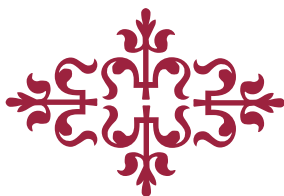


Growing Up Bookish

An Anglo-American Memoir

Richard Wendorf



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Even just the bewildering minute counts; you have to give yourself up, and then recover yourself, and the third moment is having something to say, before you have wholly forgotten both surrender and recovery. Of course the self recovered is never the same as the self before it was given.

T. S. Eliot to Stephen Spender

What shall we call our “self”? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us — and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I’ve got a great respect for *things*! One’s self — for other people — is one’s expression of one’s self; and one’s house, one’s furniture, one’s garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps — these things are all expressive.

Madame Merle, in Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady*

PREFACE

THE WORLD into which I was born contained few books, few readers, and almost no writers. I shall eventually expire surrounded by thousands of books, most of which I have read, a few of which I have written, and more than a few (I imagine) that I shall leave sadly untouched behind me. As the dying Clive James remarked, “If you don’t know the exact moment when the lights will go out, you might as well read until they do.”

This memoir attempts to make sense of the contours of a life surrounded by, embedded in, and attempting to nourish the world of books and libraries. And because I have also devoted part of my professional life to art history and to the museum world, I have also written about the transitions I’ve made between these two spheres. I have not attempted to integrate my intellectual growth with every other aspect of my life — difficult and messy (and unconvincing) as most such attempts usually are. This is a memoir, not a full autobiography. I have recognized my children and my partners, but they are not at the center of this narrative. Nor do I seek to settle old scores or judge my various colleagues. As a teacher, as a dean, and as the director of three institutions, I have become closely acquainted with human error and human frailty, but I have always embraced Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of faith” rather than his “hermeneutics of suspicion.” And I remain, perhaps because of my upbringing, an optimistic person, with a glass more than half full. In my view, if you’re not an optimist, you have no business running a cultural institution in the first place.

In the chapters that follow, I focus on a series of defining moments and environments that have made my career as a scholar and as a library and museum director possible. In my scholarly work I have referred to such moments as “pressure points” and I have referred to such environments as examples of the “habitus” (in Pierre Bourdieu’s recent coinage): the cultural and social spheres that leave their lasting imprint upon us. Perhaps because of these various forces, my

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career has been somewhat unpredictable. I first intended to become a lawyer — and even reserved my place at Harvard Law School — but Williams sent me to Oxford and Oxford changed all that. I went to Princeton because the connection with Oxford was very strong and because I wanted to work within another small graduate program. Had I flown out to Stanford instead, I wonder how differently things might have turned out (probably not that differently at all). I didn't intend to return to the Midwest, to become an academic dean, to become an art historian, to become a library director, to leave Harvard for the Boston Athenæum, or to move to England to become a museum director. But professional patterns can be just as complicated and asymmetrical as personal ones, and I now find myself giving shape to a book on printing history that is based on unanswered questions in my doctoral dissertation forty years ago.

I begin this narrative by exploring the habitus of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where I spent the first eighteen years of my life. This first essay — and those that follow — are meant to be read on their own terms, but taken together they should also, I hope, furnish some sense of the trajectory of my life and my career as I head towards my encounter with the proverbial three score and ten.

CHAPTER ONE

In the Heart of the Heart of the Country

I

I WAS BORN, at mid-century, in the middle of America's heartland. Several states could make a reasonable claim to that distinction — Missouri, Nebraska, perhaps even Kansas — but Iowans are rightfully proud of their geographical heritage and of the culture that has evolved there. Iowa is where the homesick Dvořák wrote some of his haunting Slavonic music, where Grant Wood painted almost all of his pictures, where Meredith Willson placed that most mid-American of American confections, *The Music Man*. And Cedar Rapids, where I was born and raised, lies at the heart of America's heartland.

My hometown is not as large as the state capital (Des Moines); it straddles the Cedar River rather than flanking the Mississippi; it boasts some small colleges but none of the state's three major universities. What it did have, when my family lived there, was a genuine sense of cohesion, of various cultural and commercial interests being of just about the right size, with neither a large university nor a state capitol casting an exaggerated shadow. My mother was born there, as was her mother. My father was a Chicagoan who rode a music scholarship to the small liberal arts college in my mother's hometown, met her while they both worked at the felicitously named Inter-Ocean Reinsurance Company, married her, and began his career there. It could have been otherwise.

Although he would rarely talk about it, my father had had what used to be called "a good war." A perforated eardrum prevented him from attending officers' candidate school in the Navy at the beginning of the conflict, but he dutifully enlisted in the Army as a private and made the long journey on foot and by thumb from the sole of the boot of Italy