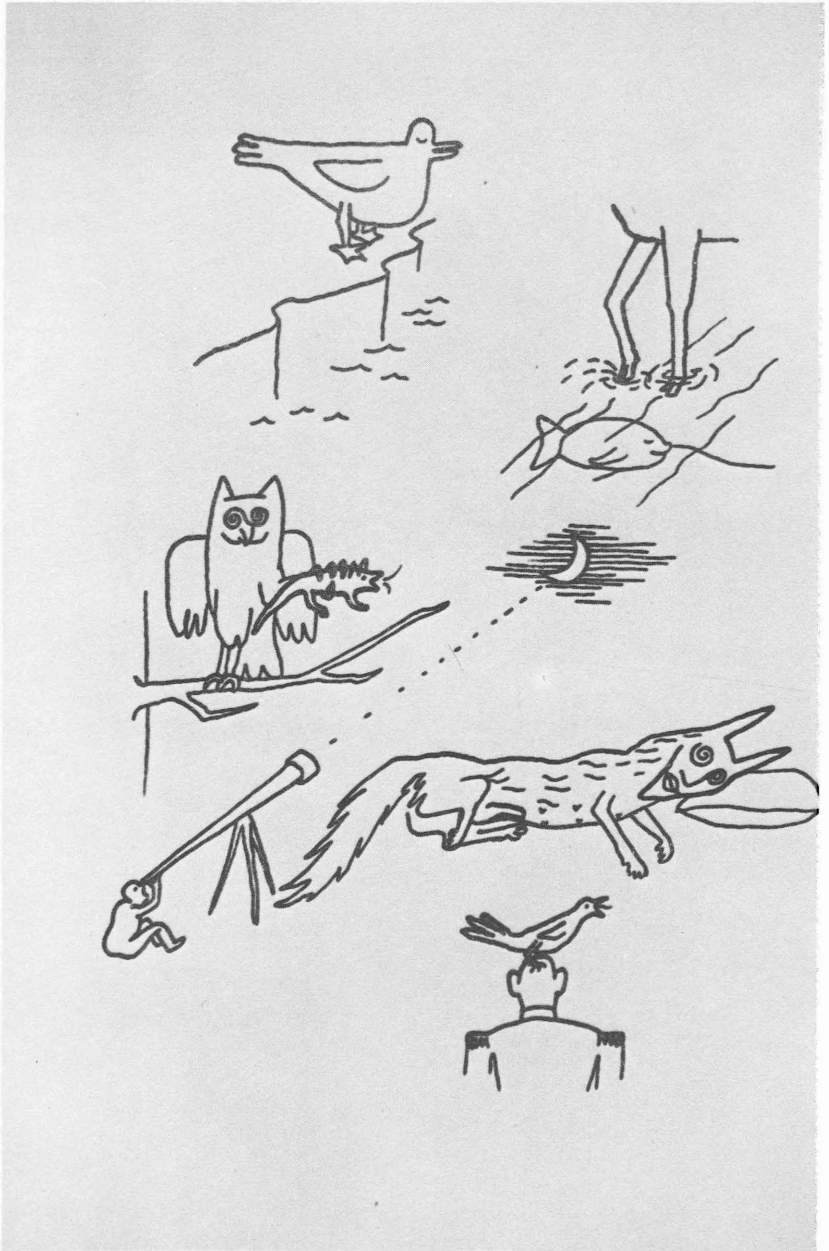
Opening lines of "The Architect" by Gregory Corso, in his *The Geometric Poem*, 1966. Printed in the form of a manuscript facsimile. This volume is number 72 of an edition of three hundred nine copies. Courtesy Gregory Corso.



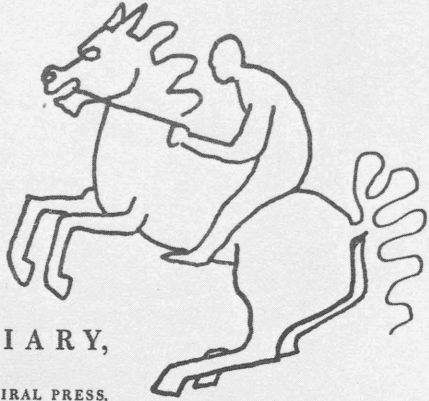
O blessed knockout
how awe
thy stars of keys
I would a tinkler of dreams be
deluded in zodiacan pretense
Than have to wonder such reality
as human violence



"O Blessed Knockout." Page from Gregory Corso's *10 Times a Poem* "Collected at Random from 2 suitcases filled with poems - the gathering of 5 years," December, 1967. Published in the form of a manuscript facsimile. About actual size. Courtesy Gregory Corso.



Drawing by Alexander Calder from *A Bestiary*, edited by Richard Wilbur, with illustrations by Alexander Calder. Copyright © 1955 by Pantheon Books, Inc. Illustrations reprinted by permission of Pantheon Books, a Division of Random House, Inc. Printed at the Spiral Press.



THE EDITION OF THIS B E S T I A R Y,

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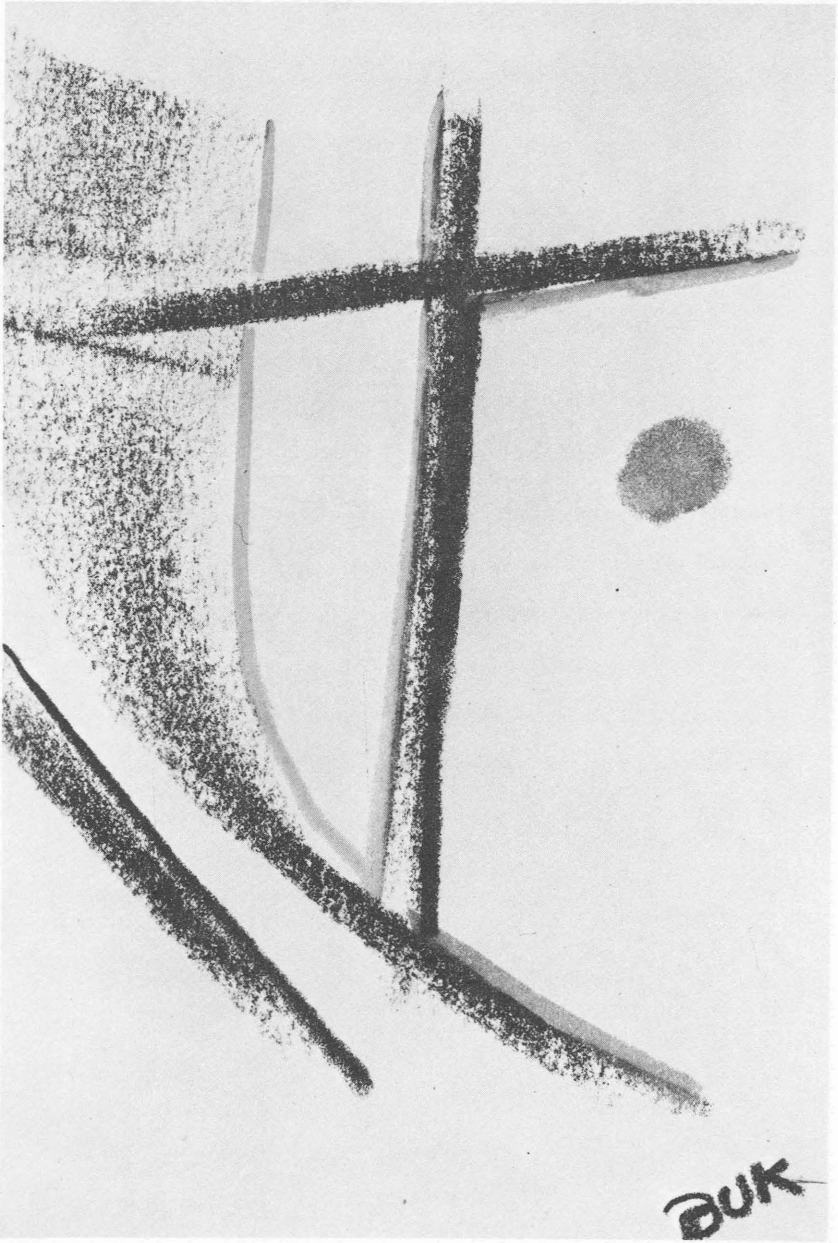
ALL OF THE NUMBERED COPIES HAVE BEEN SIGNED BY MR. CALDER AND MR. WILBUR.

THIS COPY IS NUMBER 428

Alexander Calder

Richard Wilbur

Colophon from *A Bestiary* showing autographs of Alexander Calder and Richard Wilbur.



This original drawing by Charles Bukowski was bound into all copies of the special edition of *Mockingbird Wish Me Luck* published in 1972 by Black Sparrow Press (P.O. Box 25603, Los Angeles, CA 90025). Printed by Noel Young, designed by Barbara Martin, this is number 32 of fifty numbered copies handbound in boards by Earle Gray. It is signed by Charles Bukowski. He also signed the drawings as "Buk." Courtesy Black Sparrow Press.

Book collecting can be highly rewarding remuneratively. The present value of the items mentioned above range from \$5.00 to \$175.00, with most contained in the range of \$20.00 to \$50.00. *American Book Prices Current*, *Book Auction Records*, and *Bookman's Price Index* reveal that many of these books have increased in value over the last few years. Within this collection the greatest increase in value has occurred in books containing autographs, especially after the death of the poets in question.

Of course, limited budget or not, the true collector is not speculating in books but buys them for values beyond the ones measured in dollars and cents.

* * * * *

The author and her co-exhibitor Miss Sonia K. Bigus would like to express thanks for the generous assistance given in mounting the original exhibition by David Zeidberg and Carol Hanley of the George Arents Research Library staff. The author is indebted to Jacqueline Bartelsman whose *Book Collecting: A Selective Bibliography for the Beginner* was extremely helpful in the preparation of this essay. (*The Courier*, Vol. XII, 2)