The Collecting of Twentieth-Century Literary Manuscripts

ANTHONY ROTA

It is meet and right that the Preconference with this year's theme, "Collecting the Twentieth Century," should be held here in Austin, in the shadow of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas, for this, in the vernacular, is "where it's at"; for if you want to know what collecting the twentieth century is all about, look in this catalogue. It is entitled No Symbols Where None Intended and it is the best possible catalogue of the best possible collection of Samuel Beckett material. It illuminates the life and the work in a way which justifies at a stroke the concept of institutional collecting of contemporary literary material of this nature.

The collecting of twentieth-century literary manuscripts is a comparatively recent phenomenon. By that I mean more than the self-evident truth that twentieth-century manuscripts could not have been bought and sold much more than eighty years ago. With few noteworthy and praiseworthy exceptions, scholars, collectors and librarians—and, Mr. Chairman, that order is a random one—took contemporary MSS not at all seriously until well after the end of the Second World War.

Here I should explain that when I speak of MSS I am restricting myself to the twentieth century and am mostly concerned with works of book length and, indeed, with entire literary archives, rather than with the MS of, for example, a single sonnet, which, by reason of its price, its affordability, might appeal to a whole host of buyers unable to enter into and thus to influence the market for the major pieces and collections.

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The Michelin guides, familiar to all who have traveled in Europe, have an admirable practice of prefacing the entry for each town and city with a paragraph headed *Un peu d'histoire*—a little history. Let us look together at that history which is relevant to my subject.

On occasions such as this I do not often quote from hymns, but today I say, like the hymnist William George Tarrant, "Now praise we great and famous men,/The fathers named in story"—or at least let us pay tribute to those who were pioneers in recognizing the importance of the literary MSS of our own time—and who went on to act on that recognition.

I want to speak first of the English collector George Lazarus, who came down from Caius College, Cambridge, and went to work on the Stock Exchange in 1926, having already decided to build a collection of first editions and allied material by contemporary writers, principally novelists, whom he, in his personal judgment, thought most worthwhile. Over the years he built—simultaneously—good author collections of Somerset Maugham, H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, John Galsworthy and Virginia Woolf, for example, but he came to dispose of them all, one by one, in order to devote his energy—and his limited shelf-space—to the collection by which his name is best known today—his D.H. Lawrence collection.

That collection begins in a way that is quite perfect, *viz.* with the MS of *The White Peacock*, Lawrence's first book. (It continues in much the same way, too, with many another MS, and Mr. Lazarus, at eighty, still adds to it). The point I want to make is that he bought *The White Peacock* in 1934, only four years after Lawrence's death. He bought it for a song, for scarcely anyone else showed any interest at all. (Jake Zeitlin's sale catalogue of Lawrence MSS did not follow until three years later).¹

George Lazarus made only one foray into American literature, and that was in the form of his Faulkner collection. (In literature, as with his other passions, imperial jade and Dutch paintings, he believed in going for the best). He owned but one Faulkner MS, that of *Absalom, Absalom*. My firm bought it for him two or three years after publication, at a charity auction in New York in aid of victims of the Spanish Civil War. It cost him the equivalent of £50. His was the only bid. Faulkner had just turned forty.

Another pioneer was Charles Abbott, director of the Lockwood Memorial Library of what was then the University of Buffalo. He saw at a very early stage the research potential of poets' worksheets, and long before other librarians—particularly on my side of the water—had woken up to the situation, Mr. Abbott had approached many of the better living writers of verse and had appealed for their papers. Some MSS came to him as gifts; others by way of purchase. The Lockwood holdings of Joyce, Dylan Thomas and perhaps Robert Graves will be known to many of you.
Mr. Abbott supported the MS collection with a most comprehensive purchase program for current poetry in English. (If a future generation decided that a poet not honored in his own lifetime was in fact Shakespeare come again, then Mr. Abbott was determined that that poet's works would be found ready and waiting on Lockwood's shelves. Pressures of funding and space both make his policy an unfashionable one today, but it was by no means without merit). My father worked with him on that program and also on the purchase of Joyce and Dylan Thomas material. I have heard my father tell of Thomas sending exercise books to him through the post with a request that the purchase price be telegraphed to the poet back in Swansea. And again, of being called from the bookshop to a taxi parked outside where Dylan Thomas, having "drink taken," would conduct the sale of further MSS from the back seat. The going price was then two guineas a poem! Those were the days.

Before I go on to mention the man who, if not the first, was arguably the greatest of the pioneers, I should like to demonstrate how thin and poor the market for twentieth-century literary MSS still was in the early 1950s.

In 1955 I bought the MS of Living, the second of Henry Green's novels and perhaps, with its adventurous reaching out for a new style (including the virtual suppression of the definite article), one of his most important works. It was an interesting MS, with many revisions. I seem to remember there were at least nine shots at getting the dedication right! We offered it for sale through our catalogue and through an advertisement in The Book Collector. The price was just £50. (In the figures that follow I have avoided the temptation to convert sterling into dollars, but at this time the rate of exchange was $2.80 to the pound, so the Green MS was priced at $140.00. The exact figure does not matter: the essential point is that it was a very small price). Was there a flood of orders? No: just one—and after almost thirty years I think it no breach of confidence to say that the buyer was Stanford University.

Even today Green is not as widely recognized as he deserves to be, but after his death the British Library gratefully accepted the long loan of the main corpus of his MSS. More recently, Eton College, his old school, which featured in his first novel, Blindness, purchased the longest known series of Green's letters. Times change.

In 1957 my bookshop catalogued the holograph MS of John Cowper Powys' novel, Ducdame, and again we advertised it in The Book Collector. The price was £100. Again we received only one order, this time from the eccentric collector from Bradford, Pennsylvania, T.E. Hanley, whose collections of Powys, Shaw, Lawrence of Arabia and Beckett now form part of the resources of the Humanities Research Center.

The story of the Hanley collection has been set down in the rather extraordinary autobiography of his widow, the former "exotic" dancer, Tullah Hanley,
(Love of Art & Art of Love, Piper, 1975). It has been said that acquiring collections is an odd way to build a great library. I can only say that in my opinion the gods were smiling on the University of Texas the day that it bought the Hanley collection.

But let me return to my catalogue of what might be called "manuscript sales—but only just."

In 1957 we offered the MSS of two novels by L.A.G. Strong for £75 each. Once again only one prospective buyer came forward, this time that great librarian and bibliophile James T. Babb, here acting in his private capacity, although he later gave the MSS to Yale.

By then the tide had started to turn, but the change was not immediately apparent. In 1955 we had sold the MS and TS of Robert Graves's historical novel, Count Belisarius, to a New York dealer after we had had them in stock for several years at an asking price of only £100 for MS and TS together. Twelve months later the dealer was back in London and complained that he had been unable to sell them. Two days after that we wrote to New York offering to buy them back—but we were too late. They were sold while our letter was in the post. The boom had started.

This is not the place—and I am certainly not the person—to attempt a full account of the founding and development of the Humanities Research Center, but this is the moment to pay tribute to the greatest of the pioneers I have selected, Dr. Harry Huntt Ransom, who in 1957 began to march triumphantly down the trail which Charles Abbott had blazed.

And here let us record the debt which future scholars will owe to those who followed in his footsteps at HRC, and notably to Dr. F.W. Roberts, its director until 1978, who, first as a strong right arm to Harry Ransom and later on his own account, participated in almost a quarter of a century of aggressive (and I use the word in its best sense) acquisition of original materials in the field of modern English and American literature. Of course mistakes were made. Of course Dr. Ransom's wholesale, "man-in-a-hurry" policy of buying collections other people had formed led to some inevitable duplication. Of course acquisitions ran ahead of cataloguing. Of course not all the works acquired appear to us of equal importance.

But it is not by these things that HRC—and, incidentally, Harry Ransom and Warren Roberts—will be judged. Rather will it be by Dr. Ransom's broader aims and the degree to which they were achieved.

His aim was to make the University of Texas at Austin pre-eminent in this specialized field. It was also to gather together and preserve the materials which would show future generations what it was like to live the life of a professional man of letters in the first half of the twentieth century—not just the life of an Eliot, a Joyce or a Hemingway but also the life of a less spectacularly successful writer, whose toil and labor were just as great.
Judged by these criteria, HRC is a triumphant success. Surely it is no exaggeration to say that serious researchers into virtually any aspect of literature in the English language in the last hundred years will benefit from a trip to Texas. Much research cannot be undertaken at all without making the pilgrimage.

How the various collections at HRC come together and illumine one another is shown to splendid advantage in the catalogue of their Max Beerbohm exhibition.\(^2\) I commend it to you.

If the MSS of author A are in the HRC, there is a good chance that the MSS of his friend, B, who wrote about similar themes are also there. A’s letters to B will tell how they looked at common problems. A’s publisher’s papers may well be on hand too, and the files of the agent who represented A to that publisher. The critic, C, may tell in a letter in D’s archive how impressed he was when he first read A’s book. If Beerbohm made a caricature of A, that is probably in HRC too!

But let us go back—briefly—to our price-list once more. Dr. Ransom’s program began quietly enough in 1957, but the official starting gun was heard in June 1960 at an auction sale in aid of the London Library when the MS of Forster’s *A Passage to India* was sold for £6,500, then a record price for any MS by a living author.

Further spectacular events followed. In November of the same year the MS of Lawrence’s *Etruscan Places* was sold for £2,000 and followed the Forster to Texas. Between 1961 and 1962 Texas bought most of Edith Sitwell’s MSS for £18,000 and Graham Greene’s for a little less.

At last the British lion roused itself, feeling perhaps that someone had been tweaking its tail. In 1961 the Arts Council set up a scheme to buy the MSS of contemporary poets for the British Library. The rigid bureaucratic insistence on poetry and nothing but poetry was not without its inherent problems. The dovecotes were put in a fine flurry, for example, when my firm offered the Arts Council some MS notebooks of David Gascoyne’s which contained verse at the front and prose at the back!

The British Library itself, that is to say directly, bought the MS of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* at this time, paying a figure believed to be close to £5,000 for it. I would not attempt to suggest that Henry Green is comparable in stature to Virginia Woolf and emphatically he was not thought so in 1962, but here was a change of heart indeed! Happily, my countrymen—or at least their national libraries—are now fully aware of the desirability of acquiring contemporary literary MSS, and, within the limitations of their budgets, they pursue active, if selective, buying policies.

Another American institution, the Lilly Library, embarked around this time on the not uncontroversial policy of seeking to acquire one representative MS notebook from each of the more promising younger writers—and notably
from the so-called “Angry Young Men.” This, like the Arts Council’s program, was doubtless admirable in its intentions, but it sinned against the concept of archival integrity. There are of course two sides to the argument, and there are those who would say that it is good to give a writer exposure (through his MSS) in different parts of the country—or even of the world—but the advantages of having all a writer’s extant MSS together in one place will always be paramount for me, because of what it enables us to learn about chronology, development and so on by being able to compare one MS directly with another.

Another scheme which began in 1964 was to my mind a model of the way in which such things should be done. William Matheson—at that time head of Special Collections in the Olin Library at Washington University in St. Louis—carefully worked out a rationale for the Modern Literature Collection which the Library was about to form.

The first step was to involve the faculty and to have them participate in drawing up a list of authors. Professors suggested:

1. writers they knew personally (and from whom they might hope to get MSS);
2. writers they thought were neglected;
3. writers who, although young, showed great promise (William H. Gass hadn’t had a single book published when his name went on the list).

All the writers nominated had to be living. Matheson had to see a reasonable chance of building a complete collection of their printed work—in the best condition. There had to be a good prospect of being able to obtain MS material. Writers already famous, the obvious, and the then “expensive” names were eschewed: Faulkner and Frost did not feature in the program. On the other hand, Beckett did—and the Olin Library was successful in obtaining a number of fine Beckett MSS without breaking the bank.

The scheme was a great success and has given Washington University a balanced, structured collection of printed books, MSS, TSS and corrected proofs of a wide range of modern writers. Those who want more detail of the rationale behind the collection will find it in Matheson’s article in *American Libraries*, 1971.

The Mathesons put as much thought into their private collecting as they do into their professional work and, for an object lesson in how to build an author collection, you can do no better than turn to Nina Matheson’s article “Vladimir Nabokov—the Pursuit and the Prize,” in the *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas at Austin*, New Series, no.17 (1981). It repays study.

In this era of rapid changes in money values most of the prices I have mentioned so far doubtless seem modest enough. We should perhaps remind ourselves of the obvious truth that at the time they were paid they looked larger. It
would always have been easier for rich collectors and wealthier institutions to pay them than for those less well endowed, but all buyers face the need to make decisions about the value of material offered to them. Let us go on to consider the criteria by which we can make useful comparisons between the relative values of one given manuscript or archive and another. As we shall see, the laws of supply and demand affect the prices of manuscripts just as they do the prices of other more humdrum commodities.

At this point perhaps I should stress that in all my remarks about prices I am referring only to physical possession of a MS, to ownership of the paper and ink, for in my experience it is rare for copyright to pass in sales of this kind. This is as true of published MSS as it is of unpublished MSS—and equally as true of sales of correspondence files: it is normal in these transactions for copyright to stay where it was before.

When we seek to assess a manuscript or an archive in terms of its market value, a number of questions need to be asked. Here are some of them:

First there are questions on the supply side.

1. *What proportion of the author's work does the manuscript or collection of manuscripts represent?* Too much can on occasion be like the celebrated surfeit of lampreys. When the price rises above a certain level, even if it represents good value, many potential buyers are ruled out because of budget limitations. It is then that those with long purses can pick up the greatest bargains.

2. *Where are the rest of the manuscripts?* Have they been lost or destroyed? Are they in institutional hands already? Might some come on to the market later, or is this the buyer's last chance?

3. *What point has the author reached in his career?* Is he likely to produce more? An affirmative answer pulls both ways. Some buyers welcome the chance this implies to build a worthwhile collection, but others hesitate to commit themselves to what might become an expensive long-term project.

Then there is the demand side of the balance sheet:

4. *Is the author likely to rise in critical esteem?* One takes account of the answer but must be wary of paying today for tomorrow's estimation. I am reminded of a lady critic who asked me to set a price on the manuscript of one of her books about Joyce. She was very disappointed with the answer and said to me accusingly, "You judged that as a book about Joyce, didn't you?" When I agreed that I had, she prophesied that "The day will come when you will think of it as a book by me!" Perhaps she is right: perhaps one day she will be recognized as a greater writer than
Joyce, though I confess I see no sign of it yet. The moral is clear. A promising poet may be seen by some as a latter-day Keats, but that does not yet make the manuscript of his first book of poems worth as much as Endymion.

5. Is this a typical or an atypical example of the author’s work? Let us take the hypothetical case of William Golding. Are we dealing with one of the relatively “heavy” novels by which he has won his reputation or is this, perhaps, the manuscript of his first—and only—book of verse (Poems, by W. Golding, 1934)? The typical Golding novel will enjoy an obvious demand. The poems on the other hand will have a rarity value. There are more buyers for the former, but how strongly does the unusual quality of the latter weigh in the balance?

6. Is this a “key” book of its time? (As Ulysses was; as The Waste Land was). Is it an “intellectual landmark” in the manner of Keynes’s General Theory of Employment? Is it what Richard Landon, in the preceding paper, aptly called a “touchstone of civilization”?

7. Is the “manuscript” really a manuscript at all? i.e., is it written in the author’s hand (or even the hand of an amanuensis)? Or is it what publishers, literary agents and all too many authors call a “manuscript” when it is in fact a typescript? If the latter, is the author in the habit of composing on the typewriter, or are we merely faced with a relatively clean secretarial transcription from a discarded holograph draft?

Many years ago I went to see Doris Lessing, who invited me to buy what she called the “manuscript” of one of her recent works. When I pointed out that it was in fact a typescript, she drew herself up to her full height and said, “Young man,” (I told you this was many years ago) “do you suppose that in this day and age people still write books with fountain pens?” Of course they do and—whether or not it is logical—holograph manuscripts undoubtedly seem more attractive to our eyes than even authorial typescripts. I suppose the only possible exception might be a typescript by Ezra Pound, whose typing was at least as eccentric, idiosyncratic and individualistic as any other author’s holograph manuscript might be.

8. What is the degree of correction? Is it very lightly corrected or really heavily revised? (Both D.H. Lawrence and John Cowper Powys would be promising candidates for the all-time record for the greatest number of revisions to a single manuscript. Anthony Burgess, on the other hand, was capable—or such was the evidence of his authorial typescripts—of writing an entire novel with occasion to make no more than nine or ten substantive corrections throughout).
The answer to this last question leads us to the next:

9. **What does the piece tell us about the “creative process”?** In other words, what does it tell us about the writer’s method of work? We have already considered the extent to which an author revises. What does the manuscript or series of manuscripts show us about the progression of his ideas? The novelist and short story writer William Sansom used to begin with random thoughts jotted on the back of cigarette packets. If one had the patience to arrange the packets in the right order, one could follow the germination of a novel through manuscript and typescript to corrected proof. Ronald Firbank also used to write down seemingly random names, words and phrases, snatches of dialogue and descriptions of places that occurred to him as he moved through life. (Happily he used notebooks—now in the Berg Collection—rather than cigarette packets). Later they would be woven into the thread of his works of fiction.

10. **Has the piece been published?** If so, does the manuscript contain material not in the published version?

11. **Is the author “taught”?** The appearance of a name on a University syllabus has a more dramatic effect on prices and values in this particular market than any incursion into the bestseller lists.

12. **Do photocopies or microfilms exist?** This last is important if one remembers that libraries buy modern manuscripts not as museum pieces but as the raw material for research. If that material is not unique but is equally available through an indeterminate number of photocopies, its value is less. Indeed several of the more celebrated institutional collections will not then buy at all.

Perhaps this is the moment to look at this aspect of the British Government’s export control, a control which applies to all manuscripts more than fifty years old, regardless of value. It is worth reminding you that as a condition of the granting of an export license it is normally necessary to deposit a photocopy, which is kept under seal at the appropriate depository (usually the British Library) for a period of seven years. A recent experiment has been to ask the buyers of manuscripts exported in this way (and it is often the buyers who have paid for the photocopies in the first place) to waive their rights to this seven-year restriction. I have it very recently, on the best authority, that owners on this side of the Atlantic have been very generous indeed in waiving those rights. Whether they are wise to do so is beyond the scope of our present consideration.

Putting thoughts of photocopies behind us, and reviewing the twelve questions I have posed, let us ask too what part fashion plays in the mechanism of the market. In the case of first editions it now plays too large a part, vide
recent prices for books by such authors as Tolkien, Fowles and Seamus Heaney. Insofar as collectors buy MSS, then MS prices are affected too, but since, as we saw when we began, most major MS sales are made to institutions, then fashion is less of a factor. This did not prevent one agent offering MS leaves which had been shared by Sylvia Plath and her husband Ted Hughes as Plath MSS (with Hughes on the versos) at one time and as Hughes MSS (with Plath on the versos) a little later!

But in the end, whatever Mrs. Malaprop may have said about comparisons being “odorous,” it is by comparison that MS prices must be settled. If this MS or that archive achieved so much, then that MS or archive ought to be worth so much. It is a question of starting from a fixed reference point and working outwards from it.

Let me make just a few more points about prices and values. We have just reflected on the factors which make one MS or archive dearer than another. We have noted too how MS prices increased dramatically in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Let us pause actually to spell out what caused that increase.

It was:

1. a growing awareness of the importance of the material, and thus:
2. the vastly augmented resources made available for purchase.

The changing value of money merely accelerated the increase and gave emphasis to it.

More recently, prices for MSS have not, with certain exceptions, kept pace with the decline in the general purchasing power of the pound and the dollar—have not, in other words, kept pace with inflation. This audience, above all others, will be aware of the reason: quite simply it is a matter of reduced funding for higher education.

Younger authors, and many older ones coming fresh to the manuscript market, have been sorely disappointed by the price levels set on their manuscripts—good in terms of the market, perhaps, but poor in terms of putting their children through college, buying a house in the country, or simply in terms of how many dinners the proceeds would buy in a Manhattan or Mayfair restaurant.

Not all authors are venal about their manuscripts. In the course of my consultancy work I was recently asked by an institutional library on this side of the Atlantic to advise on their possible acquisition of all the extant manuscripts of a young Irish poet. From the working papers sent to me, I discovered that a professional valuer had advised the poet not to part with all the papers at one time but only to offer enough of the manuscripts to get the library “hooked,” so that the purchase price of the remainder could be jacked up, thus producing a greater total from the two sales than the valuer thought could be achieved by selling everything at one time.
I was appalled by this advice, partly because I did not even accept the arithmetical proposition, partly because it ran entirely contrary to my own practice and philosophy, but mostly because I thought it was potentially damaging to the real interests of the poet concerned. In my view these interests would be best served by having all his papers preserved in one place. And I certainly did not think that his reputation would benefit if he became known as a practitioner of the marketing strategy he was being urged to take up.

To my delight as I read on through the file, it became evident that the poet would have nothing whatever to do with the valuer’s scheme. I was therefore rather sorry that in my report to my client I had to make negative noises about the price the poet was ultimately seeking. The positive side of the picture is that the poet cared enough about his work and his reputation to want to see the right thing done by his manuscripts.

Of course it frequently happens that writers divide their archives—whether consciously or sub-consciously—with no thought of avarice. It may be that an author has parted with one or more manuscripts in response to approaches from collectors, charities, or even librarians, without considering what we have termed the “integrity of the archive.” Indeed, the collecting policies of some institutions, as I have mentioned earlier, can have a divisive effect.

Although in the United Kingdom there are no tax concessions for writers who give their manuscripts to libraries, fiscal considerations can still come into the picture. The proceeds of an author’s sale of his manuscripts come within the scope of our Capital Gains Tax legislation. Thus there can be compelling reasons for a comparatively well-to-do author to limit the disposals he makes in any one fiscal year. But the most frequent and totally unavoidable reason for the division of an archive is a matter of chronology: an author selling his MSS, whether on his own initiative, at the request of a library, or the instigation of a dealer, can only sell what he has written to date. If he continues to enjoy a successful creative life after that, then another archive will inevitably accrue. I apologize for laboring the obvious, but it distresses me to hear, as I have recently done, disagreeable—even dishonorable—motives attributed when such writers and agents eventually seek to pass on the ownership of this subsequent archive.

This is a major matter of concern for those engaged in the field and perhaps we can give it further consideration now. Let us set on one side the argument that it can advance a writer’s reputation to have his manuscripts distributed among a plethora of learned libraries. Let us assume a virtually unanimous view that it is in the interests of scholarship for all the manuscripts of a given writer to be preserved in one place. The problem then is to arrange an orderly and equitable method of transfer.

I am not in favor of endeavouring to arrange in the contract for the sale of the extant archive a payment to cover delivery of all future manuscripts. I do not
see how a fair and just figure can be agreed on. Who can foretell what the productive life of an author will be? Who can say what the value of money will be? Surely few business offices would be prepared to approve the payment of monies now for goods, unspecified, that might not be delivered until ten or twenty years' time? I have even heard of a case, not, I hasten to add, negotiated by me, where a distinguished, elderly and I am sure honourable author appears to be totally oblivious of a commitment he entered into some twenty years ago that his subsequent manuscripts should be delivered eventually to the institution which purchased the first batch. As Shakespeare said in the St. Crispin's Day speech in Henry V, "Old men forget." If gentle reminders have failed, what is the library to do? A lawsuit hardly seems appropriate.

What I favor is the informal, or at most semi-formal expression of a mutual understanding that the writer will offer the papers to the institution and that the institution will in principle wish to buy them on the basis of fair market value at the time of eventual sale. This mutual understanding can easily be expressed in the form of letters of intent.

I see that there are risks inherent in this situation. Each side is in a position to take advantage of the other. If an author felt that the library had to have the last ten percent of his papers, he could, in theory, seek an inflationary price. If a library felt that the author would find it difficult to sell the remaining ten percent to another party, it could seek to buy the papers for a fraction of their notional worth.

Since the mid-1950s my firm has negotiated many, many sales of papers of living authors. In most cases, "gentlemen's agreements" of the kind I have described have been informally entered into. In only two cases am I aware of an author having returned to me with unduly extravagant proposals about the asking price of the subsequent archive. In each case the author was advised not by a specialist dealer in manuscripts but by a literary agent, a man whose profession links value to best-seller lists and to royalty returns. In each case a modicum of cold water poured on the agent's ideas brought the author to a just and realistic view of the situation. On the other side of the balance the only difficulties I have encountered have arisen from changes of policy at the institution which made the original purchase.

The overall financial situation in academic libraries has undoubtedly caused many institutions which used to make the occasional foray into the MS market to drop out altogether, at least for the time being. This means that a large flow of material, from many diverse sources, has tended to be channeled, by way of special offers, to perhaps as few as half a dozen major purchasers in this country, and perhaps as many again in all the other parts of the English-speaking world put together.

The result has been a strange dichotomy in prices: the pieces and collections
with obvious appeal, the high spots (the Joyces, Eliots and Hemingways, for example) bring very big prices indeed; while MSS by writers of the second rank languish inexpensively.

Today we see two other symptoms of change: change in attitude; change in the approach to scale. Back in the heydays of those great and good men, Lawrence Clark Powell and the late William Ready (it was he who secured the Bertrand Russell archive for McMaster University), “big was beautiful”: the larger an archive or a book collection the better they—and most other librarians—liked it. Now things are different: size—large size—is for many libraries an adverse factor. There are distinguished libraries such as Berg and Lilly where physical storage space is now a problem. Then there are newer institutions which still have space but hesitate to tackle an archive (and I give a concrete example) comprising half a million pieces of correspondence between a literary agency and its authors because of the gargantuan cataloguing task it would present. Both Larry Powell and Will Ready, I like to think, would have bought the collection first and worried about funding a new building later! Both might well have let the cataloguing problem take care of itself in the fullness of time.

Then there is nowadays a nervousness about what we might call conspicuous consumption (the force that drives the nouveau riche to buy expensive cars, ostentatious jewelry and the like). The tale is told of one major library in England which was presented with an outstanding buying opportunity that would have necessitated raising supplementary funds. At a meeting of his sub-librarians the head of the library explained that he thought he could make a successful appeal to the government and get the purchase money. Did the committee want him to go ahead? “No,” said the sub-librarians. When pressed for their reasons one after another expressed an unreadiness to go back to the common rooms of their colleges and face academic colleagues who were having to sack members of faculty and cut courses because the basic government grant to the university was insufficient. When universities were under economic siege, they argued, it was scarcely decent to be seen to be spending conspicuously large amounts on what some would see as the “frivolity” of yet another collection of rare books. I do not applaud their view: indeed I decry it, but I feel I must report it.

The moral of all this is clear: for anyone with the courage to back his own judgment, with space, and with either a budget or a winning way with donors, there are many bargains to be had in the MS market today.

My brief was to look at the past, the present and the future. You will have noticed, I hope, that we have worked away from the past and have begun to discuss the present—or at least some aspects of it. We have had, alas, to ignore such phenomena of the recent past as the spurt of interest in contemporary MSS shown by a number of Canadian universities—an interest now, alas, diminished
by hard economic fact, by shortage of money. We have not had time to consider
the effect of the United States Tax Reform Act of 1969, which removed the bene-
fit that used to accrue to writers who gave their papers to a library. We have not
ever been able to consider the ingenious argument that the Act merely delayed
such gifts by a generation and really did little harm at all. We may note, how­
ever, that some writers who once gave their MSS to a library book by book, as
published, now expect the library to buy each new MS instead. This has put still
more pressure on already straitened budgets.

We have not looked at some of the thematic collections that are being
formed by enterprising librarians on both sides of the Atlantic, collections with a
regional or geographical theme, for example; or collections devoted to writers
with a common religious belief or background; writers in a particular “school”;
writers of a common decade; and the largest class of all, writers of a common
sex—the female sex (both Yale University and the University of Tulsa, for in­
stance, have formed collections of MSS by women writers). We have not even
had a chance to begin thinking about systematic ways of building collections of
modern books—and what part dealers can and should play in a mutually benefi­
cial partnership with librarians.

But now we must turn to the future. I am not sure that my crystal ball is any
less cloudy or any more reliable than anyone else’s, but some things are clear
enough. The money available for spending on twentieth-century MS collections
will still be pretty firmly linked to the overall budget level of research libraries. A
greater proportion of that money—and contemporary conscience demands
this—will have to be spent on cataloguing and conservation. Both have been
major preoccupations, of late, just up the road at HRC.

Export controls will become more stringent. In the United Kingdom in
1952, when I entered the book trade, MSS over one hundred years old were sub­
ject to control (not to a ban on export, you understand, but to a control). Later
the age limit was reduced to seventy years. Now it is fifty years—and there is
pressure from some British academics and librarians to see it reduced still fur­
ther. A proposition recently floated—and thank heaven it has found little favor
so far—called for books with marginalia in the hand of anyone listed in the Dic­
tionary of National Biography to be treated as though they were in fact MSS!
This would mean that, regardless of their value, if such books were fifty years old
or more they would need export licenses.

This would take us one small step nearer a hypothetical state of affairs
which Robert Rosenthal of the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago
puts in a question to his bibliography classes: “What do you think would happen
if a Draconian government outlawed the buying and selling of modern literary
MSS?” Reflect on it for a moment. Some pieces would doubtless be presented to
libraries by authors and their heirs, but it is my contention that much would be
lost by neglect, by decay and by accidental and even deliberate destruction. It is just because MSS are worth money that private owners—who are fallible—part with them and enable them to find more permanent homes. The same reason allows what one might term a “search and recovery” network of booksellers and autograph dealers to steer both known and unknown works to safe havens.

A hypothetical government prohibition on trading in MSS is one thing, but the danger from changing technology is already beginning to impinge on our world. The point was ably made by Ms. Cathy Henderson of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in a radio interview broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation only a few days before this Preconference assembled. Tongue in cheek, no doubt, she wondered aloud whether the day might not come when all authors would write not with pens, or even typewriters, but with word processors and, by making their revisions on a Visual Display Unit, leave behind them only textually perfect discs, so making future discussion of our subject superfluous.

The road ahead for those of us concerned with the business of seeing contemporary literary MSS properly preserved in appropriate places is, for as far into the future as I can see, going to be a stony and an uphill one, but for those with the same inspiration of vision as those pioneers we began by praising, there are still great opportunities—and rich satisfaction can be the reward.

NOTES

1. Mr. Richard Landon tells me that a Canadian collector bought the MS of Women in Love even earlier, while Lawrence was still alive.
3. Shortly after the publication of Lord of the Flies, I wrote to Mr. Golding to ask whether he was indeed the author of Poems, published by Macmillan in 1934. I received a reply stating that Mr. Golding regretted he could not help me with my enquiry!
5. I have been told that in fact Mr. Burgess destroyed earlier drafts as successive revisions were made.
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