

 Offprint from Matrix 21

Outside my window junks and chickadees perch on a swaying bird feeder. Behind them the late afternoon sky has partially broken up. I watch the transition from white to grey slowly change in these frigid winter clouds as the sun sets. I'm also looking at John DePol clouds, and an image from *Wrenching Times* (Gwasg Gregynog, 1991, see *Matrix 12*, pp. 40-50) in which I over-printed opaque white on distant mountains. I have a plan for the clouds over the Black Mountain Ridge. The image will be printed from three blocks: the first, a blue block with the clouds and borders of the image defined; the second, a block with both the foreground and the distant mountains. This will be a reduction block of two, possibly three printings; the third, a small block of opaque white, to subdue the mountains.

30 DECEMBER 2000

When printing *Emerson Wulling: Printer for Pleasure* [reviewed on p. 232], I printed the wood-engravings on the Vandercook proofing press because I was unsure of registration and inking on the Heidelberg. After the book was finished, I had to print 1000 impressions of one of the images for *Matrix 20*, plus 500 more for a prospectus – too many copies for the Vandercook – so I put it on the Heidelberg. Much to my surprise, not only was the registration perfect, but the inking was cleaner than I would have gotten from the Vandercook. One tends to think the Vandercook offers the ultimate in control. When it comes to inking, this is not the case. The Vandercook has no ink fountain, so you have to hand ink every so often, and the amount of ink varies from impression to impression. With the Heidelberg, however, once the ink fountain is adjusted, the inking stays perfectly consistent from impression to impression.

While printing the 1500 impressions one sheet slipped by without the key block being printed, leaving the three or four colour blocks exposed. A key block tends to overpower them, but the colour blocks do possess a precision and clarity all their own. The look is intriguing. With the *Ernest Morgan* prints I'll keep it in mind.

4 JANUARY 2001

In the course of my conversation with Ernest, he talked about *The Song of Quetzalcoatl* (Antioch Press, 1930). He went into some detail about the text, and said he had hired the Jacob Sander Company to do some wood-engravings for the book. He also said there were a number of pen-and-ink drawings for which he had personally cut linoleum blocks as colour backgrounds.

It was with great anticipation that I discovered a copy posted on the Internet by a Latin American bookstore in Chicago. I ordered the book with the idea of reproducing some of the images. It arrived and, much to my surprise, there were no images except for a feeble, single-colour pen-and-ink drawing on the dust-jacket. What was Ernest thinking? Had his old memory combined

details from various books under one title? Was he making things up as he went? The dilemma brings up an interesting issue: the integrity of documentation versus that of the subject. I could reproduce the feeble, single-colour pen-and-ink drawing, giving rise to the same questions in the reader's mind that have occurred to me, along with another, more obvious one: 'Why on earth did he choose to reproduce such a feeble book cover?' This might produce an interesting effect, luring the mind of the reader into speculation. But it might also cast a shadow on Ernest Morgan's integrity.

I face a similar dilemma with the *New York*. There is an image of Grand Central Station which Ken Auchincloss (the Grolier Club member with whom I'm working) objects to because it is under construction. He suggests I try the other side of the building.

The images which I brought home in my digital camera are the accurate documentation of my New York experience. Ken is concerned with showing the best view of the city from a New Yorker's point of view. I am the artist. The club is the patron. An age-old dilemma.

I had the pleasure of working with the great sculptor Siah Armajani on a book of his bridges (*Bridge Book*, Siah Armajani, Walker Art Center and Minnesota Center for Book Arts, 1991). Occasionally we would have meetings with administrators from the Walker Art Center and the Minnesota Center for Book Arts, co-publishers of the project. The administrators would come to the meetings with concerns and demands. Siah would brush them off if he didn't like their ideas, saying, 'I am the artist. We will do it my way.' They would back off immediately.

29 JANUARY 2001

For three weeks I've been battling a computer virus, Win32.mtx. The bug attached itself to an e-mail from my brother Clayton like a flea on a dog. It went on to infect 603 files. The computer was completely disabled, and so, as a writer, was I. I have forfeited the ability to write by hand in favour of the efficient, retractable world of the word processor. Besides the text of this essay, a number of other pieces of vital information were in jeopardy: the 250 digital images from the New York visit, a rough design scheme for the Morgan book, and all of my financial accounting. Surprising also was the depth of my dependency on e-mail. With the traditional postal service, or 'snail mail' as I've recently heard it referred to, I expect the mail to arrive once a day. It is a singular, finite event. An e-mail, on the other hand, can arrive anytime, day or night, and from anyone in the world, provided, of course, they are 'on line'. The possibilities are staggering, and the effect on this owner of a sick computer was devastating.

Now, three weeks and \$350 later, the virus has been exorcised and I am able to resume this narrative. A box containing 1000

prospectuses for *New York Revisited* is on its way to New York. The Heidelberg is quiet.

The anticipated four-colour wood-engraving turned into five, and the fifth colour, the reduction block, proved to be a real problem. The colour was black, and I inked up the press with Roberts and Carelson Woodcut Black from an unopened can which Henry Morris gave me a few years back. The ink smelled good, and started out printing just fine, but then I began to notice white spots showing through the black. What was this? To make matters worse the ink refused to distribute properly at the ends of the distribution rollers.

A call to Henry Morris confirmed what I suspected, that the black ink was pulling off bits of ink from the previous colours, exposing the paper below. I had been adding Lanco Matte 2000 to the ink of the previous colours in order to reduce their shine. Lanco Matte 2000 is granular in nature, and this, coupled with the heavy anti-setoff spray which I was using, was leaving plenty of material for the black ink to pick off of the surface. Henry's suggestion was to lessen the tack of the ink with a reducer. Ahh.

I remembered a can of Hanco Setwell compound on my shelf which I bought for printing *High Bridge* in 1987. In the catalogue description, Hanco Setwell compound was described as an aid in the layering of inks. Since this was what I planned to do, and having never done it before, I bought the compound and added it to the *High Bridge* inks. This created a major problem. I made the mistake of adding the compound to the first layer of ink, and subsequent layers refused to lay down upon it, I think because one of the ingredients of the compound was wax. Eventually I solved the problem by adding varnish to the second layer of ink. The Hanco Setwell compound had been sitting idly on the shelf for fourteen years.

I added the compound to the Roberts and Carelson Woodcut Black and the picking problem was solved. When I acquired the Heidelberg a few years ago, I had been printing books on a Vandercook for over twenty years. But only now, when faced with the picking problem on the Heidelberg, do I understand the significance of tack in ink. On the Vandercook it was never a serious issue. Or at least it didn't seem to be.

As it turned out the biggest factor in rejecting sheets as I sorted the *New York* prospectuses was registration. I find the Heidelberg feeding system to be delicate and complex. First the height of the feed table, the angle of the suckers, the height of the air holes, the force of the air, and the size and number of suckers opened or closed must be just so. Then the two guards which let only a single sheet of paper pass must be adjusted to do just that, and two brushes which seem to hold the sheet against the end guides as the transfer grippers grab the paper must be set just right. If they're brushing the paper too firmly as it passes beneath them they will skew the sheet. And finally there is an adjustment on the side guide which, if tightened down too far,

will prevent the sheet from coming into proper contact with the side guide. And the stack of paper must be positioned on the feed table so that when the side guide pushes the sheet into place, it moves it just far enough. Printing a five-colour engraving requires absolute registration with each of five press runs. The fact that you can't be absolutely sure whether the first run is feeding consistently until it's verified by the registration of the second adds yet another level of potential disaster.

As for *Ernest Morgan*, my brother Clayton has made his editorial changes and sent me hard copy of the changed manuscript along with a disk. I'm suspicious of the disk. Has the virus attached itself to it? I shudder at the thought of another digital disease. I'm sending the hard copy to Tracy Smith for the final editorial review. I think I'll destroy the disk.

It's hard to say which is worse, press problems or computer problems. I'm irrevocably tied to both worlds now.

7 FEBRUARY 2001

Snow began falling at noon. The expectation is for nearly a foot of new snow by morning. The meteorologists are giddy with anticipation.

In the 1930s Ernest Morgan commissioned eight bookplate images each from Rockwell Kent and Lynd Ward. The images they produced are quite good, and I hope to reproduce them in the book. Before he died, Ernest loaned me his sample book containing the images, and I scanned them into the computer. After several fruitless attempts to locate the actual blocks, I'm resigned to ink-jet reproduction. I contacted the Antioch Bookplate Company and they gladly gave permission to reproduce the images. It seems they have no written record of transactions between Ernest, Kent, and Ward, and assume a gentleman's agreement. They haven't used the images in many years.

Besides the bookplate designs, there are two Ward images from his book *God's Man* which had been adapted for bookplates. I decided these too might be useful, and remembered that Barbara Henry of Bowne and Company Stationers in New York had given me the address of Lynd Ward's daughter Robin Ward Savage. I decided to contact her regarding the two images, and to ask if she knew of the whereabouts of the blocks. The reply came not from Robin, but from her sister Nanda. She was suspicious about the copyright situation with the bookplate images and wanted to know how to get in touch with the Antioch Bookplate Company.

During my visit Ernest had shown me his portfolio of 'clip art'. It was a large collection of images which he would use whenever an occasion arose. Much to my surprise, there in the portfolio was the image which I engraved of my grandfather's 55 Chevy pickup truck. I had at one time printed it on stationery. Ernest had lifted it off the letter I had sent him requesting an

interview. He was obviously not shy when it came to the acquisition of images.

I await word from the Ward sisters.

16 FEBRUARY 2001

The block hasn't been proofed yet. Black lines stand in bold relief against unstained wood where the surface has been cut away. It's Ernest all right, and the piercing, sober look is still there.

I sent a copy of the sketch for the engraving to Ernest a few years ago. He replied with a photograph of himself smiling. He wrote that his sister did not like the sketch. He wanted me to work from the smiling photograph. A few weeks later he wrote again asking for the smiling photograph back. He needed it for an article someone had written about him. I returned it. Promptly.

In 1999 I was invited to join the Wood Engravers Network at their annual summer workshop. I took along the block of Ernest to work on, but made very little progress. It no doubt had something to do with having people around. My concentration while engraving is easily interrupted. But I think it also had something to do with the subject. I was feeling guilty about going ahead with the image Ernest's sister didn't like.

A year later I took the block down from the shelf and gave it another try. Again I was able to make very little progress. The pencil sketch I was working from was done in the classic manner—a heavy concentration on the eyes, with detail diminishing to a few suggestive lines as the composition moves away from its centre. My intention was to engrave the block in a similar way, but I was having a devil of a time. Again the block was shelved.

The other day I was sorting through blocks I have on hand to use for the Morgan images, and I came upon the discarded block for Ernest's portrait. I had given up on it completely, and was considering cutting it up to use the uncut portions for smaller blocks in the book. I took a close look at it, and didn't like what I saw. I had nearly finished one eye, and had begun working my way down a cheek. The lines looked forced, and awkward.

Today, three days later, I gaze at the finished block. Ernest looks back with intensity. He looks great. The decision to return to the block was sudden, and seemingly required no thought. I think Ernest's ghost sensed my trouble in finding enough images to engrave for the book, and concluded a sober portrait was better than nothing. The facility with which I was suddenly able to render the lines was miraculous. It was a major breakthrough—a sudden melding of the black line techniques of Leonard Baskin and David Moyer, with a line quality that has slowly been evolving for years around the edges of my own images.

The spirit of Ernest Morgan has eased its grip.



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