The New Literary Scholarship, the Contextual Point of View, and the Use of Special Collections

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The title of Bernard Bergonzi’s recent Exploding English perfectly captures the author’s ambivalence concerning the changes in the study of English literature during the past twenty years; in one sense the field exploded out of the narrow confines of Eng. Lit. and became more stimulating, but in another it exploded self-destructively, like a grenade. Circa 1960, Bergonzi tells us, English was “a genuine humane discipline, self-respecting, enjoyable, expanding, with methods that were established and familiar.”

Many special collections librarians can share his evident regret for a world in which “the English synthesis” was still whole.

All too suddenly for many of us, works of literature turned into “texts,” literary criticism became “theory,” and changes in research methods reappeared as “paradigm shifts.” Like it or not, explosions have already gone off within countless humanities departments. The radical changes that have taken place in scholarly methodology—the emphasis on “theory” in all its manifestations, the revision of the traditional canon, and especially the rise of cross-disciplinary “cultural studies”—are beginning to have an impact on the ways in which academic patrons use literary special collections. Recognition of the scope and nature of changes in the graduate curriculum will help ensure the continued vitality of our profession.

Although the literature of academic librarianship has paid some attention to the impact on the profession of such campus trends as multiculturalism, popular culture, and women’s studies, many college and university special collections librarians have attached little importance to transformations taking place in the area of literary criticism. In the late 1980s, William Matheson’s provocative survey of trends in the development of twentieth-century literary collections examined factors which impinge upon the selection process; the unavoidable conclusion one draws from the survey responses is that selectors do not, as a rule, pay much attention to “current academic needs and interests.” The fullest and most stimulating account to date of the “large-scale process

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of generational substitution” at work in the humanities and its impact on special collections is Michael T. Ryan’s 1990 RBMS address. His discussion is more concerned with collection development than service issues, though he makes a convincing plea for “building bridges to new constituencies,” which I shall amplify here.

Bridge-building is especially important in the current climate of misunderstanding. Special collections librarians have understandably been bemused and alienated by the more opaque deconstructionists. The breed is brilliantly satirized in the character of Morris Zapp, the cigar-smoking theoretician in David Lodge’s novel Small World, who compares the act of reading to a striptease show and declares that “every decoding is another encoding.” Furthermore, we feared that the ascent of literary theory meant a corresponding de-emphasis of those components of the graduate curriculum most important to us, especially traditional literary history and textual scholarship, bibliography, source studies, and the use of primary sources in general. This concern is largely unwarranted, as we shall see. Rare books and manuscripts librarians have also been inclined to regard the changes in critical method as mere faddism. Their assumption has been that the vogue for theory, feminism, and so forth would eventually run its course and that traditional humanistic scholarship, circa 1960, would eventually reassert itself. They are not alone in this regard; a visiting scholar confidently told me that theory and all its manifestations would be swept away by the year 2000, to be succeeded by an Aquarian Age and the restoration to the throne of a benevolent New Criticism. This viewpoint, however, patently overlooks the demographic facts of life: the new critical methods have long since become entrenched in the graduate curriculum of most humanities departments. Most graduate students in literature departments feel that they must, at the very least, be acquainted with current critical trends in order to be employable. As the end of the century nears, special collections librarians will discover that the number of humanities faculty who attended graduate school before 1975 is rapidly declining. In the future there will be fewer and fewer academic users trained exclusively in the methodologies of so-called “traditional” or “humanistic” scholarship. Thus the world of literary scholarship at the turn of the new century will in all likelihood be a pluralistic one.

If we do not panic and rationally examine recent trends in the scholarship of the humanities, we will discover that there is little to fear. The news from the future is not all bad and might even be downright reassuring: a new generation of users will still have a need for our principal stock in trade, primary sources, although some of their research topics and methods may at first glance appear unorthodox to us. Most of the humanities faculty members who responded to a 1992 survey by Phyllis Franklin—which mainly addressed the use of the “primary print record” rather than manuscripts—felt that special collections would continue to play a valuable role by providing them with research materials unobtainable elsewhere. To be sure, many humanists with a theoretical bent have little interest in primary sources, but such scholars have always been with us. And as Gerald Graff has pointed out, the stress on theory is really nothing
new, since the emphasis of the New Critics of the 1940s and ’50s on the study of “literature itself” was itself a theoretical stance and a reaction against traditional biographical and historical approaches to works. Yet the heyday of the New Criticism (ca. 1940–70) was, as we know, also a boom period for special collections.

The knowledge that the new scholarship in the humanities is by no means incompatible with the use of special collections should not breed complacency. On the contrary, it ought to encourage us to examine closely the nature of the changes that have taken place in the study of literature over the past decade or so. Bradley Westbrook has identified three principal ones: the shift from critical consideration of “works” to “texts,” the rise of interdisciplinary studies (e.g., feminist studies), and the reevaluation of the literary canon. Michael Ryan pointed to “the deconstruction of tradition, the fragmentation of canons, the hybridization of disciplines” as the most important trends of the ’90s. At the risk of moving into the realm of reductio ad absurdum, it is possible to say that the single most important feature in all of these trends is the transition from the examination of the text considered in isolation to the recognition of the importance of context as it establishes meaning:

If there is any point of agreement among deconstructionists, structuralists, reader-response critics, pragmatists, phenomenologists, speech-act theorists, and theoretically minded humanists, it is on the principle that texts are not, after all, autonomous and self-contained, that the meaning of any text in itself depends for its comprehension on other texts and textualized frames of reference.

Though pitched battles continue to rage between “humanists” and “theorists,” it appears that this contextual point of view will be with us for some time to come.

During the last decade, the critical focus on the analysis of language has to a considerable extent yielded to the study of the cultural, social, and political contexts of literature. One need only cite the rise of the New Historicism and the increasing concern with the “sociology of the text” in bibliographical studies. In brief, New Historicists argue that texts must be interpreted in the light of their socio-political contexts; they de-emphasize the universality of literature and uncover the dialectical relationship between the text and its cultural milieu. There is a clear parallel between the New Historicism and developments in the field of bibliography during the past decade. Jerome McGann and D. F. McKenzie have argued that the modern author usually operates in a social context and that the contribution of the publisher, editor, and even the author’s literary agent must be taken into account in the preparation of critical editions. Fortunately, contextual studies demand a return to underutilized primary sources in our keeping. New Historicists such as Stephen J. Greenblatt have been inclined to use relatively obscure tracts, pamphlets, and travel narratives which help recreate the Renaissance political environment. In the bibliographical sphere, McGann’s theories inevitably direct the textual critic to once overlooked archives of publishers and
literary agents, where information may be found concerning the development of the work of literature as it makes its way through the publication process.

Other relatively new fields deeply concerned with the cultural contexts of literature include women's studies, gay and lesbian studies, and ethnic studies (African-American, Chicano, Asian-American). The extent to which the growth of these disciplines should shape collection development is a matter for discussion elsewhere. My principal intention here is to consider the ways in which cultural studies, the broadening of the canon, and the contextual point of view might affect the patterns of use of existing collections of archival materials and rare books.

One of the pleasant effects of the reevaluation of the traditional literary canon is that it inclines scholars to examine the papers of minor figures which have languished for years on our shelves; the unpleasant corollary is that many of these collections may not have received a high level of processing, let alone full cataloging. One such collection is the large literary archive of the novelist Fannie Hurst (1889–1968) at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRHRC) at the University of Texas at Austin. During the 1920s and '30s, Hurst enjoyed extraordinary popularity as the best-selling author of Back Street and other melodramatic novels. In the postwar period, Hurst's brand of fiction went out of vogue and her literary reputation declined. Though parts of the Hurst papers (e.g., Hurst's correspondence with Zora Neale Hurston) have seen episodic use, the collection as a whole received relatively little attention and was a low cataloging priority.

During the past few years, a noticeable upswing in inquiries regarding the Fannie Hurst collection convinces us that scholars are beginning to reevaluate her place in the canon. As a result, the Hurst papers will almost certainly be given a higher cataloging priority. Ten or fifteen years ago, few would have disagreed that the Hurst archive, as a collection of literary manuscripts, automatically deserved item-level cataloging. This choice would have been based on the presumption that the literary scholar invariably begins a research project with a personal name or a specific manuscript in mind. However, the development of the MARC-AMC format in the early 1980s, the advantages of standardization and inclusion of records in national databases, not to mention increasing administrative emphasis on efficiency in cataloging of literary manuscripts, have significantly shifted the balance of opinion in favor of an archivally based approach to cataloging. Without disputing the notion that personal name or title access predominates among users of literary manuscripts, I would argue the variety of critical approaches in the current academic setting indicates a need for additional kinds of access. Reference specialists in literary collections face essentially the same problem as reference archivists interacting with contemporary historical researchers: Mary Jo Pugh has written that “not all research topics are accessible through the traditional name-based modes. The new fields of historical inquiry and current interest in cross-disciplinary research have created a revolution in readers' expectations and needs.” She goes on to argue that when it comes to topical access no finding aid will replace a knowledgeable reference archivist “but we must codify what we can.”
A well-constructed archival finding aid assists in the scholarly interpretation of a literary manuscript collection. It is therefore imperative that both the manuscript catalogers who prepare finding aids and the public services staff who interpret them should have some understanding of the ways in which traditional and non-traditional scholars might use a literary archive. The inventory’s general scope and contents note, together with the individual series descriptions, assist the researcher by identifying related elements of the collection and assembling them in a way which is both meaningful and useful to the scholar. The cataloger, for example, might include information in a scope and contents note for the Hurst papers which would link resources in various series (royalty statements, account books, correspondence with publishers and agents), in the knowledge that studies of the social and economic context of authorship are becoming increasingly important. The addition of appropriate subject headings to the catalog record assists researchers who do not begin with a name (e.g., those interested in Jewish-American authors). Though seldom seen, a section on research potential might have a role to play in the finding aid. For example, the following hypothetical topics, all of which place Fannie Hurst in a social, political, and economic context, could be pursued in her papers: the sociology of mass-market writing, Hurst’s textual revisions of radical social-political material, her function as a feminist role model as seen in her fan correspondence, and conceivably a feminist interpretation of the economics of publishing (did she regularly make less than male writers of equally successful pot-boilers?). We are not in the business of doing the research ourselves, nor can we possibly anticipate every topic of the future, but the more we know about our patrons and the way they “do” scholarship, the better prepared we will be and the more helpful our finding aids will be.

Patterns of use for rare book collections are already in the process of changing, as William Matheson has observed. His recent survey of special collections provides some “quite gloomy views of the use of twentieth-century author collections.” Matheson believes that this trend can be reversed by demonstrating that such collections are not merely fodder for the author’s bibliographer and are susceptible to multiple scholarly uses. On the other hand, it could be argued that thematic and wide-ranging collections centered on a historical or literary period will receive more attention and be of more value to the investigators of the future, for these collections contain precisely the resources which scholars will turn to for contextual studies of literature.

Consider the HRHRC’s Robert Lee Wolff Collection of Nineteenth-Century English Fiction, some 18,000 volumes of Victorian triple-decker novels and examples of Victorian popular culture. The Wolff collection contains works by the great novelists, but its true richness resides in its thorough documentation of the second- and third-rank figures who surround them. Four decades ago, Gordon Ray stressed the importance of collecting minor literature, especially because of its documentation of social history:
Much is to be learned by placing acknowledged classics among the ephemeral productions that surrounded them when they were first published. . . . Hardly less rewarding to the literary student are the publications in which the fleeting social habits of the day find record. . . . From these works may be assembled a picture of life as it was actually lived by which its imaginative portrayal may be interestingly tested.  

Today's historically-minded literary scholar is likely to have a somewhat different rationale for studying the minor literature of a given period. David S. Reynolds, for example, has placed the major works of the American Literary Renaissance in the context of popular reformist literature of the day in order to demonstrate that these classics are "products of a sudden fluidity of textual modes and strategies perceived and recorded by certain authors." His approach is contextually based but diverges considerably from conventional social-historical or source studies of Ray's era.

Wide-ranging period collections also offer opportunities for scholars engaged in the reassessment of literary canons. A large number of the novelists in the Wolff Collection are women, and some of them, such as Susan Ferrier and Emily Eden, are already in the process of being reevaluated. Hence the Wolff Collection, along with the equally rich Sadleir Collection at UCLA, will also be valuable to those engaged in "the essential function of drawing and redrawing the boundaries of the canon and of submitting its internal differentiation and hierarchy to a continuing critique." Unfortunately, we can be certain that many researchers are unaware of the potential in the Wolff Collection and in so many other rare book collections in countless other libraries. The climate of misunderstanding to which I referred earlier discourages use; in this case, it is a misunderstanding on the part of many "cutting-edge" scholars, particularly younger ones, who wrongly associate rare books with "antiquarian fact-finding" rather than the "innovative rethinking of the relation between text and culture," to use the distinction made by one of Phyllis Franklin's survey respondents.

It behooves the special collections librarian to demonstrate to a new generation of scholars how such potentially useful resources might serve their needs. This could be done through appropriate publications, innovative exhibitions, informal conversations with faculty, and even through participation in electronic networks such as HUMANIST. Involvement in the orientation process for junior faculty of humanities departments and graduate students is an excellent way to ensure that prospective users are properly introduced to the possibilities in special collections. Again, it is not necessary to formulate detailed research topics for faculty and graduate students, but only to sketch, in broad outline, how the materials might be used. The younger scholar may be open to the possibilities in special collections but may be unfamiliar with the basic techniques of locating and using primary sources, or even that special collections materials on campus could be useful in his or her research; it therefore falls to the reference librarian to provide (diplomatically, of course) some instruction.
Encouraging stimulating uses for rare books and manuscripts alike requires innovative ways of thinking about collection guides. In the world of cultural studies, context is all, and so we must also create publications which make essential links between collections and resources. With the aid of desktop publishing, it is possible to produce inexpensive guides to various topical or interdisciplinary approaches which might be pursued within the special collections unit or the library as a whole. A first step could be the creation of a guide to a variety of women's studies resources; an excellent example has been prepared by the Duke University Libraries. A contextual guide will differ from the traditional enumerative collection guide in that it assists the user in making connections between collections (in the library, and perhaps elsewhere on campus and in the area) and does not refrain from setting forth topics for research. Rather than simply referring to holdings of the papers of X, it would point to supporting materials in and linkages to the papers of Y and Z, pamphlet collections relating to X's cultural milieu, and perhaps additional items at a nearby institution. The result would be closer to an intellectual map of the collections than a simple listing. In the future, such maps will perhaps be available in hypermedia formats and will be conveniently accessed through networked computer servers.

One director of a large research library has warned that academic librarians must "reconsider how services should be formulated for a new community of users rather than expecting all users to adapt to services the way they always have been ... librarians cannot afford to ignore what changes or shifts are occurring on their campus with regard to the user community." Her implicit threat is that the wages of unresponsiveness will be marginalization in the current climate of fiscal crisis for academic libraries, which so clearly threatens the long-term survival of special collections. The few suggestions I have made here presuppose a broader and more proactive role for the reference/public service librarian of the future. Bruce Dearstyn, for one, has proposed that a new professional title of researcher service archivist should be created. These public services professionals would "openly advocate research use," by participating in nonarchival professional conferences, and by "monitoring and analyzing research use and utilizing the resulting information for planning and management decisions." He might have added that monitoring of scholarly trends, be they in English, history, or the other fields we serve, should be among the most important professional responsibilities of such a position. While the traditional scholar may always remain with us (and we certainly hope that is the case), special collections librarians will have to adapt their public services practices to meet the needs of a new generation of scholars. By doing so, they will ensure not only the continued survival of special collections but also the primacy of primary sources in the coming decades.

NOTES

1990), 187. My discussion mainly concerns changes in the field of English but is relevant to the study of other literatures. In another form, this paper was originally delivered as part of a seminar at the 1992 RBMS Preconference.

2. Ibid.


5. Ibid.


8. Phyllis Franklin, “Librarians, Scholars, and the Primary Print Record.” (Paper given at the RBMS meeting at the ALA Conference, June 27, 1992.) Franklin’s pioneering survey of academic users’ attitudes toward special collections will doubtless encourage further research on this topic.


10. In his introduction to the 1992 RBMS Preconference Seminar from which this paper emanated.


14. For a brief summary of the New Historical method, see Bergonzi, 174–77. However, he tends to underestimate the significant differences between the New Historicians and earlier historicist critics (see my discussion of David Reynolds’s book below).


18. Ibid., 41.

19. Matheson, 30.


23. See note 7.

24. Sidney F. Hutner, in his paper “Riding the Wave: Using Research Trends to Your Advantage” (given at the 1992 RBMS Preconference seminar on trends in the humanities), provided several examples of innovative exhibitions held at the University of Tulsa.


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