Jeff Deutsch

On the Uses of the Bookstore in the 21st Century
What an honor to be in such a literate, hospitable place. I feel very much at home. Thank you for letting me share my vision with you of what makes a good bookstore, and of some questions I think it’s worth asking as we think about what will allow bookstores to thrive long into the future.

I became a bookseller in 1994. Other than a two-year stint at an artists’ colony at the turn of the millennium, I have spent my entire professional life in bookselling. I worked for Barnes & Noble through the 90s and, after the artists’ colony, for a brief spell, at which point I went to UC Berkeley and the Stanford Bookstore. In 2014, I moved to Chicago for the sole purpose of stewarding the Seminary Co-op, a shop I first visited six months before I became a bookseller, and the one which I’ve thought of as my Platonic Ideal of a bookshop ever since.

When I started in bookselling, bookshops justified themselves. The purpose, but also the value of the bookshop was self-evident: they were one of the few places one could buy books. But now, nearly 30 years into my career, this is no longer the case; a simple and direct justification of bookshops does not hold. We no longer need bookshops to buy books, even serious books.

If we no longer need bookshops to buy books, do we still need bookshops at all? And if so, what, in the 21st century, makes a good bookshop?

Whatever answer we provide must begin with the presence of books, and the impulse to browse those books.
Again, we no longer need bookshops to buy books. And yet so many of us exhibit a passion for them usually reserved for more hallowed institutions, not one that utilizes the measures of the modern-day merchant — convenience and efficiency — to articulate its value.

Efficiency isn’t itself a value. In fact, there are wise inefficiencies, as any artist or parent can attest. Like the readers they serve, the good bookseller embraces the inefficient elements of the bookshop, understanding that they are anything but wasteful. Given that they are not only deliberate, but critical to creating a good bookshop, I believe the time has come to no longer apologize for the inefficiencies inherent in good bookselling.

Those among us who love bookshops should, I believe, begin our articulation anew. Those of us who couldn’t imagine a community without a bookshop might ask what a bookshop gives us beyond being a place to buy books.

The inherited model of retail, with which bookshops were established, is insufficient. We must recognize and then rectify the considerable devaluing of the work of booksellers in building spaces that contribute to a more learned, more understanding, and more fulfilled populace.

I think the Seminary Co-op is an excellent example of this sort of store.

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The best argument on behalf of bookshops is the bookshops themselves, carefully built by booksellers who created an improbable place whose sheer existence provided a value to their bookish communities that far exceeded their financial divi-
dends. You most certainly have at least one fine example here: The English Bookshop in Uppsala. What effect would its loss have on the cultural and intellectual life in Uppsala? What would its disappearance indicate about the community?

I was asking similar questions about the Seminary Co-op soon after taking over its directorship. If the Seminary Co-op didn't already exist, we would have been hard-pressed to imagine it. In fact, the first impetus for writing my book, *In Praise of Good Bookstores*, was a recognition that it was exceedingly difficult to describe the experience of the Seminary Co-op to those who had never visited, never browsed its stacks. After five years of trying to explain its singularity – its greatness – to people, and failing over and over, I decided to attempt to capture not just the idiosyncrasies of the Seminary Co-op itself, but the profound nourishment the sort of browsing experience stores like the Seminary Co-op afford those aficionados who understand its proper use.

Founded in 1961 as a member-owned co-op, the Seminary Co-op grew into one of the great, if not one of the best, academic bookshops in the country. The store carries approximately 100k books, focusing on works for the serious reader, including literature, poetry, and scholarly non-fiction.

The Seminary Co-op, while institutionally independent, is housed on the campus of the University of Chicago. According to many of its faculty members, the University of Chicago's intellectual character reflects the culture established by the Seminary Co-op – not the other way around.

While the value of the Seminary Co-op can most certainly be found in the space that houses it, the community that supports it, and, of course, the contents of its collection, I'd also like to call attention to what is excluded. Despite generations
of booksellers supplementing their book collections with wares ranging from greeting cards and coffee to board games and socks – but doing so, not as a curatorial decision, but, more often than not, because the retail margins on non-book items far exceed those of books, the Seminary Co-op has and remains committed to carrying books, and only books. Our unofficial tagline proudly declares, “No coffee, no knicknacks, just books.”

A member-owned co-operative's purpose is to fulfil its mission and then pay dividends to its co-op members. Well, we hadn't paid our members dividends since the early 90s, which meant that as an institution – on paper, at least – we were failing. But the stores most certainly were not failing. They were, in fact, doing exactly what they were meant to do: creating a world-class browsing experience that could surprise, delight, and nourish even the most informed readers.

In reimagining the structure of the stores in the late 2010s, we began with our true purpose and then tried to build a model that could support it, rather than fit our singular store into an inherited model – one that treated our mission and purpose as incidental at best, or, at worst, as an obstacle to be overcome.

And so, after a five-year campaign to engage the Seminary Co-op ownership – which had grown to well over 60,000 people, including Barack and Michelle Obama, Gwendolyn Brooks, Susan Sontag, Saul Bellow, and Sandra Cisneros – we transitioned from a for-profit member-owned co-operative to a not-for-profit; the first and only not-for-profit bookshop in the U.S. whose mission is the bookshop itself.

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The not-for-profit bookshop is unowned, and yet it feels to its bookish thousands like it is theirs, and theirs alone.

While this paradox is specific to the not-for-profit bookshop, there are certain paradoxes contained in all good bookshops.

In a good bookshop, the browser’s attention is simultaneously focused and diffused. They are taken out of themselves as they are returned to themselves. They find solitude in community. Time contracts as one is profoundly engaged with the materials that span ages; time dilates and somehow contains the timeless.

And no matter how much we learn, what we are learning primarily is that we can never be certain of that which matters most. We will always have uncertainty about the most profound things in life. And yet we continue to make our attempts, assay questions, and seek answers that might help us build a better – or, simply, a good life.

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I’d like to pause here and tell you a bit about my background.

I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish community in and around Brooklyn, NY. The rooms of my childhood in Flatbush, Boro Park, and Elizabeth, New Jersey were all book-lined; my childhood homes, my yeshiva, my shul, my relatives’ homes, and the homes of my friends’ families were heavy with large books.

My grandparents had a second-floor walkup apartment in Boro Park, on the corner of 16th avenue and 53rd Street, that they rented from 1957 until 2012. My grandfather’s book-lined living room made a particular impression. The book-
cases were filled with books whose gravity was clear from the ornate, uniform spines. Ornate, these books, but not ornamental. The bookshelves always had gaps, and the gaps would move from week to week, as an ever-rotating selection of volumes were laid out on my grandfather’s bookstand and desk.

These books were read – books are for use, after all. They were treated with reverence and love. Observant Jews are accustomed to kissing the cover of a book after closing it – a habit that has remained with me throughout the years. Along with the British literatus Leigh Hunt, who, in effusing about books, wrote of how he liked to lean his head against them, followers of my given tradition might also say, “When I speak of being in contact with my books, I mean it literally.”

These books were read in groups called chevrusas, a Hebrew word whose root means “friend.” When I was a young boy, I would join my grandfather’s chevrusa on occasion, just to observe. Seated on an austere bench in the basement of the shul across the street, my head barely clearing the tabletop, I sat with large men and their large Aramaic books watching them question, ponder, argue with, and delight in what they found on those pages.

My grandfather, learned though he was, wasn’t a scholar. He was a shopkeep. He ran a suit store named Chatham Clothes on New Utrecht Avenue, selling kosher clothing to the observant Jews in the tri-state area. He worked long days, after which he would eat dinner with his family and head across the street to learn with his chevrusa.

The activity called “learning” was common. Because there was only one thing to study – the Tanach and its many commentaries, especially the Talmud – there was no need to specify the object of learning. Learning was a daily activi-
ty, regardless of one’s age, and was no less special for being an everyday endeavor. And learning, while it reliably yielded wisdom and pleasure, was understood to be an end in itself.

The highest compliment one could pay in the Orthodox community was that someone was learned, or a talmid chacham, a wise student. My grandfather was a talmid chacham.

When, as a teenager, I left Judaism for the secular world, I found some of the conventions around books and education profoundly alien. I couldn’t fathom the notion that one strove to become educated, rather than learned, or that one might study in order to make a living, rather than learn, continually – an endeavor essential to living a more meaningful life. What, after all, was the point of making a living if not to build community and create deeper understanding – come home for dinner and then learn with one’s chevrusa, with one’s friends?

Like the Ancient Greeks, about whom I was just learning, I longed for the Good Life, and, despite my other misgivings about the Jewish way of life, I thought my grandfather and his community embodied such virtue.

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Books aren’t mere ornaments. Following my grandfather’s model, knowing that there were treasures to be found within the volumes that lined the walls of most of the rooms of my youth, I quickly became fearless in browsing them – what the British essayist Charles Lamb called “dislodging shades,” reanimating the spirits contained between the covers.

As my intellectual life was developed in the interstices between the yeshiva and the academy, the justification of the
existence of a bookshop like the Seminary Co-op was, to me, self-evident. This was the place where one could become learned – a *talmid chacham* – and fashion a daily practice that would lead one through a more meaningful life.

I found great wisdom in secular philosophy and literature, a seamless transition from the Judaica of my youth. Francis Bacon’s musings on “the pleasure and delight of knowledge and learning” would not have been out of place in the Talmud. “We see in all other pleasures,” he writes with the perspicacity of one of the rabbinic fathers, “there is satiety, and after they be used, their verdure departeth, which showeth well they be but deceits of pleasure, and not pleasures; and that it was the novelty which pleased, and not the quality. And, therefore, we see that voluptuous men turn friars, and ambitious princes turn melancholy. But of knowledge there is no satiety, but satisfaction and appetite are perpetually interchangeable.”

The best parts of the tradition in which I was raised valued the enduring *and* it valued meaningful ephemera, what the philosopher Simone Weil gestured toward when she wrote, “Stars and blossoming fruit trees: utter permanence and extreme fragility give one an equal sense of eternity.” It sought pleasures, not the deceits of pleasures. It sought to feed appetites whose satiety led to a satisfaction that endured, and which led to an appetite for further meaning, knowledge, and love; a pleasure whose verdure remains.

I’d like to make the case today that the good bookshop is a critical institution for creating a culture around discernment, and the appetite for wisdom and purpose; a place that fosters the sort of learning that encourages one to make meaning of the story of their lives – including the folly, the pain, and the
suffering – and focuses the mind on the elements of a good life: knowledge, purpose, justice, beauty, and love.

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I can’t but effuse on behalf of this experience, this pleasure, the quality of which, not the novelty of which, satisfies, beckoning us to return before too long. Booksellers are professional enthusiasts, and I hope the sharing of enthusiasm on behalf of individual books, honed so finely over a quarter-century of bookselling, will serve me well as I turn that enthusiasm toward the bookshop itself. Sixty years ago, Seminary Co-op member and sociologist Edward Shils wrote that the good bookshop is “a necessary part of the habitat of a lively intelligence in touch with the world.”

Neither this talk nor my book is a lamentation (we have enough of those!), but a celebration of the potential for the uses of the good bookshop. To borrow from Borges, I submit these thoughts that we might let our bookshops be justified.

It is not just bookshops that I hope to celebrate, but the profession of bookselling as well. Dillingham, writing in 1895, speaks accurately to our current condition when he says that “bookselling has often been classed as next to a profession.” Shils said that the “desire to be a bookseller is not highly correlated with being a great reader,” but this reveals an ignorance of the sort of reading at which the bookseller excels. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy understood the bookseller to be a “transcendental reader: she provides her clients with the conditions of possibility for reading.” Nancy continues,
“A bookseller’s customers are readers of reading at the same time as they are readers of the books they buy. The bookseller’s reading doesn’t only or simply consist in deciphering all the pages of every book; it is also a lectio as election, a choice, selection, or gleaning of ideas from books that are proposed as a function of the Idea that bookseller has both of the book and of reading, both of readers and of publishers. In that sense, current usage doesn’t call the booksellers a book merchant.... Let’s say, with less ambiguity, that the bookseller is one who delivers books [un levreur de livres]...”

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The journalist and Co-op enthusiast Jamie Kalven suggested that the shape of the bookshop operates as something akin to a literary form. The bookshop offers insight through what Mary Cappello calls, in reference to the form of the lecture, “un-pursued apposition,” and “the necessity of getting lost in the shape of one’s lostness.” What else might the literary form of the bookshop resemble?

Perhaps the bookshop is like an encyclopedia, containing all of our knowledge in one place. Or like the Huainanzi, a 2nd-century emperor’s manual of sorts, compiling everything that was known about the way of the world, the celestial bodies, the natural world, time, space, human consciousness, the principles of self-cultivation, characteristics of the sage, and the practicalities of governance. The wise emperor, well-read in their Huainanzi, would be capable of concentrating on something as small as “the tip of an Autumn hair and something as vast as the totality of space and time.”
Perhaps it is like an anthology – a compendium of ideas, tales, mores – a bible for bibliophiles. Or perhaps it better resembles the essay, as Montaigne mastered it, an amble about, considering now this and now that, a wandering series of thoughts that hope to limn a question. The essay might literally mean an attempt, but an attempt implies something unsuccessful. The essay trucks in many truths, not the achievement of one ultimate truth. Montaigne in his library: “There I leaf through now one book, now another, without order and without plan, by disconnected fragments,” where the fragments, in the bookshop-as-essay genre, are the books themselves.

Maybe the bookshop is the commonplace book of the bookseller, who, like the reader compiling their commonplace book, considers a wide range of works and filters in an unquantifiable and unscientific manner, arranging according to the principles of taxonomy that bear a relative internal logic, but are by no means definitive or final, ensuring that only the finest – measured on many a scale, but the finest nonetheless – are selected.

Or maybe it is like the zuhitsu – which can be literally translated as “following the brush” – that great pillow-book tradition begun by Sei Shōnagon in the 11th century, which, in the 14th century, in Kenkō’s hands, reached a form that resembles a bookshop. Kenkō knows that “it wakes you up to take a journey for a while, wherever it might be.” In his series of reflections and wanderings, he jots down “at random whatever nonsensical thoughts” have entered his head. Not unlike the essay, the zuhitsu thrives on rumination, not solutions. “The most precious thing in life,” writes Kenkō, “is uncertainty.”
Leaving something incomplete makes it interesting, wrote Kenkō, and gives one feeling that there is room for growth. Someone once told me, “Even when building the imperial palace, they always leave one place unfinished.” In both Buddhist and Confucian writings of the philosophies of former times, there are also many missing chapters.

If the zuhitsu is, as described by 19th-century practitioner of the form Ishiwhara Masaakira, a record of what “one sees and hears, says and ponders, whether frivolous or serious, just as they come to mind,” perhaps the literary form that is the space of the bookshop consists of the thoughts that rise in the mind of the browser – a mélange of references, idle thoughts, the index of one’s memory, the poetic lines of others, the ephemera of sensation, and the attention that is diffuse and discursive, but still somehow focused – as they follow the brush, as it were. Steven Carter, the scholar of Japanese history, who translated and edited an anthology of zuhitsu, wrote that “books pass by like currents in a river, all jumbled together, which is only appropriate since so many books are themselves jumbles of things.”

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The good bookshop sells books, but its primary product, if you will, is the browsing experience. Until 1870, when the poet and essayist James Russell Lowell used the word in reference to John Dryden’s reading habits, “browse” meant, primarily, to chew cud, to ruminate.

Here, according to the OED, is one of the earliest written appearances of the word browse utilized in this context. “We thus get a glimpse of [Dryden] browsing, he was always a
random reader – in his father’s library, and painfully culling here and there a spray of his own proper nutriment from among the stubs and thorns of Puritan divinity.” And later, he writes of the German polymath G.E. Lessing, “Like most men of great knowledge, as distinguished from mere scholars, he seems to have been always a rather indiscriminate reader, and to have been fond, as Johnson was, of “browsing” in libraries.”

One of the great benefits of the act of browsing is the rumination it evokes. Creating a space that is intentional in its gathering of materials meant to provide intellectual and literary stimulation, a space wholly devoted to books, be it a bookshop, a library, or a personal collection, is to understand the fulfillment provided by the activity of rumination and reflection. We are, after all, “of the ruminating kind,” John Locke wrote of the relationship of thinking to reading, “and it is not enough to cram ourselves with a great load of collections; unless we chew them over again, they will not give us strength and nourishment.”

To say it more directly, browsing is a form of rumination. Books, like the leaves and shrubs known as the browsage, provide ruminant-readers with their nutrients. What an unparallel activity, browsing a bookshop in a state of curiosity and receptivity, chewing one’s intellectual cud! The space of a bookshop must be conducive to unhurried rumination, if only to promote good digestion.

We booksellers mark the transformation, as our patrons, upon entering the stores, leave their everyday concerns at the door, as though stepping into a more thoughtful confine. We know it is our responsibility to create and enclose this space, allowing anyone to enter, but not any thing. It’s a place
for books, just books, and for a certain kind of book whose presence alongside the rest of the collection is meant to create something of a pasture for what the erstwhile St. Paul, Minnesota, booksellers called, when naming their legendary bookshop, the hungry mind.

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There are many forms of browsing, and many types of browsers. A non-exhaustive list of those we see in our wilds would include the *flaneur*, who meanders through the stacks, observing, loitering, shuffling; the *sandpiper*, who sees the world in a grain of sand; the *town-crier*, who heralds the latest news from the pages of the books on the front table; the *ruminator*, chewing their cud; the *pilgrim*, seeking wisdom, they know not what or where, but they know that they must find it; the *devotee*, who prays daily, regardless of the season, the *penitent*, who has not lived as they ought, and is now seeking redemption, or, at least, forgiveness; the *palimpsest*, who reads and rereads and knows that every reading leaves its inscrutable mark; the *chef*, who trusts their senses to help them identify the most delectable ingredients; the *initiate*, who doesn’t know the mores of the place, but is hopeful they might soon belong; the *stargazer*, who takes in the sky with a well-honed attention; the *general*, who sees the stacks as a thing to be conquered; and the *idler*, who just wants to while away the hours among books.

Morley, one of bookselling’s greatest champions, lamented that most habitués of the bookshop have yet to understand its uses. He knew that bookish spaces were made for the wandering browser, reflecting on sundry matters, as they travel
the stacks. He thinks of bookshops as a great instrument and yet we visit bookshops “chiefly to ask for some definite title,” playing the instrument like an amateur. He goes on, “Aren’t we ever going to leave anything to destiny, or to good luck, or to the happy suggestion of some wise bookseller? Too many of our dealings with bookshops remind me, in their innocent ineffectiveness, of children learning to play the piano. I hear their happy ploiterings among the keys, their little tunes and exercises ring in my head in times of softened mood reminding me of all the lovely unfinished melodies of life. But it isn’t what a connoisseur would call music.”

The connoisseurs of the bookshop develop their unique style. They learn divagation. They know to leave a bit of room for inspiration and aspiration. They have understood the nature of serendipity – of finding that very thing which they did not know they were seeking.

They know that rumination itself is not incidental, but is, in fact, a central element of the experience of browsing.

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No matter how much we learn – no matter how many heretofore mysterious questions are answered, it is always the great unanswerable questions that remain our companions. The most profound things in love will always bear uncertainty. Kenko writes in his zuhitsu: “The most precious thing in life is uncertainty.”

And, with the paradoxical fervor habitues of the bookstore embrace, we continue to make our attempts, assay questions, and seek answers that might help us build a better – or, simply, a good life.
I feel very privileged to have access to the literature of the Talmud. While not a believer in the god of the Torah, I am a great admirer of its philosophical and poetic concepts, including, for instance its view of the sacred and the profane, or, as I think the Hebrew would more accurately translate: the holy and the common. The Jewish calendar, whose days begin after sundown, once three stars are visible in the night sky, has its holy days, such as the sabbath and holidays, and its common days – such as those we call “weekdays.”

Deep in a relatively legalistic tractate, we learn that the evening shema prayer may only be spoken during twilight. With great poetic subtlety, the rabbis then discuss the duration of twilight, likening it to, among other things, the length of time it takes for a drop of blood on a sword to become two drops.

Twilight is an ontological puzzle: neither day nor night, it contains both. Friday’s twilight, then, is neither sacred nor common time; it has elements of both. This is of particular significance if we believe in the Torah’s view of creation. God created the world in six days, and on the seventh day they rested. God rested in sacred time, not common time.

Did God create anything on the eve of the first sabbath, at twilight? According to the rabbis – who, of course, discussed this, God did, in fact, create ten phenomena. By dint of the moment of their creation, they contain elements of the sacred and the profane – the holy and the common. Among some very interesting items like Miriam’s well, which provided water to the wandering Jews in the desert, manna, which provided them food, and the rainbow, which represented God’s promise not to destroy the world by flood, several tools of
clarification were created at twilight on Sabbath eve: writing, the writing instrument, and the tablets.

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The Rabbis taught that seven matters are concealed from us, and they are:

- The time of death
- The time of consolation
- The profundity of justice
- What is in the heart of another
- In what way we might fulfill our calling
- The restoration of the reign of loving-kindness
- The obliteration of the wicked

Within the context of the discussion around twilight, the sages discussed the unknowable. Try as we might to understand certain phenomena, their uncertainty will persist, as they are not given to us to know. And yet we seek anyway, if only to tighten the circumference around the inquiry.

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What would we lose if we were to lose our bookshops? What might we gain, if we built a more deliberate model of book-selling?

This is no eulogy. It is a celebration and a hope that the argument of the Seminary Co-op and its institutional kin – bookshops that create an unalloyed bookish space; bookshops like The English Bookshop – will flourish for generations to
come. And so, rather than provide general answers, I hope to provoke questions that you might consider as you develop your own arguments.

How might we learn to use bookshops better? How might we develop more than an inkling of what “one of the greatest instruments” can accomplish?

How might we accurately assess the immeasurable value provided by good bookshops?

How might we look to good bookshops to help provide a bookish landscape that supports conversation, contemplation, and the development of a more learned (as opposed to educated or degreed) populace?

How might we establish the profession of bookselling that we might develop careers and offer proper remuneration for those readers without whom good bookshops couldn’t exist?

How might we deliberately build a financial model for good bookshops, rather than try to fit them into an inherited retail mold? Our model must recognize that the product is not the book itself, but the experience of the bookshop – its browsage, and the thoughts, conversations, and discoveries the collection evokes.

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Like Borges, I am a reader first, which also means I’m one of the quiet, bookish thousands who ruminate during a good browse. As much as I have spoken from the perspective of a career bookseller, it is as a bookshop enthusiast that I file this dispatch. I steward the Seminary Co-op because I want to live in a world with bookshops like it. It’s a selfish endeavor, really – or it would be if I thought I
was the only one (we are legion, we thousands) – but that is the truth of the matter. These bookish landscapes built me as I built them.

I hope, like the Good Life or the Good Society, that the Good Bookstore can serve as our ambition. There is something distinctive about the good bookstore, the loss of which would lead to the loss of a particular way of being in the world.
The Adam Helms Lecture

Publisher Adam Helms (1904–1980) founded the Forum and Trevi publishing houses, among other endeavours. After his death, the Swedish Publishers’ Association purchased his extensive collection of literature related to publishing, bookshops, and the book market. They initially kept it at Stockholm University Library, and donated it in 2019 to Uppsala University Library, where it is now available as a single collection. This gift was made on the occasion of the Association’s 175th anniversary to support Uppsala University’s active ongoing research on the history of the book market.

The annual Adam Helms Lecture was held in Stockholm from 1994 to 2016, and featured authors, publishers, and researchers. When the Helms Collection was transferred to Uppsala, the lecture series followed. The first Adam Helms Lecture in Uppsala was in September 2019. The lecture is organised by Uppsala University Library in association with the Swedish Publishers’ Association.

The lecture series and associated texts are supported by contributions from the Thore and Vera Virgin Foundation for Bibliographic Research and Lectures under the auspices of Uppsala University Library.
### Adam Helms Lecture i Stockholm

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