

London and the Modernist Bookshop



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London and the Modernist Bookshop

Elements in Publishing and Book Culture

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ABSTRACT: The modernist bookshop, best exemplified by Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare & Co. and Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop, has received scant attention outside of these more prominent examples. This Element will review how bookshops like David Archer's on Parton Street (London) in the 1930s were sites of distribution, publication, and networking. Parton Street, which also housed Lawrence & Wishart publishers and a briefly vibrant literary scene, will be approached from several contexts as a way of situating the modernist bookshop within both the book trade and the literary communities that it interacted with and made possible.

KEYWORDS: modernism, print cultures, book history, cultural politics,
Popular Front

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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://modjournal.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.