



Commentary

Technology and the book: Thoughts occasioned by the closing of a bookshop

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When I opened my first bookshop twenty-seven years ago, I was both something of a crypto-idealist and a believer, as I remain, in the proposition that taste is not at all simply a matter of opinion, but a mode of understanding earned through passionate immersion in realms that remain forever foreign to most. Although I certainly had a stronger than ordinary motivation for finally learning something about why and how antiquarian books are traded, it took me quite a long time to understand what I do of the antiquarian book world. Perhaps I was at a disadvantage sitting in a bookshop every day for years on end. When I again decided to keep an open shop five years ago after a hiatus of six during which I worked privately, it was an act of resistance against the *Zeitgeist*, even if, as I mistakenly believed, a relatively safe one. But even a few blocks from Harvard Square and a stone's throw from the Houghton Library, which was surely one of the remaining places in the country where a majority of the thousands of people who flooded it daily actually possessed the vested interest in books that American academic "communities" promise but so rarely exemplify, what I was really resisting was indifference, and it's hard to know even where one's adversary lies in such a struggle, or where or how to lash out. When the term of my lease expires in April, I will close my final bookshop.

The bookshop is a cultural entity that has never really been appreciated at its worth, or perhaps even as a cultural entity at all. No doubt the (overt) taint of commerce has something to do with that, not to mention the peculiar idiot-savantry or even outright ignorance of many of its keepers, and there are indeed many bookshops which even a collector of human bizzarerie such as myself eschews. So I understand something of the general lack of respect in which antiquarian bookshops are typically held. To most they are somehow unwholesome remnants

of a bygone day, where grubby-fingered misfits pore over filthy old tomes, a plain-air asylum for a class of socially inappropriate obsessives. Strange that the desire for a profound and constant relationship to what represents humanity at its best can be widely perceived as odd, perverse or incomprehensible. In fact, the bookshop is a nexus for discovery, for first encounters with life-altering forces frozen in print.

At the risk of seeming childish, I venture that it would not be too much to say that the bookshop is a place of magic. The atmosphere of the genuine bookshop crackles with arcane communication and inexplicable connections. I first heard the word "synchronicity" used by a patron of my first bookshop by way of "explaining" the almost preternatural conjunctions he regularly experienced among my books and their browsers. The multivalent and resonant dialogue to which he referred is what any good bookseller prepares for his or her ideal audience. Of course one isn't born with the power to invoke or to respond to magic: that must be earned through lengthy apprenticeship. One's first few hundred visits to bookshops and the first several thousand books one picks up might well be merely preparatory to the first small epiphany that reveals a chick in apparent reality behind which gleams the daylight of truth. For Walter Benjamin, well known to have been a collector of antiquarian books, the creation of his library was perhaps the greatest work of art imaginable, the composition of a symphonic dialogue in which each note is itself a symphony. The well-constructed bookshop is an ever-changing incarnation of this symphonic principle.

Captive at his desk, inner eyes rolling at oozings over the smell of old books, and people who haven't the faintest notion of actually buying one just loving old bookshops; watching with half-severed tongue as the books are mis-

handled for the hundredth time, the neophyte bookseller discovers soon enough that the ideal constituency for his books is, sadly, himself. In his bookshop, he has revealed an image of himself, and it has, by and large, been spurned by the greater world. Like any young suitor, he realizes that it's time either to dissemble or to dedicate himself to "the one." Of course, "the one" may not yet be even a glimmer in his eye. It takes untold hours of delving into books before they begin to reveal that they are part of an enormous web, that their deepest purpose is often to whisper the name of another of their confederacy, that they are voices in the vast chorus of literature together. That understood, it might take several decades more to see them with the eyes of history, or, ideally, of the future, if one has been blessed, or cursed, with the desire to penetrate their surfaces at all.

The realm of the book has always been the realm of connoisseurs, even if they did not particularly regard themselves as such. When one hears the characterization, and it's still not so rare, at least among certain classes, "she's (or he's) a reader," it is normally spoken with a mixture of awe and surprise that anyone would be such a thing. However, even most "readers" have never really challenged themselves nor charted the true range and depth of the world of books, and their map of the literary world has stopped at the reading lists of the survey courses they took in school. When I rehearse the inane kvelling I've overheard for so many years over the most vapid of "classics," I am sorely tempted by despair. For such an efficient technology, conveying the greatest fruits of the imagination and the architected thought of the greatest minds of the species, in the most compact and efficient form, the book has fared poorly in penetrating the consciousness of the vast majority of even the educated.

Although for the pundit and the common man in the street alike, the demise of the book is *fait accompli*, I don't in the least feel that books are buggy-whips, and undoubtedly book-rich environments will persist long after the final ruin of paper publishing and the salvation of the forests. There are any number of compelling reasons why the codex, the tangible, spirit-charged, spring-loaded entity we have known for five hundred years (and more) should continue to exist, to be produced, to be revered, and to be an intimate part, if increasingly perhaps no longer the central core, of the world of all sensitive humans. I fear, though, that it will not be sensitive humans who will be making the choices that will determine its future. I very much hope, of course, that the future will return us to the

past in unanticipated ways, but I see nothing among the apparent larger trends to encourage me in that hope in the short term.

The ranks of the acolyte of the book are thinning. I have felt that deeply as so many friends with whom I have shared this devotion have died in recent years and as the active life of the average "collector" has dwindled to irrelevance while I sat in an empty bookshop wondering when my double would walk through the door. In spite of its universal and trans-historical essence, the experience of the book is fundamentally private. Each person's path to it, and in it, is different and ineffable. His experience of it normally gestates, or molders in solitude. It is the task of the bookseller to create society among both books and book-people. Of course that doesn't necessarily have to take place in the actual presence of either books or people, just as the literary work does not essentially require paper and ink, or, for that matter, any physical medium whatsoever, in order to exist. But with the demise of the bookshop, which seems all but inevitable in any form in which its social function can remain relevant, something of the mortar of culture is lost, and the future of the edifice becomes less certain.