Widener Library Thirty Years Later

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I fell in love with Widener thirty years ago. More than one love affair has started with a picture that excites desire; it was true in my case. As a 1960s high school student, I'd seen, in some College brochure, a photograph of Widener's massy range of columns and, a few pages later, one of students and scholars sitting in curious wooden chairs at long tables, each chair paired, on the center of the table, with a reading lamp. The two pictures created immediate attraction. It was irrational, of course, but set a tone and provided images that I'll never forget. The first time I climbed the wide staircase leading to the Treasure Room my knees literally shook--I felt afraid and completely uncertain. Now, an older lover, I'm still often uncertain, even quarrelsome at times, but always ready to kiss, make up, and admire--mostly admire. Like all love affairs, mine has had ups and downs, disappointments and moments of sheer pleasure. But the attraction's stronger now than it has ever been.

During the 1990s, I returned to a subject that long had fascinated me, literature directly engaging issues of political, social, educational, or religious import. Sartre calls this "engaged literature," talented writing or writing of genius--not crude or clumsy propaganda--that intends to persuade, to carry one point of view, or to explore difficult intellectual terrain. Its objectives might include: immediate pragmatic, even partisan ends (a crucial vote in the House of Commons, the outcome of a legal case); broad academic or civil aims (seeking the best type of curriculum, defending free speech);

philosophical or cultural debates (granted that no critic is perfectly disinterested, are all critics equally deflected toward ingrained prejudices of equal relevance?); systems of moral value and the ethics of controversial public policies (capital punishment, affirmative action). But because the modern study of literature, especially since World War II, has centered so intensively around poems, plays, and novels (in other words, fictional works), or around literary theory explicitly--though not exclusively--applied to fictive works, the study of literature as rhetoric, as the persuasive power of resourceful, often figurative language, has lost ground. This is even one reason that some have, unfortunately, criticized professors of literature for being out of touch with "the real world."

Eighteenth-century thinkers and writers, whether of fiction or not, valued literary criticism and analysis, and oratory, as master disciplines. They regarded and studied them assiduously as foundational to all forms of knowledge and value. Adam Smith and Joseph Priestley, now known chiefly in economics and science, produced two key works of criticism. Smith began his career by delivering lectures on rhetoric. Burke's Parliamentary speeches, Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Pope's ironic satires against George II, Robert Lowth's Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews, Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste," Swift's critique of academies and politics, Vico's New Science, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, and the Gettysburg Address: in the broad sense these are all engaged literature. These writings--in Lincoln's case, his early education in engaged literature of the eighteenth century helping to shape his later prose--form case studies during about one hundred years (1726-1826), from the publication of Gulliver's Travels to the deaths of Adams and Jefferson, with a midpoint falling roughly at the American Revolution.

I carried out research in several authors' works, in contemporaneous and present-day commentary, as well as in specific issues each writer faced, many demanding

detailed contexts of political and cultural history. Soon I felt as if I were writing eight books instead of a group of essays constituting one. The burden was eased by having, for the final stretches of the work, an expert research assistant, Anthony Dangerfield, but I still had to determine what sort of materials to retrieve, what items to retain for thorough examination, and where to look next. Each line of research became a mystery that might go unsolved, and various clues surfacing in Widener sent me to other Harvard libraries. But I never would have started on those tracks had not work in Widener detected them in the first place.

I didn't have topics or issues down pat before starting. All of them evolved, some a great deal. A paper on the British reception of Pope's political poetry following his death turned, after a hint by my brother, into pursuing an imitation of Pope written by a group of American poets, the Connecticut Wits. Their brief epic, The Anarchiad, figured in the passage of the U.S. Constitution at the 1787 Philadelphia convention. I believe that this poem had more immediate political influence in the United States than any other in our history, and perhaps as much as any work of literature, with the possible exceptions of Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, Lewis' The Jungle, and Carson's Silent Spring. But the story developed only because I could consult several sources: microfilm of the original installments of the poem in The New Haven Gazette and Connecticut Magazine, an 1861 reprint intended to support the Union cause, and differing scholarly treatments from the early nineteenth century down through the late twentieth century, one of which I accessed electronically and one of which I borrowed on interlibrary loan. I had started in the Houghton Library consulting literary memoirs of Pope and, after work in the stacks of Widener, had ended up in the History Department Library reading the multi-volume series of documents related to the making of the U.S. Constitution.

Other chapters of research contained their own surprises. Having started to approach the third voyage of Gulliver's Travels in the traditional manner, assuming it to

be primarily about science, and asking what narrative function it provided to the book as a whole, I soon instead saw that the longest episodes in the third voyage were about semiotics, codes, politics, and the academy, a series of links that collected scholarship in Widener permitted me to see and to extend into a general meditation on intelligence communities, academic communities, and their overlap. (Why did so many professors of literature work in the OSS and code-breaking activities during World War II? Why were so many literature majors recruited into intelligence work?) The trail led through Swift to James Jesus Angleton, with the familiar ghosts of Graham Greene, William Empson, Richard Ellman, John le Carré, and Gwynne Evans (a palpable presence) at my side. Swift's work also had interesting things to say about the excess and misuse of codes and theorizing, and about an academic community with political pretensions--or a political community with megalomanical tendencies--based on those excesses.

Finding the first American English language publication of Lowth's original Latin lectures on the poetry of the Hebrew Bible on level 3 of Pusey, and putting it together with other scholarship on Hebrew poetry, aesthetic criticism of the eighteenth century, and modern literary theories, I concluded that Lowth's study of the Hebrew Bible provided a firm foundation for theories of the sublime and of the symbol, theories crucial to generations that followed Lowth and that won greater, though perhaps not more deserved, fame for Burke, Kant, and Coleridge.

The sharpest surprise was to discover that no matter how colloquial and homespun were Lincoln's conversational remarks, stories, or ex tempore oral performances and arguments, his more formal written prose had origins not only in Shakespeare and the King James Bible but in his youthful reading of eighteenth-century engaged literature. I traced these origins to Addison and Steele, Hume, Johnson, Defoe, Gibbon, Robertson, and others. Many of these Lincoln had first encountered in Lindley Murray's English Reader, which, seeing mentioned in works collected in Widener, I was

led to consult directly in Gutman Library at the School of Education. When Lincoln's often-stated admiration for those who signed and ratified the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution is added to his early educational background, and when his own formal prose is studied, it becomes evident that his prose is <u>not</u> the product of a folksy or even distinctively American plain speech (as were many oral remarks he made). Rather, his written style owes a great deal to his reading in the engaged literature of the eighteenth century, produced in the generation before he was born. (We should remind ourselves that Adams and Jefferson were still alive when Lincoln was fourteen, finished with formal schooling).

Hume's essays on culture, criticism, morals, and taste, and his <u>History of England</u> (distinct from his writings on epistemology and technical matters of philosophy) dovetailed with debates in the current <u>so genannte</u> "Culture Wars." For he posits a limited skepticism, what one commentator calls a "skeptical realism," one that refuses polemics, polarizations, and simplifications--so rare--and one that at once avoids defending absolute or eternal truths while at the same time vigorously rejecting total relativism.

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When researching twenty-five years ago, I would have relied on card catalogs, printed bibliographies for each individual writer, usually in book form (if they existed), the MLA and CBEL bibliographies (books, also), and printed catalogs from other major libraries, almost always in book form, too, such as those from the Library of Congress and British Library. Microfilm was, of course, available. What I would have identified then I would have found more quickly and would have had it, collectively, in my hands in

shorter time. But I would not have found all the material that I located in the 1990s--including material published before the early 1970s.

Yet today we still need to rely on every one of those older kinds of printed sources--for none have become obsolete, nor are any likely to become so even in the mid-, let alone short-term, future. So, I employ those same kinds of tools plus electronic catalogs, gophers to other libraries, CD-ROM and on-line databases (MLA, ECSTC), and e-mail to colleagues returning advice and citations. I would never have had the time or patience (or postage) for such inquiries by snail mail a generation ago. All these new aids and sources I consider advantages. I would not do without them to follow only, as T. S. Eliot says, an "antique drum." There are other advantages now, too: periodicals no longer circulate at all, so a prized or crucial article is more likely to greet you on the shelf, especially if it's important or recent; and an enormous range of other library catalogues are now available electronically, including manuscript and special collections.

A few weaknesses are ingrained with the advantages: it seems an irony that while digitizing masses of information and bibliographical material makes electronic databases more important, the tasks of editing and of bibliography--if not frowned on in my field--are little rewarded. There's scant professional credit for them. Talking about cyberspace is a hot cultural topic in literary studies but actually putting in the Sitzfleisch to create such databases is not the kind of thing one is generally promoted or given tenure for (even less so in the electronic age). As a result, some databases are compiled by people not in the field at all, and the lack of pertinent information and cognizant utility can be annoying. Databases following earlier printed forms but now entered as electronic text (such as the MLA) have tended to maintain high editorial standards. Then, there is browsing and there is browsing. Having the Depository as a cost-effective and environmentally sound way (especially for the books) to expand library space nevertheless means extra research time and the occasional inability (more than

occasional in some fields) to pull those books down and browse them on the spot, a way in which certain decisions can be made swiftly. Books seem more often checked out or missing; recalls seem to take longer. That's my impatience. Widener has in twenty years gone from one catalog and one shelf plan to two catalogs and two shelf locations, then to three catalogs (two electronic ones and one on microfiche that often needs to be consulted, I think) and two classification systems with many books at HD and not classed at all; though, at the end of 1996 we will move back to only one catalog.

Usually it's better than the cards, but not yet good enough. This bothers me particularly: individual book chapters by separate authors are notoriously hard to find because they are not cataloged separately and seldom appear in specialized electronic or even printed bibliographies. For example, one book on Vico edited by Giorgio Tagliacozzo has separate chapters written by various hands on different topics, but the cataloging information simply does not reflect this. If you write a substantial book chapter for a volume that you yourself do not edit, prepare to have your name and chapter title swallowed up and disappear completely inside any electronic cataloging scheme. I've known people who have written more than half a dozen such book chapters, but their names simply do not appear in any catalogue--Hollis, MLA, AI, etc.--it's as if they had each published nothing! This disappearance of the book chapter contribution was always a problem; it's now made worse if such books are at a deposit location: one cannot quickly browse, actually pick up the volume, and look at its table of contents. Books that are actully a collection of articles by separate hands form a special category at the start and often can be recalled only on a hunch--often despite a misleading title or unknown editor. All this argues for chapter contents of such collections of essays to be available electronically, or to be more faithfully entered in specialized bibliographical databases, or for some cataloging service to make copies of the table of contents of such books, as well as of selected periodicals and publications of special proceedings.

Other observations: there is a law of diminishing returns to research when the information and resources are virtually endless--knowing when to stop is hard but important, yet teaching that skill to a beginning scholar is harder still. The amount of time to do a thorough, responsible job has increased--while the amount of time to do a relatively superficial job has unfortunately and ironically decreased! (Just plug in a few keywords in a few databases and bash away at the buttons: this produces more and more mediocre "research" efforts.) There is now a greater need for the scholar and teacher to work with and to rely on librarians and specific library services. Student, scholar, and teacher need to think, fractionally, more like librarians; librarians more like teachers and scholars. It took as much time for me to learn new methods of research as it did to research two of my eight essays. That means fully one-fifth of research time was spent learning new methods and sources of library research! Even "traditional" scholarship is not always carried out now in traditional ways--but the scholar cannot afford to forget traditional ways either.

In Widener, thirty years later, it is harder to integrate all the various forms of research and material; yet there is more of an absolute need to do so. Library materials are more expensive to acquire, catalogue, store, and access. The process, both a bit slower and markedly richer, is less convenient for what is nearby, more rewarding for knowledge of materials that are far-flung. In this environment few libraries can keep up. That makes it all the more important to lead because few, if any, other libraries will be there as a safety net to back you up. Widener, coupled with the Harvard College and Harvard University libraries is one of five or six greatest libraries in the world. And Widener is certainly the easiest to use by far, though harder now than it ever has been. It has kept up--but keeping up is harder to do. I worry about those now who are younger. How will they learn? There must be a closer integration of teaching, research, and library resources, of student, teacher, and librarian. The perceived troubles with higher

education, however one judges them, will only grow far worse if libraries (and laboratories) suffer.

A final note: in May 1991 I located in the British Library a group of manuscript letters written by close relatives of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, primarily by three of his brothers and his father. This collection had never before been cited and apparently had never been read except by his immediate family members and one or two collateral descendants. The letters tell the story how the family faced the deaths of four of Coleridge's brothers (one, possibly two, were suicides), of his only sister and of his father--all the siblings were adults--all within a period of nine years, from the time Coleridge was eight until he was seventeen. Receiving permission from the present Coleridge family, I undertook to edit the letters. From their personal nature, countless references to local events and often obscure, though interesting, individuals, and from their emphasis, too, on the service of two of Coleridge's brothers in the Indian Army from 1770 through the mid 1780s, I expected that editing and annotating the letters would require extensive research in England. But with a family at home and a three-week excursion fare in my pocket--half of that time being required to copy out the letters longhand--the Student's (manuscript) Room at British Library forbids wholesale reproduction of manuscripts--I needed to return to the States. And so I began the job here, at Widener. With the exception of one written inquiry to the Devon and Cornwall Record Office in Exeter, two local histories I'd purchased in Coleridge's birthplace, Ottery St. Mary, and one return visit to the British Library to consult a particular list of army officers (Dodwell and Miles), in a happy surprise Widener made it possible to do <u>all</u> the work here, in the reference room and particularly in the open stacks. But, after thirty years, why should I be surprised?

Other buildings, equipment, and materials are equally important for other kinds of research and scholarly work. But while admitting the great cost to reproduce them, and

while making an exception for the unique art and artifacts in museums, these other resources are, in fact, far more easily and cheaply replaced than our libraries. Widener and the College Libraries are priceless, their contents irreplaceable. At Harvard, aside from the people here, there is nothing worth more--love.

If readers of the <u>Bulletin</u> will indulge their imaginations and forgive an extended metaphor, it seems that today, if we insist on keeping afloat an old-fashioned dreadnought with few refittings (though lovely brass and mahogany), it's soon obsolete, too expensive, slow, and vulnerable, with a crew too large and with technology (such as it is) fixed and limited by--at the least--old wiring and ventilation systems. By clinging to it, both crew and ship go down. But if we radically trim down to a fast frigate--because of some visionary scheme of "new" warfare, all on a screen with buttons, or because of fiscal restraints--then the craft may become too small, not able to carry enough firepower, or enough different kinds, too reliant on other vessels in the fleet, especially when they're in dry-dock, disabled, or lacking replacement parts (if they had any in the first place); and thus, the "fast" frigate is unable to catch up--not obsolete, but weak and insignificant alone, a ship on which no one wants to serve. What is needed is a highly integrated missile cruiser, one retaining plenty of conventional equipment, yet simultaneously developing new technology and, above all, the capacity to integrate--even to replace, if that seems desirable--old with newly tailored systems, and even with systems yet to come, so that in the Command & Control Center nothing is welded down permanently, but bolted in component form, where sailors know how to key in the order for a new propulsion gear ratio on this year's software, yet still also know how to repair a marline, polish brass, use a sextant, or read a nautical chart.