Reading and Not-Printing: Obstruction at the Crater Press

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Abstract

I will begin this paper with a brief and partial history of American printing, detecting a shared predilection for a noticeably maverick relation to the printed page in the works (printed and otherwise) of Samuel Keimer and Benjamin Franklin during the colonial period, and the works of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Mark Twain in the nineteenth-century. I term the interrupted, dialectical printing that connects all of these writer/printers ‘not-printing’, and offer some explanation of his term and a description of some of its manifestations. I will then move on to consider how the idea of ‘not-printing’ might be helpful for the consideration of some contemporary British and American poets and printers before concluding with a description of some of the ways that the productive constraints of such a practice have influenced my own work as editor and printer at the Crater Press. Keywords: Printing; American Literature; Contemporary British Poetry; Letterpress; Benjamin Franklin; Walt Whitman; Emily Dickinson.

1. A History of American Not-Printing

I will begin this paper with a short history of some different kinds of errant, creative printing in America, before moving to discuss how some of these insights colour my own printing practice. I am not American, nor is my press, the Crater Press—but the piecemeal emergence of American printing (in parallel to the emergence of the Republic herself)
Richard Parker offers a narrative more redolent of the kind of eccentric practices that I am interested in than the somewhat more evolutionary (and perhaps stuffy) development of English printing. In fact, the printing I will discuss here is not really printing at all, but remains more dialectical than effectual; a process I have termed not-printing. It is characterised by the failure to print, usually by mavericks and outsiders, or of such printers’ productive near-failure, a failure that is amply represented in the great societal and business fluidity of the USA’s first century. I would also justify the attention I give to America through the assertion that the particular strand of British avant-gardism that the Crater Press publishes also has a stronger connection to the American mavericks of the past 150 years or so than to the contemporaneous productions of Britain—the more successful, more canonical British literary world has produced only a few, exceptional, printing-radicals, such as William Blake, whereas American printing and literature is well-storied in odd printing and not-printing.

I will begin, then, somewhere near the very beginning of American printing. At the end of the colonial period the distinctions between the administrative project of publishing and the creative project of writing had not yet been defined, and with the coming of the Republic definitions would need to be made. In his Autobiography Benjamin Franklin recounts his first employment as a printer after his apprenticeship, with the Philadelphian printer (perhaps just America’s second) Samuel Keimer:

Keimer’s printing-house, I found, consisted of an old shatter’d Press, and one small, worn-out Fount of English which he was then using himself, compising in it an Elegy on Aquila Rose, […] an ingenious young Man, of excellent Character, much respected in the Town, Clerk of the Assembly, and a pretty Poet. (21-22)

Keimer, (apparently only on account of his long beard and observance of the Sabbath) has been called the first Jew in Philadelphia (see Morais, 1894: 10-11), but was not, in fact a Jew at all, but, rather, a some-time adherent of the Camisard sect, a persecuted branch of French enthusiastic Christianity, who was born in Southwark in London. After apprenticing in London he had founded a press there that had failed, had been briefly imprisoned in the Fleet prison (after getting into trouble for publications critical of the British monarchy), before emigrating to the New World with the old equipment that Franklin describes. His compromised position on arrival is representative of the state of printing in the early 18th-century American colonies; with machinery as inadequate as the materials to be printed, such activities were essentially a wayward adjunct to British publishing practices and the British publishing industry, much like the thirteen colonial states, still divided but already restive. The poet he eulogises, Aquila Rose—whose name suggests, perhaps, a blushing imperial eagle—could stand for this stage in the