

# **NANCY CUNARD AND THE HOURS PRESS PARALLAX – A SKEWERED ANGLE ON THE HISTORY OF PUBLISHING**

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## Abstract

This study aims to explore the artistic and cultural contributions of Nancy Cunard, a printer, publisher, and designer from the inter-war modernist era, with a focus on her work as a letterpress printer and her connection to Virginia Woolf. The research investigates how Cunard's printing practice was influenced by Woolf's pioneering efforts in setting up The Hogarth Press in 1917 and how Cunard, like Woolf, challenged established hierarchies and norms within the publishing industry, setting up her own The Hours Press in 1927.

The study also delves into the collaborative relationship between Woolf and Cunard, particularly in relation to the publication of Cunard's poem *Parallax*, which Woolf typeset and published. It highlights the shared themes of their works, addressing the aftermath of World War I and the Spanish Flu, and challenges the notion that Cunard's poem was merely a pale imitation of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The research sheds light on the misogynistic devaluation of women's contributions within the publishing industry.

Cunard's memoirs, entitled *These Were the Hours*, serve as a comprehensive account of her involvement in printing and publishing. She sought to create aesthetically pleasing books while disregarding conventions, embracing experimentation, and following her own aesthetic instincts. Cunard's printing practice reflected a punk-ish aesthetic, featuring rough bindings, expressive covers, and typographical and visual playfulness.

In conclusion, this study aims to bring recognition to Nancy Cunard's often-overlooked artistic contributions and shed light on the historical significance of her printing practice. By examining Cunard's work through the lens of graphic design and letterpress printing, the research contributes to a broader understanding of self-publishing history and its impact on contemporary artist books. The study highlights the parallel struggles faced by Woolf and Cunard within a patriarchal system and underscores the enduring relevance of their unconventional approaches to printing and publishing.

**Keywords:** Letterpress, women in print, modernism, artist publishing,

## Nancy Cunard and The Hours Press

### *Parallax – a new angle on the history of artist publishing*

In 1925 Virginia Woolf writes in her diary: *"How my handwriting goes downhill! Another sacrifice to The Hogarth Press. Yet what I owe The Hogarth Press is barely paid by the whole of my handwriting(...). I am the only woman in England free to write what I like."* (Woolf, V.; Bell, A.(Ed.) , 1980). A freedom she owes to setting up The Hogarth Press, together with her husband Leonard Woolf, and teaching herself to set type and design books in 1917. Gaining power over the means of production and distribution enabled Virginia Woolf to develop her unique style of writing and becoming one of the greatest writers that has ever lived. Though her efforts as a graphic designer and publisher have received little attention, it is the foundation for her great contributions to feminist discourse and literature at large. Looking into Virginia Woolf's work through the lens of being a graphic designer and letterpress printer has given me great insight into how typesetting influenced her way of treating language as form. Woolf was scorned for her punkish aesthetics owing to the fact that she was self-taught, a woman, denied any kind of training. Yet the Woolf's was unwilling to take up fine printing as The Hogarth Press project was a hobby, publishing work of any literary genre that they found interesting, often short works that would likely be refused by established publishers at the time (Porter, 2004). What is also apparent is that her work as a letterpress printer has indirectly encouraged other women to pick up printing for their own reasons, from her own time up until ours, to experiment, explore and widen the scope of what a print and publishing practice can be. In this paper I am building on my previous research on Virginia Woolf practice as a graphic designer (Knutsen, 2022), looking into how she inspired another trail-blazing printer from the inter-war modernist era: Nancy Cunard.

It has become clear that I'm not the only one through history that has been inspired by Woolf to set up a press of one's own. One name kept re-appearing: Nancy Cunard. I realized

I'd seen pictures of her numerous times, yet mostly appearing un-named as an object in other artists work, sometimes referred to as a muse. One of the more famous is a Man Ray portrait; a black and white photo of a woman, arms covered in ivory bracelets, eyes lined with kohl, with a piercing gaze looking out of the frame (fig. 1).

Under the surface of infuriating gossip, endless descriptions of her looks and lovers, from her own time up until ours (even in academic articles describing her work), was a person who produced countless contributions to the cultural and political discourse of her time. This smoke screen comes as no surprise. It is basic misogyny at work. Nancy Cunard was unapologetic. A determined woman running on rage, not giving in to the standards and expectations of her time. The main reason her work is so little known and her contributions to art, publishing, journalism, and activism is silenced, is because she refused to play by the societal rules imposed upon women of her time. Both Nancy Cunard and Virginia Woolf refused to accept, and openly attacked, the patriarchal system into which they were born, using their self-publishing practices. Both defining themselves as outsiders and outlaws, which also derives from them being excluded from academic education which imposed upon them a feeling of insecurity when involved with university-educated men. This paper aims to expose some of the misconceptions aimed towards Cunard in particular.

When it comes to printing, being self-taught, picking up printing by themselves on the outskirts of fine printing and established hierarchies and norms within publishing, they were easily disclaimed by conventional publishers and printers with the argument that they were not doing 'proper printing' But that was beyond the point, as Nancy Cunard wrote in her memoirs: "The thought of printing had long attracted me, not so much from the purely aesthetic point of view as from the sense of independent creativeness it might give one." (Cunard, 1969).

Now that letterpress has vanished from mass-produced printing and anyone with a computer can become a graphic designer, the landscape has changed. Letterpress has for the last 20 years or so been absorbed into a subcultural phenomenon within graphic design, typography, education, art and artist publishing. My practice as a letterpress printer has, since the early 2010s evolved around the position of this obsolete craft in a post-digital world, and how it can be used as a tool for education and research. In this context, the contributions and approaches of Cunard and Woolf has won a whole new relevance and deserve to be looked at anew and in the light of the history of self-publishing; from fluxus to fanzines to contemporary artist books.

### Nancy Cunard; early life as poet

So, who was Nancy Cunard? She was born in 1896 in London, daughter of shipping magnate Sir Bache Cunard and the American heiress Maud Alice Burke, a prominent socialite in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nancy was a lonely only child, raised in the British upper-class society. Her prospects were marrying well and to follow in her mother's footsteps as financial patron of the arts. But Nancy wanted more. Being a young girl during the outbreak of WW1, she experienced traumatizing loss of friends and loved ones. War transformed the youth of a once hopeful and optimistic era into what Gertrude Stein would call *the lost generation*. Cunard's generation viewed the world with a cynical eye (Gordon, 2007), rejecting the old ideas and ways, laying the grounds for rebellious movements like dada and surrealism. Nancy Cunard was no exception. She wanted to be an artist and poet, soon living in Montparnasse in the beginning of the roaring 20s.

Nancy Cunard's poems were first published in Edith Sitwell's anthology *Wheels* (1916), following *Outlaws* (1921) and *Sublunary* (1923) (Cunard, 1969). Then, in 1925, Virginia and Leonard Woolf typeset, printed, and published Cunard's poem *Parallax*.

*Parallax* is a long poem which has fallen into the great shadows of T.S. Eliot's famous poem *The Waste Land*. *Parallax* is relatively unknown and rarely re-issued. When first published, it was written off as a woman's pale imitation of a masterpiece, yet it is in line with Ezra Pound's words stating that 'the only criticism of any work of art that is of any permanent or even moderately durable value, comes from the creative writer or artist who does the next job' (Tearle, 2019). Cunard had many intellectual relationships that were developmental for her artistry - and vice versa. It is too easy to attribute so much importance to Eliot without also looking at their common debt to Edith Sitwell's *Wheels*, where Cunard had already written about a world of alienation, emptiness, fear, and guilt between 1916-1921. Ezra Pound, a mutual friend, and editor of Eliot's first draft of *The Waste Land* removed what is known as The Fresca Section – a downright *slut-shaming* of Cunard. Eliot feared Cunard's talent, and both he and Pound thought women poets were a mis-breed and secretly plotted to exclude them. Both worked to downplay Cunard's poetic career, as did most critics, eventually succeeding (Marcus, 2020). Concluding that, according to Jane Marcus book *Perfect Stranger* (2020), the system of front lining Eliot and forgetting Cunard has most to do with misogyny rather than quality, and she writes something that I find essential when looking at history through a feminist lens:

Purists will always argue that the published poem has a life of its own, unassailable by the facts of its genesis, place in history, or its authors problems. But critics of culture continue to learn from drafts and diaries and letters more than the writer wants us to know. Always demystify the priesthood is a good *modus operandi* in such cases.

Virginia Woolf's role in these poems is interesting to look at. Woolf typeset and published *The Waste Land* (1923) *Parallax* (1925), and let's not forget Hope Mirrlees's typographically advanced *Paris* (1919). All 3 poems evolve around the

aftermath of World War 1 and the Spanish Flu that affected their generation greatly. As Jane Marcus writes: "*Parallax* was chosen for publication by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press as the successor to *The Waste Land* in the same avant-garde series". The review was an attack on their taste as well as a stunning blow to the young woman poet's self-confidence. The title *Parallax* is said to be suggested by Virginia Woolf – and in that light one might say it's looking at the same world, with shifting viewpoints, in dialogue with

Eliot and Mirrlees, rather than one imitating another. These 3 works were all created in a small circle of friends (or disguised enemies) and acquaintances, published, and distributed in small numbers. *Parallax* was printed and published in an edition of 420 copies, with an illustration by Eugene McCown on the cover. However, as Jane Marcus points out: some of her most significant contributions to modernist experimentation were not in poetic form, a free or freer verse, but in making a life as a radical woman (Marcus, 2020).



Fig.1 *Parallax*, Nancy Cunard

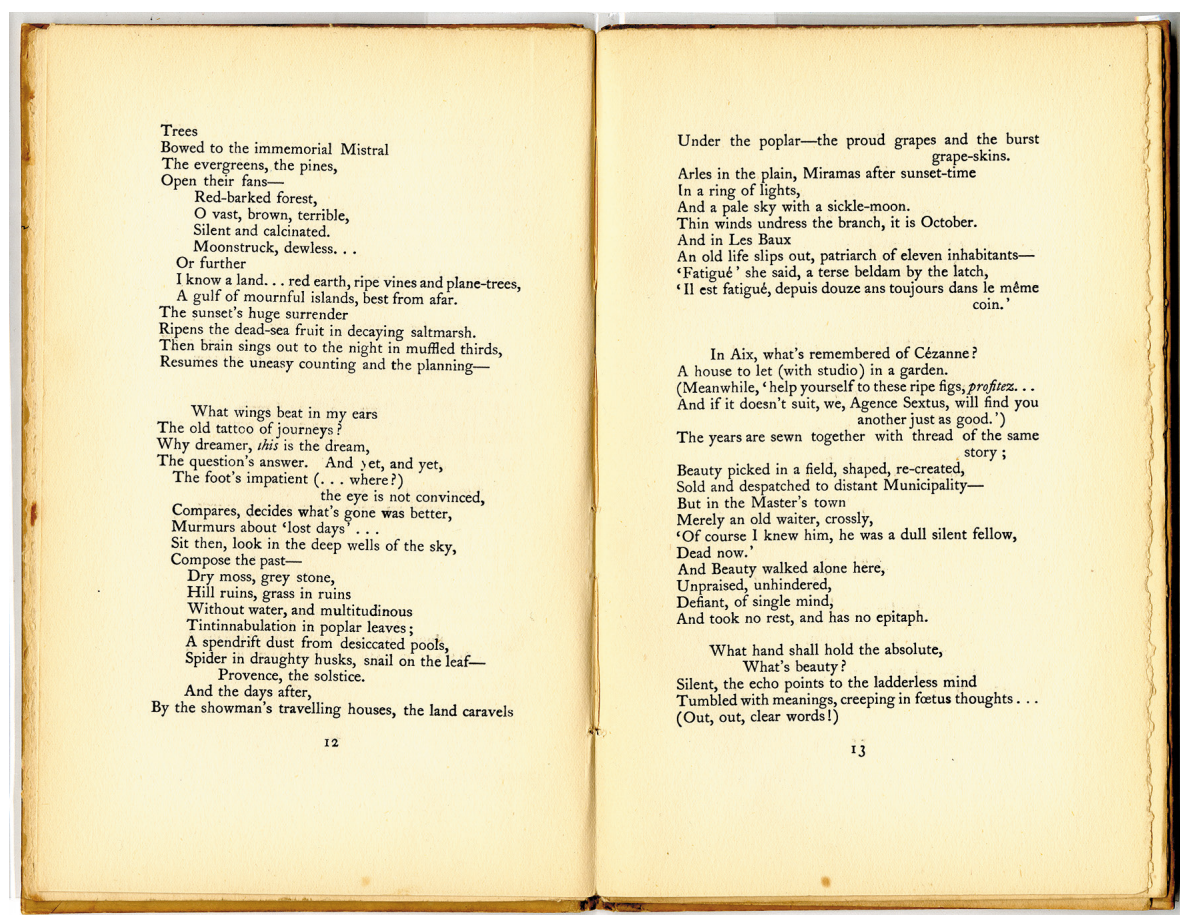


Fig 2 Parallax, Nancy Cunard.

Through the publication of *Parallax* and seeing a range of private presses of the same bat appearing in Europe and the US, Cunard took the leap and started her own printing press. The inspiration came in no way with the endorsement of Woolf; writing discouraging to her that "Your hands will always be covered in with ink" (Cunard, 1969). The relationship between Virginia and Nancy was neither close nor cordial. Based on my own experiences having people advising me against going into letterpress printing, I recognize this form of inspiration; the one that makes you angry and determined to prove

them wrong. For some, it can add fuel to the fire, and Cunard ran on rage. The American poet Laura Riding (Jackson) also was to set up a printing press, The Seizing Press in London (and later Mallorca), with partner Robert Graves in 1927 after having published her poem *The Close Chaplet* on The Hogarth Press in 1926. (Interestingly, Laura Riding and Robert Graves read *Parallax* as a conscious reply to Eliot, mocking his "utterly hopeless and unpurposed pessimism" (Marcus, 2020). There are several professional connections to be looked at in the history of inter-war publishing. Riding, Woolf, and Cunard

published works by each other and different works from the same authors, championing some now known as greatest writers of the modernist era. No one exists in a vacuum, and it is about time we dismantle the myth of the solitary (male) genius whose great talent got him up and ahead all on his own.

## The Hours Press

Cunard's memoirs, entitled *These Were the Hours*, are a comprehensive account of her involvement in printing and publishing. Like Woolf, Cunard was concerned with publishing work she found interesting. One of the things Nancy loved the most was the entire freedom of words. Unlike Woolf and several of her contemporaries, Nancy never seemed to ever have considered using the Hours for publishing her own writing, although all her first authors were her friends (Chisholm, 1979). Cunard was to be the first publisher to discover and publish Samuel Beckett in 1930. Cunard and her friend Richard Aldington (whom she had published the poem *The Eaten Heart* in 1929) came up with the idea to launch a poetry competition, sending out a call for poems on the subject of Time. Samuel Beckett submitted his poem at the last minute, and Cunard recalls reading it after being disappointed with all the other contributions: "What remarkable lines, what images and analogies, what vivid coloring throughout: indeed what technique!". Beckett won the prize of 10 pounds in addition to getting the poem published. He was 23 years old and worked as an English teacher at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. The poem was titled *Whoroscope*, printed in upper-case curves with the distinctive circular The Hours Press logo on the cover of bright red paper, plus a waistband announcing Beckett as winner and noting this is his first separately published work in an edition of 100 signed and 200 unsigned copies. Beckett and Cunard became friends, and he would contribute to several of her later publishing ventures.

Nancy Cunard wanted to make nice books, but she cared little about traditions. She was keen on experimentation and

followed her own aesthetic taste, dismissing criticism from the printer Monsieur Levy, whom she had hired to teach her and her partner at the time, Lois Aragon, the basics. After being told that proper printing required about 7 years of training, starting by sweeping floors and sucking up to your master she replied:

Thank goodness there's none of that here, Monsieur Levy! We are going to forge ahead. My intention is to learn from you everything I possibly can as quickly as may be, so as to be able to work without you as well as with you (...)

And then" he said "you and Monsieur Aragon are about to fly in the face of accepted conventions and long-established rules, all of them! This project layout of yours is not in conformity with ...

Monsieur Lévy, consider this an experimental place whenever you are going to think of conventional rules(...) (Cunard, 1969)

This insisting and independent approach was typical of Nancy Cunard. She was all about lifting new ideas and had no attempts to fit into an established industry. This does not mean that she didn't take it all very seriously. However, the enthusiastic start was soon cooled by learning that printing by hand was not all that easy or quick after all. "I began to learn that letters are one thing, and a mass of type something else to be thought of in relation to the space to be printed and the unprinted space surrounding it..." (Chisholm, 1979) Her books, even with the technical difficulties and limited possibilities available, ooze of excess and playfulness.

Likened to Woolf's aesthetics, there is a punk-ish feel to the material I've been able to examine so far. Paper bound against the grain direction, uneven inking, too much pressure when the type has touched the paper. This largely has to do with them being amateurs, learning as they go. But, they got the work published. Many of The Hours Press books have

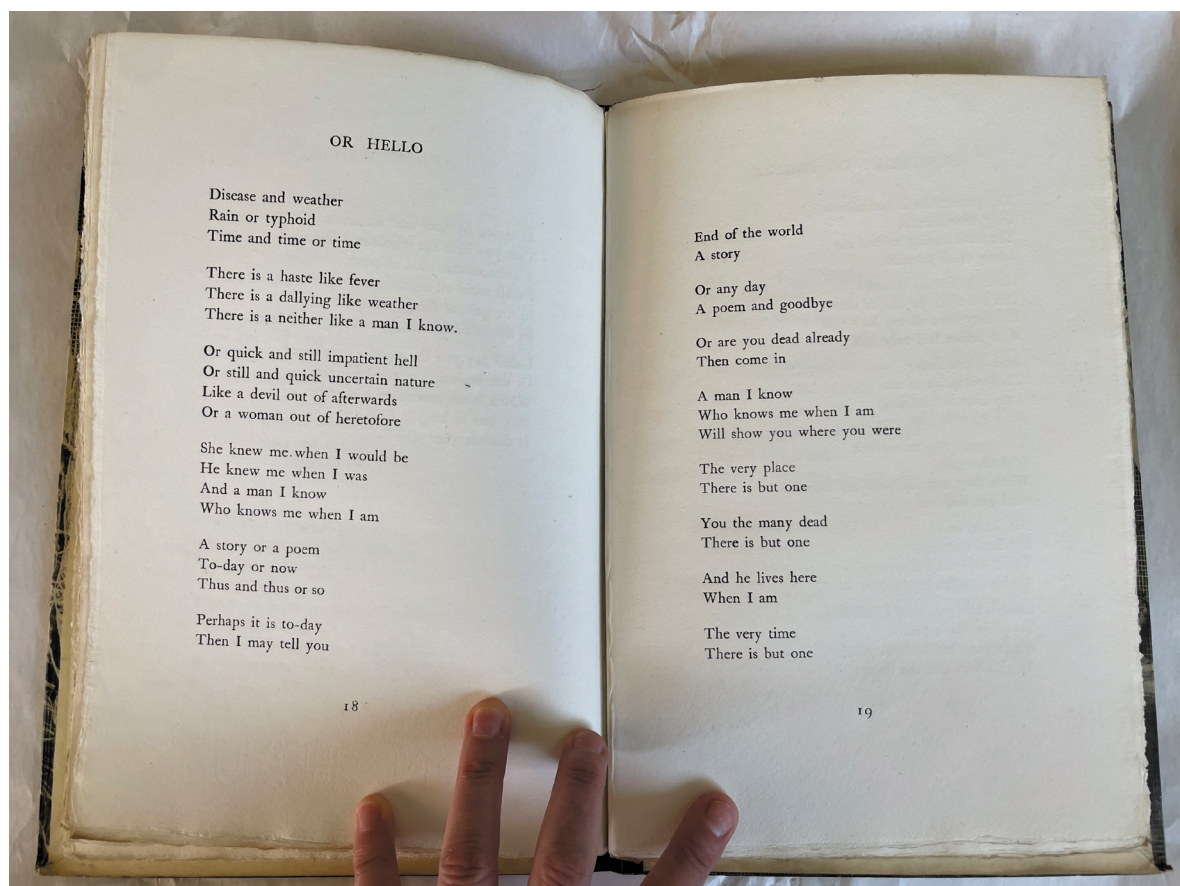


Fig. 3 Parallax, Nancy Cunard.

expressive covers featuring works by artists like Yves Tanguy and Man Ray. What strikes me when I look at the books Cunard produced is that they have a great degree of typographical and visual playfulness. 'Things must *look* nice, innovations, by all means, in our books. They make for individuality of any press that is not commercial' Cunard writes in *These Were The Hours*. On the cover of Louis Aragon's 1929 translation of Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of The Sark*, the title is constructed of ornaments and done by Aragon, which according to an impressed Cunard, stayed up all night experimenting

with arabesque shapes, punctuation marks and symbols (Chisholm, 1979). The publication *Twenty Poems Less* by Laura Riding (1930) features a photomontage by Len Lye on hard covers. It is quite large measuring 20x29 cm, type set in 16 pt. Caslon. The leading is quite inconsistent throughout, yet it has punch to it, and it is apparent that Cunard wanted to emphasize Ridings lines of poetry. It's interesting to look at her development as graphic designer with the backdrop of a conversation with fellow poet and printer Manuel Altolaguirre appearing in Cunard's memoirs:

We went on discussing various forms and styles. To both our minds, the simplest was the best: fair type and beautiful paper, great legibility, and a sort of sparseness in everything. We found out we were, in fact, purists (Cunard, 1969)

Though Cunard only worked at the press for about 4 years, she was extremely prolific and typeset, printed, and published a body of twenty-three books, editioned to between 80 and 1000 hand-printed copies. In the years between 1928 and 1931, Nancy often worked up to 16 hours a day at the press. As Jane Marcus points out: Work was indeed the center of her life, as if to make up for the work not done by her mother and the women of the luxuried class she left behind. Free in love habits and strict in her work habits, she was the very model of the new woman of the world (Marcus, 2020). In the wintertime, the house and pressroom in Réanneville was freezing. I have personal experience with this, as my first shop was without heating. Handling cold lead type in freezing temperatures, quickly makes your fingers stiffen, and as typesetting means standing still for hours, the work requires will power, self-discipline and the ability to block out physical discomforts. Safe to say, Nancy worked with dedication. She stated that "The ways of type were friendly to me" (Gordon, 2007) and that she found the smell on printer's ink greatly pleasing yet reflecting on the importance of mastering an impeccable clean print without any signs of 'printer's thumb'. 'In all', she writes, 'I thought, hand-setting was like sewing, one stitch at a time; one must *like* doing either to attain proficiency'. Later she makes a reflection I know all too well on the time-consuming labor: 'It's always twice as long as you think.' (Cunard, N., 1969).

Many said of Nancy that "One would have thought that she had grown up a printer." *The Paris Tribune* wrote that "Miss Cunard ... has ideas about printing, in regard to type, size and form which no one seems to know where she learned. No doubt they just came to her, as she herself did to the

print shop,". Nancy produced beautiful books, well up to if not above the standard set by other little presses of her time; she had a natural eye for good design and good printing (Chisholm, A., 1979). She was proud, decades later, to find her books on display with other fine books at the Victoria and Albert Museum selected for their handsome design, binding, «general taste», and individuality (Gordon, L., 2007). Nancy Cunard was highly knowledgeable, extremely well read as well as inhabiting artistic sensibility. But as was the case with Virginia Woolf, she was an autodidact without any formal training in any of the career paths she delved into during her lifetime. By the end of 1929 she moved the press to Paris in rue Guénégaud on the left bank. She was now more solidly based than she had ever been. "Success was good," she writes, and she had people working at her press, "yet it actually vexed me at times since I would so much rather have been the artisan, typesetter and printer, proof-reader (...) rather than the «Director»". And what Nancy feared the most was lack of change, repetition of and similarity to the past. No relationship nor any occupation was likely to hold Nancy for very long (Chisholm, 1979).

### Journey on – running on rage

As graphic designer Tereza Bettinardi said in her talk at the 2023 Other Typographic Worlds conference: "feminism is not a method, it's a lens." And looking at the history of women in the arts through that lens, it is striking how many women have practiced graphic design only for parts of their lives. Graphic design has been a tool or a vessel for achieving a greater cause, which as we know with a term established by Martha Scotford, makes the history of women (in graphic design) messy (Scotford, 1994). Where Woolf left printing in 1930 to devote herself fully to her work as an author, leaving the responsibility of the press to her husband Leonard Woolf, Cunard left printing in favor of anti-racist and anti-fascist activism. Through the African American jazz musician

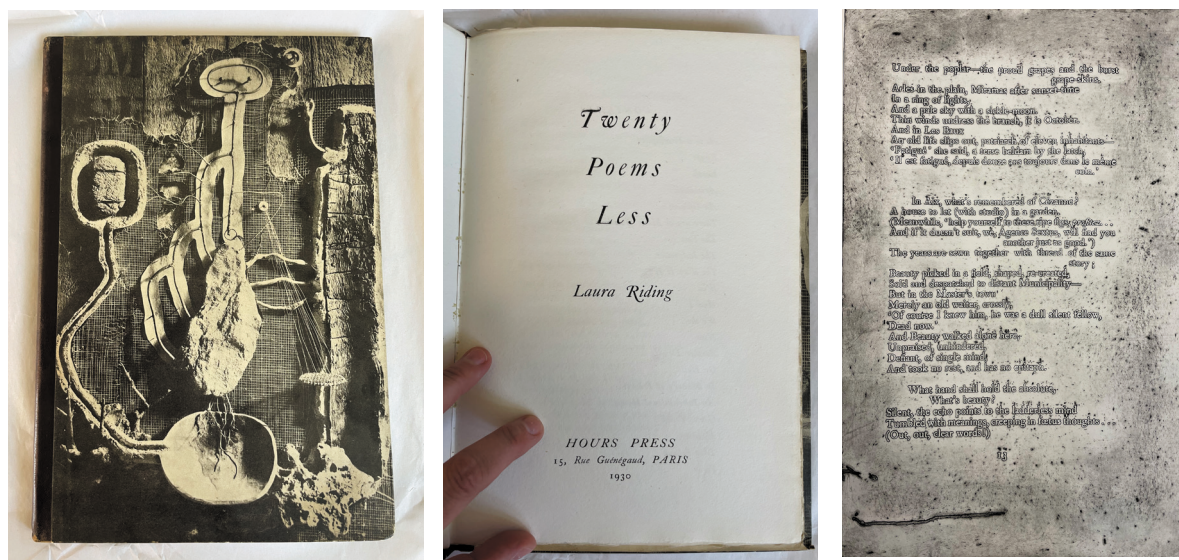


Fig. 4 - 6 Nancy Cunard.

Henry Crowder, who became part of The Hours Press, she had learned about the brutal history and struggles of African Americans. She dove deep into the fight against racism, which made her abandon poetry and devote herself to an ambitious project; initiating and editing an anthology called *Negro* published in 1934. As stated on Amazon;

*Negro* is in its subject and international approach generations ahead of its time. Its exploration of black achievement and black anger takes the reader from life in America to the West Indies, South America, Europe, and Africa. Though very much of its time, *Negro* is also timeless in its depiction of oppressive social and political conditions as well as in its homage to myriad contributions by black artists and thinkers<sup>1</sup>.

The work on *Negro* was the start of the end of The Hours Press. As Nancy embarked on this work in August 1930, she left Wyn Henderson in charge of the Press, eventually

closing down the shop in 1931. Cunard sold the Minerva press but kept the Belgian Mathieu press at Réaneville after rue Guénégaud was given up.

Born and raised in the British aristocracy, and a well-known celebrity, publishing *Negro* came with a great cost. In it Cunard published hate-mail she received during the work on the anthology, one of them from her own mother, who eventually disinherited her. Nancy was never to speak to her mother again. Being a fierce anti-racist activist laid her prone to public humiliation, hate and discreditation.

The relationship with Crowder ends, and Cunard devotes her time to work as war correspondent at the frontlines and refugee camps during the Spanish Civil War, together with Langston Hughes, Ernest Hemingway, and Martha Gellhorn, among others. In 1937, she published *Authors take side on the Spanish War*. During World War II, unable to return to France, she spends time in America and London doing resistance

1 <https://www.amazon.com/Negro-Anthology-Hugh-Ford/dp/0826408621>

work and publishes *Poems for France* in 1944. Her house in La Chapelle-Réanville is ransacked by German troops, and returning after the war, she finds all her belongings destructed; her printing equipment, art collection and books smashed and shot to pieces. Even parts of the building structure torn down. This was a devastating blow for Nancy. The epilogue in her memoirs describing the return, searching through the waste land of her destructed belongings, is nothing less than heartbreaking.

She sells her house by the end of the 40s, having ever growing financial difficulties. She continues her raging anti-racist/fascist fights throughout her life. Her physical and mental health is in steady decline, and on March 15<sup>th</sup> 1965, she is found unconscious on the streets by the police, and she dies two days later, poor, homeless and alone at the Hospital Cochin, at the age of 69. None of her family members attended her funeral.

## Conclusion

This paper presents but a fraction of Nancy Cunard's accomplishments and experiences throughout her lifetime. I strongly believe that her part in history as an active agent needs far greater recognition than is the case today. This paper does not offer any traditional conclusion, but is rather functioning as a starting point for my artistic research for the next two years, where I'll be digging deeper into Parallax and Nancy Cunard's practice as artist and publisher through graphic adaptations of her work. Though it can be argued that Cunard's personal life was full of drama and far from conventional, we must question why Cunard's words and work has been excluded from history, and her legacy as poet, publisher, printer, graphic designer, and activist largely has become surrounded by gossip, dirt and darkness. Luckily, her words are not gone, and I think it's about time they're examined and read in a new light.

## Further work

I work as an artistic researcher which is defined as research through practice. The work is to be followed by explicit reflections. My research project has been given the working title 'Your hands will always be covered in ink', to echo Woolf's words, which to me is read as a good thing (as long as it does not stain the wrong places). There's also the poetic connection between ink and ideas and how they transmit from one person - or object - to another. I aim to explore Parallax – the poem in which Woolf and Cunard meet, the catalyst for Cunard's printing practice, yet also her downfall as a poet – by illuminating the poem through large scale etchings. As the ink gets stuck around the letter forms and the ink on the letters gets wiped off, I'll explore a poetic attempt to shed light to the work of Cunard and gain a deeper understanding of the poem itself through physically working on, through and with it. In the etching series I'm about to embark on, every page of the original typeset by Virginia Woolf will be scanned, UV-printed on large copper plates, etched and printed on approximately 21 90x100 sheets of paper.

What I hope this research will contribute to through artistic adaptations and writing, is for Cunard's life's work to be seen and examined from artistic, designerly and literary angles. As with Virginia Woolf, here is yet another person who had her life greatly influenced by mastering printing and publishing – for better or for worse, and hardly anyone knows about it.

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