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Meditations on the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

By FRANK M. TURNER

In the spring of 2003 the president of Yale asked me to assume the interim directorship of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University and about six months later appointed me director. I came to the position after teaching European and British intellectual and cultural history at the university for over thirty years and having a decade earlier served as university provost for four years. In other words I had a reasonably good knowledge of the Yale Library System as a scholar and administrator, or so I thought.

I had only a modest knowledge of the Beinecke Library and that as a reader over the years, but mostly of a microfilm collection that resided there. Except for conversations with the former director during my time in university administration, no one from the Beinecke Library had ever contacted me about the relationship of the Library and its holdings to my teaching or research even though both were relevant to Beinecke collections. I mention this point not so much as a complaint as an illustration of the manner that the Beinecke and other university rare book libraries have all too often seen their role as a passive one and have believed they needed to maintain a low profile in the modern research university and even within university library systems. I will return to this point.

The Beinecke Library, which may not be familiar to everyone here, is the largest depository of rare books and manuscripts at Yale University. It is the largest such university rare book library in North America. Through the beneficence of the three Beinecke brothers, it opened in 1963 in an iconic building designed by Gordon Bunshaft. The building

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This article was delivered as a lecture at the Grolier Club sponsored by it and the Rare Book School in New York City on January 8. A few changes were made to conform to the style of this journal. —Ed.

itself (not our collections) attracts more than 50,000 visitors annually. The Beinecke family also handsomely endowed the library and its collections and other monies have come to it over time. The family fortune at the time was invested in the Sperry and Hutchinson Company, the purveyor of S & H Green Stamps. Because of the remarkable growth of the Yale endowment over the past twenty years, the Beinecke Library benefits from exceptional financial resources that impose upon its leadership and staff enormous academic responsibility.

Because the Beinecke Library occupies its iconic architectural setting, there is a danger of viewing it in static terms. And I believe many university administrations through no fault of their own tend to view their rare book libraries or collections in just such terms. They seem to be repositories of materials from the past usually relating to the humanities and seem to have only modest roles in the life of dynamic research organizations. In point of fact the Beinecke and other major university rare book libraries are profoundly protean institutions whose character, collections, organizations, responsibilities, and missions have changed over the years and now must change even more rapidly. Moreover, humanists themselves must sometimes be reminded that their own engagement with the materials of the distant past has produced major intellectual revolutions. Machiavelli's consideration of the works of Titus Livy redirected Western political theory; Spinoza's reading of the Bible transformed biblical criticism and future theology; Nietzsche's response to Socrates revolutionized modern philosophy. Remarkable moments can occur in libraries holding old books.

In many respects the story of the Beinecke Library is that of "build it and they will come." The original collections housed in the Beinecke were the Yale Collection of German Literature, the Yale Collection of American Literature, the Yale Collection of Western Americana (with origins in the vast Coe Collection given to Yale by a Harvard man), and the collections previously residing in the Sterling Memorial Library Rare Book Room. The latter became known as the Collection of Medieval Manuscripts and Early Modern Books and the General Collection. Those categories have remained in use among the staff, but they bear only marginal relationship to the realities of the collections and almost no relationship to the scholarship pursued in the Beinecke.

Over time two major factors transformed those original collections and have transformed the character of the library. First, as hoped at the time of its opening, numerous major collectors, often but not always

with Yale connections, donated their collections to the Beinecke. Two of the original Beinecke brothers gave us substantial collections: Edwin J., major gifts of materials particularly relating to the medieval manuscripts and Robert Louis Stevenson, and Frederick W. Beinecke donated his own major Western Americana collection. Of those three brothers, Walter was not a collector, but two of his children became major collectors and benefactors of the library. Walter Beinecke, Jr., and Betsy Beinecke Shirley respectively donated the J. M. Barrie Collection and a remarkable collection of American children's literature. James Marshall Osborn and his wife established a major collection relating to English literature and music. Colonel Richard Gimbel donated his vast Dickens collection. The late Walter Pforzheimer bequeathed a major collection of Molière. Paul Mellon gave and bequeathed to the Beinecke remarkable materials in a number of fields. More recently Frederick Koch donated his outstanding collection of music and literary manuscripts, and David Richards donated his Kipling Collection, which allows us to boast the largest gathering of Kipling materials in the world. We have benefited from various other donors of materials and acquisitions funds. Strength grows upon strength.

Second, the Beinecke collections have benefited and been transformed through the collection development prowess of almost three generations of remarkable curators. Among these Donald Gallup remains no doubt the most famous for his capacity to persuade authors of American literature to donate their papers (while the tax law still aided this mode of acquisition). But in the last twenty years the presence of a longtime staff of curators working with, for the moment, ever growing acquisitions funds have given new shape and direction to our collections. At present we have outgrown the shelving capacity of the building and will be constructing an offsite facility.

It is also worth noting some of the factors that the Beinecke curators like to remind me differentiate their work and that of collection development in university rare book and manuscript libraries from private collectors. Institutions such as Yale have existed and expect to exist for a long time, longer than the lifespan of any single curator or director. A private collector must collect within a much more limited time span. A library can wait for the particular edition of a book it desires or for a manuscript. As Robert Babcock has pointed out to me, the Beinecke two years ago purchased the first illustrated Italian Ovid, which Yale had tried to purchase over a half-century ago but had failed to secure in

a 1947 sale. The copy we purchased was the same one that had appeared in 1947.

University rare book libraries also collect much more broadly than individual collectors. Because of a wide range of expertise not only among curators but also among archivists and cataloguers as well as faculty, university libraries have a vast range of expertise to bring to bear in their collecting. Among other things, this situation means the university rare book library collects materials in a very wide variety of languages.

In their own collecting, university rare book and manuscript libraries collect first and foremost to foster the research of their faculties and students and the wider international scholarly community. David Stamm, whose wonderful collection of Arctic materials was exhibited here at the Grolier, once said to me that his purchasing as a collector after his retirement was very different from his collecting while a librarian. The Beinecke and similar libraries want books that are in good condition, but not necessarily pristine collectable condition. Furthermore, we do not seek to collect with our own funds iconic editions. A few weeks ago I visited a collector in Edinburgh who showed me his edition of Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* owned by William Robertson, Hume's friend and Principal of the mid eighteenth-century Scottish Kirk. I personally would love to own that copy, but what I would like for the Beinecke is a very good first edition no matter who the owner. We have also normally declined to purchase similar presentation volumes, not that we do not admire them and as individuals even lust for them, but they rarely add anything to the research value of an item. We collect for the purposes of research and of teaching. When using Beinecke Library funds what we hope is to put students into contact with intellectual, but not necessarily iconic materials from the past. On the other hand when we seek the iconic, it is for larger institutional purposes and not simply for the goal of possessing the object, however tempting and attractive.

Where we do seek the iconic and unique is in the area of manuscripts. Here again we may find ourselves in competition with private collections. The same basic principles obtain. We seek primarily to collect manuscripts that possess what we and our scholarly audience regard as research value. Hence we normally pursue manuscripts or series of manuscripts that show development of thought and revision of the text.

The story and policies I have just recounted are those that directors like to tell and those that may seem particularly appropriate for this

Grolier Club setting. But rare book libraries are and must be about much more than gatherings of wonderful, rich, unique collections accepted with gratitude and even humility and sought with the goal of furthering research. If rare book libraries think only about collecting from donors and their own funds in the future, the future will not belong to them.

What are some of the issues facing and challenging the university rare book and manuscript library?

First, there is evidence from both dealers and the press that the number of institutions collecting, maintaining, and making accessible collections of rare books and manuscripts is shrinking. For many colleges and universities, the existence of a rare book room or manuscript collection has come to be seen as an expensive luxury that devotes space and resources to materials only infrequently consulted. Some collections are being closed and deaccessioned, all too often after years of institutional neglect. The question will be whether those collections move into strong institutional hands or into the hands of private collectors, who usually are not deeply interested in making them available to the scholarly world. This situation means that the market for rare materials, whether books or manuscripts, is shrinking so far as institutions of higher education are concerned and the competition for collection development will increasingly move to a competition between a relatively few rare book and manuscript libraries and private collectors throughout the world. The decline of the dollar will for the foreseeable future put American institutions at a financial disadvantage in this competition for materials being collected outside our borders.

Second, there is also some evidence that the realm of book and manuscript collection carries less of a cachet in the wider culture than may have been the case in previous generations. To be sure, there are distinguished collectors, but book and manuscript collecting may carry less prestige than the ever-expanding world of collecting in the area of the fine arts. This situation means that the great university rare book collections may have fewer great collectors to cultivate as donors and as sources of materials for purchase.

What is true of collectors is even more true of the world of the great booksellers, which has been contracting for the last generation. When such dealers go out of business, there is the opportunity for rare book libraries to make major acquisitions of collections, but this is an unhappy development, for those dealers often could pursue areas of collection that we cannot or do not have the opportunity to pursue.

Finally, there are new or perhaps more properly newly effective barriers to institutional collecting even on the part of wealthy rare book and manuscript libraries. Throughout the world governments are under pressure to resist the export of materials judged to be examples or parts of their nation's national cultural heritage. Such is the situation even when the materials may, through legally legitimate transactions, move those materials into situations where they will be better preserved and given wider access. Possession may or may not be nine-tenths of the law, but it is the aspiration of many governments and local cultural heritage groups. I expect this situation only to grow over time and quite possibly rapidly so. Consequently, there will arise the paradox that in an age of growing globalization and internationalization of higher education, collections of rare books and manuscripts in this nation may well become much more "Americanized."

I would make one last comment in regard to the areas of traditional collecting, and I mean this statement as a kind of manifesto. The Beinecke Library and I believe that all other institutional rare book and manuscript libraries now stand deeply concerned about the provenance of the materials entering our collections. This point cannot be over-emphasized. In our concern over provenance we have encountered the situation of materials being removed from auctions when we have requested a statement of provenance. The day when the Beinecke – and I would say most other university rare book libraries – would purchase materials of any substantial value with the mere assurance that they were discovered at a country auction, in an attic, or from a respectable, but unnamed gentleman is over. Nor are we prepared to do business with dealers who find themselves offended by our inquiring into the provenance of materials. The integrity of the acquisition of rare books and manuscripts on the part of university libraries is no different from the integrity that scholars expect of each other's research or that the federal government requires of scientific investigators. There is to be sure an exhilaration and even headiness from the ability to acquire truly remarkable, unique materials, but for the Beinecke Library it will be the exhilaration of a race fairly, legitimately, and legally run.

What are the new opportunities for collecting?

First, the collections of the Beinecke, like those of many of its peers, more nearly reflect the academic interests of Yale University and its generous alumni and friends at the middle of the twentieth century than at the opening of the twenty-first. To some extent this situation is

inevitable since rare book libraries tend to be both conservative and conserving institutions rather than institutions at the cutting edge of scholarship. Consequently, for example, our collections are extremely strong in the English eighteenth century and the Johnson circle. They are strong in many traditional Victorian materials, but not strong in the recognition of the importance of different Victorian editions. Chauncey Tinker like many collectors was more interested in the first edition rather than in subsequent revised editions. It is in the detail of the later that the creativity of Victorian scholarship often resides.

My point is that the expanding world of scholarship in the humanities over the past half-century opens the way to new areas of collecting that were understandably not much recognized in the 1960s. Thus all materials relating to women in literature, history, and culture in general have become attractive. For example, Robert Babcock, our curator of Medieval Manuscripts and Early Books, has for many years collected books from that era owned by women and recently mounted a major exhibition on the subject. The rise of environmental concerns has expanded the horizon of interest for what were once considered narrow funds relating to sport or angling. Our Rachel Carson collection now receives new use and provides a platform for future collection. The explosion of scholarship relating to issues of human sexuality opens the way for acquiring materials that previously almost no institution thought proper to collect. What I would emphasize is that rare book libraries need to respond much more rapidly than in the past to the changes in scholarship occurring around us. We must become institutions of the present as much as of the past. Our use of financial resources and the focus of our collection development must reflect the scholarly imagination of our own day as well as continuing to build upon the imagination of previous generations of scholars.

In this respect, we need to anticipate what materials are being published and produced today that in fifty years will become rare and difficult to find. What I am about to say will be considered quite controversial by some of my colleagues in the world of rare books. Rare book libraries should not wait for books to become rare, but should anticipate. Let me give an example. Most university rare book libraries do not purchase contemporary materials now being purchased by the wider university library system. Rather, the rare book library waits a few decades to find out whether particular authors have come to be regarded as important and of lasting interest. In the meantime, the books by

those authors are used and abused by readers in the wider library and become “trashed” by the time they have come to be recognized as rare. I would give as an example the first and subsequent editions of the major mid twentieth-century French authors whom most of us read as undergraduates. Sartre, Camus, and their major contemporaries were readily available in the 1940s and 1950s and known to be important and influential. Their books could have been purchased then at retail whereas first editions are now relatively expensive. Rare book libraries should select a limited number of authors and areas in which they will purchase as certain authors, philosophers, and the like receive recognition in their own day. They will have pristine copies of important works at their initial prices. Some of those authors will disappear into the dustbin of history, but others will continue to be recognized as important, and the rare book libraries will have excellent copies at what fifty years from now will seem even better than bargain prices. The Beinecke already pursues this policy with contemporary poetry. To the extent that we can, I would hope that university rare book libraries might encourage students and alumni themselves to collect in the contemporary world and in time donate their collections to their university.

In so speaking of books, I inevitably come to the subject of electronic materials. I do not believe the book will disappear. What I do believe is that in addition to books and other materials on paper, we shall have an additional incremental task of collecting materials in non-traditional formats. Over the course of time these will make us yearn for the enduring qualities of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French paper!

This subject, however, allows me to make another point too often neglected in our consideration of collecting. Collection development, no matter how well financed and no matter how imaginative, really means very little if it is not backed up by strong bibliographic control. I cannot say too much for the extraordinary contributions to the scholarship fostered by the Beinecke Library carried out by our staff in Technical Services and Access Services. Our Technical Services staff checks records of book prices, catalogues rare books, and archives our manuscripts. There is no area of the Beinecke in which as director I have made a larger financial investment and no area where I believe such investment better pays off. We have virtually doubled our manuscript unit and created the Beinecke Library’s first offsite facility to forward our efforts to overcome our monumental manuscript cataloging backlog. Such cataloguing is the major path to learned accessibility, future

secure scholarly reference, and the more general security of our collections. In my time at the Beinecke I have learned enormously from the staffs in both Technical Services and Access Services. They represent major partners in the Beinecke effort to create a bibliographic structure for effective teaching and scholarship. No part of the world of rare book and manuscripts deserves greater attention and greater appreciation.

The nontraditional materials come to us and will continue to come to us in expanding volume. The library now has approximately 75 manuscript accessions containing computer media. The library saw fairly steady numbers from 1997 to 1999 (two to four accessions per year) and from 2000 to 2004 (five to seven), but the numbers jumped significantly in 2005 and 2006 (15 and 14 respectively). The disks come in varying quantities per accession. In some cases there may be a single disk, in others as many as 130 in differing formats. Originally our archivists thought (hoped) the electronic records would duplicate paper materials in manuscript collections. In recent accessions of manuscript collections such has proved, however, not to be the case.

These electronic materials need to be understood as a new departure in collecting, preservation, and accessibility. Some people would like to think that this is a development that can somehow be avoided. It cannot and should not. As my friend and colleague Patricia Willis, our soon-to-be-retiring curator of the Yale Collection of American Literature, has said to me, "As the telephone was to the letter, so is e-mail to the telephone, and archives as we have known them are the poorer. In this electronic age, the window of the creative process established through manuscript culture may be closing, or we need to find it in a different way. So we need to learn to mine the creativity that is realized in cyberspace (and not be snooty about it)."

Beyond figuring out how we are going to collect and preserve these materials, we must recognize that his process will represent for the handful of great rare book and manuscript libraries the necessity over time of creating entirely new divisions in our organizations. To be sure, they will commence as subdivisions of existing units, but I would predict that in far less than a decade they will constitute separate divisions alongside those devoted to printed materials and manuscript materials. They will be extremely expensive, but perhaps less expensive over the long run than collecting exceedingly rare medieval manuscripts from a finite world of such materials. It will require new resources, new equipment, and new outlooks. I happen to believe it is the world of the young and

that the young archivists, cataloguers, and curators on our staff should be given this task. It is and will be their world. Those of us now in charge of presiding over the great rare book libraries should seek the funding for these efforts, assuring the hiring of the best young talent, and then get out of their way.

To mention the electronic world of the born digital inevitably brings us to the realm of digitization. There exists today an enthusiasm for digitization that is well founded and well grounded. There also exists an enthusiasm for digitization that is from a scholarly standpoint unthinking. As one of my most esteemed Yale faculty colleagues recently quipped to me, "Digitization will mean much better undergraduate papers, and much less good graduate student scholarship."

The benefits of the digital for preservation and accessibility seem on the surface fairly clear. Digitization of materials that are not consumed or destroyed by the process itself (the last gift of a decayed book is giving itself up to digitization) are fairly straightforward. The vast digitization projects of Google and Microsoft will make accessible to the scholarly world and the general public more books than ever before in history. Student and scholars in the most out-of-the-way places will have access to enormously obscure publications including journal articles from the past five centuries on their laptops, an experience from which I profited while writing lectures this past year on a subject relating to Victorian religious life. The scholarly fallout (and tonight I am only interested in those repercussions) is yet to be understood or comprehended. For example, at this point graduate students pretty much discover these materials on their own. There exists a vast disconnect between these enormous databases and the capacity of scholars and their students to use them. It is unclear that there will be library cost-savings, though many administrations across the country will reduce library budgets with the idea that students and faculty can find what they want or need on the Internet.

What I fear is that this situation, combined with the absolutely necessary and expanding off-site shelving of printed materials by all the great research libraries, will mean that only the most energetic of scholars will search for editions not accessible electronically or in the intensive-use areas of their central libraries. The world of digitized libraries for the moment, and this may change in a decade hence, provides the illusion of completeness and comprehensiveness at least so far as scholarship in the humanities is concerned.

So much for my wider scholarly concerns. What does digitization mean for rare book and manuscript libraries? Will they become as some fear simply museums? I think not and I suppose I am paid to think not.

First, there will remain for some time the issue of intellectual property and copyright over much manuscript material, which may not prevent digitization for preservation purposes but may prevent its dispersion.

Second, there is the issue of sheer volume. All the major rare book and manuscript libraries have large and usually growing backlogs of materials that are accessible to readers but not yet catalogued. The cataloguing process, which may in time become intimately linked with the digitizing process, will still move very slowly.

Third, there is nothing inexpensive about digitizing. There is no reason to believe that this technology will not be surpassed a decade hence by a new technology that will require the transmigration of data already digitized. Those who have witnessed the transmigration of audiotapes to CDs can imagine the challenges of this transmigration of still greater quantities of materials.

All of these factors are certainly unheroic and may represent King Canute of the library world resisting the inevitable.

There is, however, I think a legitimate scholarly danger, and one not adequately recognized by scholars, of thinking the digital solves all scholarly problems. There will remain the necessity of working through actual manuscript materials no matter how they are presented in digital libraries. There will remain the issue of scale in the size of publication. Let me give two examples, the early editions of Descartes' *Meditations* replicate in size a small devotional missal. In other words, in producing the book, he and his publisher understood the term of the title as relating to the character of the book. Such was not the case with the early editions of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* that appeared in quite large volumes. Or again, Rousseau's *Social Contract*, that most corrosive of books to the social and political status quo, as first produced could easily have fit into a gentleman's jacket pocket. In other words, the image that appears on the digital screen cannot necessarily convey the character of the book as a physical object.

Over time, I also believe much that exists in the digital world may itself become subject to hacking and the changing of text. Certainly such will become the case with many materials that were born digital. Hence, one of the ironies of the digital age may well be the recovery in

scholarly reputation and value of the editing of texts and the assuring of the character of the Urtext.

Having seen the swings of fortune in the academic world, I have every confidence that in a decade or so the same scholars now praising digitization will rediscover (in a mode of scholarly revisionism) the necessity of looking at the actual physical text.

Consequently, I do believe that scholars will continue to frequent the Beinecke Library and other rare book and manuscript libraries. But, in the digital age, I would argue that those visits so far as the scholarly and social missions of rare book libraries are concerned may be beside the point. The digital age arguably finally brings almost to a complete close the world of secret knowledge that the publication of books in the early modern era first breached. Digitization, assuming it is pursued honestly and without compromising the text being digitized, brings the rare book library truly into the democratic age and tears away the veil of the curator or the collector who resisted releasing the knowledge embodied in their collections to a wider world.

The real challenge to rare book and manuscript libraries embodied in digitization is not the danger of obsolescence, but rather the challenge of bringing mind and intentionality to the vast collections of digital materials. At the Beinecke and other major rare book libraries we make available tens of thousands of images. We still have not made them as easily or meaningfully accessible as we might. Part of this task relates to our cataloging and online presentation. Part relates to our and other libraries hesitation to say some collections are more important than others. Part relates to our still not having discovered the real potential of the digital. At present, we and other libraries in a sense make digital materials available for scholars to use in a traditional manner. They can present images in class or have students build projects around them. We have yet really to imagine how materials can be taken to the broader world where they may stir the scholarly imagination around the globe. We need more "mind" and intentionality behind the digital effort. It must be more than electronic Xeroxing cast into cyberspace.

Martyn Wade, the national librarian of Scotland, whom I have found one of the most helpful and interesting of my library colleagues, has posed the following question in regard to a rare book and manuscript library and the digital world: What would occur if we begin genuinely to believe that our digital readers and patrons are every bit as important and deserving of high quality service as the patrons who come into

our reading room? This is the single most interesting question that I have encountered in the past five years. Personally I can hardly begin to answer it or even to conceive of the way to answer it.

But let me conclude with a few thoughts on the matter. The realm of digitization imposes on libraries not simply new opportunities but new responsibilities. In the case of the Beinecke, digitization means that within the city of New Haven and the state of Connecticut, we need to find ways to inform our colleagues who teach high school history and literature how to use our digital library to bring to their students materials that never before could be made available to them. The access to those materials is absolutely free. Most teachers, who are far more overworked than those of us in the university world, know little or nothing of what is available digitally. Moreover, along with the rest of us they may simply be overwhelmed by it. Interestingly, whenever I have mentioned such materials to teachers, their first question is whether their students may come to the Beinecke to look at the real thing rather than the digital image. That is a problem I am willing to deal with.

Here I return to my opening complaint that in all my years as a faculty member at Yale in one of the major departments in the humanities no one from the Beinecke Library ever contacted me about using the collections. We must find at the Beinecke Library ways of reaching out to actual or potential digital patrons. We must make them aware of what is available, how to access it, and how to use it. We must become a full service rare book and manuscript library in the electronic age. I believe this will require additional staff and even more additional imagination. The challenge of the digital and electronic age is how to transform these new ways of access to the benefit of scholarship and teaching. We need to make the digital not a matter of technology but of scholarly transformation.