One of the most broadly based and strikingly interesting subjects in literary studies today is the question of canon-formation—which is but a part of an inquiry into the institutions of literary study. Admittedly the basis of this larger inquiry is frequently ironic, with protestations of the power of the canon’s establishment, calls for its change or expansion, and the recognition of the social structures that created and continue to preserve it. The subject involves extensive discussion of such questions as how artists reinforce the canon by the choice of styles or procedures, how critics construct canons, how canons govern curriculum and, perhaps more important in the long run, how canons influence the critical research agenda and literary scholarship generally. These questions are of deep importance if we hope to penetrate what underlies and accounts for the complex factors that have been at work in shaping institutional collecting of twentieth-century literature.

T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis saw tradition as a fundamental ingredient of culture, and both argued for the extension of that tradition. Eliot, a subtle apologist for his own work as well as his contemporaries, Leavis proselytizing for writers such as Lawrence, who both fulfilled and extended tradition. Later critics, however, such as Raymond Williams, have taken a more empirical view and have noted the complex and changing shape of canons by examining the social and political forces as well as the historical process itself that extends, modifies, and dissolves literary hierarchies. Richard Ohmann’s essay, “The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960–1975,” illustrates this predictable evolution. He notes the cultural process and conditions that establish authors, categorize them, and ultimately pronounce values and thus hierarchies, such as major, minor, or merely “popular” writers.

Research libraries in the United States have played a crucial, and one could argue, an ultimately decisive role in the formulation and extension of this century’s
literary canon. This paper proposes to offer a few observations on this phenomenon and explore briefly several of the conditions which shaped the acquisition of literary materials of twentieth-century writers in the middle of the century. It will focus especially on the role of one figure and one library, not with the intention of presenting a paradigm for the successful acquisition of these materials, but rather to use the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRHRC) at The University of Texas at Austin to illustrate a number of important considerations and developments which occurred in the direction and growth of modern research collections in American universities during the crucial years from the early fifties through the early seventies. This paper does not concentrate on the important, independent, and reciprocal role of the book trade in these developments because in its original version it was paired with a paper on that subject delivered by Anthony Rota.²

At one time it was easy to ignore the importance of the research library in the development of the study of recent literature, with the acquisition of authors’ literary archives—usually acquired from descendants many years after an author’s death when his or her reputation was more or less fixed—a mere ratification of the then current established literary values. For the past half-century, however, research libraries have been active agents, betting as it were on less solid reputations and in the process frequently solidifying or enhancing them. In fact, during the 1970s libraries were often, as a matter of course, out in front of critical reputations. Examples come readily to mind: The University of Tulsa’s acquisition of the Jean Rhys archive, the HRHRC’s acquisition of Paul Scott’s papers, and the important contemporary author acquisition program at Washington University, St. Louis.

My point is not to contend that acquisitions of writers’ archives are the decisive factor in establishing a writer’s place in the literary canon, but to argue that such acquisitions are part of a large social process that does so, and an account of this process is essential to an understanding of institutional collecting of modern authors. As John Rodden noted in his recent study of George Orwell’s literary reputation, “One of the most difficult problems for literary and cultural historians is to cast light on the making of literary reputations as a social process while not ignoring that intrinsic aesthetic attributes of works contribute to authors’ reputations.”³ The “aesthetic attributes” are not, however, the subject of this paper.

As the discipline of literature in American universities became increasingly preoccupied with the study of the present and the competition for manuscripts more intense, libraries made purchases of a wide variety of contemporary literary materials without the confidence of solidified aesthetic judgment, historical perspective, or the security of established literary reputation. Even the papers of living authors accumulated in manuscript collections. In the decades following World War II, literary collections in research libraries in America were transformed. More than depositories for the books and papers that made up a clearly established canon of American and British literature, they became engaged in the fortunes of literary reputations, and, to
varying degrees, participants in the changing shape of literary studies. There is not one history of this development, for the particulars must be traced in studying the motives and activities of twenty-five or thirty libraries that began seriously to develop twentieth-century collections. But, however different the factors that spurred them individually, their common impact dramatically altered in scope and direction the development of literary research collections in the United States. For the historians of this process it will be important to measure cause as well as effect, because many of these changes did not come at the instigation of research libraries themselves but from larger and more fundamental shifts in universities and literary studies generally.

The acquisition of twentieth-century literary materials was a part of the post-war expansion and development of American universities in which research played an increasingly important role in the national agenda. Obviously it was the basic and applied sciences that received the vast majority of federal and state funds, but the humanities rode a large coattail from the late fifties through the early seventies. Establishment of federal agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities played an important part, but other federal and state funds supported expansion to an even greater degree.

Taking into account all of these factors affords a kind of archaeological study of an aspect of a culture’s growth, confidence, and vision. It affords, too, a revealing picture of American characteristics, both individual and collective: a sense of competition, corporate as well as individual enterprise, a not naive belief in the achievement of distinction, yet a suspicion of the roots of that distinction. Within the United States reactions to these developments in the middle decades of the century also reflected sectional as well as national prejudices.

This subject is certainly a matter, as Henry James would have said, the full consideration of which would carry us far. But with this brief backdrop in mind, we can perhaps better understand some of the active forces behind the substantial revolution created by the acquisition of modern collections by research libraries from the 1950s through the early 1970s.

The pantheon of individuals who were important figures in the development of twentieth-century collections in the United States is a large one, and most of the names, whether private collectors, librarians, or book dealers, are familiar: Charles Abbott, John Quinn, and T. E. Hanley, to name only a few important collectors. Names such as Norman Holmes Pearson, Lawrence Clark Powell, and Harry Ransom also dominated this arena, people who represented major institutions and guided them to distinction in twentieth-century holdings. A third group of important early figures included Lew Feldman, Bertram Rota, Jake Zeitlin, James Drake, among many book people in the trade, who had keen eyes on the literary marketplace where the aesthetic, political, social, and economic forces frequently merged or collided.

As early as 1947, almost ten years before the first Sotheby sale devoted exclusively to the “moderns” in October 1956, John Carter observed with some foreboding the
growing volume of American university buying in the rare book market. Seeing a mixed blessing, he viewed these changes as

the direct outcome of the greatly increased attention being paid to the rare book rooms on a hundred American campuses. Up to a point this development is obviously healthy, both as a sign of grace among dons and because competition is a good thing in itself. But whether in the long run the rare book men in the university libraries can have it both ways is another matter. Bread sown on the waters, in the shape of a liberal education in book-collecting to undergraduates, may often return in the shape of a handsome collection bequeathed by a grateful *alumnus*. The cultivation of an intelligent interest in rare books among wealthy graduates and other patrons does good in itself, as well as setting the scene for an appeal when the library wants to buy an important book for which no funds are available. The mere disinterested propagation of sound taste and technique in book collecting is a laudable and very proper function of a university library. But if the libraries all over a huge and wealthy continent are also going themselves to invade the auction rooms, the neglected studies and stately homes, and file sets and MS. cupboards of living writers and the various other sources normally tapped by collectors and the trade, it is conceivable that the time may come when they will drive their own pupils out of the market.⁴

More than twenty years later, when Carter provided an epilogue in 1969 to his Sandars Lectures in a reprint of *Taste & Technique in Book Collecting*, he made a less reserved commentary on the fate of the private collector and the breakdown of components in the rare book market when in his inimitable style he wrote:

To the book collector, however, whether he be an Englishman or an American, the most familiar, as they are the most menacing figures, are the professed rare book librarians: the men whose business it is to take books and manuscripts out of private hands and immure them forever behind steel doors and glass. Anyone who has compared the Gothic vaults of Rylands or Folger with the interior of the Beinecke library in New Haven will agree that steel and glass can make quite a setting. Gordon Bunshaft's six-storey glass sheath towering up with the marble shell, the serried shelves of red and blue and green and brown volumes brilliantly lit, looks like the King's Library set on end and mounted by Cartier. It represents a wholly original conception of rare books as treasurable objects, and it must be a most effective demonstration to potential donors. But the facts remain that the books belong to Yale and not to you.⁵

Wrong as Carter was about the demise of the private collector, he recognized other results of this onslaught of institutional buying. He saw its implications for bringing twentieth-century literature into the curriculum: "The Americans initiated this method of anticipating the Eng. Lit. requirements of the future, with the
University of Buffalo one of the first in the field; writing round to every author they could think of with the offer of an honorable home for his then unregarded manuscripts; and with the most gratifying results, too. 

Cause and effect are frequently difficult judgments to make, but the impetus for American institutional acquisitions of twentieth-century materials was not brought on simply because of their availability. The major shifts in the way literature was taught in America after World War II, with the advent of the New Criticism, and its attention to the evolution of the text through various drafts as it freed itself from the author, was also a contributing factor. The availability of manuscripts and related materials coincided with the increasing interest in contemporary literature in English departments in the United States. The pressure was on librarians to acquire materials from the period on which the younger professors were teaching and writing. With the expansion of American universities there was an insatiable demand for research materials, and with this demand came keen competition among universities who were building collections from an infusion of state and federal dollars. It was natural that these expanding university libraries with burgeoning new graduate programs concentrated their rare book and manuscript buying in the area of the twentieth century, where materials were available, materials which were then not left to ripen but were quickly made available to dissertation students hungry for new topics. The number of dissertations being written on Joyce, Faulkner, and Hemingway had, in a few short years after World War II, surpassed the number being written on Shakespeare, Milton, and Johnson. Living authors were being studied as their work was published. If a student used original materials, the stigma of writing a dissertation on a contemporary author was lessened. Literary criticism also fostered these shifts. Leavis and Richards became far more important names as critics than E. M. W. Tillyard and J. Dover Wilson.

Disraeli once said that an author who talks about his books is as bad as the mother who talks about her children. With that admonishment in mind it is still pertinent to discuss Harry Ransom (1908–1976) in order to particularize some of the complex issues of institutional acquisitions. To demythologize the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center and Harry Ransom is a task in itself, but from a distance of over thirty years the picture can be clarified and his purposes better understood. Further, a discussion of Ransom serves to illuminate several of the important trends that emerged in the phenomenal growth of American institutional acquisitions of rare books and manuscripts in the sixties, and it also illustrates a number of institutional purposes not related to the book trade.

Ransom's ladder to power at the University of Texas had consecutive steps: instructor (1938), professor, dean (1954–1957), vice-president, provost (1957–1960), president (1960–1961), chancellor (1961–1971), in that order, and of course creator of the Humanities Research Center. Ransom, as he moved through these faculty and administrative tiers, had a profound commitment to the building of libraries gener-
ally. He believed that for the University of Texas to take its place among the great institutions of the world it had to have one of the great research libraries. He knew it was more than a hundred years behind the major libraries in America, in depth as well as breadth. The competing needs of breadth and depth are like the horizontal and perpendicular tensions in a liberal arts curriculum, the difference being in a curriculum the tension is intellectual, whereas with libraries it is usually financial. Concern for breadth is seldom mentioned in the many stories told about Ransom, but it is a recurring theme in his correspondence during those early years, and extremely important to an understanding of his ambition and the later ambition of other universities.

Like many brilliant leaders of institutions, Ransom was given to both candor and secrecy, depending upon how he judged the situation. His diplomatic skills are legendary: a faculty member tells the story of being in a state of near desperation and going to see Ransom to ask him for help with his unreasonable colleagues, a malicious dean, and for travel funds. Ransom heard him out, shook hands with him, but said hardly a word. Although nothing was resolved, the professor went out feeling so good he took his wife to dinner and spent the whole evening telling her how fortunate they were to be at the University of Texas. Ransom created an aura of optimism that was compelling, even though this feeling could lead to expectations beyond those that he could deliver. Many book dealers felt the same way, especially when they waited for final commitments, and waited, too, for payment. Like many collectors, his eyes were larger than his purse. Given the length of his purse you can imagine the size of his eyes. Furthermore, even if other institutional buyers had had as large a purse, they would not have had the freedom to open it. From his position as chancellor, president, or provost, Ransom could command resources in abundance. Ransom was an enormously complex person, who was by turns a quiet man of letters, a seasoned and adroit administrator, a poet of some accomplishment, a lobbyist in one of the trickiest state governments in the country, and a visionary in a part of the world that admired as well as destroyed visionaries. That he focused on libraries was not remarkable for him, given his background, but that he was able to realize this vision was not only remarkable, but miraculous. Luckily there were powerful people who shared his vision for the University of Texas.

The accretive message not of his public statements but of his correspondence is very clear: he knew he had a moment in time to do what he did, and he was constantly aware of this temporality. The players in Texas would change, and, more importantly, he realized he was altering the foundation as well as the old practices of acquisition. He did not realize, however, until much later, after many attacks from many angles, that he had been a key figure in reshaping the thinking of the entire enterprise.

Ransom also brought a number of book dealers into prominence, who themselves became targets for criticism, both within and outside the book world. When the attacks on Texas and Ransom himself began, he was not as dismayed as many have
suggested, which is not to say he liked it. John Carter realized from the beginning that Texas was a major, but not by any means the only, institutional player in this revolution, when he warned of the depletion of the British national heritage. He wrote, “we must not let the flattering depredations of Texas on our cultural heritage obscure the competitive activities of other American libraries.”

Ransom for the most part kept his own counsel amid the wide criticism. But one dealer, Jake Schwartz, because of his impetuous and provocative nature, probably elicited from Harry Ransom more precise information as to Ransom’s purpose and vision for the University of Texas libraries than all the politicians, regents, and faculty that dealt with Ransom over the years. This is revealed in a correspondence that covers the late fifties and early sixties, the period when Ransom had just embarked upon his ambitious development of the libraries, and when he had finally come into a position to realize this ambition. Schwartz was irrepressible. His letters in typescript with corrections and additions in three colors of ink on nearly every line are as difficult to read as a page of Ezra Pound’s typescript for the Cantos. His technique was to cajole, bait, rationalize. Just before he offended Ransom completely, he would mention a treasure Ransom couldn’t pass up without being a fool. For Schwartz all of his sales were gifts. He would cry over the great steals he had made for Texas and in turn the steals Texas had made from him. Ransom frequently, out of sheer frustration, tried to explain to him what he was trying to do and why.

The correspondence begins about the time Ransom made his first great modern purchase. On November 17, 1958, in a brief introduction to an exhibition catalogue, Ransom began: “It is with a sense of pride joined with a feeling of responsibility that the Research Center of the University of Texas announces the opening of the T. E. Hanley Library . . . [a library that will be a] major source of teaching materials for work in the new Academic Center.” A point to be noted: “teaching materials,” not great treasures. Foreshadowing an attitude that one librarian expressed to William Matheson in his recent survey: “We buy research materials, not rare books.” But who believes that?

Ransom concluded his one-page preface to the catalogue with a statement that expressed his belief in the value of literary manuscripts for study and research, and his purpose in acquiring and continuing to acquire such collections in the future:

Mr. T. E. Hanley, who over a period of some thirty years built these research collections, concentrated his attention on manuscript sources, and it is of course in this area that the supreme importance of the Library is recognized, for it is to the author’s manuscript that the scholar must turn in his final appeal for an understanding of the writer’s meaning in art. The research collection which ceases to grow becomes at best only a museum, and the Research Center intends to meet its responsibility for the future of the Hanley library, as for the other great collections in the Center, by constantly adding to holdings in important areas.
A few months before Ransom’s introduction was published, Jake Schwartz on May 30, 1958, sent Ransom a clipping from that day’s *Times Literary Supplement* which reported the growth of rare books and special collections in midwestern American institutions and noted that such vigor is no longer the exclusive preserve of “their elder sisters on the Eastern seaboard.” The theme of the article is the inevitable journey westward that, not too many years earlier, involved the movement of materials across the Atlantic to upstarts such as Yale or Harvard—by the last decade of this century, the theme will embrace Japan as the crass upstart. Schwartz’s accompanying comments to this article, however, were more provocative.

Two weeks later Ransom replied to Schwartz, describing the breadth he was trying to achieve—a breadth necessary for so many of the expanding state universities—and listed as examples a series of large collections in the fields of drama, music, and history Texas had acquired. He concluded by saying: “This is not the end: we intend to continue the program by expanding the University Library and improving the undergraduate general reading sections.” Ransom writes this without commenting on a statement in the *Times Literary Supplement* article that states, “foreigners—i.e., non-Texans—have been wondering for years when Texas as a whole will have been rich enough long enough to feel the need for first folios and such.” What the “foreigners” anticipated was not Ransom. They looked for a nouveau riche response from the outback, a conservative purchase of proven value such as a Shakespeare folio, a flamboyant gesture to bring cultural icons to a new wealthy home, hardly a new approach. The book world was not the place for the uninitiated to start new trends.

Anthony Rota has outlined well the prices modern manuscripts brought in those years, pointing out, for example, that the heavily revised manuscript of Henry Green’s *Living* was sold for $140. Ransom, having no intention of following the course that was anticipated for him by the press or his immediate critics, concluded his letter to Schwartz with the question: “Do you know of any library of modern literature in England now for sale?” His interest from the beginning was twofold: breadth but also concentration, in depth, in an area where masses of material were rapidly becoming available and the prices were still relatively low. In the same letter he also told Schwartz he was interested in “general collections, not of rare books, but of regular reference materials. Keep your eye open for us.”

From the point of view of history, Schwartz’s peculiar way of trying to ingratiate himself with a client is very valuable: he elicited clear responses. He would frequently tell Ransom how he was the victim of unscrupulous colleagues in the book trade and how Ransom needed Schwartz’s protection and expert advice, forcing Ransom, out of defense, to state more precisely just what he was trying to do.

Later that year, on October 1, 1958, Schwartz touched a real nerve when he wrote that someone told him that the only first-rate collection Ransom had bought thus far was the Hanley. I am going to quote Ransom’s reply to Schwartz at some length because it expresses his attitude toward much of the early criticism and indicates why
he seemed immune from hostile comment later, as well as revealing his general attitude toward the market in rare books and manuscripts. It also gives us a candid glimpse of the fragile and yet crucial relationship Ransom saw between the book trade and libraries—a relationship that he was dependent upon and valued highly, believing, however, that there were very different factors operating behind each:

About our general program and the points which you make in your most recent letter I will try to be literal and clear.

The University has had a good library: we are trying to make a great one.

In this program we have bought collections because of what they are worth to Texas—not because this bookseller or that thought they were dollar-valuable. For example, we have turned down great “bargains” later snapped up by the “sophisticates” interested in the period previous to 1700 (simply because Texas can never build a great library in the early field). [Although the recent acquisition of the Pforzheimer library was to prove him shortsighted on this point.]

I think I should emphasize the fact that while we have been represented in the main by four firms (alphabetically: Drake, El Dieff, House of Books, Kelleher) [parenthetically, one can add a fifth name of a dealer who was shortly to become a most valued adviser, Bertram Rota], no bookseller—and certainly not Mr. Swann—knows either the extent or the details and purpose of our plan here. More specifically, no bookseller knows, because the facts are quite confidential, the details of donation to the University involved in our major purchases, 1957-58. Hence generalizations by booksellers about what the University is doing or has done are simply groundless except as they relate to specific negotiations in which that bookseller has participated. I emphasize this point because I have received repeated, and quite erroneous, reports, especially after the booksellers meeting in California this summer.

... There have been ... collections for which we paid more than the original asking price. The ... materials were essential to our start in an undergraduate browsing room where sheer mass—some of which admittedly is not worth much, some of which is quite remarkable for our purposes—was the immediate point at issue. As for the folklore-wildlife materials, I can only say we needed them for an immediate research program unique to Texas and that here again we are about to receive a gift (this time by a non-Texan New Yorker) worth ten times the value of our purchase and consigned to us because the earlier purchase got us into primary position in the field.

... On the other hand, as I have repeatedly told our principal agents, I am not a book evaluator (nor a librarian, nor—in the sense in which I prefer to use the term—a “bibliographer”). I am a professor, temporarily charged with the chief executive duties of the University’s main branch at Austin. As such, I am a trustee of public funds (even when those funds have come by donation into the public treasury for purchase of libraries). I must therefore account not only to the scholars for whom the libraries are being built here, but also to our other administrators who work with me, our lawyers and auditors who are charged with dollar-responsibility, the governing
boards, and the legislative committees seriously interested in the development of the University. I must also account to my own conscience.

For these reasons, I am disturbed—though not surprised or astonished—by what you say in your letter. As I told you, I have had to deal with rumor and counter-rumor all summer, some of that rumor arising on campuses and not in booksellers gatherings.

... If booksellers think we have been “almost eaten alive by vultures,” then all I can say is that we’ll prove an indigestible meal to any such birds that flock around hereafter if I can identify them. I can’t resist adding that vultures eat dead meat, and as Frank Dobie is fond of saying, “Texas ain’t got much, but it’s got life.”

Although Ransom was no bibliographer, no librarian, no seasoned collector, he was sure of one thing: you learned more about books and their value from book dealers than anyone else, and he valued and depended upon his relationship with them as much as almost any institutional buyer ever had. He concluded his letter to Schwartz on this subject:

Let me say finally that we are grateful to all members of the trade—and especially to the four or five who have brought us along this past year in what was a confusing transition for everybody. Every one of them has had to put up with a most annoying system of delayed payment (caused by the way in which vouchers track through endless channels and finally produce checks long after normal business procedure would have produced them). None of these booksellers—even when they must have been agitated by the delays and uncertainties—has ever suggested what most banker-business men would demand: interest on their money. One bookseller, offering us a collection in good faith which we virtually accepted in good faith, had to be told that the same collection had already been offered by a colleague in New York under a different description and the deal was off: we met the most gracious treatment—more gracious, I’d say, than I would have met in an academic faculty. Another bookseller twice advised me strongly against buying a collection from him until I convinced him on the spot, among the books, that I needed this particular stock of a former bookseller to assist other colleges in Texas, including a small Negro institution starving for almost any kind of book. I conclude on this note simply to emphasize the fact that although undoubtedly any business, academic as well as mercantile, can be what you call a “jungle,” there may be some wayfaring value in what you call “innocence”—provided, of course, that innocence knows where it’s going.

We are going towards a great Library at Texas.

In quoting Ransom at length it is not my intention to suggest that his was an Olympian vision, above the concern of the world of libraries, or that he was not at times outflanked and a victim of the innocence he seemed to have cherished, but rather to present a view—certainly not a typical one—of an important institutional
buyer who deeply affected the rare book and manuscript market of the late fifties and sixties. During Ransom’s early years much of the public criticism against Texas came from the British press, but some of the most hostile attacks came more quietly and more viciously, not from the press, not from the trade, but from private collectors, from other institutions, from the University itself, and perhaps the most stingy of all, from several of the writers who had sold and continued to sell their manuscripts to Texas, Edmund Blunden and W. H. Auden to name only two. Ransom saw the Blunden incident as especially painful, because it could undermine his ability to convince the legislature and the regents to continue their support. And I think we all know that libraries, far less rare books and manuscripts, are rarely a high priority for state and federal funds.

Many of us from the midwest and other sections of the country are appreciative of Ransom’s wide swathe in the book world, because whether he drove prices up or not, he made it much easier for less well-known institutions to develop and expand their programs. The development of research collections was deemed respectable and proper. In the late sixties, when we embarked on a modest but serious program at the University of Tulsa, there was some commentary in the British press about further upstarts depleting the national treasures, but they evolved to serious commentary and concern as purchases such as the Cyril Connolly and the Harriet Shaw Weaver collections, a large portion of Rebecca West’s manuscripts and papers as well as Paul Scott’s and Jean Rhys’s were acquired. Tulsa and others learned from Ransom to seize an opportunity, believe in what you are doing, and know that the light of opportunity can be quickly shadowed. Ransom’s very success eventually curtailed Texas’s singular domination of the market as other institutions followed in its wake.

The press, which has covered many of these events sporadically over the years, has, in my view, been inattentive to the overall strategies of institutional collectors, concerned more with highlighting only costly purchases. A not untypical example of early press opinion regarding Texas can be cited from Times Literary Supplement of June 30, 1961. Commenting on the results of an auction of modern literature manuscripts where 548 lots went for £44,407, the reporter noted:

The fact that the purchases of one dealer, L. D. Feldman, of the House of El Dieff, New York, accounted for more than £27,000 (58 per cent) and the prevalent assumption that “bought by El Dieff” means “sold to Texas,” suggests one explanation for the present bullish state of the market for modern literary manuscripts and (particularly) correspondence which, in its simplicity, has been sometimes too easily adduced by critics (perhaps envious critics?) of the Lone Star State’s university, some of them from one or another of the soberer institutions of the eastern seaboard. It would, indeed, be much to the advantage of Austin’s reputation in the world of bibliophily if those who direct its acquisitive policies were to promulgate a manifesto defining them for they have been widely misunderstood and hardly less widely
transduced. But even if Texas were the bulldozing Moloch it is commonly represented to be, the hard fact is that when Mr. Feldman or another makes a successful bid on this or any other university’s behalf there is always an underbidder.18

Bertram Rota sent this article to Ransom and considered it, “on the whole, fair and well-informed.”19 I would agree, on the whole it was. Libraries build collections and can avoid duplication and perhaps competition by informing dealers and other libraries of their general aims, but Ransom’s forays were so large and became so well known and resented that general disclosure would, I believe, have increased competition by stimulating others to fish in the same waters with an eye only toward his presence there. Many Ransom purchases did not appear attractive until he acquired them, and such announcements in advance could also increase prices in anticipation of his interest.

This discussion began by pointing out a number of complex cultural and historical factors that influenced research librarians in their acquisitions of twentieth-century manuscripts and books. A recognition of these elements is necessary to understand institutional collecting patterns from the 1950s forward. The subsequent focus on one institution and one figure has illustrated a few of the factors that shaped collection building during this period. Harry Ransom was in no sense typical, but his ambitions for his institution, his single-minded focus, his ability to elicit financial support, his determination to concentrate upon recent literary materials, and his interest in collecting all the prepublication materials of an author, offer an excellent illustration of the impulses, risks, talents, judgments, and influence that are necessary to change patterns and affect history. Ransom’s legacy extends beyond the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, and therefore an account of his motives and actions gives us a better understanding of the history of twentieth-century collections in the United States.

NOTES

12. Letter from Harry Ransom to Jacob Schwartz, June 17, 1958. This and all references to Ransom are published with permission of both the HRHRC and Ransom’s estate.
16. Letter from Harry Ransom to Jacob Schwartz, 1 October 1958.
17. Letter from Harry Ransom to Jacob Schwartz, 1 October 1958.
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  Mary Jo Lynen and Arthur P. Young, eds. 1990. 256p. 0-8389-0532-2. $27.50.

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