

The Books of William Everson

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“Very few perfect books have ever been written, and very few that are perfect have ever been printed. One reason for that is the pressure that inheres in the book as a symbol; it is so great that the individual . . . cannot embrace the book in its totality.”¹ Much of William Everson’s life has been spent in the elusive effort to “embrace the book” as a symbol. As a poet-printer, he has sought to make the book as printed artifact speak a single and unequivocal truth—the truth that artistic wholeness is possible in a diversified and highly fractured, assembly-line society: “My whole attempt in a pluralistic age is to give the book a sacral, holistic character, to recover time with it.”² His commitment to this aesthetic search for wholeness has prompted a remarkable journey as writer, printer, and prophet of the “San Francisco Renaissance” poets.

A Californian of Norwegian descent, son of a printer, Everson was born in Sacramento in 1912. Before World War II, he was a farmer-writer in the San Joaquin Valley. His first publication, a ten-cent pamphlet of short poetry called *These Are The Ravens*, appeared in 1935. He also published two slim volumes, *San Joaquin* (1939) and *The Masculine Dead* (1942), in the first years of World War II. The poet’s early work is dominated by images of gentle fields, wildlife, and strong mountain children whose hardiness embodies the continuity of human life. All that sustains and all that links man to his past pulses from the fertile earth, mother of poetic art. These early poems, says Everson in a typically natural metaphor,

are the ravens of my soul,
Sloping above the lonely fields
And cawing, cawing.³

¹ William Everson, “The Poem as Icon—Reflections on Printing as a Fine Art,” *Soundings* (8 December 1976), p. 7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³ William Everson, *These Are the Ravens* (San Leandro, Calif.: Greater West Publishing Company, 1935), p. 3.

The holocaust of World War II shattered that tranquility which Everson had achieved in his poetic life in the late 1930s and early 1940s. As a pacifist, he chose to enter the Civilian Public Service Camp at Waldport, Oregon. CPS camps, such as Waldport's Camp Angel, served as alternative military duty for pacifists prior to the outbreak of World War II. Established in 1940 by the Quakers, Church of the Brethren, and Mennonites, the alternative service camps brought non-resisters of varying backgrounds together for such projects as land reconstruction, medical research, and hunger relief.⁴ Everson engaged in such tasks daily, using free time to organize the creative abilities of his fellow pacifists. At Camp Angel, he and others established the Untide Press. The mimeographed publications of the press aimed to communicate the importance of the pacifist cause and to preserve an aesthetically effective description of the lives led by members of the camps.

The first major publications of the Untide Press now in the University of Iowa Libraries are Everson's *X War Elegies* (1943) and *Poems: mcmxlii* (1945). Even in these initial efforts, Everson's concern with the book as a totality is apparent. Although mimeographed, *X War Elegies* includes line drawings by artist Kemper Nomland illustrating the poems, and, evidently, the poet felt the finished product worthy of the signature which he placed in The University of Iowa's copy of that volume. These evidences of Everson's holistic approach to art reflect his belief that poetry is no longer singularly an aural art, but is primarily read in silence from the printed page. This change makes the printing press immensely important, for the visual impact of the words on the page must substitute for what was once the subtleties of aural interpretation. The printing is, therefore, an integral part of the poem's effect:

From the moment a poem became primarily a thing, an object on a page, it began to lose the force of its nature. . . . Today the fate of a poem may be decided by nothing more than its appearance as it is lifted to be read. . . .

Both the poet and the typographer are left with the merest devices to indicate what is actually a profusion of subtle effects. In printing, I have tried to maintain the poem's prime aural reality.⁵

⁴ For more information on the Civilian Public Service Camps, see Floyd E. Mallott, *Studies in Brethren History* (Elgin, Ill.: House of the Church of the Brethren, 1954), pp. 237-244.

⁵ William Everson, "A Note on the Psalter of Pope Pius XII," *Novum Psalterium Pii XII. An Unfinished Folio Edition of Brother Antoninus, O.P.* (Los Angeles: Countess Estelle Doheny, 1955), p. xxiii. Hereafter, "A Note on the Psalter."

These “merest devices” include not only the typography, but also the artwork, the weave of the paper, the kind of ink, and the method of binding. All contribute significantly to the creation of an aesthetically unified object.

In April of 1944 Everson, typically expressing his concern for the total effect of the book, wrote to the CPS director about the progress of the Untide Press projects. Fully aware of the severe shortage of funds, even for necessities in the CPS camps, the poet felt the pacifist-artist cause, as presented in the *War Elegies*, urgent enough to warrant the best possible materials and craftsmanship available.

We are starting work on the *Elegies* and hope to have them done in six or eight weeks. Nomland came down on an exchange [of camp members] and designed the books. If press work can live up to his design, this will be a really unique book not only in CPS but in these United States—numerous line cuts in the inimitable Nomland manner, color work throughout, fine paper, etc. I have great hopes for this edition.⁶

Although this expensive plan never materialized, several lower-cost projects were completed by the Untide Press. In 1944, a revised edition of *X War Elegies* did appear. Printed on a handpress by Everson himself, this edition (a copy of which is now held by the University of Iowa Libraries) and *Waldport Poems* (1944) continue to reflect Everson’s interest in the whole book as artifact.

Everson’s early work illustrates even more about his holistic approach than simply the importance of visual effect. He further insists on matching the nature and quality of the presswork to what he judges as the integrity and seriousness of the subject of the poems. Art which flowers from a cause as important to him as pacifism naturally dictates masterful press work. He notes in “The Fine Arts at Waldport,” a pamphlet designed to acquaint readers with the artistic community at Camp Angel, that “Bad ideas and excellent art are not the most compatible of bedfellows.”⁷

The ideas which Everson considers important enough to be included in the Waldport poems printed by Untide Press reflect upon the way of life experienced by men living in the camps. In these slim volumes, as

⁶ William Everson, April 13, 1944. Letter to Harold Row, Director of CPS, General Board of the Church of the Brethren. Microfilm copy at the Church of the Brethren General Office Archives, Elgin, Ill.

⁷ William Everson, *The Fine Arts at Waldport* (Evanston, Ill.: Brethren Service Center, 1943), p. 2.

well as in the collected poetry of *The Residual Years* (1944), the poet explores the nature of the tasks performed in the camps:

To sunder the rock—that is our day.
In the weak light,
Under high fractured cliffs
We turn with our hands the raw granite,
We break it with iron . . .

We perceive our place in the terrible pattern,
And temper with pity the fierce gall,
Hearing the sadness,
The loss and utter desolation,
Howl at the heart of the world.⁸

The emotions resulting from separation of husbands and wives, the effects of the war on the natural landscape, and the urgency of the pacifist cause, are fit subject matter for Untide Press:

I, the living heir
Of the bloodiest men of all Europe,
And the knowledge of past tears through my flesh,
I flinch in the guilt of what I am,
Seeing the poised heap of this time
Break like a wave.
And I vow not to wantonly ever take life, . . .⁹

The publications of Untide Press speak for the unique position of those writers, severed from the ties of the world, who published under its **name**.

In fact, Everson's attempt to present a coherent work of art extends even to the act of naming the handpresses upon which he does his printing. The name of his first privately-owned press reflects an orientation to nature as the wellspring of his creative powers:

When I left the Untide group after the war and took up my own venture, I decided to call it The Equinox Press. Not only were the equinoxes my favorite seasons . . . but the name symbolized vividly the ideal of balance. . . . It caught up in my mind the humanist

⁸ William Everson, *X War Elegies* (Waldport, Ore.: Untide Press, 1943), p. [22], numbering from recto of first leaf.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. [8].

goal I had set for myself: to live a life of equipoise and moderation in the context of pure nature.¹⁰

In the fall of 1947 Everson wrote "There Will Be Harvest," a poem celebrating the founding of the Equinox Press and his move to Berkeley. It is the only poem in the poet-printer's yet published verse that makes specific reference to the art of the handpress.

There will be harvest, harvest. We freighted the handpress
Out of the hills. Mounted at last in the little room
It waits for the black ink of its being;
And the rich paper, drawn out of Europe, it too hand-fashioned;
The work of the hand, all; the love of the hand in its sure sweep
When the bar pulls over; all about it the touch of a hand
Laid on it with care
All work of wholeness executes in the enlivened eye: a godly issue.¹¹

In Berkeley, Everson associated with the group of young artists gathered around Kenneth Rexroth, but he found that the interior equipoise he sought to render in the works printed by Equinox Press had not survived the war. The experience of isolation in the camps, as well as the ravages on the natural landscape caused by the upheaval, shattered the personal and artistic integration the poet had earlier achieved. The search for new wholeness, therefore, becomes a dominant theme in the post-war poems.

That theme is reflected in *The Residual Years*, a collection of pre-war poems and the poems printed earlier in the mimeographed editions from Untide Press. Published commercially by New Directions in 1948, the later poems in the volume show a disjunction with nature and a frustrated search for some comprehensive context in which the passion of the poet might be ordered. Nature is now inadequate to that task:

Apart on his rock
The forester sucks his sufficient quid,
And never hears,
At one with the landscape,
That crouches behind its masked firs,

¹⁰ William Everson, "Printer as Contemplative," *Quarterly Newsletter* [of the Book Club of California] (1954), p. 52. Hereafter, "Printer as Contemplative."

¹¹ William Everson, *There Will Be Harvest* (Berkeley: Kenneth J. Carpenter, 1960). See colophon.

Its skeletal snags,
Brooding upon the lost myth
Created once in its unfathomable past
And never regained—
But it wants to,
It waits, it waits,
Its immense obsession—¹²

One year after the appearance of *The Residual Years*, Everson published his first full volume on the new Equinox Press, *A Privacy of Speech* (1949). His readiness and need for a major philosophical change, however, made that first effort also the last printing to be completed under the Equinox name. In the Christmas season of 1949, Everson found a new context for his writing and began learning to express himself poetically from a radically different philosophical orientation. That Christmas a friend of Everson's, Mary Fabilli, invited him to attend a midnight mass where the reenactment of the nativity scene deeply stirred the sensibilities of the young poet. He recalls in his "Autobiography" how the scent of the fir trees and the shepherd statuettes which flanked the crèche impressed upon him a new "reality" and a deep sense of his own need for a new perspective on the world around him:

And as I sat in that familiar estrangement of feeling which had never left me in the Catholic churches, there came to me the resinous scent of the fir trees. . . . That scene was the only thing I could seize on with anything like true realization . . . , [and] out of the greatness of my need I sensed in it something of a verification . . . that I need not fear, were I to come to the Christ, that He would exact the dreaded renunciation of my natural world. On the contrary, it was of His, His own, of His making. . . . It was there in the Cathedral . . . wooing me to probe back behind the façade of appearances . . . to seek for the reality that lay behind them all.¹³

As a newly-committed Catholic, Everson's greatest challenge would be to integrate the powers of the artist and the powers of the believer. The attempt to mediate the Bacchic forces of poetic inspiration and

¹² William Everson, *The Residual Years* (New York: New Directions, 1948), pp. 15-16.

¹³ William Everson, Foreword to "Pages from an Unpublished Autobiography," *Ramparts*, 1, No. 2 (1962-3), p. 60.

invention—first as a convert and later as a monk—led inevitably to difficulties:

I think that the conflict [between the artist and conventional society] is inevitable. The artist himself will find himself on the cross in society . . . because in that tension between the institutional and the charismatic, the institutional mentality is . . . suspicious of any charismatic phenomenon. If you are a mystic today, you get hauled off to a hospital for observation . . .¹⁴

When the responsibilities of his new faith interfered with the desires of the artist, Everson gave first priority to his religious commitment.¹⁵ Much of the pain of that disciplining process as well as many of the critical problems raised by the religious priority are clearly expressed in the writings of the Catholic period.¹⁶

Everson's attempt to work out the implications of his conversion extend not only into the subject matter of his poetry but, further, into his handpress work. Upon dedicating himself to the church, he renamed his press the Seraphim Press. Whereas the Equinox Press represented the humanistic love for perfect balance struck in the art of printing, the Seraphim Press was so named for its higher aspirations:

But when I entered the Church, my values, the whole emphasis of my mind, underwent a rapid and profound alteration. I left behind the vision of a purely natural balance, and struck out for the super-natural extremity, the absolute attainment beyond all the limited attainments of life. I laid aside the work of my humanism upon which I had been engaged, and took up the first of the conversion poetry which was ready to print; and because I wanted

¹⁴ William Everson, "The Artist and Religious Life: Brother Antoninus, O.P.," *The American Benedictine Review*, XI (September-December, 1960), p. 225.

¹⁵ Paul Lacey, *The Inner War: Forms and Themes in Recent American Poetry* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 87.

¹⁶ The critical problems facing Everson can be further conceptualized along a Dionysius-Apollo dichotomy. The early poems use nature metaphors candidly to explore areas of interest to the poet, particularly the ramifications of sexual encounter. Many areas of interest could not be so candidly explored, however, when the poet's intent was religious. New metaphors were needed. The early period, can, therefore, be characterized as a period of Dionysian influence in which the unharnessed use of the natural landscape prevailed in the poems until the time of Everson's conversion. The radically disciplined monastic life then adopted by Everson required new priorities, new symbols, and self-control of the Apollonian influence—a force which remained ascendant in Everson's writings until approximately 1969. Since Everson's reemergence into secular life, the Dionysian influence is again evident, especially in "Tendrils in the Mesh" (1973), where the erotic imagery is but slightly tempered from its former, pre-Catholic character.

to dissever myself from the psychology of my past, and to make a testament to the great things of my new discovery, I decided to change the name of my press.¹⁷

Everson continued printing while serving at Maurin House, a Catholic worker house of hospitality in Oakland. There Seraphim Press published *Triptych for the Living* in 1951. It is illustrated with woodcuts by Mary Fabilli, making apparent, as the colophon indicates, Everson's continued insistence on seeking a unified effect through both the meaning and the appearance of the words:

. . . and indeed the book [*Triptych for the Living*] in its design looks back toward the primitive church in search of a model appropriate to the apostolic character of the text.¹⁸

That same year Everson entered the Dominican Order as a lay brother, taking the name of Brother Antoninus. He again changed the name of his press, this time to St. Albert's Press in honor of the Dominican priest revered in the house in which Everson lived. No longer seeking to print his own work but wanting to find a handpress task which would necessitate his personal immersion into the monastic community of workers, Everson began searching for a text worthy of the serious and perfect skill of a whole community of dedicated brothers. No text seemed more appropriate for such an ambitious endeavor than the new translation of the Psalter recently completed at the direction of Pope Pius XII. Everson became convinced that God had called and equipped him to do this specific labor of devotion:

[He] had led me to the handpress, and instructed me in its craft, and brought me to the Order where I might work, and then had given me the work . . .¹⁹

Everson and the Dominican brothers worked on the printing of the Psalter in their spare time for two or more years. The task, so intricately and thoughtfully conceived, proved more formidable than was originally thought, however, and the work was never completed. In May of 1955, to celebrate the fifth centennial of the first appearance of a separately-printed psalmody (1457), Everson published the first

¹⁷ "Printer as Contemplative," p. 52.

¹⁸ William Everson, *Triptych for the Living* (Oakland, Calif.: Seraphim Press, 1951). See colophon.

¹⁹ "A Note on the Psalter," p. xv.

and only folio. It is introduced with a lengthy “Note” detailing the kind of ink, paper, and binding used in the printing. As the “Note” indicates, it was a project attempted with only the most thorough preparation and by the most highly skilled craftsmen available, for “No poetry of earth has ever surpassed the Psalter in nobility of utterance, nor dealt with such intensity of man’s exaltation in God’s fulfillment, nor the deep abjection of his Fall.”²⁰

Everson found that the challenge of the Psalter project did provide a deep immersion into the contemplative community and aided him in the many adjustments he faced as an artist there. It did not, however, engross all his concentrated life. In spite of institutional pressures and the enormous effort demanded by the Psalter, he published a significant body of poetry during those years.

Everson’s first Catholic work, “At the Edge” (printed, 1952; published, 1958), is an exploration of the poet-seeker’s encounter with the vast unknown of the subconscious. The poem urges the reader to move from the darkness of that realm into the exposing light of God:

There is a mark, made on the soul in its first wrongdoing, and
that is a taint;
And the mark of that taint, it must either widen or wane—
As the soul decrees in its inclination so will it be.²¹

The radiance of God’s presence is similarly the subject of two other brief poems written in Everson’s early years as a Catholic poet, “A Fragment for the Birth of God” and “An Age Insurgent: Poems by Brother Antoninus.” The “Fragment” is a seven-line poem celebrating the significance of the Christ-child’s “little cry” and the triumph of the Holy Mother. “An Age Insurgent” like “At the Edge” is an attempt to stir the reader to be on the offensive for his Christian commitment.²²

These short religious poems preceded Everson’s first lengthy volume published commercially as a brother, *The Crooked Lines of God* (1960). That volume, Everson has explained, is arranged in three parts, “each corresponding to a particular phase of spiritual development, and each dominated, more or less, by the psychology of a particular saint.”²³ The three saints, Augustine, Francis, and Dominic, rep-

²⁰ Ibid., p. xiii.

²¹ William Everson, *At the Edge* (Oakland, Calif.: Albertus Magnus Press, 1958), ll. 1-3.

²² William Everson, *An Age Insurgent: Poems by Brother Antoninus, O.P.* (San Francisco: Blackfriars Publications, 1959). See letter accompanying the volume.

²³ William Everson, *The Crooked Lines of God* (Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1962), “Foreword,” p. [2]. Hereafter, *The Crooked Lines*.

resent both a chronological and a spiritual journey; the poet moves from the spirit of Augustinian repentance and renewal in "Out of the Depths" to the Franciscan ethic of work in "In the Crucible." There, Everson recalls, "already the cramp was setting in. . . ."²⁴ The problems of attuning his naturally spontaneous and individualistic personality to the form of his new religious priorities and convictions had not been solved. The poet's creative drives were at war with his religious aspirations, and the devotee quieted the poet within. The tension which resulted from this inner war is sustained in *The Crooked Lines* until it is synthesized in the third and final section of the book, "Out of the Ash," by the contemplative Dominican spirit which, Everson notes, moved him toward,

Not peace, certainly, rather a new crucifixion. . . . By 1954 the poems, which had thinned to a mere trickle, choked out altogether, stopped.²⁵

The physical rigors of the monastic life and the discipline of attempting to "keep the lines straight" brought the volume to a close earlier than the poet originally expected.

Everson continued, however, to pursue integration of the creative and the religious selves throughout the early 1960s, as is apparent in his second major Catholic work, *The Hazards of Holiness* (1962). In that volume the poet seeks integration of the many areas of his life through the writing of poems in a Jungian context, a structure which, Everson notes, reveals "the struggle to make myself comprehensible to myself. . . ."²⁶ He prefaces many of the poems with a dream recollection, a passage of Scripture, or both.

The Hazards of Holiness is divided into three sections which further reflect Everson's understanding of that interior struggle. "Friendship and Enmity" traces the seeker's path from darkness to the light of God. But this path leads to an even more desperate striving—a wrestling with the inner demon who is so deceitful that he is often mistaken for God Himself. That wrestling is the subject of many of the poems in the second section, "The Dark Face of God." The poems in "Love and Violence," the third and closing section, speak of the triumph of love through the violent struggle of the seeker determined to cling to his God:

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ William Everson, *The Hazards of Holiness* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 7.

Where the kites are shrieking
 There reeks the carcass.
 Where the treasure is sunk
 There cowers the heart.
 Having done such things in the green wood
 What will I do in the dry?

 Have pity on me, have pity on me,
 At least you my friends,
 For God hath touched me.²⁷

Everson's dedication to his faith was continuing to pose difficulties for him poetically; the landscape with which he was once so familiar no longer met his poetic needs. In *The Crooked Lines* and *The Hazards of Holiness* he sought for institutionally acceptable metaphors which would at once admit his spontaneous images and also communicate the religious intent of the poem. Such difficulties do not plague Everson in the privately-printed volumes of this period, *The Blowing of the Seed* (1966) and *In the Fictive Wish* (1967). Written in 1946, but not published until just after *The Hazards of Holiness*, these poems contrast sharply in their use of metaphor with that in the religious poetry. Drawn from the physical landscape, the earlier metaphors more naturally express the content of the poems. Unlike the two major volumes of Catholic poetry, these poems do not strain to remake the passion with which they are concerned into poetry readily accepted by the religious community. That passion which is the subject of *The Blowing of the Seed* and *In the Fictive Wish* is the passion for wholeness found in the sexual encounter.

The Blowing of the Seed details the meeting of a Nordic man and a Mediterranean woman; the "cold encrusted man" is associated with the wintry seasons while the woman is from the "deep equatorial zone" and represents the warmth of the earth. In the same way that the harshness of late winter is tempered by the suggestion of warming spring winds, so also the man, a remnant of the glacial age, is tempered and softened by the loving fervor of the southern woman. The use of the nature metaphor greatly increases the sensuality of the passage:

I move to meet you now in a greening time.
 I come with wind and with wet
 In a soft season.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 88, ll. 12-17, 21-23.

I bring you my hand.
I bring you the flesh of those fallow fallen years
And my manifest reasons.²⁸

Everson's skill in appropriating the natural landscape as metaphorical background for poetry dealing candidly with sexual encounter is most evident in this early verse. It is a much more difficult task, however, to transform the erotic passion poetically into holy desire, as Everson does in this passage from *The Crooked Lines*, written some 16 years later:

My Lord came to me
In the deep of night;
The sullen dark was wounded with His name.
I was as woman made before His eyes;
My nakedness was as a secret shame.
I was a thing of flesh for His despise;
I was a nakedness before His sight.²⁹

Everson's religious poetry of the late 1960s accordingly tries with increasing concentration to explore the potential of the religious metaphor. That potential is developed in *The Rose of Solitude*, published in 1967 by Doubleday. In this poem a monk, the man of God, encounters Rose, the woman of the world. The narrative asserts that, though these two people could have acceded to archetypal sin, they manage through the strength they gained in avoiding evil not only to remain sinless but to achieve a kind of deliverance and wholeness greater than either possessed previously as individuals.³⁰ Like *The Crooked Lines*, *The Rose of Solitude* attempts to deal with erotic statement clothed in an institutionally-acceptable religious language:

In the stigmata of His gaze her love coils like the flesh on its iron,
the love-ache of the opening.
When she utters the Holy Name you would never doubt God
died for the love of men.³¹

By contrast, the early work published alongside *The Rose of Solitude* can deal with the erotic expression directly:

²⁸ William Everson, *The Blowing of the Seed* (New Haven: Henry W. Wening, 1966), Part vi, ll. 1-6.

²⁹ *The Crooked Lines*, p. 60, ll. 1-7.

³⁰ William Everson, *The Rose of Solitude* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), "Foreword," pp. x-xi.

³¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 16-19.

Water-woman,
Near water or of it,
The sea-drenched hair;
Of gray gaze and level
Mostly he knows her;
Of such bosom as face would fade in;
Of such thigh as would fold;
Of huge need come to; . . .³²

This particular poem, *In the Fictive Wish*, also marks Everson's return to privately handprinted work after nearly a decade of commercial publishing. The slender volume carefully observes Everson's holistic theories of art: the short lines of the poem are placed carefully within wide margins and great solicitude is taken to secure unity of typeset and paper weave. Finally, the poem is illustrated with an unusually delicate woodcut.

The Last Crusade (1969), a handprinted folio volume from this late Catholic period, a copy of which is now held by the University of Iowa Libraries, was designed and printed by Graham Mackintosh. The skillful presswork and handmade paper contribute to the total effect of the volume—that of communicating an ultimate kind of religious experience through poetry. *The Last Crusade* is less concerned with achieving a perfect union of subject and metaphorical vehicle, the hope of publications such as those released by the Untide and Equinox presses, than with capturing the nature of that religious experience in the book. Everson described the writing of this poem as an act which, in itself, changed and healed him, and he replied to the critical attacks on his handling of the imagery in *The Last Crusade* with the almost apologetic remark, "I cannot claim that a spiritual or therapeutic success guarantees a corresponding aesthetic one."³³ The religious influences so pervasive in Everson's life during this time persuaded him that the passion for balance, lifted to idolatry, can kill the poet; this is the theme of *The Last Crusade*. In the poem, a holy man is killed for lapsing into mere self-gratification. Since, by implication, the poem can become a form of self-gratification to the poet, it too may have to be sacrificed in order that he may attain a higher spiritual goal. That sacrifice does not, however, require the lowering of presswork or artistic standards in the crafting of the book itself. Indeed an experience as raw and devastating as that which was endured by the knight in *The*

³² William Everson, *In the Fictive Wish* (Berkeley: Oyez Press, 1967), p. 9, ll. 35–42.

³³ William Everson, *The Last Crusade* (Berkeley: Oyez Press, 1969), "Foreword," p. 23.

Last Crusade, as well as one as transcendent and liberating as that enjoyed by the poet who escaped the knight's doom, deserves the finest in skilled handprinting.

That vision of spiritual purity and devotion which Everson had so relentlessly pursued led him, perhaps more to his surprise than to others', away from the monastic life and back into the world. *Tendril in the Mesh*, handprinted in 1973, details the poet's psychological withdrawal from the contemplative life and his entrance back into secular life. One year later Everson commercially published *Man-Fate: The Swan Song of Brother Antoninus* (1974), the longest poem of which is "Tendril in the Mesh." Everson wrote of that poem:

[It] is a love poem sequence, a cycle of renewal, but it also concerns the monastic life, from the point of view of one who has renounced it.³⁴

The long struggle to remain within the boundaries of what is ecclesiastically acceptable writing dissolves in *Man-Fate*, and Everson no longer is compelled to couch passion in religious images. He speaks of his decision to leave the solitary life as a kind of return to his poetic home, to a context into which he more naturally fits. And, just as the lovers in *A Rose of Solitude* achieved a kind of spiritual deliverance by remaining true to their original loves, so the poet is delivered from damnation as he returns to his spiritual home:

Whoever forsakes his element
Is ludicrous, and in his perverse
Exacerbation, damns his own eyes.³⁵

Everson wrote "Tendril in the Mesh" while still a member of the religious order. He read the sequence for the first time on the afternoon of December 7, 1969, at the University of California, Davis. Having completed the reading, he publicly stripped off his religious habit, fled the stage, and returned to private life.³⁶ Since this event and his marriage in the following year, the poet-printer has continued to write prolifically and to supervise work on the handpress.

Much of his recent writing has involved the preparation of various introductions and explanations for texts of Robinson Jeffers's work, in-

³⁴ William Everson, *Man-Fate: The Swan Song of Brother Antoninus* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. vii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40, ll. 24-26.

³⁶ William Everson, *Tendril in the Mesh* (Aromas, Calif.: Cayucos Books, 1973). Broadside.

cluding introductions for *Cawdor*, *Medea*, and *Californians*. Perhaps the most extraordinary of Everson's lifelong attempts to create the unified or "sacral" book, in fact, involves the printing of Jeffers's *Granite and Cypress: Rubbings from the Rock*. Every aspect of the poetic content, the landscape against which the poems were written, and the nature of the poet himself has been taken into account in the designing of this artifact.

Everson has based his conception of *Granite and Cypress* on the assertion that the true purpose which Jeffers found in life following the extreme disillusionment the poet suffered as a result of World War I was effected by his handling of stone—"the direct physical labor involved in building Tor House and the fabled Hawk Tower."³⁷ The book is a collection of all the poems which Jeffers wrote "under the impact of stone." The design conceived by Everson calls for the lengthy Jeffers line to be extended in the text exactly as the poet intended. And, to avoid boredom on the blank versos, a special process was developed whereby each is printed with a reverse imprint of the recto, forming a kind of shadow used to enliven the left page. The paper for the Jeffers volume was handmade in England, and the type was specifically chosen to support the subject matter—"stark, glyptic, truly abrasive, recalled the feeling of perceptive readers that . . . to experience his language is to suffer his awful accessibility to the elements."³⁸ The binding of *Granite and Cypress* is laced with deerskin rawhide from the California coast, and a slipcase "fashioned of Monterey Cypress, with a window of granite from Jeffers' stoneyard (rock drawn by the poet's own hands from the sea) . . . brings together the book's archetypal duality: the permanence of granite wrapped in the enduring presence of cypress."³⁹

Everson's edition of *Granite and Cypress* speaks eloquently to his desire to write and print books of poems that are, as physical objects, works of art. As a poet, he seeks substantially to integrate the implications of his beliefs into his works, regardless of the vicissitudes of the critical climate into which they come. He continues to sculpture his poetic language to meet the needs of his philosophical poetry; he believes that the message his poetry communicates is as important as the sound of the lines, the appearance of the text, the appropriateness of the image. He insists on integrity between the poem and the poet's life in the world as well as between the poem and the printer's con-

³⁷ Robinson Jeffers, *Granite and Cypress: Rubbings from the Rock* (Santa Cruz, Calif.: Lime Kiln Press, n.d.). Broadside by William Everson, p. 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

cerns. As a poet-printer whose struggle to remain whole in a highly specialized and helplessly fractured world has produced much moving poetry bound in volumes of consummate craftsmanship, Everson has continued to “embrace the book.”

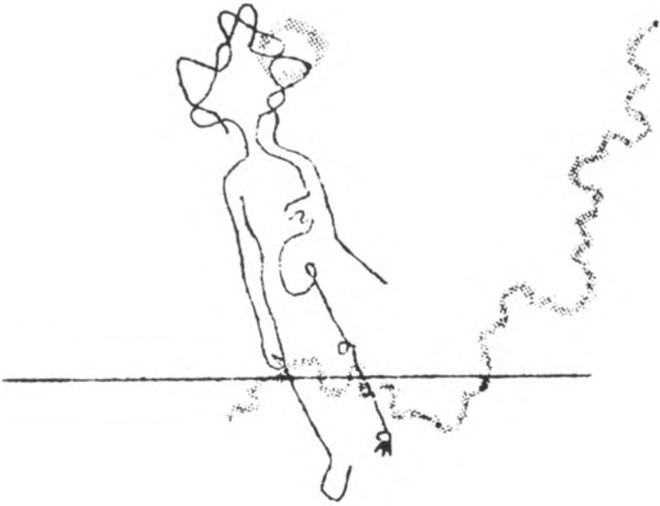
The
Year's
Declension

by William Everson

Berkeley: 1961

Title page of a collection of poems printed at the University of California at Berkeley in an edition of one hundred copies. The initial letters "y" and "d" are printed in red on the original page, which measures 11¼ x 8 inches.

[28]



WAR
(The Internment, Waldport, Oregon; January 1943)

ELEGY X

To sunder the rock--that is our day.
In the weak light,
Under high fractured cliffs
We turn with our hands the raw granite,
We break it with iron.
Under that edge it suffers reduction.
Harsh, dense and resistant,
The obdurate portions
Flaw and divide.

From the road in the dawns we behold the sea,
In its prone slumber,
Holding the west with heavy ease.
The rock closes it out,
Narrows our sky,
In the morning thaws lets fall its sparse rubble.
We wait, suspended in time;

Opening of "Elegy X" from *X War Elegies* by William Everson, issued in mimeographed form as the first publication of the Untide Press, Camp Angel, Waldport, Oregon, in 1943. From a copy in the University of Iowa Libraries.