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The Presence of Books

AN INTRODUCTION

Let Your enormous Library be justified.

—JORGE LUIS BORGES, “The Library of Babel”

THE RARE PUBLICAN

The sociologist Edward Shils wrote, “It may well be that we live in an epoch in which the bookshop is an institution suspended between ‘the dying old society’ and the ‘society struggling to be born.’”¹ Would that we were living in an epoch in which the bookshop itself was so clearly the given, as it was in Shils’s.

Throughout the centuries, we booksellers have looked back on a more genteel or refined era, when the business of selling quality books to serious general readers was viable. But our nostalgia, like much nostalgia, is likely fictive, or at least imprecise; good bookstores have never made good business sense. We know from Shils’s 1963 essay “The Bookshop in America” that the difficulty of maintaining good bookstores isn’t new, but in our time it has become ever more acute, as the society struggling to be born might well leave the bookstores behind altogether if

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we don't develop a model that supports what is best in them.

Shils was a particularly eloquent practitioner of a genre: the lamentation of the state of bookselling in our time. Speaking to the newly formed Booksellers' League in 1895, its president, Charles T. Dillingham, remarked upon "the gradual decrease in the number of retail booksellers as a distinct class," noting that "there are few left of the species outside the large cities."² As far back as the eighteenth century, in their *Encyclopédie's* entry for bookselling, Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert included the complaint "that Bookselling is no longer worth anything, that the book trade is no longer going well."³

We don't need another lamentation of the state of bookselling in our time, but I do think that, before it's too late, we would be wise to consider a certain ideal of bookselling—that we imagine a future in which bookstores not only endure but realize their highest aspirations.

In 1994, there were approximately 7,000 independent bookstores in the United States.⁴ As of 2019, there were 2,500, and of those few bookstores left, even fewer sell books exclusively.⁵ Neither of these facts is incidental. In the twenty-first century, readers no longer need bookstores to buy books. Furthermore, from a retail perspective, the net profit from book sales alone is not sufficient to support bookselling as a financial endeavor.

Why do we even need bookstores at all then? And presuming we do, how can we build a model that

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supports them, that allows them to serve their highest ideals?

• • •

What a strange thing, the bookshop. There are just so *many* books. In 2019, there were 20 million published books available, not counting books published that year. Every book requires considerable attention to write, publish, sell, and read. Books serve such diverse purposes and are written for so few readers at a given time. As such, efficiencies common to other industries are impossible in the book industry.

The remarkable and perhaps unique thing about the good bookstore is that it has never counted on the blockbuster—or what Shils describes as “overstuffed political books” and “puffy and pallid biographies”—to thrive, but on thousands and thousands of singular “products” (forgive me, booksellers) that must be patiently left on the shelves, rendering capital inert, as it were, until their destined reader discovers them.⁶

John Ruskin, the nineteenth-century art critic and armchair political economist, in his 1891 lecture “Sesame and Lilies,” writes of “books of the hour” and “books of all time,” noting, of course, that this isn’t a distinction of quality—there are good and bad books of the hour and good and bad books of all time—but of species. If the conventional wisdom is to be believed, there are books of the hour that one must read in order to participate in the cultural conversation and books of all time that everyone is meant to have

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read. This is not the case, of course, and that is one of the great virtues of the book trade and the reading public. Surely there are books of either category that enough people have read that it *seems* like everyone is reading them—or has already read them—but we booksellers know that the conventional wisdom is false and has little bearing on the work of bookselling. The bookstore is a haven for the heterodox.

The good bookstore's collection comprises books that might have been published a month ago, a year ago, a half-century ago, a couple of millennia ago; the attuned bookseller must provide a selection of books of all vintages. To do so, the work of bookselling demands a firm grasp not just of the literature of the ages but also of the literature of one's lifetime and of the thousands of new publications announced in the publishers' catalogs that arrive seasonally, and by the dozens. Only a minute fraction of the books one considers will make the shelves. Discernment is the primary quality of the good bookseller; filtration, selection, assemblage, and enthusiasm their work.

As a business proposition, this model is clearly untenable. No retailer, whose work is to buy cheap and sell dear, would develop the business of the bookstore. The newspaperman H. L. Mencken, speaking to the same point in his 1930 essay "Lo, the Poor Bookseller," writes:

The marvel is, indeed, that [the bookseller] ever survives at all. It is as if a haberdasher, in addition to meeting all the hazards of the current fashion,

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had to keep in stock a specimen of every kind of shirt, collar, sock, necktie and undershirt in favor since 1750.⁷

Ninety-odd years later, our conundrum hasn't changed, even if the books and authors have. Our customers might find our stock insufficient if we don't offer the latest Ta-Nehisi Coates or Elena Ferrante, while another, less contemporary, reader might be disappointed by not finding twenty-five-year-old volumes by bell hooks or Elizabeth Hardwick. And that same bookseller must know which Coates and which Ferrante, if any, to keep on the shelf and which, if any, to let go a decade from now.

On these points, the novelist and enthusiast on behalf of bookstores Christopher Morley, writing at the same time as Mencken, understood our challenge well. The bookseller, he writes, "has to combine the functions of the bar-room and the bodega. He must be able to serve, on demand, not only the cocktail of the moment but also the scarcest of old vintages. How rare is the publican who understands the merits of both."⁸

It's clear that the *business* of bookselling is secondary for most booksellers, which is why they find creative ways to make profits elsewhere, that they might continue to sell the sorts of books that drew them to the work in the first place. Most of them, too, would expect to see the likes of Coates, Ferrante, hooks, and Hardwick on the shelves of any good bookstore. In our time, bookstores have taken to selling everything

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from socks to coffee, just as booksellers in Shils's time took to "dealing in pen-wipers, blotters, writing pads, and greeting cards or gramophone discs," and of course we understand why: they need the margin.⁹

I have been a bookseller since 1994, and throughout my career I have operated these sorts of stores. The pull of the presence of books is so strong that I have, without pride but without shame, supplemented the book collection with notebooks, coffee, greeting cards, and other sidelines, thinking it a reasonable compromise to maintain a decent bookstore. And it is. Even decent bookstores, I would argue, are tremendously important to a thriving community. But they aren't representative of our highest aspirations.

Neither, of course, is the largest and most mercenary seller of books in the world, Amazon. In fact, the *work* of bookselling is completely circumvented. This twenty-first-century model of selling books is an "everything store" that does away with filtration, selection, assemblage, and enthusiasm entirely. Jeff Bezos, in a talk delivered to the Special Libraries Conference in 1997, explained that he chose books as the first product his new company would sell because "there are more items in the book category than there are items in any other category by far."¹⁰ In addition, their relatively uniform size made them easy to package and ship. That Bezos then turned books into loss leaders (products sold at a loss in order to attract customers who will then purchase higher-margin products, creating profitable transac-

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tions) is particularly unsavory considering that professional booksellers have long placed a higher value on their cultural work than on the tremendous effort required to achieve even thin margins selling books. They *needed* to sell socks in order to make bookselling profitable; Bezos *chose* to devalue books in order to make already profitable merchandise, like socks, even more profitable.

But, lest we give ourselves over to lamentation, let's consider a different sort of bookstore.

DISLODGING SHADES

In 1961, two years before Shils published "The Bookshop in America," five students of the Chicago Theological Seminary established a consumer cooperative whose purpose was

to make available, primarily to students, faculty members and administrative officers of theological seminaries and other scholastic institutions located at or near the campus of the University of Chicago . . . books, publications and supplies used in the study of theology and for building up by such persons, seminaries or institutions of their professional and scholarly libraries.

The second article of incorporation reads in full, "The name of the association is the Seminary Cooperative Bookstore, Inc."¹¹

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Shils was a member of the University of Chicago's faculty in 1961, holding joint appointments in the Sociology Department and on the Committee on Social Thought. Perhaps the early booksellers of the Seminary Co-op read Shils's essay. In 1969, the general manager of the Co-op, John Modschiedler, hired Jack Cella, who began his forty-year tenure as the leader of the Co-op in 1973. There is little doubt that Shils expressed his opinions to the seven shop-keeps running the bookstores in Hyde Park, including Cella. Shils had a reputation for many things, but timidity expressing his opinions on matters of the intellect was certainly not one. Even if they hadn't read the essay, they probably heard Shils express his anathemas in their shops. In 1978, Shils became the 8,704th member of the Co-op.

As bookselling in general is an unlikely, and perhaps unwise, business, serious bookselling must be an extraordinarily foolish financial endeavor. "Why should anyone who has or who can obtain \$10,000 or \$20,000," asks Shils, "invest it in a bookshop to sell serious books when, if he were an economically reasonable person, he would do better to open a beauty parlor or a hamburger and barbecue shop, or put his money into the stock market?"¹² Shils's question is rhetorical—he knew why. Cella and Modschiedler knew why. If the aim of a reasonable person is to live a life of meaning and purpose, serious books can provide the concentrate of the examined life.

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, Cella and the legion of booksellers who worked beside

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him built arguably the best serious bookstore in America. They ignored the incredibly specific purpose for which the bookstore was established and built an expansive institution. Good bookstores reflect their communities; exceptional bookstores both reflect and create their communities. In those early years, the Seminary Co-op did both superbly.

Upon Cella's retirement in 2013, the philosopher Jonathan Lear, a longtime Co-op member, wondered about his successor. "Where does one post the help-wanted ad: Looking for a soul (or souls) willing to be incarnate in a bookstore?"¹³

• • •

Sometimes the mere existence of a phenomenon—a human, an institution, a work of art—is worthy of awe. Its declaration cannot be countermanded. When I first descended the perilous staircase leading to the old Co-op in 1994—incidentally, the year Amazon was founded—the bookstore was in its heyday. Like many who came before and after me, I was deeply persuaded by the Seminary Co-op's existence. The bookstore was a realization of a humble but powerful vision: a broad selection of books whose presence on the shelves created an unparalleled browsing experience undiluted by tchotchkes or knickknacks, pen wipers or gramophone discs, and only the occasional puffy or pallid volume. The collection created a totalizing environment; engagement with this landscape of book spines shifted the patron's sense

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of space, time, abundance, value, and community. To a confused and restless young man trying to find his way in the world, who knew only that the presence of books was of paramount importance, the Co-op seemed as close to a spiritual home as he could hope to find.

It was, in fact, a religion predicated upon books from which I was attempting to take my leave. But even then I knew that, whatever else was left behind, the presence of books would remain.

I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish community in and around Brooklyn. The rooms of my childhood in Flatbush, Boro Park, and Elizabeth, New Jersey, were all book-lined; my childhood homes, my yeshiva, my shul, my relatives' homes, and the homes of my friends' families were heavy with large books.

From 1957 until 2012, my grandparents lived in a second-floor walkup apartment that they rented in Boro Park, on the corner of Sixteenth Avenue and Fifty-Third Street. My grandfather's library—or rather, book-lined living room—made a particular impression. The bookcases were filled with books whose gravity was clear from the ornate, uniform spines. Ornate these books, but not ornamental. The bookshelves always had gaps, and the gaps would move from week to week; an ever-rotating selection of volumes would be laid out on my grandfather's bookstand and desk.

These books were read—books are for use, after all—and were treated with reverence and love. Observant Jews are accustomed to kissing the cover of

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a book after closing it—a habit that has remained with me throughout the years. Along with the British literatus Leigh Hunt, who, in effusing about books, wrote of how he liked to lean his head against them, followers of my given tradition might say, “When I speak of being in contact with my books, I mean it literally.”¹⁴

These books were read in groups called *chevrusas*, a Hebrew word whose root means “friend.” When I was a young boy, I would join my grandfather’s *chevrusa* on occasion, just to observe. Seated on an austere bench in the basement of the shul across the street, my head barely clearing the tabletop, I sat with large men and their large Aramaic books watching them question, ponder, argue with, and delight in what they found on those pages.

My grandfather wasn’t a scholar. He was a shop-keep. He ran a suit store named Chatham Clothes on New Utrecht Avenue, selling kosher clothing to the *haredi* Jews in the tri-state area. He worked long days, after which he would eat dinner with his family before heading across the street to learn with his *chevrusa*.

The activity called “learning” was common. Because there was only one thing to study—the Tanach and its many commentaries, especially the Talmud—there was no need to specify the object of learning. Learning was a daily activity, regardless of one’s age, and was no less special for being an everyday endeavor. And learning, while it reliably yielded wisdom and pleasure, was understood to be an end in itself.

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The highest compliment one could pay in that community was to say that someone was learned, or a *talmid chacham*, a wise student. When, as a teenager, I moved into the secular world, I found some of the conventions around books and education profoundly alien. I couldn't fathom the notion that one strove to become educated rather than learned, or that one might study in order to make a living, rather than to learn, continually, an endeavor essential to living a more meaningful life. What, after all, was the point of making a living if not to build community and create deeper understanding—to come home for dinner and then learn with one's *chevrusa*?

• • •

The Chicago poet Nate Marshall once said, during an event at the Co-op, that “the greatest thing a poet or poem can give you is permission.” A bookstore too, it turns out, can give you permission. That is precisely what that first descent into the Co-op established: permission to be among books outside of an institution of learning, be it a university or a yeshiva, and outside of a teleological paradigm.

I remember how awestruck I was on that first descent. It recalled the British essayist Charles Lamb's remembrances of his first engagement with the library at Oxford:

What a place to be in is an old library! It seems as though all the souls of all the writers, that have be-

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queathed their labors to these Bodleians, were reposing here, as in some dormitory, or middle state. I do not want to handle, to profane the leaves, their winding-sheets. I could as soon dislodge a shade. I seem to inhale learning, walking amid their foliage; and the odor of their old moth-scented coverings is fragrant as the first bloom of those scintial apples which grew amid the happy orchard.¹⁵

Following my grandfather's model—books aren't ornaments—and knowing that there were treasures to be found within the volumes, I quickly became fearless in dislodging shades. As my intellectual life was developed in the interstices between the yeshiva and the academy, the justification of the existence of a bookstore like the Seminary Co-op was self-evident. This was the place where one could become learned—a *talmid chacham*—and fashion a daily practice that would lead one through a more meaningful life.

The philosopher Francis Bacon's musings on "the pleasure and delight of knowledge and learning" would not have been out of place in the Talmud. "We see in all other pleasures," he writes with the perspicacity of one of the rabbinic fathers,

there is satiety, and after they be used, their verdure departeth, which showeth well they be but deceits of pleasure, and not pleasures; and that it was the novelty which pleased, and not the quality. And, therefore, we see that voluptuous men turn

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friars, and ambitious princes turn melancholy. But of knowledge there is no satiety, but satisfaction and appetite are perpetually interchangeable.¹⁶

The best parts of the tradition in which I was raised valued not only what endures but also meaningful ephemera, what the philosopher Simone Weil gestures toward in writing, “Stars and blossoming fruit trees: utter permanence and extreme fragility give one an equal sense of eternity.”¹⁷ It sought pleasures, not the deceits of pleasures. It sought to feed appetites whose satiety led to a satisfaction that endured and led to an appetite for further meaning, knowledge, and love—a pleasure whose verdure remains.

SOULS INCARNATE IN A BOOKSTORE

In 2014, I answered Lear’s help-wanted ad and succeeded Cella at the helm of the Seminary Co-op. Since then, more than a dozen of the country’s finest professional booksellers have joined me in this work. We “souls incarnate in a bookstore” quickly understood how difficult it is to articulate the experience of browsing the stacks of the Co-op, much less its value, to those who, by dint of distance or assumption, have not yet entered its hallowed space.

Having spent over seven years in the Seminary Co-op, and the prior twenty years in wonderfully large and serious bookstores throughout the country, I feel the pity of Heinsius for the ones “that know not

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this happiness.” Heinsius, the keeper of the library at Leyden who, according to the great seventeenth-century melancholist Robert Burton, “was mewed up in it all the year long,” is my kin.

I no sooner . . . come into the library, but I bolt the door to me, excluding lust, ambition, avarice, and all such vices, whose nurse is idleness, the mother of ignorance, and Melancholy herself, and in the very lap of eternity, amongst so many divine souls, I take my seat, with so lofty a spirit and sweet content.¹⁸

I can't but effuse on behalf of this experience, this pleasure that, relying for satisfaction not on novelty but on quality, beckons us to return before too long. Booksellers are professional enthusiasts, and I hope the sharing of enthusiasm on behalf of individual books, honed so finely over a quarter-century of bookselling, will serve me well as I turn that enthusiasm toward the bookstore itself, exhorting you to join me as we articulate the need for the bookstore in the twenty-first century.

It is not just bookstores that I hope to celebrate, but the profession of bookselling as well. Dillingham, writing in 1895, speaks accurately to our current condition when he says that “bookselling has often been classed as next to a profession.”¹⁹ Shils says that the “desire to be a bookseller is not highly correlated with being a great reader,”²⁰ but this reveals an ignorance of the sort of reading at which the bookseller

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excels. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy understands the bookseller to be a “transcendental reader: she provides her clients with the conditions of possibility for reading.” He continues:

A bookseller’s customers are readers of reading at the same time as they are readers of the books they buy. The bookseller’s reading doesn’t only or simply consist in deciphering all the pages of every book; it is also a *lectio* as *election*, a choice, selection, or gleaning of ideas from books that are proposed as a function of the Idea that bookseller has both of the book and of reading, both of readers and of publishers. In that sense, current usage doesn’t call the bookseller a book merchant. . . . Let’s say, with less ambiguity, that the bookseller is one who delivers books [*un levreur de livres*].²¹

A simple and direct justification of bookstores no longer holds. We no longer *need* bookstores to buy books, even serious books. In fact, bookstores might well be an inefficient and inconvenient way to buy books in the twenty-first century, and it is certainly the case that we have become creatures of efficiency and convenience.

But efficiency is an inconsistent ideal, a dubious virtue. In fact, there are wise inefficiencies, as any artist or parent can attest. Like the readers they serve, booksellers embrace the inefficient elements of the bookstore, understanding that they are anything but wasteful. Given that they are not only deliberate

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but critical to creating a good bookstore, the time has come to no longer apologize for the inefficiencies inherent in good bookselling. The inherited model of retail, with which bookstores were established, is insufficient. We must recognize and then rectify the considerable devaluing of the work of booksellers in building spaces that contribute to a more learned, more understanding, and more fulfilled populace.

• • •

If we no longer need bookstores to buy books, why, then, do we still need bookstores? And what, in the twenty-first century, makes a good bookshop? Whatever answer we provide must begin with the presence of books and the impulse to browse those books; the best argument on behalf of bookstores is the bookstores themselves, carefully built by booksellers who, like Cella and our precursors, created an improbable place whose sheer existence provided a value to their bookish communities that far exceeded their financial dividends.

Join me as we make our way through the bookstore. I will use the bookstore itself—in many cases, the Seminary Co-op, although the experiences I describe are common to good bookstores—to make a case that a good bookshop, as Shils wrote, is “a necessary part of the habitat of a lively intelligence in touch with the world.”²² We will wander the stacks, pull a volume from the shelves, consider a thought or two, delight in a particularly felicitous observation,

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daydream a bit, and hope to circumscribe the problem, that we might tighten the circumference around the solution. As Walt Whitman says, “I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes; we convince by our presence.”²³ So it might be with books; so it might be with bookstores.

This book is not a lamentation (we have enough of those!) but a celebration—and, perhaps incidentally, a justification—of the good bookstore. To borrow from Borges, I submit these thoughts that we might let our enormous bookstore be justified.

• • •

My grandmother gave up the apartment in Boro Park in late 2012, eighteen years after the death of my grandfather, and the same year the Seminary Co-op moved one block east, from its subterranean origins to an illuminated, but still humble, building adjacent to Frank Lloyd Wright’s Robie House. After her death the following year, my grandparents’ apartment was razed. I had a chance to visit prior to the building’s demolition. As I climbed the staircase and entered the vacated apartment, I was struck by the indentation in the carpet along the living room wall. My grandfather’s books had made their impermanent mark and, for the better part of an hour, I beheld that indentation, formed in space by weight and time, as though I was considering the stars and the blossoming fruit trees, reflecting upon that which remains and that which passes.

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