

My Studies at the Free Academy of Gehenna

LANCE HIDY

MERRIMAC—When the North American editor of *Parenthesis* asked me to contribute to a Massachusetts-themed issue, the suggested assignment was to ‘describe the influence of Gehenna Press’s Free Academy on my own work, western Massachusetts fine printing, and the commercial publishing industry.’ I am pleased to write about how Leonard Baskin, Harold McGrath, and Arno Werner—the instructors in the ‘free academy’—became so influential. Their influence was partly due to their generous personalities and enormous talent, but some credit must also go to the ancient New England culture of book arts that made Gehenna possible. In the four decades preceding the first Gehenna imprint in 1942, the men of Boston’s Society of Printers made groundbreaking advances in typographic arts and education that would both inspire and enable Baskin’s ‘Impulsions to Print,’ to quote the title of the talk he gave on the fiftieth anniversary of his press. In this essay I will draw upon published remarks by Baskin, Arno Werner, and others, and from my own memories as a participant in the Gehenna community beginning in 1965.

For those who saw the Gehenna books in the 1960s, or who visited the press in Northampton, the impression was stunning. It certainly was for me, and for other young people whom I met there, including Barry Moser and David Godine. The Gehenna Press was having an effect on us that was similar to what the Kelmscott Press had on the generation of Daniel Berkeley Updike and Bruce Rogers, two of the founders of the Society of Printers.

I doubt that Baskin, his pressman Harold McGrath, or hand bookbinder Arno Werner ever had a three-way agreement about their informal apprenticeship programs—they evolved naturally. The graduates of ‘The Free Academy of Gehenna’ began to develop their own reputations and became recognized outside Massachusetts. Sandra Kirshenbaum, the San Francisco-based publisher of the journal *Fine Print*, told me in 1979 that she believed the Northampton vicinity where Gehenna was based had become the most vibrant and productive book arts community in the US.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Press in 1992, Baskin spoke on the subject:

... financial loss was perhaps more than made up by the press’s serving and functioning as a free academy of the typographic arts. Apprentices were always welcome and Harold’s great patience was further tried as he slowly and skillfully taught these young people the intricate mysteries of composition and printing techniques. That the Gehenna Press



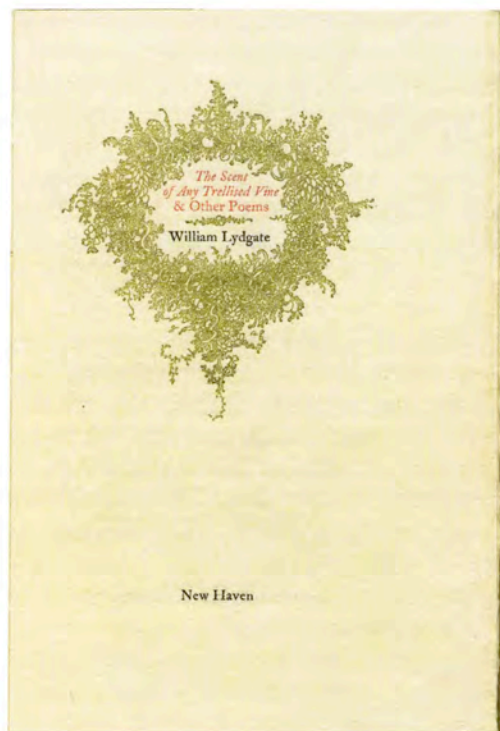
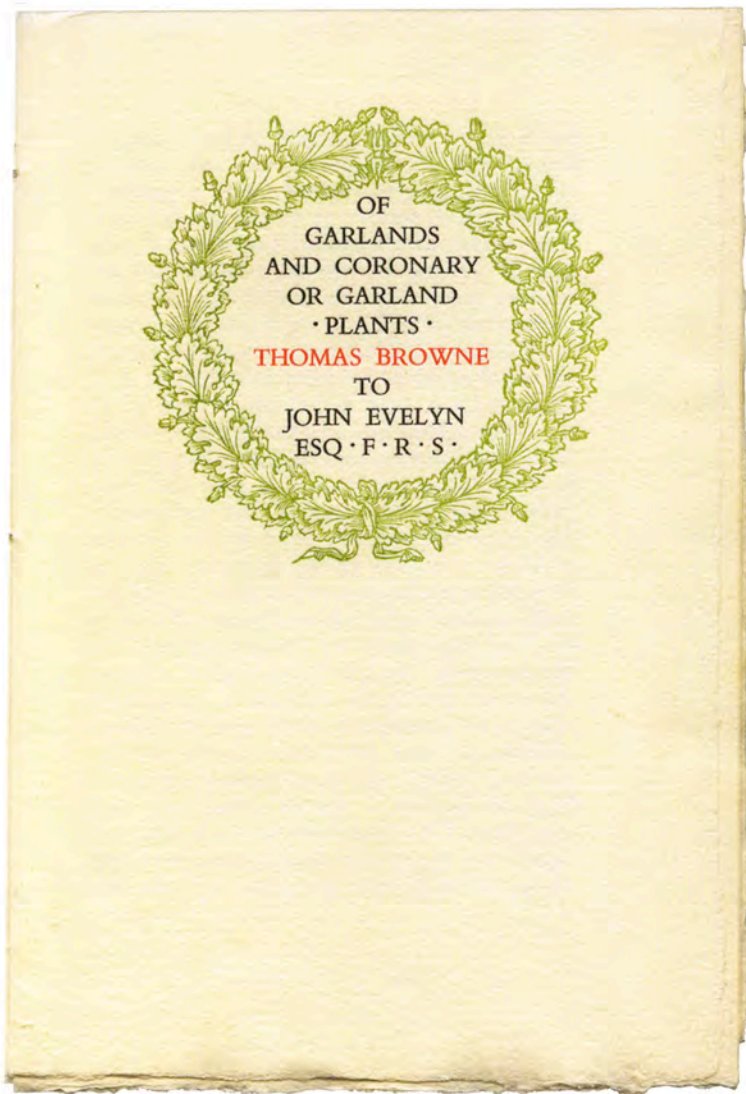
This is the 10 × 15-inch Chandler and Price in the J.E. Press on which Baskin printed the first Gehenna Press book in 1942. I used the same press to print my first book in 1966–67.

served as a fountainhead for a generation of book workers significantly adds to the totality of its achievements.

Arno Werner, only forty miles away in Pittsfield, had been trained by one of Europe’s finest hand bookbinders—Ignatz Wiemeler of the Academy of Graphic Art in Leipzig. Arno’s taste for simplicity and restraint, combined with an infallible aptitude for the mechanics and materials of binding, enabled him to fill the third spot—completing the Gehenna trio of artist, pressman, and binder.

As Gehenna’s fame spread, so did Arno’s. It is important to remember that Arno was as eager to pass on his craft as were Baskin and McGrath. For Arno it was a sacred mission. In 1981, at the age of eighty-two, he was quoted as saying in the Stinehour Press booklet, *Arno Werner on Bookbinding*:

Right now, hand binding is in a time of renewal. We have emerged from a wasteland and are enjoying an increased interest in and respect for our work. I have no use for those who are out to cash in on this renewed interest, with costly



LEFT: Leonard Baskin's 1962 keepsake booklet, printed by Harold McGrath. ABOVE: Booklet of poetry printed by Lance Hidy at the J.E. Press in 1966–67. BELOW LEFT: Carolyn Coman, a former apprentice of Arno Werner, visited him at his home and studio in Hadlyme, Connecticut, in February, 1984. Photograph by Lance Hidy. See also Lance Hidy's Arno Werner poster reproduced on page 18.

workshops and apprenticeships. What is needed in our profession is an interest in giving—not just that old American interest in getting. The thirst for the dollar cannot be the only incentive, nor the getting of it the primary reward. There must be an understanding and love of our work, and the desire to preserve the life of our craft.

When I see people around me who are not interested in giving freely of their time and expertise, I cannot understand it. This is our craft that we love and which feeds us. How can we not have the time and energy to do our best, and to teach others?

Indeed, Arno would never let anybody pay him for bookbinding lessons. He would put them to work instead. During Carolyn Coman's apprenticeship in the mid-1970s, Arno gave her a second-hand VW Beetle. And when she left to start her own shop, he helped provide her with tools and equipment. In 1977 when she formed a partnership with Nancy Southworth in northern New Hampshire, near the Stinehour Press, Arno visited and continued to educate them—for free. You will hear similar stories throughout the community of hand binders whose lives he touched.

Harold McGrath was equally encouraging. His intricate tissue-paper make-readies for Baskin's wood engravings were a revelation—the hidden secret that he would reveal to anybody who wanted to learn. He explained to us how to





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Five of Hidy's Baskinesque
wood engravings done
during 1967–70 at the
Jonathan Edwards College
Press and the Godine
Press—Jonathan Edwards,
Andrew Marvell, William
Caslon, Henry David
Thoreau, and John Brown.



cajole fine impressions out of a platen press but it was on the big Kelly 2 flatbed cylinder press where we learned the more advanced skills required to print eight pages at once. He was a genius as a mentor—funny, modest, observant, gentle, and loved by all, including his grateful boss.

Leonard seemed less available than Harold or Arno, often coming across as gruff and aloof, but he was constantly teaching. In 1953, after setting up a letterpress lab the Worcester Art Museum, he left to teach Smith College's book arts program begun by Clarence Kennedy in 1948. In addition, for several decades he encouraged, invited, and tutored qualified apprentices and students, including myself during 1965–69.

Weary of my habitual apologies for taking his time, Leonard explained that by mentoring novices like me he could pay the debt to those who had helped him. In his 1965 speech to accept the AIGA medal, he even named names—men who were also medalists, and members of Boston's Society of Printers (Baskin and McGrath became honorary *sp* members in 1980): '... Carl Purington Rollins, Daniel Berkeley Updike, Bruce Rogers, Ray Nash, and Joseph Blumenthal. These were, and the latter two happily still are, my mentors, the unassailable paragons; toward their various perfections I aspire....' [See Richard Zauft's profile of *The Society of Printers* on page 11.—Ed.]

In 1965, when the Gehenna Press was in its prime and I

was finishing my freshman year, Leonard was reviving his connections with Yale, especially with the Yale Library, and the Jonathan Edwards College Press. In February 1965 the Company of College Printers was invited to meet Leonard at a Gehenna Press exhibition in the University Library. Then in May, a wayzgoose for the college printers and their friends was held in Jonathan Edwards College, with Leonard as the speaker and guest of honor. At a dinner afterward, I was spellbound by our visitor's description of the ideals that shaped the Gehenna Press—made more understandable by the recent Gehenna exhibit. The following fall, when I started my bursary job in the J.E. Press to reduce my debt to the college, I fervently began imitating the Gehenna style and technique—a youthful compulsion that endured for five years. At Leonard's recommendation, I promptly visited a shop in lower Manhattan where I purchased E.C. Lyons burins and boxwood.

My first attempt in the difficult and unforgiving medium of wood engraving was a portrait of the Rev. Edwards himself, for a student directory. Learning that Gehenna also employed photoengravings (as William Morris had done at Kelmscott), I used that illustration process on my first ambitious assignment for the college—an eight-page program for Bertold Brecht's *Scenes From the Life of Galileo*—printed on the same C&P platen press used for the first Gehenna title.

As I tell my Baskin story, keep in mind that it is not



ABOVE: These are the four copper etchings by Lance Hidy that Leonard Baskin suggested would be perfect illustrations for Andrew Marvell's poem, *The Garden*.

BELOW: *Moral Reflections on the Short Life of the Ephemeron*, which Hidy produced at the J.E. Press during his senior year, 1967–68. He illustrated it with colored etchings inspired by Baskin's 1958 masterpiece, *Horned Beetles and Other Insects*.



unique. You will hear variations on it from others who came under the spell of Gehenna. My experience is just one illustration of how western Massachusetts became a book arts mecca. [See Barbara Blumenthal's article 'Arno Werner, Leonard Baskin, Harold P. McGrath and the Tradition of Book Arts in Massachusetts' on page 17.—Ed.]

When I presented Leonard with my first efforts, he was gratified to see that I was using the J.E. Press for artistic purposes. (Baskin printed the first Gehenna book, *On a Pyre of Withered Roses* at the J.E. Press in 1942.) This earned

me the first of several invitations to accompany two Yale librarians on one of their regular 170-mile round-trips to the Gehenna Press. On my first visit they took me to the Smith College book arts press where he taught. He explained there was only one assignment for the course—to edit, design, and illustrate a little book, hand-set the type, print the pages by letterpress, and bind it by hand. The one absolute rule was that the text must have been previously unpublished. This, he said, was to prevent the appearance of yet another precious edition of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. The result was a wonderful assortment of books, including poems written by the students themselves, cookbooks of grandmothers' recipes, family letters, and deserving manuscripts discovered in the Smith Library.

I also spent some time with Harold McGrath who showed me around the press, and gave me tips on make-ready and roller pressure. Harold gave me a folder of Gehenna keepsakes that he had printed, including the 1962 booklet, *Of Garlands and Coronary or Garland Plants* by Thomas Browne.

These Gehenna items became my textbook. When I returned to Yale for my junior year, instead of studying for classes, I decided to pretend that I was one of Leonard's Smith College students, and produce a little book of unpublished material—all on my own time. A classmate of mine, William 'Tony' Lydgate, agreed to let me use ten of his poems which I printed in a thirty-two-page booklet

titled *'The Scent of Any Trellised Vine & Other Poems.'* When Leonard saw the title page, he told me he liked it better than his. (See illustration on page 6.)

I also showed him four tiny landscapes that I had etched in copper over the summer break. He told me that he had been considering illustrating Andrew Marvell's poem, "The Garden," but that he would not have to do it now, since my prints were perfect for it. Taking his advice, I eventually produced 115 copies of *The Garden* in 1970, hand-set Gehenna-style in Cancelleresca Bastarda under the imprint of David R. Godine, Publisher. (And, of course, it was Leonard who introduced David and me to each other when we were both trying to emulate the Gehenna Press in every possible way, including purchasing the same kind of Kelly press.) Others agreed with Leonard's opinion about the marriage of my etchings with Marvell's poem, for the book was featured in The Grolier Club exhibition and catalogue, *A Century for the Century* (2000)—one of "the hundred most beautiful books of the twentieth century."

Going back to the J.E. Press—my unofficial tutelage under Baskin and McGrath had been appreciated by some authorities at Yale. Out of respect for Leonard Baskin's generosity to a young J.E. printer, and in support of the work I had already put into these extra-curricular studies, it was arranged that I would spend my senior year as a 'Scholar of the House.' This exempted me from taking courses (except to make up one that I had failed from spending too much time printing my junior year), so that I could spend the entire year drawing, painting, and printing—all under the watchful eye of three Yale professors. One of them, Alvin Eisenman—director of Yale's graduate graphic design program, AIGA medalist, and Dartmouth protégé of Ray Nash—was especially helpful to me. But everyone knew that the only eyes that mattered to me were Baskin's.

The culmination of the year's work was a little book, *Moral Reflections on the Short Life of the Ephemeron* by Thomas Boreman, first published in 1719. I illustrated it with three colored etchings inspired by my favorite Gehenna book, *Horned Beetles and Other Insects*. In addition, I had made many watercolors and pen-and-ink drawings that were exhibited shortly before graduation in the Jonathan Edwards College Common Room. The entire exhibition was stolen, alas, without any of it having been documented with photographs. But the book survived, driving home one of the great virtues of printing and binding thirty copies. If one vanishes, there are others to take its place.

At the Godine Press I produced a revised edition of the mayfly book (as we called it) after *The Garden* was completed in 1970. Arno Werner, whom we had met through Leonard, delicately bound the new edition.

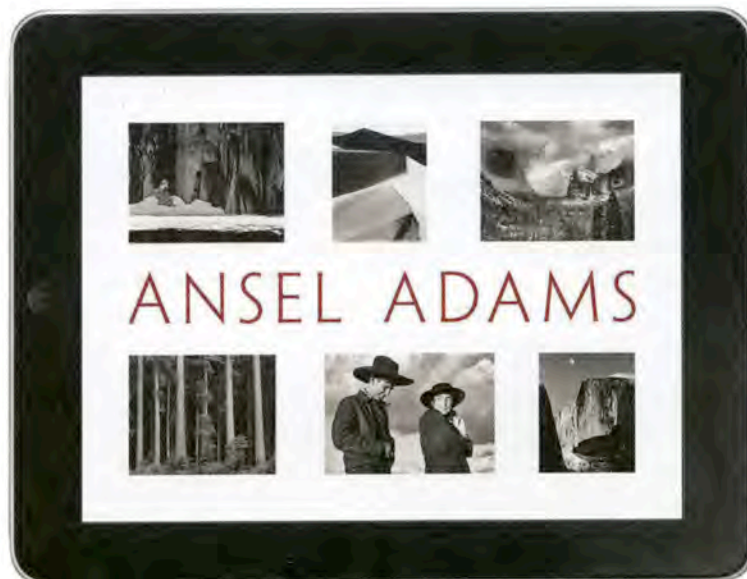
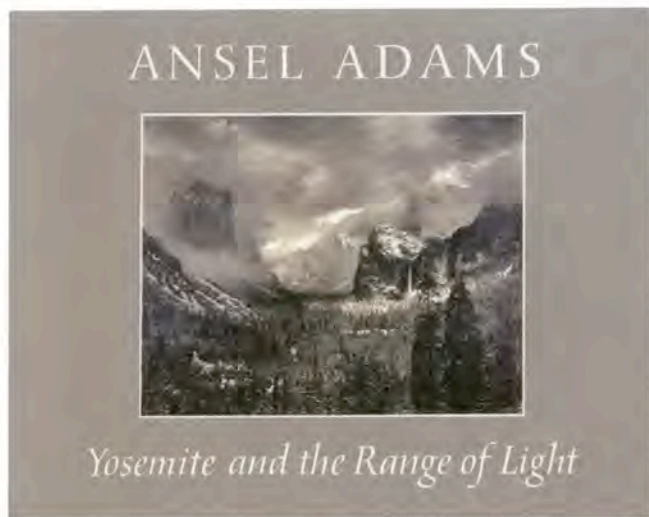
A few weeks before I received my diploma, Leonard formally offered to let me come and study privately with him. Some financial support was arranged through the efforts of the Yale librarians, enabling me to spend nine months during 1968–69 living in the vicinity of Northampton and The Gehenna Press. I spent relatively little time with Leonard as it turned out—mostly because I was struggling to find



After 1977 I departed from the Gehenna style and developed my own photography-based style for posters and postage stamps. The superficial resemblance to Baskin's work was gone, but the underlying attitudes about art and craft were unchanged.

my own voice, my own style. This turned out to be more frustrating and perplexing than I had anticipated. So, when David Godine asked me to help him establish the Gehenna-like Godine Press in Brookline, I jumped at the offer, happily pursuing the Gehenna muse for a few more years.

Leonard's esteem for Yale's undergraduate printers persisted, and was not limited to those at Jonathan Edwards College. In 1971, during the national Vietnam protests, when youthful disillusionment with the Establishment was at its peak, he helped set up a new press at Yale's Calhoun



LEFT: Lance Hidy worked closely with Ansel Adams on *Yosemite and the Range of Light* (Little, Brown, 1979), the last book of his career, and one of Hidy's first important commercial works. RIGHT: Hidy art-directed the Ansel Adams iPad app. In addition to type and images, the app contains narration, music, video, and other interactive features.

College. Little is known of the outcome, other than these remarks he made a few years later:

I set up a small press at one of the colleges at Yale and offered to teach there for a term. Well, I had over 250 applications for this little room, to learn how to print. Now what's that an expression of? They, those 250, represent some sort of intellectual level—all of whom expressed academic dissatisfaction and wanted to make a thing with their hands.

Another facet of the Gehenna ethos that is seldom noted, but lives on among the Gehenna diaspora, is its openness to using offset lithography. Much credit for this must go to Clarence Kennedy, who started the book arts workshop at Smith College and was a brilliant photographer and friend of Ansel Adams. As a photographic consultant to the Meriden Gravure Company, Kennedy was probably the one who introduced Leonard to E. Harold Hugo (1900–1985), Meriden's guiding light, and life-long friend of Leonard's. The three men, Baskin, Kennedy, and Hugo, collaborated on the 1962 Gehenna book, *Four Portrait Busts by Francesco Laurana*, which contained 300-line halftone reproductions of Kennedy's photographs. Six years before his death Leonard offered this rebuke to letterpress snobs: 'I find the prejudice for letterpress and against offset to be ludicrous and absurd. One must, I think, be concerned with those typographic verities of clarity, cogency, wit, grace, strength, and comeliness and not be preoccupied with process.'

Michael Russem, whose Kat Ran Press rose to prominence for its fine letterpress books in the post-Gehenna period around Northampton, also employs offset when needed. Michael has taken Leonard's open-mindedness one step further by becoming a master at digital book design with Adobe's InDesign software, and also designing websites for

clients such as The American Printing History Association and The Fine Press Book Association. Not coincidentally, Michael has also become a leader in the Society of Printers, which played such an important role in revitalizing the book arts in the last century.

Another who has moved beyond letterpress, a former student of Harold McGrath's, is Sandra Klimt. After a distinguished career in the production of art and photography books at the Meriden-Stinehour Press, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Little, Brown and Co., she eventually started her own company specializing in the production of fine photography books. For her, as it was for Baskin, fine printing is fine regardless of whether it is letterpress or fine-line duotones printed by offset. The lesson was clear: standards should not be relaxed, no matter what the medium.

Today, Sandra and I are working together on books for the Ansel Adams Trust, published by Little, Brown and Co., she as the production manager, and I doing the typographic design and image sequencing. Harold McGrath's example of uncompromising craftsmanship with both type and image set a standard that is as relevant to our commercial work as it was in the private press.

At Little, Brown and Co., the Ansel Adams books are overseen with a wise and light touch by Jean Griffin—but the hands-on orchestration of all the team members is deftly conducted by books editor Michael Sand, who has the best eye of any editor I have ever worked with. Michael is formerly of *Aperture*, which was a superbly produced graphic arts journal. The other team members include Andrea Stillman, who once departed the Metropolitan Museum of Art to work as Adams's assistant, and is today the foremost expert on his work; William Turnage, Adams's close friend and business

manager, who is now the uncompromising, visionary director of the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust; and Thomas Palmer, our duotone master who polished his craft while working at the side of Richard Benson—who, in turn, started at Meriden Gravure, where Baskin's work hung on the walls, and where photographs were printed for Gehenna books. Sumner Stone, of the Stone Type Foundry, and former director of type development at Adobe, also deserves a mention. His innovative sans serif font family Magma enlivens our pages with its graceful and legible characters, making a good companion for the display font Penumbra Flare Serif, designed by me. When you add Little, Brown's copy-editing experts, and the printing craftsmen at Mondadori in Verona, you have, in all, a capable book arts team that is proud both of the quality of the Ansel Adams books, and of their affordability.

Sumner Stone's experience with calligraphy parallels Sandra's and mine with letterpress, adding further evidence of the value that private presses and undergraduate printing labs have had in preparing people for the daunting challenges of commercial publishing and type founding. Sumner studied at Reed College with calligrapher Lloyd Reynolds (with whom I also studied briefly), whose book arts press was the west coast counterpart to those of Nash, Rollins, and Baskin on eastern campuses—with an equally impressive list of former students who have distinguished themselves in the graphic arts.

This collaboration demonstrates the value that private presses and undergraduate printing labs have had as training grounds, or nurseries as they are sometimes called, for people who, like Sandra and me, move on to the daunting challenges of the commercial publishing industry.

Today, as we enter an era of electronic books, can the lessons of Leonard Baskin, Harold McGrath, and Arno Werner be transferred to the new media? Having recently worked on the *Ansel Adams* iPad app, I can say that the answer is both yes and no. Yes, type and images still need to be arranged harmoniously. However, writing code for an app bears no resemblance to printing with ink on paper. The people who have the skills to build such code are likely to come from the video games industry—which has little or no familiarity with traditions such as those embodied in Gehenna books.

It was not that long ago, in 1994, that Leonard Baskin chastised those letterpress purists who disapproved of offset lithography. Today that old rivalry between letterpress and offset printing has been rendered insignificant by the dawn of ebooks for reading on hand-held electronic devices like the Kindle and iPad. The ebook challenges me, and perhaps all of us who love fine printing, to honor the old lessons—such as those I learned while printing Andrew Marvell's *The Garden* with copper etchings and Cancellersca Bastarda type—by applying them to the design of an iPad app.

This is very much like the challenges that the first printers faced in transferring the standards of the calligraphic book, written with a quill pen, to the new industrial technology of printing from metal type. If they could do it, so can we.



Lance Hidy's 2005 redrawing of the 1905 logo by Bruce Rogers.