Reflections on the Publishing Scene

An Alternative Press. Why?

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Assuming the book- and library-trade press reflects the matters of current interest in the world of books in some rough sort of way, it would seem that we are entering another period of interest in and concern with respect to the “alternative press.” Not only are articles and news accounts appearing with greater frequency in the book periodical literature but several widely recognized and senior figures in the publishing world have added their voices to the growing chorus. And to lend further substance to this sense of things, several wealthy patrons and charitable foundations have recently been recruited to support foundering imprints or new departures—all have been characterized as alternatives to the established practices/firms and as worthy undertakings when being reported by the book-trade media.

An onlooker acquainted even fleetingly with the history of the trade cannot but be put in mind of parallels with the trade journalism and gossip of that season of “beats” and “hippies” of two–two-and-a-half decades ago or the earlier season of the radicals, literary and otherwise, of the late 1920s and 1930s. These outbursts of enthusiasm were also marked by an upsurge of articles, letters, talks, and conferences not simply extolling the virtues of book publishing and selling of this kind but with extended, convoluted and often arcane disquisitions on the unique and critical social or political or cultural role of the “alternative press” often joined with rococo expressions of apprehension over the “declining” fortunes of this sector. The latter handwringing, if past practice proves a reliable guide, will often be accompanied by more-or-less open criticism of a society and, in particular a trade that is: 1) so closed-minded, ill-contrived, and fallen from grace that an “alternative press” is required to correct the shortcomings/evils thereof; and 2) so uncomprehending of its collective shortcomings and evils that it fails to adequately support—both in terms of funding and purchasing of “alternative” publications—those whose vision of the society/politics/culture is wider or deeper or more compassionate or more sensitive or better in some other dimension than any others.

These extended excursions in criticism of things as they are, will not only be largely tolerated by the vast majority but be positively assented to by a handful of significant figures or segments in the trade, as confirmed by past behav-
ior in previous swellings of preoccupation with "alternative presses." Such self-righteous outbursts arising out of some perceived wrong or shortcoming by one or another of the many disaffected circles in any trade or profession are common and, therefore, even though not readily understood, customarily ignored by the preponderance of those in the trade. But it is difficult to understand what leads a scattering of the trade's notables who, have presumably particularly benefited from the present structure and functioning of the trade to join in the chorus, occasionally with remarkable vigor.

Trying to come to grips with this periodic fixation on "alternative publishing" is complicated by a couple of factors. The first is simply one of definition. The term "alternative press" seems to have almost as many meanings as overt proponents—each advocate infusing the term with somewhat different content. Thus, some will be championing the cause of this or that school of poetry; others one of the dozens of currently modish splinter political agendas—most commonly those of the left but occasionally of the right; blueprints for one or another utopian economic scheme reliably attract a large and vocal following; the promotion of exotic religious cults never loses favor even in periods when the hue and cry for rearranging the structure of publishing is not being widely trumpeted abroad; a generous serving of the comforts to be derived from various schools of self-help/psychology can always be counted upon; and on and on. But even those propounding radically contrary views or those espousing doctrines so disparate that the onlooker is hard-pressed to find any basis for meaningful dialogue seem able to find a common ground in the term. So what we are left with is a term so elastic as to be devoid of virtually any signification. In the absence of any tangible content or secure denotion or connotation, it is exceedingly difficult for all but the true believers to even discuss the issue—and it is likely that even the true believers will only be able to pick around the edges of the matter given their quite disparate agendas.

Given this lack of signification of the term, one might then reasonably turn to an examination of the structure of the book trade as it is presently conducted to try to derive meaning by way of contradiction/contrast and thereby endow the term with sufficient content to make it a meaningful expression—and hence knowledge concept, which might be examined using the common intellectual tools. This was, after all. the means by which the signification of the Russian term "samzidat" literature was derived—by contrasting it with the monolithic, state-controlled publishing apparatus put in place by the Soviet communists. But this avenue is also closed at the end of the day for the following reasons.

Unlike the communist and akin state-controlled national publishing structures, the book trade of the West and other developed countries is for all practical purposes entirely free. That is to say; anyone may enter the trade at any time without hindrance and once established is virtually free to publish, import, or sell publications of any kind. The exceptions to this splendid autonomy are entirely obvious and save for the occasional and usually remedi-