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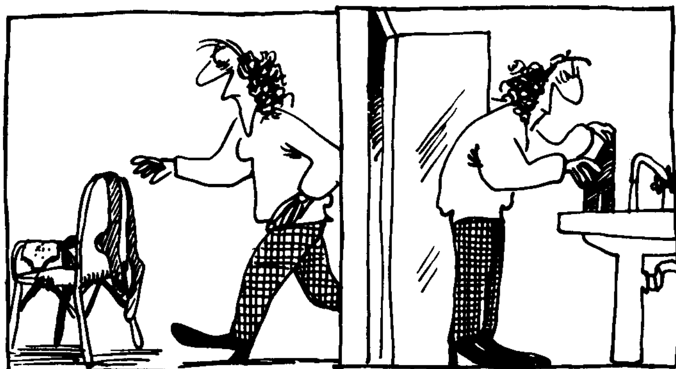

Learning to Write as a Professional

Sociologists have begun to tell stories on themselves, recognizing that the impersonal reporting of ideas and research results that used to be thought scientific hides facts readers want to know (see the collections of autobiographical pieces edited by Hammond 1964 and Horowitz 1969). Most sociological autobiography has focused on how research is done, and writing deserves the same kind of attention.

I have already discussed how the institutions of scholarly life, especially schools, create the problems of scholarly writing. That discussion focused largely on the earliest phases of the scholarly career: school and just beyond. This chapter and the next look at writing problems as they arise at later stages of a career in sociology. In chapter 6, Pamela Richards discusses the crucial transition from the early post-student days to being a grown-up professional. This most immodest chapter in an immodest book tells some stories from my

thirty-plus years in the business and draws some analytic points from them.

The chief point is that no one learns to write all at once, that learning, on the contrary, goes on for a professional lifetime and comes from a variety of experiences academia makes available.

Sociologists don't think of writing as a serious problem until they have trouble getting their work written or published. They may dismiss it as blithely as an acquaintance who said, "Writing style? You mean when to underline and put in footnotes?" They may treat the skill of writing as a gift of God which they just happen not to have received, like the student who explained to his thesis committee (I was a member) that he knew his thesis was badly written but, you see, he wasn't verbal. They may realize that they have difficulty saying what they mean, but they think that they can farm the job out. The nonverbal student said it was OK because his wife was an English major and could take care of any problems. Others settle for hiring an editor they can ill-afford.

Not everyone develops the sensitivity that I did about writing clearly. I can pinpoint some of the events of academic life (largely lucky accidents I was, for whatever reason, ready to respond to) that sensitized me. English courses had something to do with it. As an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, I had a good practical course in writing, which concentrated on techniques of organization and rewriting. I probably learned there that the first draft was just a first draft that I should routinely expect to rewrite. On the other hand, a few years of graduate school, reading sociology books and journals, gave my style all the typical features I now edit out of my own students' work.

After I got my degree, several experiences with people who were now academic colleagues rather than teachers reminded me of that undergraduate wisdom. I got a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Chicago in 1951, at the age of twenty-three. Not surprisingly, I

had trouble finding an academic job. Why should anyone hire such a child when they could have a full-grown adult for the same price (at that time, four thousand dollars a year)? I was lucky to get a research job, studying marijuana use, at seventy-five dollars a week. During the Christmas vacation, a Chicago streetcar fell over onto an automobile driven by a member of the teaching staff of the Social Science II course at the University of Chicago. They needed a replacement in a hurry, and some friends already teaching the course knew me and vouched for me, so I got the job. That was how I met Mark Benney (since deceased), a British journalist who had begun adult life as a petty criminal and ended up teaching social science through the encouragement and help of David Riesman and Everett Hughes. He had published several books, and his experience as a professional writer showed in the grace and clarity of his prose, which I admired. Small, thin, and prematurely bald, Mark had a devious way that I attributed to his prison stretches. He was careful about what he said, so if he said something serious, you knew he meant it, and meant you to take it seriously.

I had already published an article or two in professional journals and must have thought I was pretty good, or at least competent. I drafted a paper based on my thesis, the study of Chicago public school teachers I've already mentioned. It raised some problems about education and social class that I thought would interest Mark, so I asked him to read it. When he gave it back, he said it was very interesting and then raised some points about the substance. Seemingly as an afterthought, he added, "Of course, I suppose you have to write it in that funny style to get it published in a sociological journal." I knew that he was a "real writer," so the remark stung, and I determined to go back and do it again, using some of the lessons about rewriting I had learned in college. I began to see that finishing a paper didn't mean you were done with it.

Several years later Jim Carper and I wrote an article

based on our study of the occupational identities of graduate students in several fields. We submitted it to the *American Journal of Sociology*, then edited by Everett Hughes, who had directed my thesis research and to whom I felt close and loyal. The manuscript came back, with a note from the managing editor, Helen McGill Hughes (Everett's wife and a sociologist as well as a journalist), saying that I was to understand that Everett really loved me, that he had written his editorial comments at four in the morning, and that I shouldn't take their violence literally. The comments certainly took me aback. Among other things, he said that whole sentences and paragraphs sounded like they had been translated from German, word for word. I didn't read German (or any other language, despite passing a university exam in French to qualify for the Ph. D.), but I knew that was bad. One memorable paragraph quoted one of our most ponderous sentences and added this commentary (given here in its entirety): "Stink! Stink! Stink!" Mark's casual joke had sensitized me. Everett's letter strengthened my desire to write clear, understandable prose that sounded like it had been English all along.

The final step in my addiction to serious rewriting came when Blanche Geer joined Hughes and me in a study of medical students. She took writing very seriously and taught me about it through serious discussions over single words in the drafts we were doing. We had wonderful and interminable discussions, for instance, about "perspective," a word and idea central to the theoretical apparatus of our study. The question was what verb we should use with it. Did people "hold" a perspective, or "have" one? Maybe they "used" a perspective. Each word's overtones were different, and distinguishable, once we focused on them. So the question was not which word was right, but what we wanted to say. We discovered problems through stylistic discussion, but we finally had to solve them theoretically.

Our conversations taught me that it really mattered how you said things and that you had a choice in the matter. They also taught me that rewriting was fun, a kind of word puzzle whose point was to find a really good economical way to say something clearly. My talks with Geer completed my conversion to taking writing seriously and were by far the most important of all these experiences, because they continued through our writing of a number of papers and books together.

The sociologists I had gone through graduate school with had habitually traded drafts of papers-in-progress with each other, and we had been pretty good about telling each other what needed doing next. I don't think I realized how this reading and commenting and being read and commented on among peers affected my professional development until I hired Lee Weiner as a research assistant a few years after I started teaching at Northwestern. I was away the summer he began work, and as a conscientious revolutionary, Lee (who later became one of the Chicago Seven) read all my correspondence, although it was not part of his duties. When I returned in the fall, he told me excitedly how much he had learned by looking through the folders I kept on papers I had written, seeing what my friends had written on, and about, succeeding drafts, and how I had taken those comments into account in my next version.

Several years out of graduate school then, I had built a pretty efficient writing routine around rewriting on the basis of friendly criticism of early drafts. I had learned to see rewriting as fun, something like doing crossword puzzles, not as an embarassing task whose necessity revealed my shortcomings. I learned that thinking about writing, experimenting with my own style, and tinkering with other's work were fun too.

Maybe thinking of writing as an enjoyable game immunized me against the anxieties other people describe, but my relative lack of writing anxiety also had sociological roots. I had grown up in a strong theoretical tradition which also had a strong organizational

base. The Chicago school of sociology developed at the University of Chicago in the 1920s, under the leadership of Robert E. Park. (See, for further discussion of the Chicago school, Faris 1967, Carey 1975, and Bulmer 1984.) It had a coherent point of view, embodied in Park's writings and developed and carried on by a cohort of powerful thinkers and doers, most prominently Everett C. Hughes, Herbert Blumer, Louis Wirth, and Robert Redfield. It also had a long list of classic empirical monographs to its credit: *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, *The Taxi Dance Hall*, *The Gang* and, later, *French Canada in Transition* and others. I studied, along with a couple of hundred other post–World War II students, with the giants of the post-Park generation and grew up on that pile of monographs. We knew there were other ways of doing sociology, but few of us took them very seriously. Growing up in that tradition and setting gave me a theoretical arrogance, the comforting conviction that I had essentially learned all the general theory I would ever need to know from Hughes and Blumer, and that the theory was good enough to deal with any problem that came up. I knew, and know, better intellectually, but that hasn't affected the emotional result.

Knowing you are essentially right takes a lot of pressure off your writing, since you don't then try to solve sociological problems by finding the just-right way to formulate them. Some people solve theoretical problems by logical analysis. I learned to decide theoretical problems empirically. Either way is better than trying to do it by finding the right way to say it.

The growing number of sociologists and sociological specialties has produced a similar increase in sociological organizations and journals. Sociologists edit these journals, and editorial jobs are usually one of the honors that come to people who have been in the business for a while. Graduate training programs do not teach you how to edit a journal—how to copy edit papers, how to deal with the printer, or how to coax

authors to improve their work. Most journals cannot afford professional editors, so the sociologists who become editors do all that themselves. They learn the job by doing it, with the help of a few tips from their predecessors. My experiences as an editor, during which a hobby became a second profession, contributed a lot to my views on writing.

After years of editing the works of friends and colleagues informally, I took on two serious editorial jobs. In 1961 I became editor of *Social Problems*, the official journal of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, an organization that had been started in opposition to the monolith the American Sociological Association was turning into. I understood my job to be (and I think it was so understood by those members of the SSSP who had an opinion) to put out a journal that was somehow different from the "establishment" *American Sociological Review* and *American Journal of Sociology*. I wasn't sure what that entailed, but I thought I ought to try to find a home for articles that were not welcome, for one or another reason, in the larger journals.

What would make an article unwelcome? Most SSSP members thought that the establishment favored heavily quantitative work, work based on structural-functional theory, and work that was apolitical (and therefore in a real sense conservative). The SSSP thus favored work that was nonconservative, not biased toward the quantitative, and used either "Chicago" or, in later years, Marxist theories. In any event, it wanted to be open to whatever wasn't Eastern establishment. I must have accepted all that as reasonable, even though establishment journals had published my own nonquantitative, non-structural-functional work often enough.

So I took over as editor with the notion that my responsibilities consisted of publishing antiestablishment materials. I had also decided (though no one made this part of my official or unofficial responsibilities) that I was going to do something about what I thought was the sad state of sociological writing by rewriting what appeared in the journal as much as necessary. With that in mind, I recruited people for my editorial board who wrote well and knew what good writing was and who I could therefore count on to help me.

I learned a lot from my first few issues. Once I assembled my first issue (and I'll speak about those problems shortly), I rewrote every paper in it extensively. That was a more intensive and more educational experience of editing than I had ever had. Doing so many papers by so many people in so many styles in such a short time made me feel like a newspaper copy editor. I learned to go through a paper rapidly and to spot the things I knew I would without doubt change immediately. (I never understood how I did some of what I learned to do: for instance, to spot a typographical error in a page of galley proofs from across the room when I couldn't even read the type.) But I also learned that I was not going to rewrite all the papers that way, much as they might need it. It took too long, and I had other things to do. I might do a few pages of a piece, to show authors what I had in mind, but after that they would have to do it themselves or it wouldn't get done. In the last few years, some larger journals have begun to employ copy editors, but even they cannot afford what it would cost to edit journal articles the way, say, a textbook is rewritten.

I learned another lesson when I assembled the articles for my first issue. A journal is supposed to come out regularly, every second month, like the *AJS* or *ASR*, or quarterly, like *Social Problems*. If you missed your deadline, you lost your turn in the printer's queue, people complained about their magazine being late, and the officers of the sponsoring organization wanted to know what was wrong. Better to come out on time. That did not mean that you published work you didn't think was good, but that you published work that was

good, no matter what its breed: quantitative or qualitative, Chicago-style or structural-functional. Every journal editor I have ever talked to has agreed that, whatever prejudices they secretly expected to implement on assuming office, they soon found that the main thing was to get enough decent articles to fill the journal and get it out on time. Authors who think editorial prejudice accounts for their work being turned down or sent back to "revise and resubmit" are, for that reason, almost always wrong.

Of course, a lot of prejudice can be hidden in the definition of a "decent article." But here I am convinced by Stinchcombe (1978), who argues that when sociological analysts are doing good work they are all doing the same thing. Their work often looks more different than it is because they try to inflate its significance by using "portentous names," derived from "epochal theories" to describe what they do. (Many fields in the social sciences and humanities foster this practice, not just sociology.) Because good work is basically the same whatever its theoretical label, "good" is a professional and catholic judgment, like the judgments of musicians or dancers, who usually recognize when others are performing well, even if the judge doesn't care much for what they are doing. When sociologists show me work they think has been turned down because of prejudice, it is almost always badly organized and badly written. (I know that that is the voice of the establishment talking and don't know how to convince skeptics I am right, other than to point to the contents of the journals, which are always more various than critics think.) The prejudices that do exist operate more subtly, as when the editor decides that one badly written, poorly organized piece is worth putting some special effort into, but not another. The lesson for people who do unpopular work is not that they can't get published but that they shouldn't expect editors to do their work for them. No one should, but some have a better chance of that happening.

I had a different editorial experience when I undertook to edit a series of books for the Aldine Publishing Company in 1962. Alexander Morin, then president and himself a social scientist, thought it would be worthwhile to put together a series that represented the Chicago tradition, broadly conceived. This led me to deal with book-length manuscripts and with authors who had the anxiety that goes with the commitment to a book. I also learned the necessity of thinking about how much a book could be expected to sell, not because Morin was a crass businessman but because if too many books lost money there wouldn't be any series. I learned the importance of subject matter and having something to say about it. People who did not care about your fabulous contribution to social theory might nevertheless read your book because they cared about the problems of death in hospital settings or the way mental illness was defined by family members, professionals, and the courts. We eventually published some fifteen books, and the series was reasonably successful, the sellers making up for the bad guesses.

Working as a book editor showed me a larger dimension of editing. I found that I could see an inner logic struggling to express itself in others' work more easily than I could see it in my own, just as I could see redundancy, fancy talk, and all the other faults in their prose more easily than in my mine. Since I wanted to criticize manuscripts in a way that would induce authors to fix them rather than just get mad (otherwise there would be no books for the series), I had to learn to be precise about what bothered me. I also had to tell them the facts of life about commercial publishing. I explained to first authors who had taken their contract to a lawyer that, yes, the contract did favor the publisher but not to worry about it since few publishers took advantage of those clauses. (With more and more publishers becoming subsidiaries of conglomerates, that advice may not be as true as it used to be.)

My own experience with editorial prejudices has

been minimal. The one area where I suffered a little had to do with a major change in the practice of sociology journal editors. My first articles, drawn from my master's thesis, were about jazz musicians. Following the practice of the exemplars I had used (e.g., Oswald Hall's articles on medical careers and Whyte's *Street Corner Society*), I quoted extensively from my field notes and interviews. But musicians didn't talk as politely as doctors (or as Hall reported they talked). They said "shit" and "fuck" a lot and, in the interest of scientific accuracy, and with a little mischief in my heart, I quoted them verbatim. That was acceptable in my thesis but editors in the fifties routinely replaced these words with dashes: "f——" and "s——." (This practice reached a height of foolishness in a postwar issue of the *AJS* devoted to the U.S. Army, in which Fred Elkin's article "The Soldier's Language" ended up largely dashes.) I forget which of my articles was finally allowed to contain bad words written out; it might only have been when they were published in *Outsiders* in 1963. Of course, dirty talk now appears routinely in published sociology.

When I described my writing seminar in chapter 1, I said that I had told the class about my own writing rituals, but I didn't say what they were. Since I began giving the class, I have started writing on a computer, so that I no longer do what I described there. But here is what I told the class then; it's the way I wrote most of what I have written, and I am not sufficiently aware of my new computerized routine to give a fair account. (What I can say of it is to be found in chapter 9.) The entire procedure is tailored to the rhythms of the academic year.

I am lazy, don't like working, and minimize the time I spend at it. So, although I have written a fair amount, I have spent relatively little time at the typewriter. I would begin what eventually became a paper by talking, to anyone who would listen, about the topic I was going to write about. When I began teaching, that meant

that I talked to my classes about it. (*Art Worlds* started out as the transcribed recordings of the lectures I gave the first time I taught the sociology of art, eight or nine years before the book was finished.) If I was invited to give a talk somewhere, I tried to persuade people that they wanted to hear about my "new research interest," that is, the paper I was beginning to work on. Those talks did some of the work of a rough draft. I learned what points I could get to follow one another logically, which ways of making a point people understood, and which ways caused confusion, what arguments were dead ends that were better not entered at all.

I had not, when I began relying on talking as a way of getting something started, read David Antin's explanation of why he writes by talking, but I recognized my own feelings in his description:

> *because ive never liked the idea of going into a closet to address myself over a typewriter what kind of talking is that? ive gotten into the habit of going to some particular place with something on my mind but no particular words in my mouth looking for a particular occasion to talk to particular people in a way i hope is valuable for all of us*
>
> (Antin, 1976, i)

After talking about something for a while (usually several months or longer) I would get restless. I seldom recognized the feeling for what it was. It ordinarily did not strike me during the school year or even during most of the summer vacation. We have for many years spent our summers, and any other time off from teaching, in San Francisco, returning to Chicago just in time for the beginning of the fall quarter. About three weeks before the day we departed, I would suddenly, with no premonitory symptoms I could notice other than this vague restlessness, sit down and start typing all day and half the night. I typed double-spaced on legal-size yellow ruled pads. I tore each sheet off the pad carefully. If it didn't tear neatly at the perforations, I didn't

use it. I didn't rewrite—not then, anyway—just kept typing. If I had trouble making a point or couldn't see how to end an argument, I made brackets by combining the slash and the underline (I love the computer's ability to produce several varieties of brackets) and said something like "I can't get anywhere with this now." Then I went on to some other point I could write about.

I added up my production frequently and announced to anyone who would listen that I had done six pages or, counting lines and estimating words to a line, 2500 words. I tried to avoid crossing anything out, but was not rigid about it. If I saw a better way to say something, I replaced the old phrasing with something better. I also, quite neatly, inserted new passages where I thought them necessary, either by cutting and pasting or marking in the text on page 7 where the inserted material on my new page 7A would go. (It pleased me when secretaries complimented my neat manuscripts.) I have written as many as three ten-to-fifteen page manuscripts—rough drafts of articles—in a three week period.

So I would return from California with these rough drafts and spend the school year tinkering with them. I often put them away for several months and seldom thought of them as the routine of teaching—attending meetings, talking with students and colleagues—took over my daily life. That helped me redo the papers because, during the interim, I would forget why a particular point or way of expressing it was so necessary and find it easier to change them. I might not take any of these folders out and begin rewriting until the Christmas vacation. I always began by fixing sentences: cutting excess words, clarifying ambiguities, amplifying telegraphic thoughts. As I told my class, doing that invariably brought up the theoretical difficulties I had papered over, so that I soon had to reconsider my whole analysis. When I could, I wrote a new version of the parts that didn't work. If I couldn't, I didn't. In either

case, I usually put the paper away again, for months or sometimes years.

From here on, the description fits my new computerized habits as well, and I will speak in the present tense. Eventually I make another draft. I can do this kind of work any time and usually spend no more than a few hours a day for three or four days at it. After a second or third draft, I have something I can send to some friends who might have helpful thoughts or harsh criticisms. I prefer hearing those criticisms in private from my friends rather than publicly in a "Letter to the Editor."

Some papers never get finished, but I hate to waste anything I write and never give up hope, not even on pieces no one likes. I have had some things in my files for twenty years (in fact, I am still nursing an even older paper on the Abbey Theatre that I wrote for Everett Hughes's class in ethnic relations in 1948).

When I get criticisms and comments, from friends or from editors who have rejected a paper, I assume that I have failed to make my points clearly enough to forestall the objections they make, and look for what I can do to meet the objections without changing my position, unless the criticism convinces me that the position requires changing. This revising and rethinking goes on until I can't think of anything else to do with it, or until some home for the piece presents itself (that is, until I am asked to prepare something for some occasion or volume, and what I have been working on fits the specifications). I have sometimes thought I was done with a piece of writing and then discovered that I wasn't. How do I know that? When I see something that can be done better than it is, and see a way to do it, I know that I will have to go through the manuscript one more time. (I twice thought *Art Worlds* was finished before it really was.)

As I accumulated experience and became more cocksure, I began to set myself writing problems. Becoming dissatisfied with the long, complicated sentences I was

writing, I started experimenting with short ones. How few words could I use? Very few. I also began searching for alternatives to the third person (too pompous) and the first person (tiresome in excess and often inappropriate). That led to an orgy of second persons, stage whispers to the reader: "You can see how this would lead to . . ."

Such a routine presupposes that the writer can afford to wait as long as I habitually do to finish things. When you write to a deadline—if, say, you have agreed to contribute a chapter to a book, and the deadline is approaching, or you have agreed to give a paper at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association—you don't have that luxury. You don't have it, either, if you need publications to convince your colleagues or some administrator that you deserve promotion. One way around the latter problem is to do something that necessity forced on me early in my professional life. Because I had research, rather than teaching, jobs for many years, I always had to start new projects before I had finished old ones. As a result, I was always working on several generations of writing simultaneously: roughing out an initial draft of something new, rewriting initial drafts from an older project, making the final revisions in something ready for press. That is easier than it sounds. In fact, it makes every step of the process easier because when you get stuck on one job you can turn to another, always doing what comes easiest.

When I started making photographs in 1970, the standard photographic practices I then learned gave me more ideas about writing. I learned, as all photo students do, that the most important thing a photographer can do is photograph and that making thousands of bad photographs is no disgrace as long as you make a few good ones too and can tell the good from the bad. Students learn to "read" a contact sheet, made by printing a cut-up roll of film on one sheet of paper, so that each frame is reproduced at its actual size. You see

every exposure you made, and you learn how to tell which one has an idea worth pursuing. It's the perfect way to learn that all that counts is the final product and that no one will criticize you for false starts and wrong ideas if you find something good in the process. I learned to be prodigal with film, paper, and my time. That carried over to my writing. I became more willing than ever to write down any damn thing that came into my head, knowing by analogy with photographing that I could always weed out what I didn't like or couldn't use.

Sometime in the seventies, I began to develop literary pretensions and ambitions. I think this started when a friend who was a "real writer" (a writer, that is, of fiction) said kind things about some drafts of an essay I was writing on art worlds. I began to wonder if I couldn't make the writing better in a more extended sense than just clarity. I began experimenting with a kind of organization I had barely been aware of before. I began to plant the seeds of ideas to be explored later in the early sections, and to introduce examples that I would later use to recall a complex point for readers. I quoted Anthony Trollope's story (from his autobiography) about relying on an old manservant to bring him coffee before he began writing and his comment that he thought that servant deserved as much credit as Trollope himself for the resulting books. I let that stand for the artist's dependence on the help of others for getting the work done, and later in the book I just referred to Trollope and his servant, expecting readers to recall the theoretical point.

Perhaps as a result of my experiences in teaching, I have become more and more convinced of the importance of stories—good examples—in the presentation of ideas. I used to be irritated when students told me that what they remembered from my sociology of art course was the story of Simon Rodia and the Watts Towers, which I told in enormous detail and illustrated with slides. I wanted them to remember the theories I

was so slowly and painfully developing. Later I decided that the stories were more important than the theories. In a way, I should have known that, because I always began writing reports of field research by picking out representative incidents and quotes from my field notes and arranging them in some order, then writing a commentary on them.

Art Worlds also introduced me to the problems and opportunities of illustrations. It was obvious that a book on the arts should be illustrated. I first experimented with that possibility in a mischievous way. The *American Journal of Sociology* had accepted, after many revisions, an article called "Arts and Crafts," which dealt with the way some craft media got taken up by worlds of art. In the course of the paper, I described a number of art works that illustrated my analytic points. When the article was accepted, I called the managing editor and asked if she didn't think that some illustrations would be appropriate. The *AJS* almost never published pictures, other than portraits of deceased members of the University of Chicago Sociology Department, and I think I assumed that she would say no, and I could then feel discriminated against. Naturally, she said that she would ask the printer and the editor, but thought they would say yes, as they did. Now I had more work to do, finding pictures that really made the points I wanted to make and for which I could get prints at a reasonable cost. The text had referred to Robert Arneson's ceramic sculpture of a teapot whose spout was an erect penis, and to a photograph of a nude woman by Edward Weston. I thought that perhaps there would be trouble over these (the Weston photograph included pubic hair, which had only recently made *Playboy*) but my prejudices were wrong again.

When I put the book together, I knew that it would have pictures. Grant Barnes, my editor at the University of California Press, gave me a wonderful piece of advice. He said, "Don't put captions on the pictures that just identify them. Say at least a sentence explaining what the reader should see in the picture." Since I followed that advice, a reader can get the gist of the book just by looking at the pictures and reading the captions. All this has increased my interest in the visual aspects of writing and bookmaking. I expect my new computer's ability to produce pictures and unusual typefaces to be a help with that.