

ABWIR

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Press Books

KELMSCOTT TO MOSCOW

BY
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I welcomed John Kinnane's invitation to think again about private presses, to which I have been a bit disloyal these last few years. Collecting them was always fun,



Madonna Icon from Five Leaf Icon Screen, 1983, by Vladimir Sulyagin.

and still could be. Prices are enormous but at least one would buy a fine object, which cannot be said for the rubbish-subject of dust jackets.

As to conditions in the modern world, they strike me as roughly similar to those which caused Morris to get so steamed-up a century ago. Here are two sentences from this week's *Economist*, which has just re-designed itself:

'Page make-up and graphics programs allow anybody able to use a computer to change a type-face or its size, to paste in pictures and to lay out the text in almost any manner. In a trice, office machines can set the type and print it out in fine detail.'

In other words, new methods produce do-it-yourself printing just as other new methods in Victorian decades caused easy production of large editions. The complaint was that quality suffered, as of course it still does. All our jolly home-authors working their toys make indifferent grey books. Does this mean we need another Morris, are ready for new private presses to keep flags flying?

To some extent we have them, sweeping up the written-off machines of yesteryear, pressing hot metal into mould-made paper, producing and reprinting wood-engraved vignettes to illustrate pleasantly harmless texts. The subject is not redundant, work goes on, books appear; nobody gets steamed-up about that, one way or the other. Perhaps television has drawn our brains to even greater scandals than the grey pages of an Apple Macintosh?

For me, it was never 'the horrors of Victorian typography' (as William Peterson still calls them, in his new book on the Kelmscott Press) which drew me towards William Morris, but the horrors of public-school

football. A dear old stone-deaf fellow called Newman, living in a cold stone house at Cotterstock near Oundle where I was at school in the winter of half a century ago, had known Morris and surrounded himself with Pre-Raphaelite art. I was allowed to cycle over to him for free tea and his monologue about Morris, Rossetti, De Morgan, and to see his things, instead of suffering the shoves and shouts and mud of rugger, which seems inexplicably enlightened of such powers as were. In those conditions I viewed his Kelmscott Chaucer, Gill Gospels, Rossetti chairs, De Morgan tiles, and have felt well disposed towards them from that day to this.

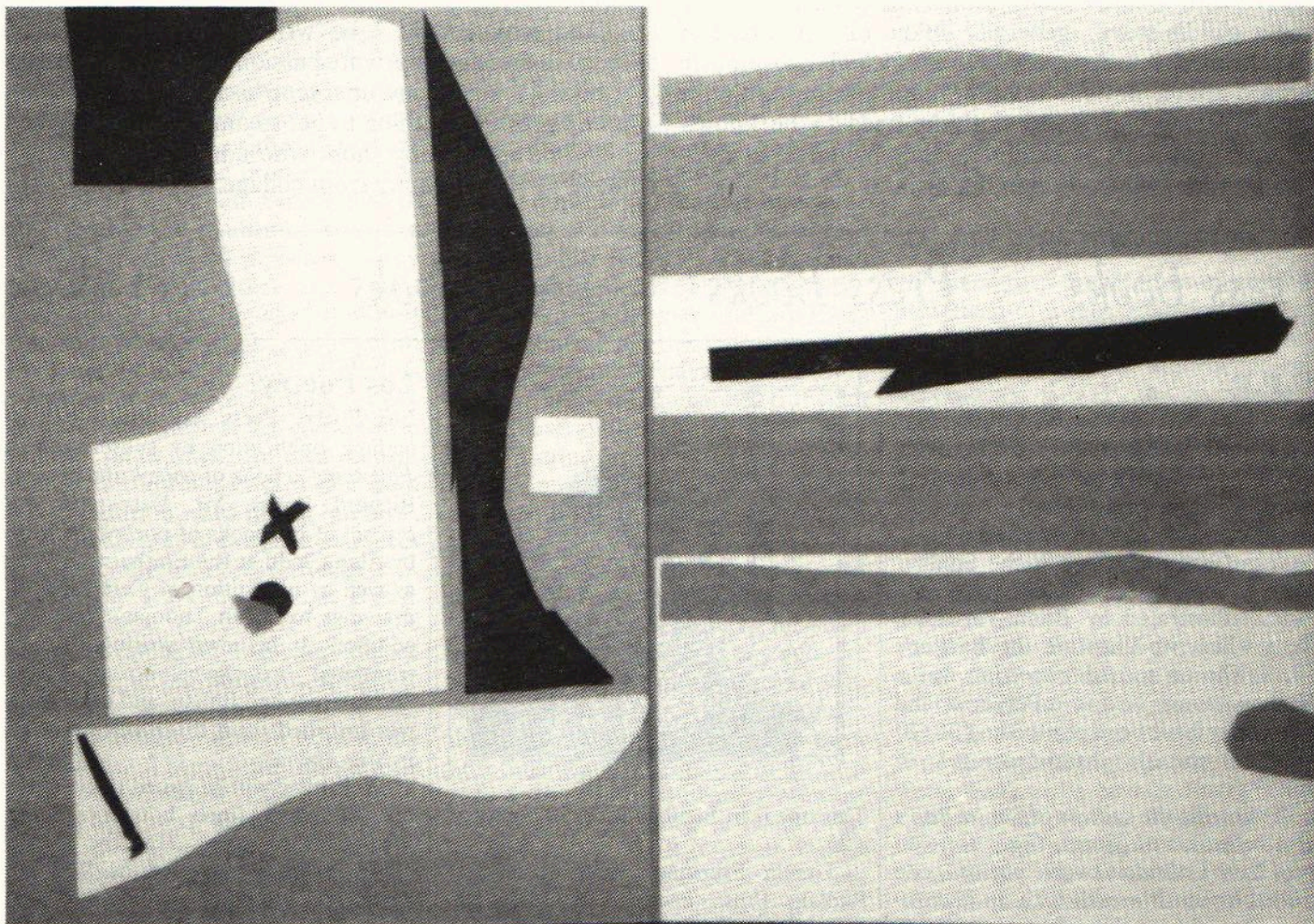
The passion has drained out of printing, and one wonders why it was ever there. Those who deplored Victorian standards, associating them with mass-production, shared a social nostalgia for village life, local markets, home-brew; quite ignorant or oddly silent about English seventeenth-century printing for instance, far worse than Victorian though the desired conditions had then prevailed. Nobody would choose a Shakespeare folio for its paper, type, margins or impression. Anyway most of what Morris rejected is eagerly collected by everyone now.

We used to argue about the nature or definition of private presses, but time settles that debate as they

divide between printer-publishers one side of the fence, and artists or print-makers the other. Printer-publishers (Rampant Lions, Whittington, Rocket) follow quiet lives and create excellent things, are blameless but would easily agree that none is a Kelmscott, Doves or Ashendene. That form of indignant discovery went, and I can't imagine what should bring it back. Artists (Morris Cox, Natalie D'Arbeloff, Shirley Jones in England, Leonard Baskin and those he has influenced in America) have offered more interesting prints than ever came from the private presses of a century ago — but one desires their books for the prints, not the printing. Baskin can do it all, but typography has ceased to be a subject to get steamed-up about. Lots of people can write good prose these days — I am amazed on the rare occasions I buy an *Evening Standard* at Paddington for the way home — and lots of people know how to design a book. Good taste exists abundantly, along with deliberate clever bad taste.

Putting aside the printers and designers therefore, I am tempted to mention some private books which are from no press but possess a head of steam, the force, western books have lacked.

If I were to write a book about private presses now its focus might be Moscow, where my wife and I spent a



Good and Evil & Elemental Strength, from Every Day and Eternity, by Vladimir Sulyagin, 1983.

concentrated week of visits to artists' studios in November eighteen months ago. A friend from the Soviet Union, viewing Baskin's work in Culham, said we should see a few artists who were making books in Moscow — and she was right, had understood the mood. That was a memorable week of smog, of rattly car-drives criss-crossing the city, of attic slums and chaotic studios. To reach them we climbed on planks over pipes, below old rafters of the tall houses, dust, tins and pots, stray wires wandering like webs. I have beside me a book of photographs we commissioned, to portray that moment of artists' studios in Moscow.

But the point was, these brave and free-thinking dissidents had made their art through forbidden times, the Brezhnev years, though they could never show or sell it and were allowed no studios; so one solution was to create it in book form, at the kitchen table. The artist who especially delighted us was Vladimir Sulyagin, often using a collage technique though he is also a fine and imaginative painter. He first showed paintings, then one after another at his easel a long series of simple collage portraits of Russian writers most of whom had suffered for what they expressed. Then we came to the climax, his books, mostly collage: religious, thoughtful, simplified down to final suggestions of composition; experimental, occasionally humorous (two about cats, one a child's story), generally linked to a tradition of icons and the techniques of Malevich. I enormously desired these, he was uneasy about parting with his soul's history; yet Russian artists need to be known outside Russia, to be exhibited, they have feared their new freedom will end upon the instant.

On another memorable day such art as we had chosen, including fifteen of Sulyagin's books — in screen form, or panorama, folded cardboard, panelled like a map — arrived at Culham, brought by the artists who had travelled with large packing cases beside them on passenger seats of the Aeroflot plane. By odd chance the art critic John Spurling came here on the same day — but that is another, continuing story, for the series of collage portraits as a result forms at this moment an exhibition at the Festival Hall.

Dear Sulyagin, and his enormous explanations. I could hardly wait to have everything safely housed by James Brockman, and here they all are now. Before that day was over — occupying most of it indeed — I asked for a few brief words on each subject in his books, so that I should not foolishly misunderstand, for his text was minimal or nothing. He has no English, I no Russian, his careful profundities were scrupulously interpreted. Never ask a Russian for a brief explanation.

The dust settles, one of those collage screens is open now beside me: the Disciples represented by cut-out numbers, a small black chalice and its blood-red shadow, one leaf of the screen pure white another threatened with black, a strangely tender Madonna and Child, the Trinity, all in simplest cut papers mounted on cardboard.

And why should I be writing about them here? Because these were private passions within the restraint of books, forced there unable to escape; not yet printed at any press, something to get steamed-up about. *Jazz*, it will be recalled by those who admire it, was reproduced by photography from collage.