

A Pleasant Madness

WILL RUETER discusses his influences and experiences at the Aliquando Press with ROLLIN MILROY as he receives the Robert R. Reid Award and Medal for Lifetime Achievement in the Book Arts.



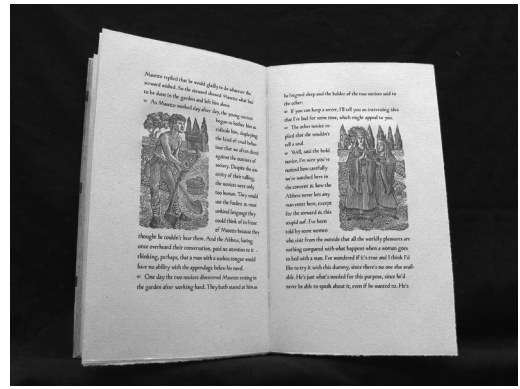
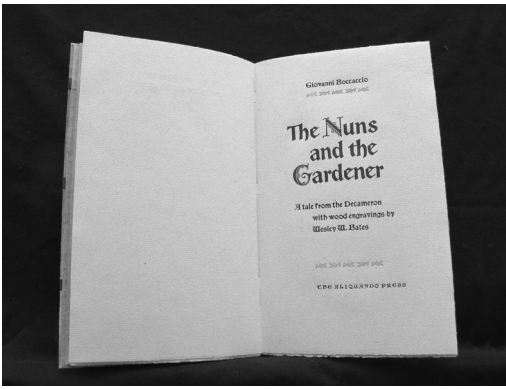
Rollin Milroy (left) in conversation with Will Rueter. (Photo by Jason Vanderhill)

ROLLIN MILROY of British Columbia's Heavenly Monkey Press engaged Will Rueter of the Aliquando Press in Ontario in a dynamic, unscripted discussion at Simon Fraser University's downtown Vancouver campus on March 21, 2013. Rueter was in the city to not only serve as a judge in the Alcuin Society's Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada, but also to receive the Robert R. Reid Award and Medal for Lifetime Achievement in the Book Arts. Rueter was born in 1940; his father was a printer and his great-grandfather was a lithographer in Amsterdam. A great-uncle was a respected artist and graphic designer, some of whose patterned papers Rueter has incorporated into his own work. "I have a few of their genes and that helps a lot," he said as the discussion opened. The lively and wide-ranging conversation that followed explored everything from the origins of Rueter's own press, based in Dundas, Ontario, to tips for new printers starting out today, as

well as Rueter's insights on his development as a printer and the future of the craft.

To start let's jump back a bit to 1963, the year that the Aliquando Press was established. I'm wondering if starting a private press was not considered a very old-fashioned, or uncool, or not-hip thing to do in 1963?

In 1960 I had the very good fortune to be able to travel to Europe. I lived in London for 10 months, in South Kensington close to the Victoria and Albert Museum. I had no money but I was able to find a small job and soak up whatever I could. At that point, the *Book of Kells* came from Ireland for the first time to the Royal Academy and I had a season pass, and that single event changed my life. I became really excited about the physical properties of the book. I knew nothing of books or bookmaking. Eventually I returned to Canada, worked in a bookstore



for a year in London, Ontario, discovered the work of Frank Newfeld—very beautiful, very experimental, very exciting books from McClelland & Stewart—and I decided that I wanted to be a book designer. It was one of those odd circumstances. I went to the Ontario College of Art, where I met Stan Bevington, and I bought a small table-top press. But I had no idea of the tradition of the private press—Morris, Cobden-Sanderson, or anyone else.

So why get your own little press?

Because it seemed like such an exciting thing to do. I wanted to make books.

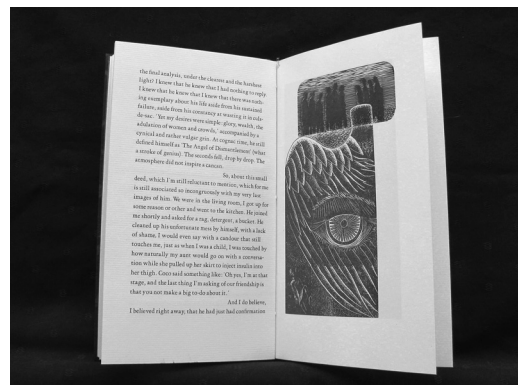
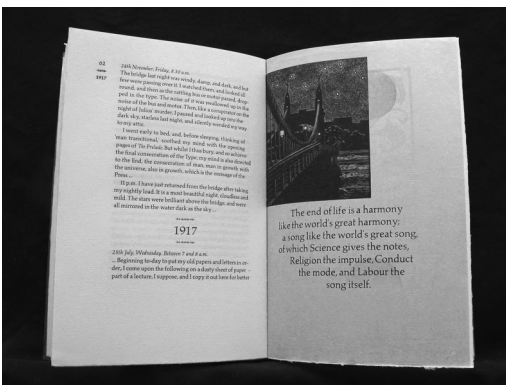
And you wanted to be able to do everything yourself?

Absolutely. I knew nothing about what I was doing, but I was very fortunate that I was able

to find a small press and a font of 12-point Bembo type, and Stan and I shared the cost of some ornaments. It was a very exciting time for typography in Ontario because people like Frank Newfeld were designing commercial books in a stimulating way. There was a lot of really strong advertising design, which I think we seeped up, and there were some private presses in Ontario, like the Heinrich Heine press and the Roger Ascham Press that were quite scholarly, and they were really doing a great job of presenting information, poetry, essays in a very invigorating and experimental way. They definitely influenced me. I just wanted to be part of the printing scene.

You got into it. Aside from having your own press, your first real paying gig was with the University of Toronto Press, correct?

I had a job working with Sam Smart, as a designer, right after art school. Then I got a short-term



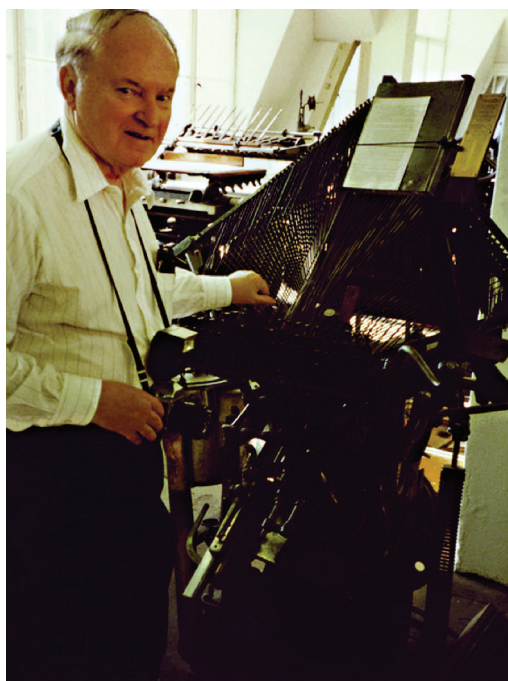
Canada Council grant in 1968 and spent three months in Europe, basically in England and Holland, reading and looking at the Monotype Works and the library of the Amsterdam Type Foundry. I came back to Canada with no job, and I applied to University of Toronto Press. Miraculously, they were looking for a designer. So that was the other life-changing experience. They entrusted me with some quite exciting projects. A wonderful designer—I'm sure you've all heard of Allan Fleming—was my boss. He gave me an awful lot of confidence.

Jim Rimmer was the second person to receive the Robert R. Reid Award. You both shared a mentor named Paul Duensing. Tell us a bit about Paul, who he was and why he was important.

I first contacted Paul Duensing in the 1970s when I was hoping to increase my range of type. Paul was an extraordinary person. He had a vast knowledge of typefaces and type design. He designed and cast type based on letterforms stretching back centuries before Gutenberg. He cast a wonderful italic typeface of his own design. He wanted to create beautiful typefaces from his own designs, with his own private press and his own private type foundry. He was in the unique position of being a one-man shop. He was a very calm person—very funny, very generous in every possible way. And he was an extremely important mentor to me. An extraordinary man. He mentioned to me that there was this guy out in Vancouver called Jim Rimmer, and if I ever came out here I should meet him. He was in awe of Jim.

This was the 1970s, early 1980s, and Jim was doing things that Paul couldn't imagine anyone doing—cutting his own letterforms on the back of type blanks. I met Jim and Jim blew me away. I didn't have much contact with Jim, but he did so much to help me. Jim was one of the most decent men I ever met. I just wish I'd known him a bit more than I did.

Going back to Paul, your latest book, which is really just being published as we speak, reprints several essays by another of Paul's protégés, a man named Leonard Bahr, also



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Paul Duensing.

from Michigan, who operated the Adagio Press. This was a man who worked primarily in the 1960s. The Adagio Press did. Tell us a bit about the book *Pressing Matters*. What is it? Who is it?

Leonard Bahr worked in a Detroit ad agency as a typographer. He was in some ways the antithesis of Paul. He was much more like me—a total type-A personality. He once was hospitalized, seriously, because he found a typo in a book that he had just printed. He was a great, great guy.

Was it self-injury?

I never went there! He was totally passionate about type. He would get himself into knots because a customer chose what he thought was the wrong typeface for the job. He did some absolutely beautiful books. He produced a book on Cobden-Sanderson that just about killed him—this was the hospitalization. After that he produced less complicated but no less interesting pamphlets.

Let me interrupt. How did you connect with Leonard in the first place?

Through Paul Duensing. There was one occasion when Leonard, Paul and I all ended up in Kalamazoo. Leonard drove from Detroit to Kalamazoo because he wanted to be part of the gang. We had some hysterical talks. Leonard and Paul would banter constantly. “Never ever use Cheltenham! How could you use Consort?” They were also great opera lovers, so there was a lot of banter about favourite singers and performances. They were very close friends and delightful people to be with, but totally opposite personalities.

So your new book—*Pressing Matters*.

Leonard wanted to write a book on private printing. He printed two chapters and actually set one of them in type and pulled proofs that he gave to Paul, who gave me a copy. The book was never completed. When I was thinking about doing a book for the 50th anniversary of my press, I realized this would be a wonderful opportunity to honour Leonard’s work and I wanted Paul to be part of the book. So Leonard’s first two chapters became the first two essays in this book. With a little careful editing I was able to tie them together. You very kindly filled in some gaps with your essay.

One of these chapters was “The Economics of Private Press Printing,” which you asked me to do.

I wanted Paul to be represented though he was no longer alive. I went through a number of his writings and some of his correspondence and created an essay for him. And I wrote an afterword called “Printing as Pleasure,” because I think there is so much joy in the act of printing.

In it I made some rash judgments about the future of the private press. Will there be books in the future? I think it would be very nice to think that somehow books will be around. I can’t make any prognostications—but as technology changes, the book has probably got a finite lifespan in its current form as a commercial undertaking. The private press, I’m hoping, will

still continue in some form or other. I really don’t know that I can say much more than that.

The fact that the question occurred to you suggests that you perhaps worry about the future.

I think anybody who makes books or reads books worries about the future of books. It is such an open-ended problem and I don’t know that I could come up with any major answers. I was trying to refer to some of the thoughts that Paul and Leonard had, and I don’t know how they would feel if they knew the current state of books.

Why is what you do—what Jim, what I and others in this room are trying to do—why is it or why might it be important to people who don’t necessarily live and breathe letterpress and limited edition books? Why might it have some importance or place in their lives?

I think what we do is important to us and it is hard to know how much it will affect other people. I can’t imagine not having a private press. I have a very odd personality, and for almost 50 years I have been able to hide (if you like) behind my private press. It’s my compulsion, my obsession, my contact with the world. The discipline of making books allows me to identify with my press and the press has become the best part of myself, so from a very personal point of view it’s a kind of salvation. I think it is the kind of salvation that people like Cobden-Sanderson found. How it affects other people is anybody’s guess. I would hope, though, that people would be able to appreciate the craft, the beauty of the physical object (if it is indeed beautiful), the importance of the text—always the text—because that is what we work from—and for.

One of the things I’ve enjoyed about our friendship over the past 10 years or so is the beautifully written letters that I receive from you in a calligraphic sense. Do you think it is important for people interested in the graphic arts to actually be able to render with some accuracy and competency letters and drawings and page layouts by hand?

Absolutely, as it is important for artists to be able to draw and to express themselves in their chosen medium. Having done most of my work by hand rather than on a computer, I'm not saying I'm a particularly good renderer (I have a problem also being left-handed so I don't consider myself a very good calligrapher; I'm always fighting this urge to fling my left hand over my shoulder). But it's essential to be able to render, to appreciate the subtlety of each letterform. I remember when I was in art school and Frank Newfeld rendered six words in 10-point Perpetua italic with a blunt hand. He knew that letterform so well that he could write that letterform and you saw that it was Perpetua italic. You understand letterforms by drawing and you understand their relationships by drawing two or three letterforms together. Letterforms have their own rules and their own disciplines when they become type. They have to relate so you are not seeing individual forms but words and paragraphs.

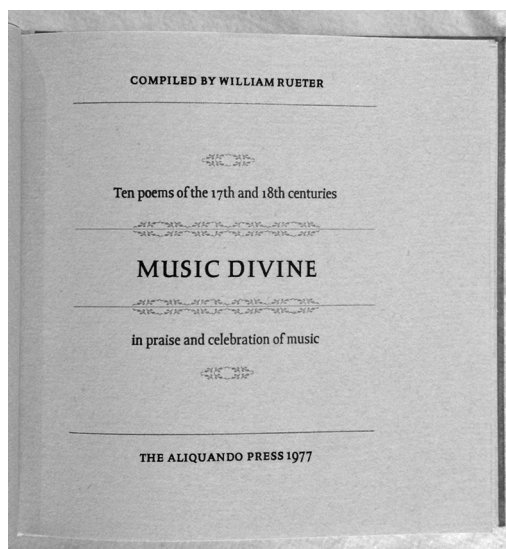
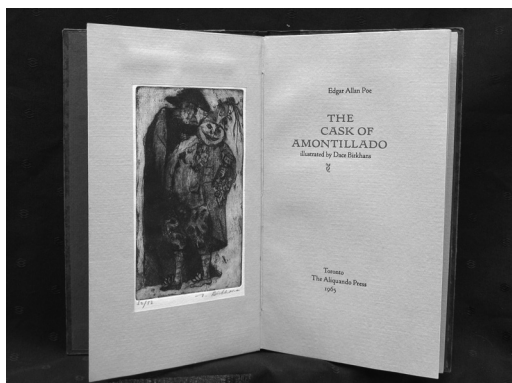
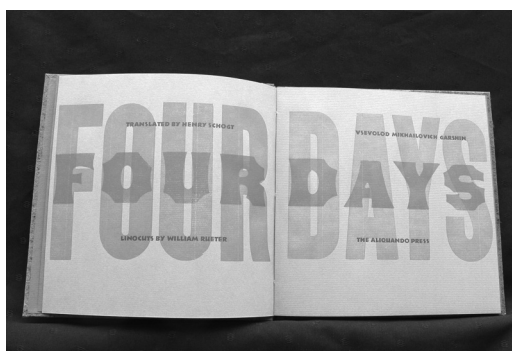
And you think that is more obvious to a person if they are actually forced to sit down?

It becomes a lot more obvious. I think you still have to think with your hand and not with your mouse.

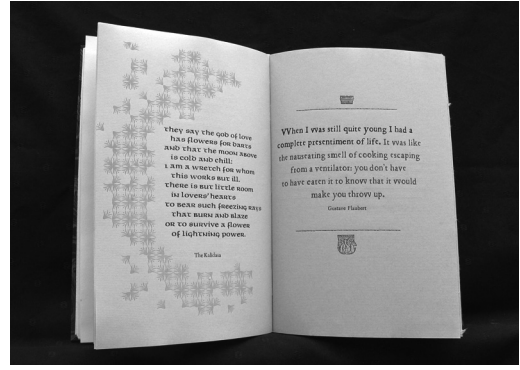
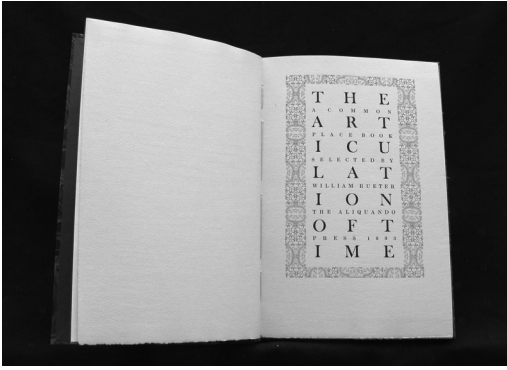
PRINTING IS MUSIC IN A VERY VISUAL WAY

What interests you and I share, which I've encountered with other printers, is a very strong interest in music, and a desire to express that interest in music through printing and through books. How or why do you see these two mediums overlap? What is it about the music that speaks to you and makes you want to express it through type?

I have great frustration with music. I can't read music; I have never been able to. I once tried to build a harpsichord and discovered that I am not a woodworker. Printing is music in a very visual way, and I need music when I work in my studio. I was trying to think of an analogy between printing and music, and in an odd way letterpress and private printing have a kind of



Clockwise from left: Four Days (2003);
Music Divine (1977);
The Cask of Amontillado (1965).



The Articulation of Time (1993).

parallel relationship with early music. A piano makes beautiful sounds but the sounds are pretty smooth. The touch on the piano is very predictable. With a harpsichord, lute or guitar, you are getting that tension and release, and that's exactly what happens with a printing press, especially with a cylinder press. You can feel each impression as it goes through. There is also a kind of roughness and immediacy to private printing that you often experience with early music, with its unusual and slightly odd sounds that are so much part of the aural experience.

CLASSIC WORKS & FAVOURITE BOOKS

Since Christmas I have had the good fortune to meet primarily young people in Vancouver who are interested in getting involved in letterpress printing either privately or on a commercial basis. They seem very keen but two things they seem to be running up against are access to equipment but also, more importantly, access to knowledge, information. What's your advice to someone who wants to create their own Aliquando Press today? What should they be doing, where should they be looking, who should they be talking to, who should they be reading?

Certainly they should be talking to anybody who is actually printing. They should read the classics because there is so much to learn. D.B. Updike's *Printing Types* is a wonderful read, and a great source for a variety of historic type styles.

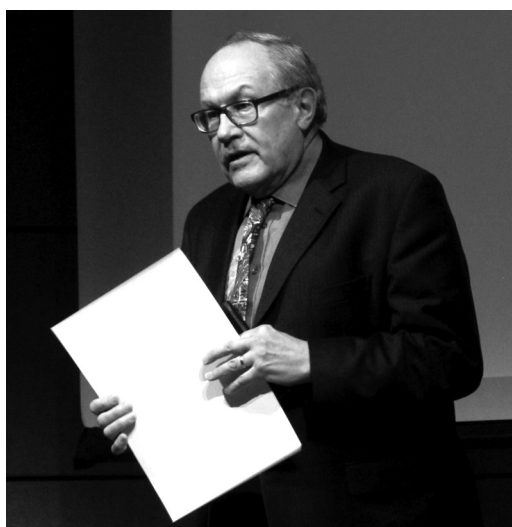
Steinberg's *500 Years of Printing* and more recently a book called *The Book in the Renaissance* would give them an idea of printing history. Another book we discussed yesterday is *Just My Type*, by Simon Garfield, a British book in which he covers an amazing amount of information about typefaces in a jolly and accessible way. I really want to sit down and read it just for the joy of reading someone who writes well. A book I came across recently called *Letterpress Now* will give you very basic and quite good information on how to operate a press. You have to be devoted to printing. You really have to want to learn. Don't assume you are going to make any money at it, because there is no money to be made, but you can have a hell of a lot of fun.

Of all of your books—and you've only done 100, not including the U of T stamp—which is your favourite, tonight, and why?

I'm going to tell you a very quick shaggy dog story, which may explain why I can't narrow it down to one book. I had almost a second mother in my Dutch cousin. She and her husband went to the island of Bali in the 1930s. They were both artists and their experiences were absolutely phenomenal. Then came the war, and the Japanese invasion, and they were put in separate internment camps. Maria, my Dutch cousin, had a lot of her husband's work with her—sketches and rolled up canvasses, which were destroyed when the Allies bombed her camp. Occasionally they would be able to exchange postcards. (They

wrote in English because the Japanese would be unable to read the mail.) And her husband would ask Maria, “How are my colourful children?” My books are my own colourful children—some questionable and some more appealing than others—but I love them all. I will name three books, but I can’t narrow it down to one.

- *The Articulation of Time* (1993). I did this 20 years ago when I first became aware of my own mortality. I wanted to do a commonplace book with lots of quotations: kind of life passage if you like, with lots of poetry, lots of texts that had meaning to me at the time. I used a variety of papers, typefaces and ornaments. It was a very personal book to do and I am very fond of it.
- *Majesty, Order and Beauty: Selections from the Journals of T.J. Cobden-Sanderson* (2007). Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson (1840 to 1922) worked as a barrister and was very unhappy. William Morris’s wife asked him, “Why don’t you take up bookbinding? Nobody does that in the Morris household.” Within two years he became the finest bookbinder of the 19th century. Influenced by Morris, he set up the Doves Press, which is important for its simplicity of design and concern for the text. He wrote journals that are amazing beyond belief, filled with his vision of the Book Beautiful. I think he held himself together, as some of us



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Will Rueter on his acceptance of the Robert R. Reid Award and Medal. (Photo by Jason Vanderhill)

do, through making his books. I tried to do a book in the style that he might have done. I set the type ragged right rather than justified and tried to produce a book of the 21st century—it’s a very complicated book to explain. I had to try to respect the centrality of his approach.

- *Diary of an Amaryllis* (2008). My wife, Maureen Steuart, is a very fine artist. One spring when she wasn’t feeling well she decided to make some drawings of the life cycle of an amaryllis I had given her. She wrote the text and made a little accordion-fold book which I absolutely loved, and I wanted to re-create it in print. It’s always nice to collaborate with one’s spouse. We had remarkably accurate reproductions of her drawings done.

How did you reproduce the drawings?

We went down to the local copy shop. The colours are very accurate. It pleased me very, very much to do this book. I am very sorry Maureen isn’t here tonight. Her love and her compassion really comes out in this book. I am very proud of it.

THE ARTISTS WHO INSPIRE WILL RUETER

When you are working alone in your studio, whose work are you celebrating? What has been an inspiration to you?

Anton Koberger is one of the great incunabula printers. It was a life-changing experience for me to discover his *Nuremburg Chronicle*. It is an amazing book—a history of the world to 1493. He left a few blank pages at the end so you could keep the book up to date. But he didn’t mention the discovery of America. The illustrations are absolutely astonishing. It is likely that Albrecht Dürer worked on some of them. The blocks were repeated a number of times to suggest different personages and views, but it was the idea rather than the fact that was important.

Who else is your inspiration?

William Blake. His was the most personal private press in some ways. I don’t begin

to understand everything that he writes about, but his imagery is astonishing.

Is the inspiration purely from the design perspective, or for his writing?

Both. How could anyone not respond to his passion?

The third one of your inspirations was Cobden-Sanderson.

Yes. His genius lay in the use of only one typeface, relieved occasionally by initials, and in the simplicity and integrity of his books. Within those limitations he says so much about how successful a design can be.

Rudolf Koch, another one of my great heroes, designed some extraordinary faces and brought a spirituality to his work. My inspiration also comes from music I listen to in the studio: Bach, Shostakovich, many others (Mumford & Sons at the moment).

I'm a very fortunate person. People who have helped me I could name forever. My friends from many parts of the world have always inspired me. When I worked at U of T Press I knew some extraordinary people who trained me and mentored me. People in the publishing world have been very helpful.

I wanted to say one thing to end this talk, and that is that private printers do work in very strange ways. I think we're very fortunate to be able to come in contact with them. There's a quote by Henry James in which he talks about writing, but I think it also says a lot about private printing: the challenge and the frustration of it. He says:

We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.

And the calligrapher Donald Jackson reminds us: "Cultivate your madness." I think that pretty well sums it up.



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Will Rueter's "Gang of Four" (from left): Jim Rimmer, Rod McDonald, Glenn Goluska and Stan Bevington.

POP QUIZ

Rollin Milroy closed his conversation with Will Rueter with a series of short questions that demanded sharp answers that he said promised "a concise and complete snapshot of exactly who Will Rueter is, and what you're all about." So far as the book arts go, anyway. The results follow.

Roman or italic?

I love Roman.

Rag or justified?

I can't make a decision. Justified is hard to do. Rag is easier. They both have their purposes.

More ink, or impression?

Unfortunately, I'm an impression guy. I'm stuck with a press that demands cardboard.

Second colour—red or blue?

I prefer blue but very often I use red.

Leather or vellum?

Leather.

Marbled paper or paste paper?

Marbled, just because I've got a lot of it.

Wood engraving or etching?

Wood engraving, absolutely, with type because they are so compatible. Etching has possibilities too.

I think we all know the answer to this one: Kelmscott or Doves?

I love Kelmscott but I have to go for Doves.