

1 Introduction: Modernist Bookshops

I got out at Holborn Station and asked the way to Parton Street. No one had heard of it. Michael Roberts had mentioned Red Lion Square. I found my way to that pleasant quiet garden, shaded by London planes, the trunks patterned with large mosaic. He had mentioned the LCC Central School of Art, and there it was, on the corner. And there was Parton Street, narrow alley joining the square to Theobald's Road.

I found it in the end because of the gay display of posters advertising the *Daily Worker*, *Russia Today*, and *USSR in Construction*. ... In 1933 outside [David] Archer's bookshop were racks of unfamiliar and exciting periodicals. ... Inside the shop rows and rows of poets' slim volumes. — Maurice Carpenter, *Rebel in the Thirties*

Parton Street is a place-name evocative of 1930s literary London. Located a little more than two blocks southeast of the British Museum where Bloomsbury meets Holborn, the street connected Red Lion Square to Theobald's Road near Holborn Station. For a time, the street gave its name to a community of poets, artists, and activists moved by W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, surrealism, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), and the Spanish Civil War. David Archer's bookshop at 4 Parton Street, most famous for publishing Dylan Thomas's first book, brought all those individuals and interests together. In fact, along with Archer's, two other vital modernist institutions gave shape to the scene: a publisher and a cafe. And while publishers and cafes have been well considered within modernist studies, bookshops have generally been overlooked. This Element will use Parton Street as a case study to explore the role of the bookshop within the networks of modernist literary production. Even if Archer's stands as one example of what Huw Osborne has termed the "modernist bookshop," the shop's relationship to Lawrence & Wishart publishers next door and Meg's Cafe across the way presents an opportunity to consider how modernist bookshops existed as part of the world of literary publishing and socializing.

Yet, Parton Street did not simply function as a convenient marker for a congestion of activity but formed through cultural and geographical forces

that made such activity possible. The street, as I have noted, existed on the edges of Bloomsbury, itself a place of unclear geographical borders and of overloaded cultural significance. Sara Blair, approaching the “geocultural landscape” of Bloomsbury, has argued that it was “not place alone but the generation of a host of tactics ... that comprise[d] both material Bloomsbury and ‘Bloomsbury’, at once a habitat and the forms of belonging to it.”¹ Archer’s bookshop on a specific street, in a specific neighborhood, drew from its location and constructed an idea of itself embedded in its environs. As Section 2 will demonstrate, David Archer’s choice of Parton Street for the bookshop and, indeed, the idea for the bookshop itself were very much rooted in local activism.

Before we arrive at the bookshop’s origins, we should attend to the “forms of belonging” that made Parton Street a meaningful space. To accomplish this, I will first take a slight detour over to Charing Cross Road and the bookshops found there in the decade before Archer’s opened its doors. In particular, I want to focus on Henderson’s at 66 Charing Cross Road, which, from 1919 to 1920, published *Coterie*. The journal featured an impressive number of American and British poets and advertised its stock in a section in the back of each issue entitled “At the Bomb Shop” (as the shop was more familiarly known).² *Coterie* doubled as a literary publication and advertisement for the bookshop, as did *Poetry Review* for Harold Monro’s Poetry Bookshop at the same time. The networks these journals generated for their bookshops extended beyond their locations in London and also rendered the poetry they published synonymous with the shops’ locations. *Coterie*’s name speaks to the coming together as “habitat and forms of belonging.” Jennifer Wicke,

¹ S. Blair, “Local Modernity, Global Modernism: Bloomsbury and the Places of the Literary,” *ELH* 71.3 (Fall 2004), pp.815–16. An example Blair gives of what made those “host of tactics” for progressive individuals possible was the area’s infrastructure: she takes the easy divisibility of the signature Georgian townhouse for single living as a determining feature (820), a feature also present and meaningful on Parton Street as it contained similar buildings.

² For full electronic reproductions of *Coterie* with some more contextualizing history of the periodical, visit *The Modernist Journals Project* at http://modjourn.org/render.php?view=mjp_object&id=coterie.catalog

also writing on Bloomsbury, has argued that a coterie as well defined as Bloomsbury not only consumed “in a concerted effort of knowledge, taste, and power” but also presented the coterie lifestyle itself as desirable for consumption, producing a “coterie of and for consumption, a force within the market that made a market.”³ Circling back to Parton Street, as all the various memoirs of the shop attest, it briefly held up a desirable coterie lifestyle to be consumed, even if it remains difficult to explain exactly what it was.

To get at the unique form of a bookshop like Archer’s within modernist print cultures, we can turn to the journals and literary collections it sold for an analogy. If, for example, *Coterie*’s title speaks to a form of belonging, the journal’s format points to its plurality. Osborne, who has edited the only extended analysis of modernist bookshops to date, sees bookshops framed similarly, likening them to the anthologies, periodicals, and miscellanies of the time. Modernist bookshops are places where “authors, readers, representations, interpretations, production, and dissemination cohere in diversely unpredictable acts of intellectual and material change.”⁴ Approached in this way, modernist bookshops resemble collections such as periodicals or anthologies. As a kind of provisional institution or “authored work,” to borrow Jeremy Braddock’s term, modernist bookshops, like the modernist collections of the gallery or anthology he concerns himself with, “exist not simply for the sake of their individual works; they are also systems with meanings in themselves.”⁵ To take on board Braddock’s concept of the modernist collection for bookshops means that attention must be paid to the shop’s stock, the bookseller, finances, customers, locale, and scene as determining elements in a literary community.

³ J. Wicke, “Coterie Consumption: Bloomsbury, Keynes, and Modernism as Marketing,” in K. J. Dettmar and S. Watt (eds.), *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, Rereading* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 116.

⁴ H. Osborne, “Introduction: Openings,” in H. Osborne (ed.), *The Rise of the Modernist Bookshop: Books and the Commerce of Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2015), p. 6.

⁵ J. Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p.6.

Braddock, like many others writing on modernist institutions, refers to Lawrence Rainey's *Institutions of Modernism* when establishing his own sense of a "provisional institution." Rainey, in an oft-quoted passage building on Jurgen Habermas's theorization of the eighteenth-century public sphere, argued that "modernism, poised at the cusp of that transformation of the public sphere, responded with a tactical retreat into a divided world of patronage, collecting, speculation, and investment, a retreat that entailed the construction of an institutional counterspace, securing a momentary respite from a public realm increasingly degraded."⁶ Braddock demurs, instead arguing that "[r]ather than constructing a regressive 'institutional counterspace', the modernist collection was figured as ... a *provisional institution*, a mode of public engagement modeling future ... relationships between audience and artwork."⁷ What better place to build such relationships than a bookshop? Andrew Thacker, discussing the "public face of the modernist bookshop," argues that "[t]o run a bookshop which stocks experimental or

⁶ L. Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 5.

⁷ Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice*, p. 3. Rainey's framing of modernist institutions has come under critique from several angles. Ronald Schleifer challenges Rainey's definition of institutions – "structures that interpose themselves between the individual and society" – for assuming the "'individual and society' to be more or less natural entities rather than examining how they are instituted by means of habits, transpersonal rules, and cultural formations." L. Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, p. 6. See also R. Schleifer, *A Political Economy of Modernism: Literature, Post-Classical Economics, and the Lower Middle-Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 41. And more recently, John Xiros Cooper reminds us that Rainey limits what he means by institution to "small literary periodicals, literary presses, coteries and the like in the early years of the movement." J. X. Cooper, "Bringing the Modern to Market: The Case of Faber & Faber," in L. Jaillant (ed.), *Publishing Modernist Fiction and Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 89. Patrick Collier takes issue with Rainey's conceptualization of how and where aesthetic evaluation occurs, arguing that Rainey is on "dubious ground ... [for] suggesting that some alternative sphere might exist, or has existed, in which value is constructed in the absence of identifiable, competing interests." Collier, *Modern Print Artefacts*, p. 24.

avant-garde texts represents a direct engagement with a public culture of commerce,” adding that “[m]odernist bookshops ... appear to dwell both inside and outside the market, existing as part of the degraded public sphere and as spaces where counterpublic discourses might emerge.”⁸ A modernist bookshop, however radically posed, still ran a business in the book trade – it simply could not be viewed as a full retreat from the public realm.

I use Parton Street as an example in this Element to also foreground the role of the book trade on modernist bookshops and literary modernism. The focus here has been restricted to the 1930s, which, on the one hand, signifies along certain well-established lines within modernist studies, but the decade also saw important developments within the book trade that would have direct effects on bookshops and bookdealers. Most impactfully, the trade became more regulated following the Net Book Agreement (NBA) in 1901, but more so following a new emphasis on its enforcement in 1929. Broadly put, the NBA declared that publishers must sell new titles to all booksellers at the same net price, and, in turn, booksellers could not sell below the established net price.⁹ As an agreement among members of the Publishers Association and the Booksellers Association, it created stability in the trade and gave smaller bookdealers fairer competitive terms with the larger outlets.¹⁰ The NBA survived for decades to come, even while publishers

⁸ A. Thacker, “‘A True Magic Chamber’: The Public Face of the Modernist Bookshop,” *Modernist Cultures* 11.3 (2016), p. 434.

⁹ Frederick Macmillan successfully experimented with net pricing in 1890 with Alfred Marshall’s *The Principles of Economics*. M. Plant, *The English Book Trade; An Economic History of the Making and Sale of Books* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1939), pp. 441–2. Coincidentally enough, Marshall was an important figure for David Archer while the latter was at Cambridge (see Section 3).

¹⁰ The Booksellers Association was previously the Associated Booksellers of Great Britain and Ireland (1895), but I have retained its current and more commonly known name to avoid confusion, especially as this Element does not focus on the internal developments of the association. As for the NBA, to be sure its implementation was uneven and there were differing views over its benefits. Booksellers opposed more competitors and the resulting lower turnover, whereas publishers desired an expansion of outlets for distribution. R. J. Taraporevala, *Competition and Its Control in the British Book Trade, 1850–1939* (London: Pitman

like Basil Blackwell and G. S. Williams worried that a proliferation of booksellers would not increase overall sales for their firms but would instead introduce complexity into the trade.¹¹

Another significant development – the modern paperback – sustained the trade during a period otherwise marked by a global economic depression and the aforementioned conservatism toward expanding competition. The modern paperback combined the old and unpopular paper-covered book with the new and cheap reprint series.¹² Lise Jaillant has argued that cheap reprint series not only expanded general readership but also helped circulate literary modernism, as figures like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce would be reprinted alongside other so-called middlebrow fare.¹³ It is a claim heightened by a recent assertion that around one-third of the British reading public in the 1930s and 1940s owned paperbacks.¹⁴

There were other considerations for prospective bookdealers in the 1930s. Circulating libraries and book clubs were popular means of drawing clientele.¹⁵ And the NBA gained influence after 1929 when it added

Publishing, 1973), p. 114. John Feather, who relies on Taraporevala for much of his NBA discussion, opens his chapter on “The Publishing Industry” with the declaration that the NBA “was the principal support upon which the whole structure of the British publishing industry rested for almost the whole of the twentieth century. J. Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 152. Thomas Joy, who was a prominent mid-century bookseller and commentator on the trade, argued that the NBA was an overall good for smaller bookdealers. T. Joy, *The Bookselling Business* (London: Pitman Publishing, 1974), p. 26.

¹¹ J. Barnes, *Free Trade in Books: A Study of the London Book Trade since 1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 152–3.

¹² Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, pp. 172–3.

¹³ L. Jaillant, *Cheap Modernism*, p. 5.

¹⁴ P. Mandler, “Good Reading for the Million: The ‘Paperback Revolution’ and the Co-Production of Academic Knowledge in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain and America,” *Past and Present* 24.1 (August 2019), pp. 251–2. J. R. Evans, “The Promethean Society: A Survey,” *Twentieth Century* 1 (March 1931), p. 23.

¹⁵ I discuss circulating libraries in Section 3 in some depth, and book clubs in Section 4.

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-70869-2 — London and the Modernist Bookshop
 Matthew Chambers
 Excerpt
[More Information](#)

oversight to trade terms applications submitted to the Publishers Association by booksellers. In short, a small bookdealer like David Archer could enter a relatively stable market with some mitigation of risk.¹⁶

A bookshop like Archer's could conceivably get trade terms and expect some price protection in the market. But as Section 3 will show, the shop mainly relied on smaller firms for its stock. And those firms relied on small shops like Archer's for distribution. Publishers like Victor Gollancz Ltd., Hogarth Press, and Lawrence & Wishart advertised and distributed in narrower channels than their larger competitors. Advertisements might be bought in *The Times* but would more regularly be featured in the *Daily Worker*, *New Verse*, and *Left Review* and would sometimes direct the reader to a specific bookshop.¹⁷ These relationships between bookdealers and publishers, as well as among bookdealers themselves, made the trade an intimate space. Jean-Luc Nancy captured this intimacy when he declared that a "bookstore is always found on the edge of a grand avenue that leads nowhere but from book to book."¹⁸ This image, considered as a description of the trade, emphasizes both the localness of the bookshop and the interconnectedness of the book trade. Places like Archer's may not have always been on the main thoroughfares, but neither did they exist in a vacuum. There were more than sixty bookshops in Parton Street's W.C.1 postcode in 1934, fifty within a kilometer of Archer's. One brief example best underscores how this community of bookselling functioned: Ben Weinreb, who worked at Archer's and later became a well-established bookdealer in his own right, began his career as a book runner. Shops like Archer's would advertise that they could acquire

¹⁶ Taraporevala, *Competition and Its Control*, pp. 137–9.

¹⁷ For example, Nancy Cunard advertised her Hours Press in a circular noting in which shops her books were stocked (a strategy *Left Review* regularly employed in its back pages). For Cunard and the Hours Press, see N. Cunard, *These Were the Hours* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 15. Hammill and Hussey, *Modernism's Print Cultures*, p. 109.

¹⁸ J. L. Nancy, *On the Commerce of Thinking: Of Bookshops and Bookstores* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p. 45.

titles available at other dealers across London in short periods of time, and runners like Weinreb would fetch them.¹⁹

To foreground the importance of place and network for a bookshop, this *Element* progresses as a series of close views at the individual addresses on Parton Street. Section 2, “Red Lion Square,” examines the political activity at the South Place Ethical Society, as well as the forming of the Promethean Society, to both introduce how the adjoining Parton Street became a place for networking and examine how David Archer came to open a bookshop there. In Parton Street’s prehistory, we have the blueprint for the literary and political activity that was to follow. Section 3, “4 Parton Street,” details the bookshop opened there and its founder David Archer. This section has two central purposes: to examine the figure of the bookseller and to examine the varied lives and functions of a modernist bookshop. Section 4, “2 Parton Street,” focuses on the publisher Lawrence & Wishart’s early years (1936–9) at this address, especially its formal business partnership with the Workers’ Bookshop and Collet’s Bookshop, and less formal connection to the bookshop next door. This section also reviews Lawrence & Wishart’s challenges partnering with the publisher Victor Gollancz on the influential Left Book Club to highlight the important role book clubs had in the identity of shops like Archer’s in the 1930s. The *Element* concludes in “1 Parton Street and Beyond” with a discussion of Meg’s Cafe and the difficulty of reconstructing the archives of modernist institutions, as well as a consideration of possible ways forward for the study of modernist bookshops with a review of some of Archer’s contemporaries.

2 Red Lion Square

The origins of the Parton Street scene begin with David Archer’s bookshop. But why did Archer open a bookshop on Parton Street? Why did he open a bookshop at all? The answer begins with the fact that the shop was opened as a Promethean Society venture. The story of the society itself is

¹⁹ N. Barker, “Obituary: Ben Weinreb,” *The Independent* (April 7, 1999), www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-ben-weinreb-1085605.html [accessed January 12, 2019].

centered on Holborn and Red Lion Square. This section focuses on the formation of the Promethean Society to set up the intellectual and social background that shaped Archer's bookshop. In essence, the Promethean Society gave Archer's the identity that later attracted politically involved artists and writers. And Red Lion Square was an ideal space for the Promethean Society to establish itself.

As the statue of Fenner Brockway and a bust of Bertrand Russell that bookend the park in Red Lion Square attest, the square has been the site of much radical activity since the early twentieth century.²⁰ The South Place Ethical Society (SPES) moved to the newly built Conway Hall on Red Lion Square in the late 1920s and drew much of that activity.²¹ Conway Hall was, and remains, a space devoted to the debate of religion and ethics and regularly holds concerts, talks, and study groups. The hall features lectures on literature, politics, and science, and the space serves as a meeting place for a myriad of groups and activities. But in its first years at the Red Lion Square address, it underwent a bit of an identity crisis. SPES had a close relationship with the Rationalist Press Association (RPA); in fact, two of SPES's appointed lecturers had been key RPA members (Joseph McCabe and Archibald Robertson). A junior RPA member, J. B. Coates, who also edited SPES's monthly publication, *Ethical Record*, openly challenged the RPA's focus in an August 1931 entry into the RPA's organ *Literary Guide*. This led to a failed leadership challenge within the RPA, but it left Coates

²⁰ Indeed the location has been no stranger to social protest: it is claimed that the exhumed corpse of Oliver Cromwell was held at an inn at Red Lion Fields the night before his second "execution." A. Fraser, *Cromwell: The Lord Protector* (New York: Grove Press, 1973), pp. 692–3. And later when that field was developed into a square in 1684, neighboring Gray's Inn inhabitants, protesting the loss of their view, battled the development's workers. D. Hayes, *East of Bloomsbury* Camden History Society, 1998), p. 13. In a quieter mode, a blue plaque at 17 Red Lion Square notes that Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1851), William Morris, and Sir Edward C. Burne-Jones (1856–9) lived there, formative years for Morris after student life at Oxford. F. MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life of Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 110–53.

²¹ "Conway Hall: Beginnings," <https://conwayhall.org.uk/ethical-society/beginnings>

and figures like C. E. M. Joad motivated to found their own society.²² Another incident compounded the administrative uncertainty during this time, when F. M. Overy, SPES secretary and manager, was found dead of an apparent suicide following a diagnosis of a terminal illness.²³ In fact, SPES's records of its early years at Conway Hall are scanty, suggesting some turmoil in its management, but it would remain an important address for progressive activists.

As it turned out, Coates was not alone in stirring generational controversy in his circles. In April 1930, E. M. Barraud wrote to the editor of *Everyman* complaining that columnists G. D. H. Cole and Liam Flaherty had been stoking up subversiveness without providing a path forward for people such as herself. In a frightening reveal of how isolated a woman with non-mainstream views could be made to feel in interwar Britain, she opined “[t]here must be dozens of people like myself who’d rather be dead right away than die by inches over a number of years.”²⁴ She goes on to demand “I want to meet the rest of us.”²⁵ Somewhat remarkably, she would get her wish. Over the next several months, *Everyman* published the responses under the banner “The Revolt of Youth”; by the summer, Barraud was joined by George Pendle and Jon Randell Evans in manifesto mode, arguing that they “want to fight against death” and insisted they were “not cranks bent upon forming an ‘organization’ ... [and were not] content to talk about Change, but [would] work changes in the world.”²⁶ In the following issue, they appealed to interested individuals to help “form a loose association of small groups ... supplemented and co-ordinated by postal correspondence.”²⁷ By the following March, this “loose association”

²² B. Cooke, *The Blasphemy Depot: A Hundred Years of the Rationalist Press Association* (London: Rationalist Press Association, 2003), pp. 99–103.

²³ “Ethical Society Secretary Found Dead,” *The Times* (August 16, 1932), p. 7. The *Ethical Record* paid tribute to Overy, noting he scouted the Red Lion Square address and advocated for SPES's move there (E.F.E. 1932, 2–3).

²⁴ E. M. Barraud, “The Revolt of Youth,” *Everyman* 3.63 (April 10, 1930), p. 336.

²⁵ Barraud, “Revolt of Youth,” 336.

²⁶ G. Pendle, J. R. Evans, E. M. Barraud, “The Revolt of Youth,” *Everyman* 3.74 (June 26, 1930), p. 684.

²⁷ G. Pendle, J. R. Evans, E. M. Barraud, “The Revolt of Youth,” *Everyman* 3.76 (July 10, 1930), p. 716.