

'A True Magic Chamber': The Public Face of the Modernist Bookshop

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Abstract

This article explores the role of bookshops in the construction of a public for modernism and analyses a number of bookshops committed to promoting modernist culture, such as those run by Sylvia Beach (Shakespeare and Company), Adrienne Monnier (La Maison des Amis des Livres), and Frances Steloff (Gotham Book Mart). It also considers how the bookshop is a fulcrum between commerce and culture, a key issue for contemporary modernist studies, and discusses aspects of bookshop culture that seem to operate 'beyond' the market. One example is that of *We Moderns*, a catalogue issued by the Gotham Book Mart in 1940 and which represents a fascinating example of the print culture of the modernist bookshop. Drawing upon the work of Mark Morrisson and Lawrence Rainey, the article also evaluates the position of the bookshop within debates around modernism and the public sphere.

The Business of the Magic Chamber

A member of the public strolling through Paris in the early 1920s who drifts onto the Left Bank in search of culture, might find themselves in the triangle of small streets between the grander avenues of Boulevard St. Michel and the Boulevard St. Germain in the 6th Arrondissement. These are the streets around the Sorbonne and, as such, there are many bookshops servicing the university. Thinking it might be fun to buy a book, a modern or contemporary book, they stroll up Rue de l'Odéon, across from the National Theatre, spying a likely looking bookshop and decide to enter. As a member of the public, they might soon become a customer, which entails a quite different relationship to the person who runs the bookshop. What, however, does the bookseller think of them, probably a total stranger who enters the space of the bookshop, a space that is both public (anyone can enter) and yet, often, feels intimidating or private?

One bookseller from the Rue de l'Odéon offered the shop owner's perspective, describing Left Bank bookselling and the reception of the member of the general public in this way:

A shop seems to us to be a true magic chamber: at that instant when the passer-by crosses the threshold of the door that everyone can open, when he penetrates into that apparently impersonal place, nothing disguises the look of his face, the tone of his words; he accomplishes with a feeling of complete freedom an act that he believes to be without unforeseen consequences; there is a perfect correspondence between his external attitude and his profound self, and if we know how to observe him at that instant when he is only a stranger, we are able, now and forever, to know him in his truth; he reveals all the good will with which he is endowed, that is to say, the degree to which he is

accessible to the world, what he can give and receive, the exact rapport that exists between himself and other men.

For this bookshop owner, to cross the threshold of this 'magic chamber' is a key existential moment: the stranger acts with 'complete freedom', somehow revealing their 'profound self' and the 'truth' of their subjectivity. In entering the shop this member of the book-buying public demonstrates something like an openness to the other, revealing in both his 'good will' and in how far he is 'accessible to the world', the 'exact rapport' between himself and the other. This bookseller appears to believe that they can decipher your subjectivity as transparently as reading the words on the page of the book they are holding at that moment. The 'magic', then, of the bookshop is to produce this transformative moment when the passer-by shifts, we might say, from public to private, from anonymous stranger to a person the owner can begin to relate to. The woman in the street thus becomes a member of a specific public in this moment – the book-buying public. Interestingly, the bookseller then suggests that it is the liminal space of the encounter that partly conditions this transformative relationship: 'This immediate and intuitive understanding, this private fixing of the soul, how easy they are in a shop, a place of transition between street and house!'²

This philosophical meditation upon the bookshop as a 'place of transition' is taken from Adrienne Monnier, the founder of La Maison des Amis des Livres, a French language bookshop and lending library started in 1915 in Rue de l'Odéon. This street also contained another bookshop of significance to scholars of modernism, one that in the Anglophone world has tended to overshadow Monnier's bookshop, even though they were deeply intertwined enterprises. This is, of course, the English language bookshop, Shakespeare and Company, opened in 1919 in nearby Rue Dupuytren by Monnier's companion, the American Sylvia Beach, and which relocated in 1921 to a position opposite La Maison des Amis. Shakespeare and Company achieved fame as the rendezvous for the many expatriate British and American writers in Paris in the twenties and thirties, as well as for publishing the first edition of *Ulysses*. Rue de l'Odéon – or 'Odéonia' as Monnier described this small corner of Paris – was thus the site of some of the most influential collaborative practices of modernism.

In an excellent discussion of Beach and Monnier, Joanne Winning describes how the two bookshops transformed the 'physical space' of the street into an 'intellectual space' where 'modernist identification and then production' flourished.³ Though Beach famously published *Ulysses* it was Monnier who suggested the printer, Maurice Darantiere of Dijon, to undertake the arduous task of typesetting *Ulysses*. In 1921 Monnier also arranged for La Maison to host Valéry Larbaud's celebrated lecture on Joyce, along with readings from *Ulysses* in French and English, to an audience estimated at 250 crammed into the bookshop. The lecture was a key event in establishing Joyce's reputation in France and was followed, eight years later, by Monnier's publication of the first French translation of Joyce's novel. Monnier's La Maison des Amis was the French equivalent of Beach's bookshop in terms of its commitment to experimental modernism, staging readings by modern French authors such as Jean Cocteau, André Gide, and Paul Valéry, and stocking avant-garde 'little magazines' such as Pierre Reverdy's *Nord-Sud* and André Breton's early surrealist magazine, *Littérature*.

Unlike Beach, Monnier herself was actively involved in the publication of several little magazines, such as Princesse Caetani's *Commerce*, Henry Church's *Mesures*, and Monnier's own small magazines, *Le Navire d'Argent* and *La Gazette des Amis des Livres*: the first French translation of Eliot's 'Prufrock' appeared in *Le Navire* in 1925, jointly translated by Monnier and Beach, followed by an American issue of the magazine in 1926 containing first French translations of Hemingway, Cummings, and William Carlos Williams.⁴ Due to her lack of funds Monnier at first specialized in 'modern literature' and 'modern works', rather than the expensive leather-bound editions of established French authors, as would have been stocked by most other bookshops in Paris at the time.⁵ Monnier also decided that 'the true business of a bookshop included not only selling but lending', and thus developed a subscription lending library, one of the earliest in France, a feature copied by Beach.⁶ Both libraries serviced the reading needs of many modernist writers in Paris in the 1920s and 30s. Beach recalled that Joyce, for example, took out dozens of books from her library and sometimes kept them for many years.⁷

The shared 'intellectual space' of the two bookshops can be seen in the discount offered to members of Beach's library if they were also library members with Monnier's bookshop. Monnier's bookshop was also patronized by the same expatriate customers we normally associate with Shakespeare and Company, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Commenting upon the American writers who visited the two bookshops, Beach used a revealing image that combines sociability and geographical proximity: 'we shared them all. There should have been a tunnel under the rue de l'Odeon.'⁸ This confirms Winning's analysis of the bookshops as forms of 'lived space', in Henri Lefebvre's sense, as a shared location both for 'incoming connections' and 'as a centre for outgoing dissemination.'⁹

For Monnier, then, a bookshop was more than merely a place that sold books, and the language she uses to describe her business may strike us today as somewhat quaint or out of touch with what we wearily call 'economic realities'; she writes, for example, that she 'founded *La Maison des Amis des Livres* with faith' and that 'Business, for us, has a moving and profound meaning.'¹⁰ For Monnier this 'profound meaning' envisions the bookshop as both a semi-religious space (shown in her references to 'faith', 'grace', and 'rapture'), as well as something akin to an image of the good life, where human beings discover fulfillment based upon their interaction with others and with the mystical qualities of books. Monnier thus resists viewing the act of economic exchange that transforms the passer-by into a member of the book-buying public as equivalent to the sale of other types of commodity:

Selling books, that seems to some people as banal as selling any sort of object or commodity, and based upon the same routine tradition that demands of the seller and the buyer only the gesture of exchanging money against the merchandise, a gesture that is accompanied, generally, by a few phrases of politeness.

We think, first of all, that the faith we put into selling books can be put into all daily acts; one can carry on no matter what business, no matter what profession, with a satisfaction that at certain moments has a real lyricism. The human being who is perfectly adapted to his function, and who

works in harmony with others, experiences a fullness of feeling that easily becomes exaltation when he is in rapport with people situated upon the same level of life as himself; once he can communicate and cause what he experiences to be felt, he is multiplied, he rises above himself and strives to be as much of a poet as he can; that elevation, that tenderness, is it not the state of grace in which everything is illuminated by an eternal meaning? But if every conscious person can be exalted upon his calling and grasp the wonderful rapports that bind him to Society, what shall our own feelings not be for us, booksellers, who before every thought of gain and work that is based upon books, have loved them with rapture and have believed in the infinite power of the most beautiful?¹¹

For Monnier, then, before the profit and loss account is reckoned, the bookseller should have loved books with a 'rapture' and it is this experience of 'faith' that, in an image of utopian longing, might be 'put into all daily acts.' The relation of the bookseller to their books thus presents something like an image of unalienated labour, demonstrating the 'rapports that bind' the subject to society seemingly prior to mediation by commodity-exchange.

We might read Monnier's words today with a mixture of feelings: nostalgia perhaps for a view of works of art as embodying 'the infinite power of the most beautiful', or for a historical moment crucial to early twentieth-century modernism when revolutionary ideals were harnessed closely to avant-garde experimentation. Or we might take a more cynical attitude to Monnier's claims, one conditioned by our training in interpreting modernism through the categories of commodification or economic institutions: selling books, we might retort, is really no different from the selling of any other commodity, banal or otherwise. Much of the impetus for this interpretation of the logic of bookselling in the modernist period comes from the work of critics such as Lawrence Rainey, John Xiros Cooper, Kevin Dettmar and others, who have taught us to be more attentive to the economic relationships that governed the interactions between modernist texts and their publics. 'Who Paid for Modernism?', in Joyce Wexler's phrase, is now more likely to be how we discuss modernist writers than a language of rapture and magic.¹²

However, of all the 'institutions of modernism' that have been discussed since attention shifted from grace and beauty to the bottom line of modernism it is surely the modern bookshop that has received the least critical attention. This article thus offers some thoughts towards analyzing the role of the bookshop in modernism, focusing upon three features of its relationship to the public: its ambivalent location between commerce and culture; its promotion of collaborative cultural practices; and its significant role within the networks of modernism.

Jump to The Public Face of the Bookshop

Extensive work has been done that has considered modern periodical culture, small presses and publishers, salons, manifestos, movements and isms, as well as other significant features of the modernist marketplace such as celebrity, patronage, and censorship.¹³ However, despite the welter of scholarship upon the complex cultural infrastructure that underpinned Anglo-European and American modernism in particular, one of the most important sites of the everyday transaction of the modernist artefact between artist, writer, publisher, and public has been virtually ignored – that is, the humble bookshop.¹⁴

Theoretical discussion of the bookshop as a 'contact zone' between the culture of modernism and the public might start by revisiting Rainey's argument in *Institutions of Modernism* that we need to 'trace the institutional profile of modernism in the social spaces and staging venues where it operated'.¹⁵ His aim is thus to examine 'the troublesome place of literary elites in public culture', where public culture is what he calls a 'colloquial counterpart' to Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere, simultaneously a set of sites and meeting places in the eighteenth century (salons, coffee houses, journals, networks) and a practice which aimed to produce undistorted forms of communication across a number of different spheres (aesthetic, political, social).¹⁶ The public sphere becomes transformed in later centuries by other institutions, such as the mass media, producing what Habermas calls 'systematically distorted communication' rather than the pure rational discourse of the public sphere.¹⁷ Rainey, summing up his use of Habermas, thus argues that modernism responded to this transformation in the public sphere by retreating into 'a divided world of patronage, collecting, speculation, and investment, a retreat that entailed the construction of an institutional counter-space securing a momentary respite from a public realm increasingly degraded, even as it entailed a fatal compromise with precisely that degradation.'¹⁸

Rainey's term, 'counter-space', recalls the concept of the 'counterpublic sphere', developed by feminist critics such as Nancy Fraser and Rita Felski in response to Habermas's work.¹⁹ However it is worth stressing how Rainey's 'counter-space' does not possess the element of critique inherent in the notion of a counterpublic. For Rainey, the modernist 'retreat' from the commercial public sphere is into a world of patronage and collecting, borrowing from 'exchange and market structures' to develop deluxe editions and rare books which not only echo the wider commercial world but which are now based upon 'a limited submarket for luxury goods'.²⁰ This tendency runs the risk, as in Rainey's infamous judgment of H.D., of retreating so much that the public is completely forgotten: the 'counter-space' thus becomes a 'coterie poetics', where the deluxe edition is not sold in a bookshop open to the public, but by a subscription list of like-minded writers and artists.²¹

In contrast, for critics such as Fraser and Felski the counter-public sphere is an oppositional discursive space within contemporary society that wishes to ultimately transform the public sphere rather than ape its worst features. In terms of modernist studies, one of the most stimulating arguments drawing upon this notion can be found in Mark Morrisson's *The Public Face of Modernism*. Morrisson interprets modernist little magazines as 'engaged with the public sphere and with the commercial culture of the early twentieth century'.²² For Morrisson, magazines such as Ford's *English Review* or Harold Monro's *Poetry Review* sought ways to 'rejuvenate' the public sphere by drawing upon the new print technologies that enabled the boom in magazine production at the turn of the century. Certain magazines, however, found that though they could not intervene to 'rejuvenate' the discourse of the public sphere as exemplified by the mass market for magazines, they might have more success in developing 'counterpublic spheres'. For Morrisson, then, magazines such as *The Egoist*, *The Little Review* and *Masses* respond 'to the possibility of appropriating some of the institutions of the newly emerging mass publishing world to create counterpublicity, counterpublic spheres whose ultimate aim was to influence the dominant public sphere.'²³ As Morrisson stresses, at no point did these magazines aim to 'retreat into the private and elite confines of coterie production.'²⁴ Little magazines in this account thus resemble bookshops: both always maintain a public face.

This article thus considers Rainey's notion of 'public culture' and how it relates to that rather neglected 'public face' of modernism, the bookshop. As well as discussing the La Maison des Amis des Livres and Shakespeare and Company, it focuses upon another female bookshop proprietor, Frances Steloff, founder of New York's Gotham Book Mart. Morrison's articulation of counterpublic spheres seems to be one important way in which we might understand these bookshops as engaged, to recall Monnier, simultaneously in the banal discourse of selling a commodity as well as in something that articulates a more aesthetic and sometimes politicised discourse. Morrison, for example, explores in detail not only Harold Monro's magazines, *Poetry Review* and *Poetry and Drama*, but also the multiple activities – readings, talks, and discussions – that were staged in his Poetry Bookshop and which were designed to enable poetry to reach beyond a coterie audience towards the newly enfranchised mass public of urban London. The bookshop thus operated, in Morrison's terms, as a 'public space of oral performance'.²⁵ Or, as Monro asserted in 1912 in another trope of collaborative practice: 'Our purpose is to draw this public together and bring it into touch, through the Bookshop, with poetry as a living art, and as represented in the work of living poets.'²⁶

Bookshops, then, to adapt the terms used by Rainey of wider cultural institutions, are key 'social spaces and staging venues' for the development of modernism.²⁷ However, they are not necessarily institutions that represent the 'tactical retreat' from the degraded and commodified public culture that Rainey associated with other modernist practices in his book, such as the patronage of individual artists by wealthy benefactors or limited print runs of deluxe editions of texts (although we can find examples of these in bookshops). To run a bookshop which stocks experimental or avant-garde texts represents a direct engagement with a public culture of commerce; any member of the public can enter and browse in a modernist bookshop, and even if they cannot necessarily afford to purchase, say, the luxury edition of Pound's *A Draft of XVI Cantos* published by Bill Bird's Three Mountains Press in 1925 for 400 fr (around £5),²⁸ they might well be willing to part with a smaller sum to purchase a copy of *The Little Review* (15c) or *The Egoist* (6d) magazine.

Therefore, in terms of ongoing debates around modernism, its publics, and the marketplace, more attention should be focused upon the bookshop for the simple reason that it operates as the fulcrum between culture and commerce.²⁹ However, returning to the (admittedly rather artificial) opposition between Adrienne Monnier and Lawrence Rainey, do we really have to choose between an interpretation of the bookshop as a 'magic chamber' or as just another commercial venue? In a rejoinder to what he calls the 'market fatalism' that has infused much work in modernist studies over the last twenty years, Glenn Wilmott has called for more attention to practices that exist 'outside of the market' – to which he includes 'bookshop culture'.³⁰ This seems slightly paradoxical, as the bookshop is the most obvious nexus for where the market impinges upon literary culture: after all, bookshops sell things, they rarely give them away. But Wilmott's 'bookshop culture' gestures beyond the transaction of commodities, towards the collaborative practices and cultural activities imagined by Monnier, engaging publics in ways beyond treating them as mere economic agents. Modernist bookshops, then, 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, both commercial venues and sites of rapture and magic. As Winning forcefully argues, the Beach/Monnier 'model of the bookshop' is more than a business enterprise which 'articulate[s]

space through its exchange value': for, in its 'shaping of bookshop space as space for congregation and social connection', it is 'clearly defined by its use value.'³¹

Defining modern bookshop culture beyond the market thus begins with the idea of the bookshop as a social space in which activities other than selling books takes place, and all three of the bookshops discussed here can be understood in such a fashion. Janet Flanner, for instance, described Shakespeare and Company in the following way: 'Her [...] bookshop in the Rue de l'Odeon served as a literary clubhouse, reading room, lending library, seminar room and almost as an expatriates' town hall.'³² Here we witness the bookshop as 'staging venue', in Rainey's terms, for modernist culture, acting as a performance space or as a location for readings, gatherings, cafes, salons, or just simply places to hang out – or even stay overnight. Monro's Poetry Bookshop, for example, had two attic bedrooms for poets to stay at low rents, with Robert Frost, W. W. Gibson, and the sculpture Jacob Epstein all staying there at various times, while Wilfred Owen once had to be turned away as there were no beds left.³³

Many of these activities of the bookshop as social space and 'staging venue' beyond the market involve practices of networking and collaboration. Kate McLoughlin's collection of essays, *The Modernist Party*, draws attention to the idea of the party – as actual event and literary topos – as a form of gathering that, amongst other things, presented modernists with key opportunities for networking. One such instance was a cocktail party held in 1948 at the Gotham Book Mart, New York, the bookshop to which this article now turns. The party was held for a visit of the Sitwells, Edith and Osbert, with the gathered literary celebrities (Stephen Spender, Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Charles Henri Ford, Delmore Schwartz) being photographed for a feature in *Life* magazine (fig. 1). This image of mid-century celebrity culture also demonstrates the importance of the bookshop as staging venue, facilitating networking for writers and artists in a way we now take for granted via social media, and which inevitably gave rise to collaborative work by modernists. However, in addition to acting as sites for collaborations and cocktail parties, modernist bookshops were themselves also networked across continents. Bookshops were crucial nodal points in the networks that diffused modernism around the globe, and tracing these networks also reveals lines of connection, influence, and support between key bookshop proprietors. Beach, for example, not only learnt much about bookselling practices from Monnier, but she also visited two other key bookshops in London before opening her shop: Monro's Poetry Bookshop, in Bloomsbury, and Elkin Mathews' shop in Vigo Street. From Mathews she obtained early volumes by Pound (such as *Lustra* and *Personae*) and Yeats, along with multiple copies of Joyce's *Chamber Music*. Mathews had published all of these authors and thus provided Beach with a model of the independent bookseller as publisher as well as stockist of modern works.³⁴

figure

Fig 1 Lisa Larsen, 'A Collection of Poets', *Life* magazine (6 December 1948).

A similar set of connections can be traced between the Gotham Book Mart and Shakespeare and Company. The Gotham Book Mart was opened by Frances Steloff in Manhattan, in 1920, barely a

year after Shakespeare and Company opened in Paris. Frances Steloff, on her first visit to Europe in 1923, had visited Beach's shop in the hope of meeting Joyce. Correspondence between Beach and Steloff from 1934 onwards indicates a mutual respect for each other's enterprises as well as a shared understanding of their role in promoting modernist work. In a letter from 1936, for instance, Beach praises Steloff's shop: 'Your shop is so well managed, and is certainly the best modern bookshop anywhere to be seen.'³⁵ This is a revealing use of the term 'modern,' indicating how the owners saw their premises as replicating the cultural innovations of the products that they stocked. In 1934 Steloff requested several copies of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* from Beach, while in 1935 Steloff inquired about Beach's plans to sell a number of Joyce manuscripts.³⁶ There is also considerable discussion of various little magazines, with Beach trying to secure an outlet for Henry Church's magazine, *Mesures*: 'I gave him such an exciting account of the Gotham Book Mart [...] that he feels more than ever that you are the only one who can handle *MESURES* in America and get it into the hands of the people likely to be interested in it.'³⁷ In reply Steloff notes that 'We cannot do very much with literary magazines in foreign languages, but since we do carry a complete stock of ultra-modern, it is quite possible that we can build up a demand. We would be willing to list it in our forth-coming catalogue of *Modern Authors*.'³⁸ Though there is clearly a business dimension here, shown in the recognition of the difficulty of selling non-English language products in the US, there is also a sense of being mutually engaged in promoting the 'modern' and 'ultra-modern.' Steloff thus ends this letter warmly: 'With appreciation of your good will and assuring you of our desire to co-operate at all times.' When World War Two broke out Steloff heard that Beach might have difficulty returning to the US without a job and so she sent her a telegram: 'Welcome, job waiting, cable collect'.³⁹ Beach never received the message, and stayed in France, finally closing Shakespeare and Company in 1941.⁴⁰

Jump to We Moderns

In a later memoir Steloff observed of Beach and Shakespeare and Company: 'We had a lot in common, of course. Our bookshops were often thought of in the same breath, though I never had the advantages that she did.'⁴¹ This remark not only reveals the different trajectories by which the two women became bookshop owners, but also points to how they might be placed differently within the cultural field of modernism. Beach came from a wealthy background in New Jersey: her father was a minister in Princeton and the family were friends with President Woodrow Wilson and took holidays in Europe. Beach opened Shakespeare and Company with a cheque sent from her mother for \$3000⁴² (cashed for 24,000 fr.; around half a million dollars today) and, although the shop never made large profits (partly due to Beach's careless way with accounts),⁴³ she continued to receive financial support from her family to the extent that she acted as another of Joyce's long-suffering female patrons. T. S. Eliot once claimed that Joyce had no bank account and instead 'Sylvia acted as his banker. When he needed money he wrote to Sylvia, who promptly sent a banker's draft.' Such financial transactions led Beach to ironically refer to her shop as 'The Left Bank'.⁴⁴

Frances Steloff began the Gotham Book Mart, and, indeed, her biographical journey, from a quite different place. Born in 1887 to a family of Jewish immigrants in Saratoga Springs, New York state, Steloff was one of ten children who lived in terrible poverty.⁴⁵ At the age of fifteen she ran away to New York, eventually finding work there in Loeser's department store, selling corsets. During one Christmas period she was transferred to Loeser's magazine department, selling mainstream magazines such as Scribner's and Munsey's. From there Steloff moved to work in the book

departments of McDevitt Wilson and Brentano's, learning along the way about first editions, out-of-print books, and deluxe publishing. While working at Brentano's she would often pause outside the small independent bookshop on 31st Street, The Sunwise Turn, started by Madge Jennison and Mary Mowbray Clarke. The Sunwise Turn self-consciously marketed itself as a 'Modern Bookshop' (fig. 2), paying close attention to the modernist 'look' of its interior space, and also conceived the role of the bookshop to be more than selling books.⁴⁶ An 'intelligent book-shop', argued owner Mary Mowbray Clarke, must act like a "university militant" since the 'wide spread of creative ideas becomes, in the changing conditions of our time, more and more necessary to the development of this republic.'⁴⁷

figure

Fig 2 Advertising flyer for the Sunwise Turn Bookshop (courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin).

In 1920 Steloff opened the Gotham Book Mart, combining her admiration for the 'modern' Sunwise Turn with her experience of books as commodities learnt at Brentano's and department stores: her funding was a \$100 Liberty Bond, \$100 in cash, an offer of \$300 from her sister if needed, and a bookcase of around 175 out-of-print books of her own. Though Steloff's story differed in important respects to that of Beach, they not only shared a role in publicizing James Joyce but also in promoting little magazines. It was Joyce's friend and the editor of the important modernist magazine transition, Eugene Jolas, who said that while Sylvia Beach was the Paris representative for the magazine, it was 'Frances Steloff's "Gotham Book Mart" [which] acted as our American agency.'⁴⁸

A former employee of the Gotham Book Mart described the shop as 'The place where you can buy transition.'⁴⁹ It was in transition that Joyce's *Work in Progress* first appeared, and for many American readers their copies would have come from the Gotham Book Mart: of a print run of 4–5000 for transition, the standing order at the Gotham was for 500 copies besides subscriptions, accounting for about an eighth of the magazine's sales.⁵⁰ The primacy of the magazine in the stock of the Gotham bookshop was confirmed by Steloff herself: 'Books are wonderful. But they're not like magazines. There's nothing like magazines. You remember them. They stick with you.'⁵¹ The Joycean critic Zack Bowen wrote that 'The Gotham was the only place in the East at the time to carry a full stock of the 'little literary magazines' from Europe and the States that formed the impetus for what we think of as High Modernism.'⁵²

Steloff's commitment to transition and the European avant-garde ensured that the Gotham Book Mart became, in the words of W. G. Rogers, 'Joyce headquarters in America'.⁵³ The publication of *Finnegans Wake* in 1939, for example, was marked by a fake Irish wake in the bookstore which was then followed up by the formation of the world's first organisation for the study of Joyce, the James Joyce Society, inaugurated in the shop in 1947. With John Slocum as its first president, the society held regular meetings in the Gotham until the store closed in 2007. Steloff became the treasurer and the first membership was sold to T. S. Eliot.⁵⁴

The Gotham was thus a 'staging venue' for the development of modernism in the United States, particularly through its championing of Joyce, modernist magazines, and its networked links to the European avant-garde. However, it also pioneered practices beyond those of merely selling books. One instance of this is the print culture of the modern bookshop, from adverts and circulars to catalogues and other forms of expression such as window displays.⁵⁵ Such documents can be understood as rhetorical modes of address to modernism's public. For example, consider the following promotional material for the Gotham, drawing attention not only to its stock but also to its spatial environment as a bookshop. The backyard of the Gotham in the 1930s was redesigned to approximate the Parisian left-bank booksellers, a feature praised by Beach when she visited in the 1930s (fig. 3): 'I liked the way your place was arranged, and the courtyard and bookstall at the back.'⁵⁶

figure

Fig. 3 Advertising flyer for the Gotham Book Mart (courtesy of Special Collections, Skidmore College).

The idea of bringing Paris to a New York public was also played upon in the advert in figure 4. We might interpret this text, and the redesigned space of the backyard, as offering support to Pascal Casanova's argument in *The World Republic of Letters* about the centrality of Paris in 'world literary space.'⁵⁷ This is partly true, but it also indicates how the Gotham was part of an international network of bookshops committed to the promotion of modernism to the public. You may not be able to visit Paris, suggests this text, but you can read about modernism in Paris and thus 'get away from New York into the world you'd like to be in.' Thus the 'staging venue' of the Gotham Garden publicized European literature with talks on Gide and Cocteau, and mounted productions of works by Louis Aragon and Alfred Jarry.

figure

Fig. 4 Advert for Gotham Book Mart (courtesy of Special Collections, Skidmore College).

The significance of the Gotham's place in the transnational networks of modernism can be discerned in figure 5, another example of the print ephemera of the modern bookshop. *We Moderns* was a catalogue prepared by Steloff to mark the twentieth anniversary of the bookshop in 1940, and contained a cover image of the *Finnegans Wake* publication party held in the Gotham Garden. The ninety page catalogue contained over 1000 entries on books and magazines by the 'stimulating moderns, challenging the past, daring the present, foreshadowing the future' who represent an 'art in transition from which will come new forms'.⁵⁸ What made the catalogue distinct was that Steloff asked 'some of our avant-garde customers to write about their favourite writers'.⁵⁹ The bibliographic details of volumes available for sale at the Gotham were interspersed with short appreciations of writers by other writers and prominent critics. William Carlos Williams contributed a wonderful introduction ripe with the combative (and masculine) language of the avant-garde, and with half an eye on the conflict in Europe at the time:

figure

Fig. 5 Front cover of *We Moderns* catalogue, 1940 (courtesy of Special Collections, Skidmore College).

These are the shock troops of literary decency, the suicide squads and the straight shooters, disciplined to take the heavy barrages of cash for cash's sake and stand up under it [...] But the main thing is you've got to know they're in there, up front where the heavier divisions will follow them, later [...] The use of a catalogue of this sort is to gather the names of those who are working with their minds first [...] The difference between a palooka and a trained fighter is form, nothing but form [...] If there are readers who aren't thrown off the track by a few tough sentences or a slightly unfamiliar presentation, let him pick at least the legal bank rate of his reading here – if he isn't' [sic.] afraid [...] that it will spoil his taste for the rest of the stuff he trips and falls into.⁶⁰

We also find Eugene Jolas on Joyce, W. H. Auden on MacNeice, e.e. cummings on Pound, and Pound on Eliot. Gertrude Stein contributed on the 'only personality' she would like to write upon – Paris, France.⁶¹ It is fascinating to find female modernists in *We Moderns* who were, until the 1980s and 90s, marginal to the 'men of 1914' canon of modernism: thus we have entries on Kay Boyle, Mary Butts, H.D., Dorothy Richardson, Laura Riding, and Stein; Kay Boyle provides a poem on Djuna Barnes. Elizabeth Poor's entry on Dorothy Richardson is an illuminating discussion of how the English novelist was, for American writers, 'our great liberator from the dead classical language of England'.⁶² European writers such as Kafka, Rilke, Thomas Mann, and Cocteau also receive entries; there is a short section on surrealism, and a much longer one on Little Magazines, divided into Current, Now and Then, and Dead; along with several magazines for which the *Gotham* was the New York agent (such as *Life* and *Letters Today*).

Five thousand copies of *We Moderns* were printed, along with 500 on better paper and spiral bound which were sold at 50c each, sufficient to pay for the printing costs. Although the catalogue's primary aim was the serious one of selling books, it was not above poking fun at the very authors it was promoting, as seen in the cartoon from the *Saturday Review of Literature* that it reprinted on its back cover (fig. 6). *We Moderns* can thus be understood both as commercial advertising for the bookshop and as an intriguing collaborative text of modernist publishing. Before Frederick Hoffman's 1945 book, *The Little Magazine*, this was probably one of the best bibliographic sources for information upon Anglophone magazines.⁶³ *Publishers' Weekly* described *We Moderns* as 'in effect a descriptive bibliography of the 1920–1940 era, a list that was both prophetic and a retrospective coverage of high points in contemporary literature'.⁶⁴ And Carlos Williams congratulated Steloff on its publication, writing that 'The catalogue is one of the best pieces of modern literature I've seen in a long time.'⁶⁵

figure

Fig. 6 Back cover of *We Moderns* catalogue, 1940 (courtesy of Special Collections, Skidmore College).

To be both a commercial 'catalogue' and a work of 'modern literature' indicates how *We Moderns* was a precarious textual item in the cultural history of modernism. It also demonstrates the

relatively overlooked role of such items of modernist print ephemera and their role in promoting the 'public face' of the bookshop. Poised somewhere between a limited edition and a publishing circular with an advertising agenda, the title of *We Moderns* employs an interesting rhetorical device. As Michael Warner notes in his book on *Publics and Counterpublics*, publics are constituted by texts: 'Publics do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them.'⁶⁶ The address of '*We Moderns*' might be interpreted as saying, 'We', the booksellers, are central to this enterprise we call 'modern', along with the writers, and along with you the readers: the inclusive pronoun here operates to promote both the works of modernism themselves, but also the work of the bookshop in making them available and the readers who are positioned as collaborators in the modernist project. *We Moderns* both celebrated the project of avant-garde writing and, in so doing, helped constitute a public for it. It addressed this public in a fascinatingly ambivalent fashion, simultaneously possessing the aura of a modernist text and the appeal of a commercial advert.

Shari Benstock wrote in her classic study, *Women of the Left Bank*, that modernism 'was a literary, social, political, and publishing event.'⁶⁷ How crucial was it, she rhetorically asks, for the modernist movement that 'Nancy Cunard or Caresse Crosby published and printed books that were sold by Adrienne Monnier and Sylvia Beach'; such women, she notes, 'saw to it that this message had its medium.'⁶⁸ To these names we can add that of Frances Steloff, and note that the 'event' of modernism required multiple sites from which it could be brought before the public, social spaces of collaboration and connection, such as the bookshops of *La Maison des Amis des Livres*, *Shakespeare and Company*, or the *Gotham Book Mart*, locations where sometimes use-value trumped exchange value. Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, in an essay on the bookshop, that the word 'commerce' not only signifies the exchange of commodities, but also the idea of social and intellectual relations between subjects. The bookshop, he writes, occupies the site of the 'commerce of thinking', where value 'is to count for someone other than oneself, and thinking counts essentially for the other [...] by the other and in the other.' The bookshop, argues Nancy, is 'wholly occupied by the passage from one to another, from authors to readers, from publishers to authors and readers, from one author to another, from bookseller to books and from books to readers.'⁶⁹ The commercial space of the bookshop is thus also a site of collaboration perceived as the commerce of thinking, a place in which, as Monnier argued, we welcome rapture and magic into our lives. Who then would not wish to engage in the commerce of being modern, of being a member of the public of '*We Moderns*', along with Monnier, Beach, and Steloff, for it was in the 'magic chamber' of the modern bookshop that 'the public' found modernism, and modernism found its public.

Notes

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1 Adrienne Monnier, *The Very Rich Hours of Adrienne Monnier*, trans. by Richard McDougall (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 69.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

3 Joanne Winning, 'Parties as Lesbian Modernist Production', in *The Modernist Party*, ed. by Kate McLoughlin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 127–46 (p. 137).

4 For details see Monnier, *The Very Rich Hours*, pp. 69–152 and Sylvia Beach, *Shakespeare and Company* (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) and Noel Riley Fitch, *Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation: A History of Literary Paris in the Twenties and Thirties* (New York: Norton, 1985).

5 Monnier, *The Very Rich Hours*, p. 71.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

7 Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, p. 21.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

9 Winning, 'Parties', p. 136; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. By Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 39–42.

10 Monnier, *The Very Rich Hours*, p. 69.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

12 See Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Have, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); John Xiros Cooper, *Modernism and the Culture of Market Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt, eds, *Marketing Modernism: Self-Promotion, Canonization, and Rereading* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Joyce P. Wexler, *Who Paid for Modernism? Art, Money, and the Fiction of Conrad, Joyce, and Lawrence* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997).

13 See Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (eds), *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009–13); Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Mary Ann Gillies, *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880–1920* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2007); Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton

University Press, 2005); Celia Marshik, *British Modernism and Censorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

14 The first collection of essays on the topic has only recently been published. See Huw Osborne (ed.), *The Rise of the Modernist Bookshop: Books and the Commerce of Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

15 Rainey, *Institutions*, p. 5.

16 *Ibid.*

17 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

18 Rainey, *Institutions*, p. 5.

19 See Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. by Craig Colhoun (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 109–42; Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Mary Ryan, 'Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth-Century America', in Colhoun, pp. 259–88.

20 Rainey, *Institutions*, p. 17.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 168.

22 Mark Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905–1920* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), p. 10.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

26 Harold Monro, 'The Bookshop', *Poetry Review* 1 (November 1912), 498–500 (p. 498). See also Joy Grant, *Harold Monro and the Poetry Bookshop* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967).

27 Rainey, *Institutions*, p. 5.

28 On Bird see Hugh Ford, *Published in Paris: American and British Writers, Printers, and Publishers in Paris, 1920–1939* (London: Garnstone Press, 1975), pp. 95–116.

29 Some contemporary booksellers I interviewed recently in the Welsh 'booktown' of Hay-on-Wye echoed Monnier's view of bookselling. One secondhand bookseller said that there were people in the trade today who thought selling books was like selling a tin of beans. He dismissed this idea and claimed there was something more 'aesthetic' about selling a rare first edition of, for example, Conrad.

30 Glenn Wilmott, 'Modernism, Economics, Anthropology', in *Disciplining Modernism*, ed. by Pamela L. Caughie (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 197–209 (pp. 198–99).

31 Winning, 'Parties', p. 140.

32 Janet Flanner, 'Americans in Paris', *New York Times Book Review* (8 March 1959), p. 5.

33 Grant, *Poetry Bookshop*, pp. 66–7.

34 On Mathews see James G. Nelson, *Elkin Mathews: Publisher to Yeats, Joyce, Pound* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

35 Sylvia Beach to Frances Steloff, 24 November 1936, Sylvia Beach Papers, Princeton University Library, Series 1: Box 33 Folder 22. All further references to this correspondence come from this folder.

36 Steloff to Beach, 7 February 1935.

37 Beach to Steloff, 24 November 1936.

38 Steloff to Beach, 7 February 1935.

39 Frances Steloff, 'In Touch with Genius', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 4.4 (1975), 749–881 (p. 760). Due to war conditions the telegram seems not to have been delivered.

40 See Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, pp. 404–5 and Beach, *Shakespeare and Company*, p. 216.

41 Steloff, 'In Touch with Genius', p. 760.

42 Fitch, *Sylvia Beach*, p. 40.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

45 For biographical information on Steloff see W. G. Rogers, *Wise Men Fish Here: The Story of Frances Steloff and the Gotham Book Mart* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965).

46 See advert for *The Sunwise Turn* in *The Little Review* 5.8, December 1918, end pages.

47 Mary Mowbray-Clarke, 'The Small Bookshop', typescript of talk for Booksellers in the NYPL, 27 January 1922; Mary Mowbray-Clarke/Sunwise Turn Papers, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, box 1, folder 1. On the Sunwise see also Rainey, *Institutions*, pp. 65–69, and Ted Bishop, 'The Sunwise Turn and the Social Space of the Bookshop', in Osborne, pp. 31–64.

48 Eugene Jolas, 'Remembering James Joyce', *Modernism/modernity* 5.2 (1998), 1–30 (p. 10).

49 Rogers, *Wise Men Fish Here*, p. 113.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

52 Zack Bowen, 'The New York James Joyce Society', *Joyce Studies Annual* 12 (2001), 74–80 (p. 78).

53 Rogers, *Wise Men*, p. 226.

54 *Ibid.*, pp. 226–7.

55 One interesting window display was by André Breton and Marcel Duchamp in 1945, advertising the publication of Breton's *Arcane 17*, which led to the threat of prosecution by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice; see Steloff, 'In Touch with Genius', pp. 770–71.

56 Beach to Steloff, 25 November, 1936.

57 See Pascal Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 82–125.

58 *We Moderns: Gotham Book Mart 1920–1940* (New York: Gotham Book Mart, 1940), p. 3.

59 Steloff, 'In Touch With Genius', p. 790.

60 William Carlos Williams, 'Introduction', *We Moderns*, p. 9.

61 Stein, *We Moderns*, p. 3.

62 Elizabeth Poor, *We Moderns*, p. 58.

63 Frederic J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich, *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947).

64 Cited in Steloff, 'In Touch with Genius', p. 746

65 *Ibid.*, p. 823.

66 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 72.

67 Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900–1940* (London: 1987), p. 21.

68 *Ibid.*

69 Jean-Luc Nancy, *On the Commerce of Thinking: Of Books and Bookstores*, trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), pp. 29–30.