Leonard and Ted (and Me)

by Richard Michelson

Chutzpah, my wife says. *Look up the definition in the dictionary and you'll find your own name.* It is true that on this date in 1998 I am trying on Ted Hughes's shoes, but audacity is far from what I am feeling. Nerve? No. Nerves.

"Er, excuse me, Mr. Baskin," I mutter. "I am wondering if I might ask you to personalize this print for me." I hold out my offering: a small etching of a Rabbi I had purchased years earlier for $60, paying $10 monthly. It is the first piece of art I had ever bought. Baskin considers it, saying nothing, so I point proudly behind me. "I own the new gallery in town." The year is 1985. In 1979 I had opened a small poster shop—5 feet wide by 12 feet long on the second floor of an abandoned department store, reconfigured into an arts and crafts mall in the then run-down mill town of Northampton, Massachusetts. But now I had taken the leap to Main Street and my own eight-hundred-square-foot storefront. I was tired of trafficking in dorm room decoration. I had ambition: to help build the careers of real living, breathing contemporary artists, and suddenly, impossibly, Leonard Baskin, the man whose oeuvre inspired me as no other could, was standing at my front door.

I knew the legion stories of his cutting wit, his arrogance, his self-importance, his lack of interest in small talk and societal pleasantries. His genius. He was said to be honest to a fault, often crushing, with a single phrase, budding artists who preferred the imagined romantic lifestyle to the hard daily grind of creation; or less than serious admirers who came to bask in the master's glow. And were you a proponent of the then reigning abstract movement, that shelter for talentless shams, he had your number, and he wasn't afraid to name names on his list of ignorant artists and curators alike. For Baskin, I was to discover, the simple act of conversation was often a verbal duel to the death.

"I've looked in your gallery," he answered now. "Dreadful stuff. And this etching," he added, pulling out a pen, "was not one of my finest moments. I should have added some lines here, here, and perhaps here." He handed me back my print, still un-personalized, and walked away. It appeared to me as if a deranged child had gotten hold of my beloved Rabbi, and scribbled all over his face.

It was May 1958, when the already celebrated brash young Baskin met the eight-years-younger, equally self-assured poet Ted Hughes. They were destined to clash, or to bond, and, over lunch, it was the latter, each recognizing the others' seriousness of purpose. Baskin had burst on the artistic scene early on with his powerful, politically-charged, black-and-white life-size woodcuts such as "Man of Peace," "The Poet Laureate" (ironic in tone, and ironically prior to Hughes's ascendance to that post in England), and "The Hanged Man." Equally drawn to the natural world, Baskin had completed a series of miniature linoleum engravings of insects and animals, 26 of which were included in the second Gehenna Press volume of 1951. As early as 1942, while still a student at Yale, Baskin, having come in contact with the words and images of William Blake, had started his own press, named for a line from the first book of Milton's *Paradise Lost*,

"And black Gehenna call'd, the type of Hell." Type, ink, design, poetry, politics, art: The Gehenna Press would continue in the next fifty-eight years, until Baskin's death, to set the gold standard for the Fine Press Book in our century. It would influence generations of bookmakers, and provide a voice for young poets such as Ted Hughes, Anthony Hecht, and Stanley Kunitz. In 1953 Baskin was offered a job teaching at Smith College, and so it was that Hughes, five years later, following Sylvia Plath back to her alma mater, where she had secured a year's instructorship, met Baskin, and began a relationship that would nurture the creative work of both men throughout their lives.

Baskin's work looked intensely at the world around him. His engravings, with their intricate network of sinewy anatomical lines, delicate and twisted, depicted both the inner maelstrom and the outer physicality of the human form. His work was populated by

Leonard Baskin etching,* Scavengers in Love, *from* Masks *(1999)

Jews, blacks, Native Americans, women, workers; the marginalized in society, given center stage, one figure at a time, with their weary eyes and massive bodies; their despair and hope given emotional weight by Baskin's stylistic devices. But his are not one-dimensional

victims. He did not avert his gaze from human evil, or animal instinct, nor did he recoil at what he saw. He sought to attack life on its own terms, and his Raptors, especially, came to haunt Hughes's imagination. With their proud nobility, gluttonous beaks, and alluring plumage (barely concealing their death-delivering talons), Baskin's Raptors mimic our own struggle to exist as both the oppressed and the oppressor. He is drawn to the scavenger, nobly surviving by its wits, even if, sometimes, forced to prey on those weaker. Hughes could appreciate the classic Baskin conundrum: love of the heroic and the common, the ordinary man and the artistic genius. The tension in much of Baskin's work lies in the interaction between these two poles. When in 1967, Baskin invited Hughes to compose poems in conjunction with a recent series of raptor images he had completed, the resulting masterpiece, *Crow*, published in 1971, was to give voice to my own adolescence angst and to be my first exposure to the work of both artists.

In 1974, Baskin moved to England for personal reasons, but in part to be nearer to Ted, who, demonized for Plath's death, refused to return to the states, and in part because his own star in the U.S. had dipped. "Art," he would later explain to me, "is content, or it is nothing. The artist must be committed to making a statement. Photorealism is the same thing as minimal abstraction. Both are unwilling to say anything about the nature of reality, about their own involvement with reality.…" By the time he moved to England, and even a decade later, when he had returned and first walked past my gallery doors, Baskin's brand of engagement had come to seem passé. With the continued ascendance of *art d'jour* movements—abstract, pop, conceptual—those "art experts," whose opinions he had impugned, were happy to reduce Baskin to a footnote.

But while the official "gatekeepers" were paying attention elsewhere, the tide was already beginning to turn. A young generation of artists was tiring of the facile in art, or those paintings that needed a critical gloss to be understood. They were turning back towards engagement with the world around them. Baskin, far from being "unable to change with the times and adapt to new artistic explorations," became celebrated as "an artist who never sold out his vision." Book lovers and poets, however, had never strayed. "L-a-n-g-u-a-g-e poetry" never made the inroads in the poetry world that, for instance, abstract expressionism was able to forge in the inner sanctums of the Museums. Gehenna Press editions continued to be collectables and Baskin and Hughes continued to collaborate. The Gehenna Press published *A Primer of Birds* in 1981*, Mokomaki* in 1985*, Capprichio* in 1990*, Howls and Whispers* in 1998, and their final collaboration, *Oriestia,* published in 2001 after both men's death. Some of Hughes's poems, such as those in *Howls and Whispers*, poems about Plath which he considered too controversial to appear in *Birthday Letters*, have still not been published elsewhere, and the chill I got, reading them in hand script, on Baskin's drafting table, remains with me today.

But back to 1985, one week after the time frame of this essay's second paragraph. I was still stewing over the insult to my gallery and "art collection" when Baskin again passed by. My anger overcame my awe, and I charged into the street, planting myself before him. "You ruined my Rabbi," I shouted, defiantly waving my etching in front of his eyes. "The lines you added dilute the power and mystery, and I'll tell you why." Baskin listened patiently to my outburst, and when I was done, he looked at me, as if for the first time. "What is your name?" he asked. "Michelson," I answered. "Ah," he said, mulling it over, "the poet."

In 1985, I had published one slim chapbook of less than 100 copies, and my first

full-length collection wasn't scheduled to come out from the University of Central Florida until later that year. Among the unknowns in the poetry world, I would have been the most unknown if I had been on anyone's radar screen at all. Baskin, however, read and remembered everything. It is an astonishment I would revisit on a regular basis over our years together. I would introduce him to a client who happened to be a brain surgeon and hear Leonard discuss brain surgery techniques not yet common knowledge among medical personnel. To social scientists he would quote the latest data in their field. When he heard my wife speaking in Dutch, he spoke to her in Dutch, and if you wanted to talk baseball, he knew the stats. What I was to learn from Baskin was how much I had to learn. "Your ignorance could fill volumes," he admonished me on a regular basis, and yet I can not today envision a more patient mentor, or a more charitable collaborator.

When he stopped by my office a day after our second meeting, it was to bring a new un-scribbled-upon etching, signed "for Richard, from L.B.," and as our paths intertwined, and the promotion of his career and the selling of his work became my life's work, he always introduced me first, as "the poet Rich Michelson, who is also my dealer." It was not flattery, but a simple ordering, in Baskin's mind, of the importance of one's attributes.

My awe never vanished, but, over time, regular lunches at a local diner, occasional travels, and shared hotel suites brought a certain familiarity, as it must into any relationship. He became Lenny, and we developed an easy banter. I loved to sit in his library and look through the rare volumes that comprised Baskin's incomparable collection. I educated myself, if only to prove an adequate foil for his arguments, to see how long I could parry and thrust. In his studio, he loved to talk while he painted, sometimes turning towards me to make a point, while his brush, held behind him, continued its work. It was on one such day in 1995 that the phone rang and I picked it up.

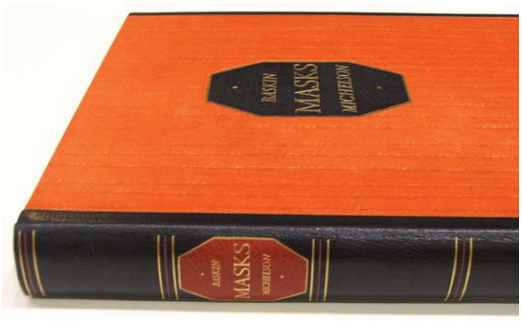
"Is Lenny there?" the voice said. "This is Ted." Unable to answer, I found my throat paralyzed. I was once again a wide-eyed schoolboy with a crush. I wanted to introduce myself, but what does one say? I thought of the fawning Baskin syncopates and tried to come up with some intelligent remark, but no words came. I handed the phone over and listened to the shop talk between these two masters: current projects, state of health, family concerns. They discussed some images of Masks that Baskin was etching, some based on the miniature sculptures known as Netsuke, which achieved their finest expression in seventeenth-century Japan. "Perfect," he told Hughes "for some of your accompanying poems." When the receiver was back in its cradle, Baskin turned, and invited me to visit Ted in England. He would write a note of introduction.

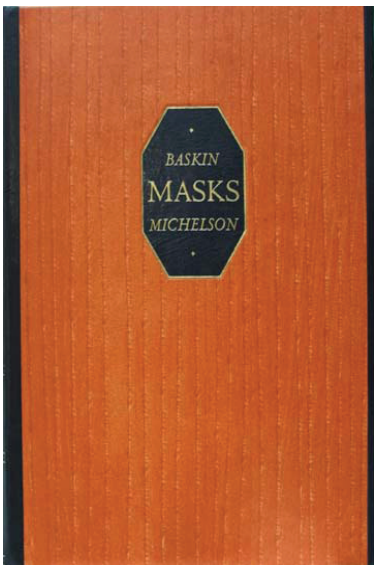
Suddenly my own output seemed inadequate. I had nothing of value to show Mr. Hughes. My first collection had appeared ten years prior, to little notice, and I was no longer proud of the effort. Now Baskin admonished me: "Don't be ridiculous. What are you waiting for? A Pulitzer? Prizes are vanity." My courage was returning. "No," I answered. I'll be ready when I have my own Gehenna publication."

It was months later that Leonard broached that subject. He was working on a book entitled *Semblant*. It would contain essays on five of his favorite artists, combined with lithographic portraits of each. Baskin knew of my love for Munch and asked if I might like to write one essay. I slaved for months, and when I presented the finished work, Leonard began to read while I remained standing before him. Finally, he set down my papers. "Among scholars, he said, "you are a lousy academic, but a fine poet."

To his credit, Baskin let me re-envision his project. I wrote eight poems, each spoken by a woman in Munch's life; his sister, mother, lover, etc. The poems, depicting a different Munch through each of their eyes, would together create a rounded portrait of the artist (these were eventually reprinted in my University of Illinois collection *Battles and Lullabies).* Baskin raved. Symmetry be damned. He set my works among the four other scholarly essays, and I had my first Gehenna publication. "Now," I said, "I am ready to visit Ted. I'll take this volume for him to see." I had an appropriate calling card.

But I did not act fast enough. In October 1998, Ted Hughes died. Baskin began a Memorial bronze, *Morning Figure for TH*. And several days after that, Leonard stopped into my office. He dropped a series of etchings on my desk. *Masks*, he said. See if you can come up with some poems.





Richard Michelson,* Masks: Poems, *illustrated by Leonard Baskin (Rockport, Maine: The Gehenna Press, 1999), [26] leaves, [27] leaves of plates: col. ill: 46 cm.

And so it came to be that I was trying on Hughes's shoes that day in December, 1998. How to create a proper Homage? Work in my voice or in Ted's? The etchings were conceived with his poetry in mind, but as an illustrator, Baskin always refused to "illustrate," in the strictest sense, the written word. And he expected the words would not "illustrate" the illustrations. Rather two artists, contemplating the same theme, must work independently, if the finished volume is to reach a higher level that is unobtainable by each alone. If it does not, there is no reason to have both collaborative elements.

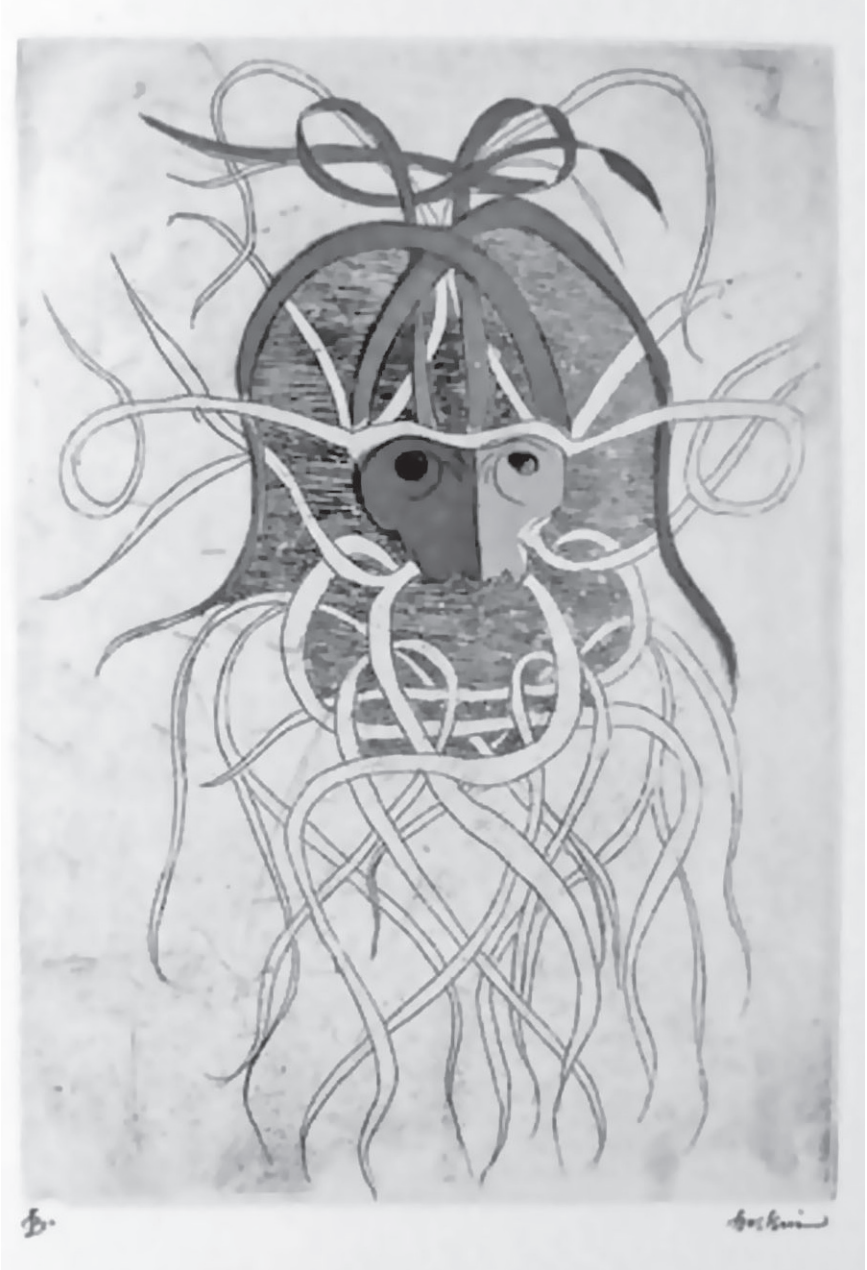
I pinned up the etchings on my study wall and contemplated them; I began to meditate on the theme of Masks—those we regularly wear to face our daily lives, and those we discover others to have worn—often only after their deaths. I asked to borrow the books Baskin had been reading while he worked on his etchings. I reread all previous Baskin/Hughes collaborations, and I made a conscious effort to internalize without imitating Hughes's voice or rhythms. "What's taking so long?" Baskin would bark, when I had nothing new to show him. "I'd like the project published before I die."

When fear of Hughes's shadow overtook me, I reassured myself that only 26 copies of Masks would be published, Baskin's typical "print run." By now we had worked together on four children's books, which, promoted by major publishers, had sold tens of thousands of copies, and yet I was never as nervous as when I finally brought Baskin my sheaf of twelve new poems.

I read them out loud, standing before Leonard in his studio, and when I finished, I looked up for the first time. "For a poet," he said "you are a fine poet." And that was praise enough. There was work to be done. We set all the etchings on the floor and lined up which poem to pair with which etching. Some combinations created a spark, and others didn't. In the weeks to follow, Leonard, newly inspired by the poetry, created an additional three etchings. I responded with two new poems. Afterwards, we eliminated four etchings and cut part of one poem and the whole of two others. We rearranged the order and added a division between two parts: *Masks* and *Death Masks*. Meanwhile, a small coterie had been engaged. Type had to be selected and the page layout designed. Papers had to be chosen (hand-made and imported from Italy). The incised copperplates were printed by Michael Kuch, Baskin's assistant, and an important bookmaker and artist in his own right. The printing required, in Baskin's words, "…a wide forage of technique including a la poupee, overlays and stencils…to achieve the right color, however putative and uncertain the hue." Twenty six-copies were made, each containing 26 hand-printed etchings, and six of those copies labeled Deluxe, included a second suite of etchings, a preparatory watercolor, a copperplate, and a typewritten (pre-computer) page of my manuscript with pencil corrections. Each letter of text had to be handset and printed by master-printer Arthur Larson. The bindings had to be individually sewn by Daniel Gehnrich. Work was in high gear, but Baskin's kidney was failing. He oversaw the process, the work both exhausting him and keeping him alive. I brought him my personal copy to sign while he lay on the couch in his living room, barely able to lift his pencil.

I was in the hospital room when Baskin drew his last breath, his face going impassive as if it were one of the Death Masks he had drawn, and although he believed in neither God nor an afterlife, I will swear until my own dying day that, on my way back to my car, I watched a crow fly past the hospital window.

A week later, I traveled to Baskin's Brooklyn foundry, where I picked up the first casting of *Memorial Figure to TH*. Started the day after Ted's death and completed just prior to his own, it went back to my gallery, which by then, thanks to Baskin's reputation, had grown into a multi-level, 6000-square-foot exhibition space with 60-foot-high ceilings. The bronze was set in its place of honor, above the encased open copy of *Masks*, the first public showing for both works of art. As artists and as cultural forces, Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin will be with us forever.



Leonard Baskin etching, About Face II, *from* Masks*, 1999*