

2015 DO OR DIY

Expanded Second Edition

Do or DIY

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Cover image: detail from a Matthias Huss illustration for an edition of the *Danse Macabre* published in Lyon, 1499.

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I. HISTORY

In 1759, Laurence Sterne, soon to be Minister in the North Yorkshire village of Coxwold, borrowed money from a friend to finance the publication of his first novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. When overseeing the printing, he made certain that the title page gave no indication of where the book was printed, since the London elite turned up their noses at provincial publishers. That provincial book is now of course a cornerstone in the Western literary canon. It stands, according to the Italian writer Italo Calvino, as the progenitor of all experimental literature.

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Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was the founding editor of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* and initially conceived of the publication as an in-house journal for the local theatre. Subsequently, he decided to publish the collected issues as a book to be released through the printing and distribution company that he had established together with Johann Joachim Christoph Bode (the German-language translator of Laurence Sterne). Before their collection was ready, however, an anonymous group — opposed

to what they saw as the disreputable practice of self-publishing — intervened by releasing the book first, under the appropriated name of the fictional imprint 'Dodsley & Compagnie,' a wry nod to the English publisher James Dodsley who had taken on Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* from 1761. Lessing was outraged, demanding: "in order to put a stop to the work of a few poor burglars, you want to become highwaymen yourselves? … Who is it that wants to prevent this? Will they have the heart to confirm their role in this outrage under their real names? Has self-publishing ever been forbidden anywhere?" The distribution of his own edition of 1769 ended in a fiasco.

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At the age of eighteen, Derek Walcott borrowed money from his mother to pay the Guardian Commercial Printery in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad for his vanity-press first book of *25 Poems*. He peddled them himself, hand-to-hand. Later an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992.

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In 1781, Friedrich Schiller released his first play, *Die Räuber* as a self-published, anonymous book. A bookseller sold one portion of the edition's 800 copies at book fairs on a commission basis; Schiller himself was responsible for local sales. The author had little fiscal success; lacking public interest and eager to advertise his work, he gave most of his copies away or sold them at a loss. It took Schiller until the end of the decade to pay back the 150-guilder loan he had borrowed to pay for the cost of printing.

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Following a German edition, the first Italian publication of the anti-fascist novel *Fontamara* (Nuove Edizioni Italiane, 1933) was paid for by its author, Ignazio Silone (*nom de plume* of Secondino Tranquilli), who had it printed in Switzerland to avoid censorship. By 1936 it had appeared in seven more languages, had been distributed to twenty countries, and a stage version, *Bitter Stream*, was showing in New York. The novel would eventually be printed in Italy by Mondadori, in 1949.

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When no press would publish it, and no magazine would serialize it, Stephen Crane borrowed \$700 from his brother and published his first novel himself, under the pseudonym Johnston Smith. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, considered the first work of literary Naturalism, is now a canonical touchstone for American studies.

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In the summer of 1942, Pier Paolo Pasolini paid Mario Landi, owner of an antique bookshop in Bologna, to publish a small collection of his poems under the title *Poesie a Casarza*. The fourteen poems were all written in his native Friulano dialect, signalling both a strong attachment to the region and a defiance of the Fascist intolerance of dialect and diversity. The book launched Pasolini's career as one of the twentieth-century's most successful and controversial writers and filmmakers.

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In 1517, Martin Luther published his ninety-five theses as a site-specific installation at the Schlosskirche Wittenberg. A cooperative of friends, using the new technology of the printing

press, distributed translations throughout Europe. The Protestant Reformation followed.

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Walt Whitman not only financed the first printing of *Leaves of Grass*, he also helped to set the type and pull the pages himself from the press at a local shop, whenever the job printers took a break from their regular commercial work.

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In 1890, Stefan George hit on a sly way to increase demand for his work. Henceforth, it would only appear in unique, severly limited, privately printed editions. Moreover, he theatricalized their exclusivity by destroying the plates after each printing. Even after George began his collaboration with the publisher Georg Bondi in 1898, the works of the 'master' continued to appear simultaneously in increasingly opulant privately printed editions. By 1899, with *Der Teppich des Lebens*, this sales strategy was pitched at a further remove as the book was displayed and sold in only a few bookshops and for only a few days. George's disciple Karl Wolfskehl was enraptured: "this is truly not a book that one reads and sets aside: every owner should be required to lay his book upon and to chain it to a lectern, like those for the Koran or the missals of the Middle Ages, and to solemnly — and only occasionally — turn its page."

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With the help of his professor Philip Green Wright, who had a Gordon jobber platen press in the basement of his family home, Lombard College student Carl Sandburg set the type, printed the sheets, and bound fifty copies of his first book of poetry, *In Reckless Ecstasy*. He would go on to win three Pulitzer Prizes.

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In the same year that James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Elliot's *The Waste Land* were published, Carlos Díaz Loyola self-published his book of poems *Los Gemidos*. Loyola, a Chilean writing under the *nom de plume* Pablo de Rokha, only managed to sell a few copies. Indeed, both the public and the critics were so indifferent that the author sold the bulk of the edition by weight to the slaughterhouse where it was used to wrap meat. Today, accordingly, it is almost impossible to find a first edition of *Los Gemidos*, which is now considered to be one of the fundamental works of the Latin American avant-garde movement.

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Aron Hector Schmitz, writing as Italo Svevo, published his first two novels at his own expense, *Una vita* (Vram Editore, 1886) and *Senilità* (Libreria Ettore, 1898). Both books went completely ignored by critics and readers alike, and Svevo abandoned literature. A few years later, he befriended James Joyce during the Irishman's so-called 'Italian exile' (Svevo's wife, Livia Veneziani, is immortalized in *Finnegans Wake* as Anna Livia Plurabelle). After reading *Senilità*, Joyce encouraged Svevo to return to writing and in 1923 *La coscienza di Zeno* reached bookstores, again at the author's own expense. Despite others' indifference, Joyce promoted the book, and after its translation into French its popularity began to grow. *Zeno* is now regarded as one of the greatest Italian novels of the twentieth century.

In 1773, Johann Heinrich Merck helped his friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to finance and print his only Sturm und Drang drama, *Götz von Berlichingen*, assigning the author fivehundred copies to sell in order to cover the costs. Goethe sent desperate letters to his friends: "Listen, if you would like to buy copies of Götz from me, you would be doing me a favour." But he was too slow. By the time he had managed to sell the first few copies, unauthorized reprints had appeared, and more pirated editions followed. While he admitted that he was pleased to have "received much acclaim from all sides", he also confessed to being "highly embarrassed" by his inability to pay for even the paper stock.

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Tristan Corbière, son of a bestselling novelist, himself remained an unknown and struggling writer, finally saving enough to pay to have a slim volume of verse, *Les amours jaunes*, published just before he died of tuberculosis in 1875. His posthumous apotheosis in Paul Verlaine's landmark anthology *Les Poètes maudites* canonized him as the Symbolist master he is recognized as today.

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La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiare bene (1891) is now regarded as a masterpiece of gastronomical literature and a canonical example of the nineteenth-century positivist attitude towards life. In the introduction to his book, which eloquently translates as 'The Story of a Book That is a Bit Like the Story of Cinderella,' Pellegrino Artusi bitterly recounts how his manuscript was rejected several times: "publishers usually care not a whit whether a book is good or bad, useful or harmful.

For them it need only bear a well-known name on the cover, so that they might sell it with ease." Finally, after suffering the humiliating disinterest of those witless publishers, Artusi struck out: "I exploded in a fit of rage, which I need not repeat here, and decided to take my chances and publish entirely at my own expense." As of today the book has been republished in 111 editions, sold more than 1.2 million copies, been translated into at least six languages, and spawned an iPhone app.

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In the winter of 1912 Marcel Proust submitted a manuscript to three prominent Parisian publishers: Fasquelle, Gallimard, and La Nouvelle Revue Française. Within weeks, all three had rejected the project. Fasquelle explained that they "did not want to risk publishing something so different from what the public was used to reading." That 'something different' was the monumental modernist novel À la recherche du temps perdu. Soon another publisher, Ollendorff, had also rejected the manuscript, despite Proust's offer to pay for the printing himself. Alfred Humblot, a Director at Ollendorff, rebuked: "I don't see why any man should take thirty pages to describe how he turns over in his bed before he goes to sleep." The book was eventually published by Grasset, but only after Proust agreed to finance both the production and publicity. André Gide, who had been the editor at La Nouvelle Revue later confessed: "the rejection of this book will remain the most serious mistake ever made by the N.R.F. — and (since to my shame I was largely responsible for it) one of the sorrows, one of the most bitter regrets of my life."

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The legendary economic success of Alexander Pope's selfpublishing ventures is said to have inspired Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock to convert his fame as a 'sacred poet' into hard currency. After numerous disappointments with publishers, he announced a call for subscribers to *Die deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik* in 1773. The result was overwhelming: Nearly 150 agents secured 3,678 signatures in 263 towns, leading to a profit of some 2,000 Reichstaler. The subscribers, however, had signed up for a pig in a poke. As Goethe recalled, it was a "venture, successful for the author, but unsuccessful for the public" because readers "could not find any thing of any worth" in it, resulting in "the evil consequence that, for some time thereafter, no thought could be had of subscription and advance payment." Indeed, it would take several free sample publications, multiple extensions of the subscription deadline, and many desperate appeals to the literary public before Johann Heinrich Voß finally found enough readers to be able to self-publish his epochal translation of Homer's *Odyssey* in 1781.

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Nathaniel Hawthorne paid \$100 to have his first book, *Fanshawe*, published anonymously.

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In 1850, while trekking 5,000 kilometres across Europe, Gustav Langenscheidt found that his schoolboy knowledge of foreign languages did not serve him well. On his return home he worked with Charles Touissant to develop an autodidactic method for language acquisition, which included its own phonetic alphabet. Unable to attract a publisher, Lagenscheidt started his own imprint at the age of 23 in his small flat in Berlin. The big 'L' from the publisher's signet of 1856 still serves as the company's logo.

Carlo Dossi, perhaps the wittiest Italian writer of the nineteenth-century, paid for the publication of almost all of his books, which amounted to some 22 volumes, each printed in only one to two hundred copies. These exquisite editions are now jewels in collectors' libraries the world over.

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In 1892, Paul Laurence Dunbar, earning four dollars a week working as an elevator operator in Dayton, Ohio, borrowed \$125 to publish his first book of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*. He became an instant literary celebrity and inaugurated the African-American poetic tradition.

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Raymond Roussel — a key influence on Marcel Duchamp, Michel Leiris, John Ashbery, the Surrealists, the OuLiPo and Les Nouveaux Romanciers — self-published his astonishing novel *Impressions d'Afrique* in 1910. The title is a homophonic pun on the phrase "impressions à fric": a printing at the author's expense.

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Richard Wagner premiered his libretto for *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in 1853, as a privately printed edition of 50 copies for his friends in Zürich. As he comments in the foreword, the text was only a preliminary phase, and the "real work" — the staged realisation of the modern *Gesamtkunstwerk* — would demand many more years of labour. Nonetheless, the composer was already so proud of his poetic achievement that he gave declamatory readings from the text to invited guests on four successive evenings in Zürich's Hôtel Baur au Lac.

The handpicked audience ridiculed the work as "bombastic alliterative stammering". In Arthur Schopenhauer's copy, next to the final stage direction, "the curtain quickly falls," one finds the philosopher's marginalia: "And it's about time!" The "real work" premiered at the Bayreuth Festpielhaus in 1876.

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Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founder of Futurism, invested almost all of his family's wealth promoting the movement, mainly by publishing journals and books by I Futuristi (including, first and foremost, himself). He often gave away those publications as gifts — to the most hostile critics, the most ardent supporters, or simply whoever else asked for them — including thousands of copies of the flyer *Against Past-Loving Venice* tossed from the top of the clock tower overlooking the Piazza San Marco in Venice in 1910.

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When Futurism exploded in 1909, Aldo Palazzeschi (pseudonym of Aldo Giurlani) had already published three books at his own expense: two volumes of poetry, *I cavalli bianchi* (1905) and *Lanterna* (1907), and a novel, *Riflessi* (1908). On the cover of the latter two books the publisher is listed as Cesare Blanc, and Palazzechi's fourth book, *Poemi* (1909), was said to have been both printed and edited by Blanc. Blanc turned out to be Palazzeschi's cat. Impressed by *Poemi*, F. T. Marinetti agreed to publish Palazzeschi's following work, *L'incendiario* in the series Edizioni Futuriste di Poesia, but once again, Palazzeschi would have to pay (750 lire to print 1,000 copies, although Marinetti obligingly offered to cover the distribution expenses). The book was hailed as one of the century's most brilliant collections. By 1914, Palazzeschi had abandoned Marinetti and the Futurists on

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account of ideological differences, going on to have a long and illustrious literary career. But he never forgot his faithful feline supporter.

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Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Jane Austen, George Meredith, Beatrix Potter, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Rudyard Kipling, Nikolai Vasilevich Gogol, A. E. Housman, Kate Chopin, Charles Ives, Edgar Rice Burroughs, D. H. Lawrence, Edith Sitwell, Nancy Cunard, Anaïs Nin... all did it themselves, at their own expense, publishing in advance of others' validation.

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Together with the more famous avant-garde Gruppo 63, small belligerent groups of counterculture writers sprung up all over Italy in the 1960s. Based in Naples, Rome, Florence, Bologna, Modena and Genoa, these groups made pioneering interdisciplinary experiments in visual poetry and sound poetry. Going beyond self-publishing, they also forged networks of independent distribution for alternative literature and culture more generally — a phenomenon which came to be called *'esoeditoria*.' Geiger Press, the flagship publisher of the *esoeditoria* era, ran for two decades after its founding in 1967 by Adriano Spatola. Similarly, various young Italian dissident groups — including hippies, Maoists, Situationists, and Metropolitan Indians — spent the long '60s self-publishing a myriad of short-lived magazines, including *Re Nudo*, *Pianeta Fresco*, *Puzz*, and *Buco*.

In 1970 the writer, art critic and theorist Carla Lonzi, together with several colleagues (including the painter Carla Accardi and the activist Elvira Banotti) wrote a manifesto to launch a publishing house devoted solely to their own work. Scritti di Rivolta Femminile was the first institution of the Italian feminist movement and two of its books are now considered genderstudies classics: *Sputiamo su Hegel* (1970) and *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* (1971).

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Following on the DIY ethos of the mimeograph revolution, Language Poetry — the most important literary movement of the later 20th century — flourished when authors established their own presses, distribution networks, journals, reading series, and bookshops. Susan Howe's Loon Press, Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba Press, Johanna Drucker's Druckwerk, and dozens of others in tandem altered the course of contemporary literature, whilst commercial publishing plodded on, oblivious and unchanging.

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In a passage on publishing in his lecture course on the novel, Roland Barthes considers two contrasting strategies. On the one hand, the would-be novelist might decide not to publish at all, following, for example, Gustave Flaubert, who made statements throughout his career against publishing. In 1853, aged 32: "Publishing is basically a very stupid thing to do." And then again in 1862, aged 41: "If I show it [sc. the finished work] to the public, it is out of stupidity and in compliance with a received idea that one must publish, something which I personally don't feel the need to do." At the other extreme, Barthes posits the frenzied publication activity of Emmanuel Swedenborg, a seventeenth-

century poet, mathematician, geologist and physicist who gave up his scientific research to devote himself to theosophy. Swedenborg's system was to write each new book in the town or city he intended to print it. A seasoned traveler as well as an experienced bookbinder, Swedenborg made and distributed his books himself in cities all across Europe. His work would have a profound influence on Balzac, Nerval, Baudelaire and Breton. As an example of how to do it, observes Barthes, the Swedenborg method was "assez délirant" [pretty crazy].

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In 1931 Gertrude Stein sold a painting by Pablo Picasso, *Woman with a Fan* (now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C.) to finance Plain Editions, the imprint under which her partner Alice B. Toklas would further Stein's work.

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That same year, Irma Rombauer self-published a cookbook for the First Unitarian Women's Alliance of St. Louis, Missouri. The *Joy of Cooking* currently sells over 100,000 copies a year.

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Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, known as the father of gymnastics in Germany, founded the first exercise field in Berlin's Hasenheide park in 1811. Five years later, in partnership with Ernst Wilhelm Bernhard Eiselen, he published the sport's bible, *Die deutsche Turnkunst*, at his own expense. Because they intimately linked gymnastics to national German political goals and the patriotic movement of the German student associations of the Burschenschaften, the duo were apprehended in 1819 and Jahn

put under arrest. He was not 'rehabilitated' until 1840. A few years later, gymnastics became a school subject. Many of the exercises and much of the terminology from the handbook are still familiar today.

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Giovanni Verga, who would later found the literary verismo movement, paid a local imprint to publish his first novel, *I carbonari della montagna*, in four elegant small volumes in 1862. He had just turned 22.

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In 1961 the poet Ian Hamilton Finlay co-founded the Wild Hawthorn Press. The imprint released much of Finlay's printed matter: from postage stamps to books to the magazine *Poor*. *Old. Tired. Horse.*. Even though Finlay rarely left his home in the Pentland Hills of Lanarkshire, Wild Hawthorn Press patiently built an international context and distribution channel for his extensive collaborations and concretist experimentations. Most of the rest of his work was also self-published — in the form of site-specific garden inscriptions.

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Having borrowed enough money, Nikki Giovanni arranged to publish her first book of poetry, *Black Feelings*, *Black Talk* in 1968. Within months it had sold more than 10,000 copies, galvanising debates across the political spectrum over how the literature of Black Power could, and should, operate.

HISTORY

Alberto Pincherle, better known by his penname Alberto Moravia, wrote his first novel while convalescing from osteo-articular tuberculosis. Soon after, in 1929, he borrowed 5,000 liras from his father to pay the prominent Milanese company Casa Editrice Alpes to publish that novel, *Gli indifferenti*. Despite the hard financial and political times, the public reception was resoundingly enthusiastic and the book was an instant classic. It remains widely regarded as one of the most important fictional works of pre-war Italian literature.

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Ezra Pound self-published his first book of poetry, *A Lume Spento*, in 1908. He priced the hundred copies of the edition at around 6 pence, hawking them himself. In the end he gave most of them away.

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In 1971 Juan Luis Martinez submitted his first book of poems to Editorial Universitaria. After two years of considered deliberation the publisher rejected *Pequeña Cosmogonía Práctica* because it was impossible to classify generically. Finally, Martinez self-published the manuscript in 1977, changing the title to *La Nueva Novela*. The book is now considered a seminal work of contemporary Chilean poetry.

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In 1982 the literary pirate Kathy Acker paid for the publication of her novel *Great Expectations*. In a hand-written letter to her friend Paul Buck, she spoke candidly of the challenges that her venture in self-publishing involved:

The writing gets more and more complex, convoluted, thoughts on surfaces thoughts; Well, no one will read me. The present. Of course (there goes my ink supply) – of course sent you a copy of GREAT EXPECTATIONS (at least the publisher did tell me if you don't get its because the publisher is fucking up on every account) – about that part of GREAT EXPECTATIONS I put my own money into it (this is my new nightmare) but didn't want to seem like Vanity publishing, so got a friend who was starting a publishing company to back the book in name only. This 'friend' (Vale who does Research) hands the book to a printer plus all my money up front with no contract. I found another pen! The printer does 300 copies of the book, refuses to do more, keeps the money, won't give back the boards. Meanwhile the book's getting great reviews!

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Emily Dickinson's fascicles: almost one thousand poems, all self-published in handmade booklets and privately archived.

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Although Alda Merini would go on to be twice nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1953, with the help of benefactor Countess Ida Borletti, she paid the imprint Schwarz, to publish her first collection of verses, *La presenza di Orfeo*. Nearly thirty years later — twenty of which she had spent in and out of mental health institutions — she paid the vanity press Antonio Lalli Edition to publish her now-classic *Destinati a morire*, *poesie vecchie e nuove* (1980).

When he was thirty-one, John Ruskin had his first book of verse privately published in an edition of fifty presentation copies financed by his doting father. Half were bound in green cloth with a gilt lyre device blocked on the cover, half in purple with the lyre blind debossed, for female and male readers respectively. *Poems* (Spottiswoodes and Shaw, 1850), was already considered the *rara avis* of Ruskiniana by his wisest and smartest nineteenth-century bibliographers. Ruskin's juvenilia got a late start compared to the precocious verse of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, however, whose proud father had privately printed fifty copies of her *Battle of Marathon* (Gold and Walton for W. Lindsell, 1820). Browning's small octavo contains an epic seventy-page pastiche of Pope's translation of Homer, which she had been reading since the age of nine. She was scarcely a teenager.

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On her thirty-third birthday, Virginia Woolf and her husband agreed on three resolutions: they would purchase a bull dog, to be christened John; they would purchase a house in Richmond named Hogarth; and they would purchase a handpress, to be named after the house. No further mention is made of John, but the Hogarth Press is now justly legendary. In addition to the work of T. S. Eliot and Sigmund Freud, the press published the Woolfs' own *Two Stories* (1917) and all of her most important novels: *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *The Waves* (1931), and *Between the Acts* (posthumously, 1941).

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II. PRAXIS

The Hogarth Press not only published Woolf's texts, it also profoundly affected her sense of writing itself, which she came to see not as a transparent vehicle for thought, but rather as something physical, material, opaque, resistant, exacting — the analogue of hard metal and staining ink under exhaustingly exerted manual pressure.

Today, the digital files packeted and torrenting about the Internet are again changing our sense of what constitutes writing. No less physical, despite the new ease with which it can be manipulated and visualized, language is still understood as something fundamentally material: something to be clicked and cut and pasted, peeled from one programme and poured into another, uploaded and downloaded, filtered with searches, archived and shared. Language as binary code in movement from drive to server to drive.

The most interesting writers today, accordingly, are taking the technological imperatives of the age of fibre-optics and deploying them as compositional strategies: appropriating, reframing,

and repurposing texts from our vast cultural database of found language. Innovative writing need no longer be predicated on generating new text; intelligent plagiarism is sufficient. The impulse is not new — no less than James Joyce said: "I am quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors and paste man for that seems to me a harsh but not unjust description" — but the ease and scale of scissoring and pasting are unprecedented.

At the same time, the opportunities for self-publishing have also increased. Indeed, the new writing is often essentially coextensive with its publication, as tweeting, blogging, texting, file-sharing, casting, streaming and countless webpages attest. With platforms for self-publishing today being so much cheaper and easier than letterpress was for Leonard and Virginia Woolf, there are fewer and fewer excuses for not distributing your work — no inky fingers, no strained back, and you don't have to agree on the bulldog either.

After seeing what some of the most renowned writers have done for themselves, show what you can do. Get online; cut and paste; search and destroy; share and share alike. Remember the lessons of literary history. Don't wait for others to validate your ideas. Do it yourself.

— Information As Material + Co., April 2015

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Mixing anecdote and advocacy, the first edition (2012) of this polemical essay offered an introduction to the concealed history of do-it-yourself publishing — as undertaken by some of the most revered writers of the modern Western canon. In looking back at those literary monuments, it also looked forward to the political praxis of the 21st-century's digital future.

Since 2012, translations of the essay have been prepared in Spanish, German, French and Italian by researchers in Santiago, Berlin, Paris and Montevideo. In turn, each translator has both translated the existing content and added further such examples from the literary history of their native country. As such, each translated edition expands the manuscript, like a snowball, developing a micro-political network of localised knowledge and smallpress publishers.

This second English-language edition brings together all of that content for the first time. It was originally compiled for the inaugural Cultural Literacy in Europe conference, April 2015, and has been re-printed for the 'Literary Criticism and the Small Press' symposium at the University of Westminster, July 2016.

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