



## A bibliographer's creed

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# A Bibliographer's Creed

G. Thomas Tanselle

I AM HONORED TO DELIVER THE ONE-HUNDREDTH GEORGE PARKER WINSHIP Lecture and to join the distinguished list of previous speakers. Winship's name has been familiar to me for fifty years, since my earliest interest in American printing and publishing. I notice that the index to my *Guide to the Study of United States Imprints* contains nearly three dozen references to Winship, and three of his works are included in my select list of basic titles. This representation is all the more impressive when one remembers that Winship's publications went far beyond American imprints and included Chaucer, Caxton, South America, and exploration narratives. The hundred Winship lectures (or at least the first ninety-nine of them), taken together, form a fitting tribute to his pioneering scholarship.

Last year I wrote a short piece called "A Bibliographer's Creed," made up of twenty-one points that for me sum up the essential tenets of the field of bibliography. Let me call attention at once to the "A" that begins the title: I was simply recording the beliefs that I have formed during a lifetime of bibliographical study. I hoped, however, that other people might sufficiently agree with this formulation to regard it as a convenient distillation of bibliographical thinking. In line with this desire, I also hoped it might publicize the coherent body of thought underlying bibliography—ideas that are relevant to other fields as well, since all fields, in varying degrees, use objects containing texts made of letterforms or other symbols. Each of my twenty-one points was written to stand alone, but I arranged them in an order in which each follows from the previous one. Before I could publish the piece, Bill Stoneman invited me to give this lecture, providing an opportunity for me to elaborate some of the implicit elements in the line of argument by writing a commentary on each point. The result follows.

## 1.

*Books are physical objects made by human beings. This basic fact underlies the work of bibliographers, who are pledged to explore it in all its ramifications, convinced that studying every aspect of the human past is important. Many of their observations about printed books as objects apply to other tangible carriers of verbal texts, such as manuscripts, newspapers, magazines, broadsides, and electronic screens.*

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In commenting on this first point, I want to emphasize the phrase “made by human beings.” Although it is standard to define bibliography as dealing with physical objects, their origin with human beings is not usually added, probably because they are obviously not products of nature. Yet I think it is important to keep in mind that what bibliographers study is human behavior in the past, as reflected in certain of the objects that are the surviving residue of that behavior. Bibliography is humanistic in its focus, a fact that many people outside the field (and even some within it) do not seem to recognize. Their misconception illustrates the challenge that all scholars in the various branches of material-culture study have to face. Concentrating on objects is often disparaged as less intellectually stimulating than analyzing ideas. But bibliographers, in common with anthropologists and art historians (and, increasingly, with sociologists and philosophers), know better. They know that this dichotomy is false, since ideas from the past come to us embedded in objects; and they understand how demanding and rewarding it can be to study the relationships people have with objects. We should remember that William Carlos Williams, speaking as a poet, said, “No ideas but in things.” (I would add parenthetically, adapting Williams’s point, that I believe thinking in the present is affected by all the objects that surround us, and therefore that the creators of those objects were likewise influenced by their own artifactual, as well as natural, environments.) It has become fashionable to use the word “positivistic” to describe, and apparently denigrate, the kind of bibliography that prevailed before the advent of *histoire du livre* and its emphasis on social history. But anyone who employs the word that way has not thought very carefully about the ambiguities that objects present us with, or about the subtlety with which they impart information.

It is also worth saying explicitly that this information is of interest only if we believe there is a value in learning about the human past. Not everyone thinks so, but bibliographers, being historians, do. The reason for studying the past is not the practical one Santayana gave, for even when we seem to remember the past, we do not very often avoid repeating our mistakes. It would be fairer to argue that a good introduction to many areas of endeavor (including bibliography itself) is an understanding of their history and the thinking of their leading figures. But the primary reason to look to the past is simply that, like each individual’s personal memories, some knowledge of the trail that led us all to where we are can increase the depth of our reflections, and thus the richness of our lives, whether we want it to or not. (This point reminds me of Nancy Hale’s lovely phrase, “memory, as a mode of thinking.”) Besides, the study of history is inevitable, for human curiosity requires it. What we learn when we examine the past is naturally colored by our own experience, but the goal of scholarship is to escape that limitation as much as possible—not by avoiding judgment (for what else is there?) but by putting informed judgment at the service of trying to enter into earlier frames of mind.

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In my list of examples of tangible carriers of verbal texts, I included electronic screens as a way of indicating that the relation between the verbal text of the artifact and the text of the verbal work remains the same regardless of the technology—and as a way of pointing out that bibliographers’ work encompasses the digital realm (though I am focusing on printed books in these comments). What the future of printed books will be is of course a separate topic. It has been endlessly discussed, but to no great purpose, since what will happen is going to happen whatever anyone’s personal preference may be. As a bibliographer, and therefore a historian, I am not bothered by the possibility that printed forms will significantly lose out to digital ones in the publishing world of the future. What does concern me is the preservation of the materials that enable us to study the past—that is, the physical materials produced at whatever past time we are studying. The preservation of our stock of printed items is a pressing issue, but so is the preservation of electronic files, along with the means for reading them.

2.

*The common use of the word “book” to signify both a physical object and an intangible verbal work does little harm, usually, in everyday discourse; but in any discussions that aim for precision it can only cause confusion by blurring a crucial distinction.*

I believe it is not going too far to say that the double use of the word “book” lies at the root of most of the controversies and disagreements that have occurred in the fields of bibliography and scholarly editing. Although we learn facts about verbal *works* from the physical verbal texts and other evidence in books (which is why textual criticism is so closely allied with bibliography), there is a profound difference between verbal works and the physical objects by means of which we try to apprehend them. If this distinction had always been observed, we would not have, for example, the spectacle of book destruction being associated with some so-called preservation efforts, or textual critics claiming that an editor who selects readings from different editions is necessarily mixing versions of a work.

3.

*Verbal works are intangible because they are made of language; they are therefore not normally tied to any one physical presentation.*

I use the word “normally” here because there is one small class of exceptions: those works that contain words as a prominent element but that nevertheless are also works of visual art—such as some concrete or visual poems, where the meaning is as dependent on the precise details of typographic arrangement and type design as it is on the words.

Many shaped writings, however, in which the shape plays only a supporting or allusive role, do not fall into this class and can be rendered by any typesetting that preserves the general shape. (Such shaping is analogous to stanza patterns, paragraph breaks, punctuation, and capitalization.) Furthermore, when pictures are integral parts of verbal works—as, for example, with Thackeray’s drawings, or plates in natural-history books, or some of the illustrations in classroom textbooks—the intangibility of the verbal part is not affected. There are some theorists who would not fully subscribe to this view of verbal works, believing that works (or versions, which are simply works that are linked by certain similarities) do not exist apart from their publicly perceptible forms and that each presentation (including each printed edition) is a separate work. But adherents of this general position often find that at some point they are forced to postulate an underlying, and intangible, work (or version), which is the reference point for its oral and tangible renditions.

4.

*The sequence of words and punctuation marks that is physically present in a book (or any other object carrying a verbal text, including any created by the author) is not ordinarily the verbal work itself but an attempt to transmit it in tangible form. Therefore the verbal text of the physical object cannot be assumed to reproduce perfectly the text of the intangible verbal work that was intended by the author (or by any of the other people, such as the publisher’s staff, involved in the book’s production).*

It follows from the intangibility of verbal works that any tangible verbal text may be, in varying degrees, an erroneous representation of the verbal work that it purports to convey. (Even authors do not always write down, or type, precisely what they intend.) All readers understand this fact to some extent, for they all recognize obvious typographical errors. Yet the clear corollary does not occur to many—perhaps most—readers, including sophisticated literary critics: that other, less easily identifiable, errors may also be present. Critical reading therefore entails more than interpreting the words and punctuation marks that are present: it requires a constant awareness that each word and punctuation mark may not be what was intended by anyone.

5.

*Many of the steps entailed in the production of a book can alter the verbal text and change its meaning. Such alterations can arise by accident or by deliberate action; but in either case they represent stages in the history of the text that have been made available to readers, whose interpretations of the work may have been influenced by them.*

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The great contribution of the so-called New Bibliography of the early twentieth century, as led by A. W. Pollard, R. B. McKerrow, and W. W. Greg, was an understanding of how the processes of book production affect the verbal texts that appear in print—or, stated another way, how physical operations and their supporting activities have intellectual consequences. Any alteration made by a publisher's editor, for example, obviously can change the meaning of a sentence, a passage, or—depending on its prominence—an entire text. But so can a typesetter's mistake, if it is not caught in proofreading. After the demonstrations of the New Bibliographers, who worked with Renaissance literature, it should have become common knowledge that a detailed investigation of the course of action leading to a specific book's emergence from the printing shop, in any period, is a requirement for the serious study of the work represented by the verbal text in that book.

## 6.

*Readers can be affected by the designs of the books they read. But they also understand that authors were usually not responsible for those designs (which normally reflect the contemporary cultural milieu as mediated by publishers), and what most readers are primarily seeking in each case is the author's intended meaning.*

In recent decades, much has been made of the effect of book design on readers; but not enough attention has been paid to the distinction between the reading experience and the interpretation of verbal meaning, for the first does not automatically translate into the second. There is no doubt that the reading experience is conditioned by the style and size of type, its layout in one or two columns, the width of margins and dimensions of leaves, the color and texture of paper, and the quality of binding; nor is there any doubt, as psychologists have shown, that some of these details can affect the speed of comprehension. And one can infer from these features something about the publisher's taste, contemporary design, the stature of the author, the envisaged audience, and so on. But it is not at all clear how heavily these matters weigh in readers' responses to verbal texts. Readers are not merely passive receptors, and they ordinarily make a conscious effort to understand what the author was saying. There are times, of course, when authors use features of book design as elements of meaning, but these are rare; generally authors do not regard book design as integral to their works. I know someone who refers fondly to a tattered paperback, with brittle leaves and cramped typography, in which he first encountered a work that impressed him. But when people make this kind of comment, they are only recalling a pleasant association and are not saying that the physical object influenced their interpretation of the work. People do try to ferret out authorial meaning in spite of obstacles (including the fact that they may not have access to all the available evidence, such as the way intentions may have changed over

time). Readers' marginalia, which are a major source for the history of reading, largely focus on locating intended meaning, responding to it with agreement or dissent, or commenting on its expression with admiration or criticism. The history of reading as a field of study is deservedly receiving increased attention, but the centrality of authorial intention to that field is not often remarked upon.

7.

*Books as they were published, which frequently seemed flawed to some of their producers (including the authors of their verbal texts), are facts of history and deserve to be studied as such. But intentions are also historical facts, if sometimes more elusive, and the effort to reconstruct intentions (as in scholarly editions of authorially intended texts) is a valuable historical undertaking.*

An acquaintance of mine, who played a role in encouraging the production of national histories of the book, once said to me that as a historian he could not be concerned with matters of intention and could not go along with me in my interest in restoring authors' intended wording and punctuation. His remark symbolizes the regrettable either/or approach that has characterized much of the discussion concerning what D. F. McKenzie called "the sociology of the text" (the idea that the texts we should study are the ones made public because those texts are social products—incorporating nonauthorial elements that are a natural part of the collaborative production and publishing process—and have been available for people to be influenced by). Obviously it is important to study the texts and books that actually appeared; but accepting that fact does not require one to deny the intangibility of verbal works or the legitimacy of altering inherited texts to reflect intentions more accurately. It is hard to see why the search for intentions in connection with books and verbal texts is such a stumbling block, since all other historical study regularly involves the attempted reconstruction of attitudes and events for which the evidence is fragmentary.

8.

*Like other artifacts, individual books (of all periods) frequently differ from one another even when their producers expected them to be considered identical, as in the case of copies printed from a single typesetting—a situation where variations can exist because the printing of multiple copies is necessarily a sequential process, allowing changes to occur along the way.*

The idea that the arrival of the printing press made possible the multiplication of identical copies of books is so entrenched that most people have not paused to recognize

how absurd it is. No mechanical process that operates over time, no assembly line, can be assumed to produce totally identical objects, though often the differences that do occur are small enough not to be of significance to the users of the objects. In the case of printed books, variations arising from the printing and binding operations are routine, inevitably so, among the copies of an edition (that is, copies from one typesetting). But bibliographical and textual scholars of pre-nineteenth-century books have long understood that very frequently there are other (and often more consequential) differences resulting from stop-press alterations of type or from substitutions of leaves. And bibliographers and editors specializing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are now generally aware that variants in verbal texts occur (if somewhat less often) within editions of their period, usually due to changes made between press runs. Other scholars and most readers, however, are still largely unaware of, or at least they ignore, the implications of this situation. Some of the most satisfying moments in my own teaching were the times when students and colleagues, following my suggestion of comparing multiple copies, had the experience of discovering important textual variants. I remember two instances in particular, one involving a sixteenth-century edition and the other a nineteenth-century one, where the analyses of poems were distinctly altered and enriched by the knowledge of the variant readings. Those who make such discoveries will never again think of copies of editions simply as duplicates.

## 9.

*Since copies of printed editions often vary (both in verbal text and in other features, including their dust-jackets), one cannot hope to generalize accurately about an edition as a whole or its effect on readers without examining multiple copies; the larger the number, the more confidence one can have in the validity of one's observations. Therefore a requirement for most bibliographical work devoted to printed materials—and indeed for the serious reading of their verbal texts as well—is access to multiple copies.*

It has been more than a century since Falconer Madan coined the phrase “the duplicity of duplicates.” But the fact it refers to—that so-called duplicates are frequently not identical—has not even yet permeated the book world as deeply as it should have. The value of seeming duplicates is not a welcome point to librarians, who are always short of shelf space. Instead of disposing of “duplicates,” however, librarians should welcome them—from all periods—and take pride in them for adding richness to a library's resources by providing more evidence than single copies could offer. This point applies to multiple copies not only of first printings but of all kinds of non-firsts as well (whether they come from new editions or later impressions within an edition), for they all have a place in textual and publishing history. Multiple copies in one location do not normally lessen the amount of travel that bibliographers must undertake (for still more

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copies always need to be seen); but among other benefits they can sometimes facilitate discoveries by making side-by-side comparisons possible.

10.

*Printed books, in common with all other artifacts, hold clues to their own production histories. Thus bibliographical analysis (the close examination of physical evidence in books) can frequently explain what happened to cause a book to have the particular characteristics, and the particular differences from other copies of the same edition, that it does have. Such analysis is essentially forensic, though in most instances not primarily motivated by questions of authenticity or calling for sophisticated equipment. It follows that when conservation of a book is undertaken, every effort should be made to preserve its original physical evidence.*

The remarkable arsenal of analytical techniques that has been developed since the mid-nineteenth century makes it possible in many cases to postulate, with varying degrees of certainty, how many typesetters were at work on a book, whether type was set in page-number order or according to the pages that would be on the press at one time (and how many pages that would be), what procedures were followed in making each forme ready for the press, which side of each sheet was printed first, how many times a forme was unlocked to make typographical changes, what the reasons were for a pressman's choice of locations for press figures, whether any leaves were replaced with cancels, whether unmarked impressions exist within an edition, and whether the printing surface was type or plates—among other possibilities (including the determination or verification of the place and date of printing). An awareness of such possibilities is part of the mental makeup that a bibliographer brings to every encounter with a book. These investigations are complicated by the constant chance that certain features result from what people (often innocently) have done to books since their publication. One of the current dangers comes from conservation initiatives. Since it is clearly important in bibliographical analysis to be able to examine the original sewing, the treatment of cancels, and the construction of bindings and endpapers (rather than having to rely on a conservator's description of them), any conservation measures should avoid altering such features. Sometimes the best way to preserve a deteriorating book is simply to place it in an acid-free box.

11.

*Expertise in bibliographical analysis demands clear thinking supported by a knowledge of the relevant research on the history of paper, letterforms, type, ink, graphic design,*

*printing practices, illustration processes, and bindings. Such research, appreciating the human craftsmanship and technology necessary for bookmaking, is a fundamental kind of bibliographical scholarship, incorporating the results of previous analyses of individual books—and in turn requiring revision as new analyses reveal new information.*

The vast historical literature dealing with the physical elements of books comprises a magnificent body of writings, many of which have been beautifully presented as well, in splendid examples of bookmaking. Most of this work is regularly understood as forming a branch of historical research, whereas the results of analytical bibliography are often not regarded as history-writing at all. Checklists of research on printing history, for example, are not likely to include this material. The reason is probably that many people consider analytical bibliography to be a technique of literary research, since scholarly editors of literary works played a prominent role in its development and have been its most publicized users. (Indeed, even some textual scholars have regarded it as a tool of intentionalist editing, since most editors employing it have focused on authorial intention.) But what it uncovers—information about the typesetting and presswork for individual books—is printing history (obtained, like other history, through inductive research). And the larger historical syntheses are dependent on such detailed studies for their generalizations, which of course may not match what one encounters in a given book. As R. B. McKerrow memorably said in 1913, “with almost every new book one takes up we are in new country unexplored and trackless”—his way of characterizing the fact that each investigation is an independent undertaking, which may or may not confirm any previous conclusions based on other researches. For him, the opportunity of so many explorations (given the profusion of books) makes analytical bibliography “one of the most absorbing of all forms of historical enquiry”—a sentiment echoed seventy-five years later by David Vander Meulen, when he spoke of the “alluring joy of the work,” and by Paul Needham, when he referred to the “distinctive appeal of bibliographical studies.” This view has obviously been shared by a long line of scholars, whose lives have caused the history of bibliography to be a glorious showcase of devoted research, notable for its methods as well as for its results.

## 12.

*Explanations provided by bibliographical analysis, deriving as they do from the books themselves, are based on primary evidence. Although these explanations may be supplemented by external documents, such materials offer secondary evidence, which in some respects may be proved wrong by the surviving books.*

To many people, the term “primary source” means manuscript or unpublished material, and there has been a corresponding reluctance to think of printed books as

primary. But obviously the definition of “primary” in a given case is dependent on the topic being investigated. If books as objects, or the specific verbal texts contained in them, are the subject, then the books take precedence over anything written about them. Whenever, for example, the details about a book as recorded in a printer’s or publisher’s ledger contradict what can be learned from the book itself, the former have to be in error, since the book is available for direct inspection. After all, the tangible verbal-numerical text of a printer’s or publisher’s ledger is like any other and thus may misrepresent what was intended. The word “archive” is similar to “primary source” in being generally used to refer to unpublished documents; but the stock of printed books in every library is an archive of primary evidence regarding printing and publishing practices and the verbal texts that got published.

### 13.

*The narratives disclosed by bibliographical analysis have their practical applications, as when they help scholarly editors to determine the makeup of their texts. But more fundamentally those narratives reveal what particular individuals (typesetters, printers, and so on) were doing at specific past moments, and thus they show how artifacts bring us in touch with workers of the past and their daily routines.*

There is a statement about analytical bibliography that I am fond of quoting from the great bibliographer (perhaps the greatest one) A. W. Pollard: “When we find an early printer making little economies and on the look out to save himself trouble,” he said in 1923, “we may recognise the touch of human nature which makes us akin across the centuries.” Our analyses can make us feel acquainted, at least a little bit, with some of the people whose work is enshrined in the books we inspect. We can often know, for instance, an early compositor’s distinctive spelling and punctuation preferences, his usual techniques for creating straight right margins, and his general accuracy, and we can tell when he was having a bad day. We can also observe how a later typesetter arranged words so as to avoid rivers of white space or consecutive lines ending in hyphens. In book-production details of every period, we see evidence of minds at work. All such information provides part of the background we need for judging how the words and punctuation marks came to be what they are in a printed text, and it contributes to our understanding of what was going on in the shop. But it also reminds us that our general knowledge of standard printing-shop procedures must always be tempered by a recognition of the variability inherent in any human activity. Pollard added that “one of the first requisites for a bibliographer” is “a sympathetic imagination for the troubles with which early printers had to contend.” Indeed, a sympathetic imagination is required for any historical research aimed at revealing what human beings were thinking and doing in the past.

14.

*The cultural significance of every physical characteristic of every copy of every edition makes descriptive bibliography—the detailed physical description of books—a basic genre of humanistic scholarship. A descriptive bibliography of an author, for example, is a kind of biography, one that concentrates on the successive forms in which texts of an author’s works appeared and on the production history that underlay those forms—both of which reflect changes in an author’s reputation and readership and thus offer insights into a writing career.*

Fredson Bowers, author of the classic treatise on descriptive bibliography, always insisted that the products of such bibliography should be spoken of as having been “written,” not “compiled.” His point was that a descriptive bibliography is a work of historical scholarship, not merely a set of details that have been assembled. The association of the words “bibliography” and “compiled” is no doubt a carryover from the frequent use of “bibliography” to mean a list; and it may also to some extent reflect the fact that parts of most descriptive bibliographies are formulaic in presentation. But those bibliographies (which include some monumental achievements) offer historical narratives of printing, publishing, and authorship constructed in the way that all works of history are written: the scholar, having mastered the known evidence, selects from it on the basis of that expertise, emphasizing some points and subordinating others (drawing in the process on previous analyses), in order to shape a coherent account. The bibliographer, like other historians and biographers, brings an order to the disorganized data: the result in each case is a series of hypotheses that will stand as the nearest we can come to the truth until a new bibliographer supplies a more convincing interpretation of the evidence or until new evidence is uncovered. Every bibliography, being an instance of rational inquiry, is a report on an unending pursuit.

15.

*The branch of bibliography that focuses on books in society (sometimes called “history of the book”)—encompassing author-publisher relations, copyright, censorship, book distribution (by publishers and by dealers in new and old publications), and book reception (by collectors, librarians, and readers)—makes its distinctive contribution only when its treatment of verbal works grows out of their representation in the texts of specific physical objects.*

One of the most striking developments in literary and historical scholarship in the late years of the twentieth century was a rapidly growing interest in a form of book

history that concentrates on the social and cultural impact of books. This increased attention to books is to be welcomed, and among its beneficial results has been the production of multi-volume histories of the book in various countries. At the same time, however, the remarkable popularity of this pursuit as an academic field has often caused it to attract practitioners who have no background in the study of the physical book. Paradoxically, therefore, many scholarly writings supposedly devoted to “textual materiality” scarcely show any acquaintance with the actual books (that is, objects) under discussion or how they were produced. This situation is another manifestation of the perennial confusion of “book” with “verbal work.” If one uses “book” to mean “verbal work,” one can discuss the social influence of “books” without reference to their physical production and appearance or to the verbal texts in particular editions, and that is what intellectual history has traditionally done. Such investigations can be valuable; but if “history of the book” is to have a distinct identity—and there is indeed a distinct place for it to occupy—its efforts must be grounded in the physical book. Furthermore, what should go without saying, but unfortunately needs to be said, is that its results are most effectively set forth in clear, straightforward prose, avoiding critical jargon and turgid expression.

#### 16.

*Reproductions—photographic, xerographic, digital, or any other—cannot copy most of the physical features of books: they usually reproduce only the verbal, musical, and pictorial texts on different surfaces (with the ever-present possibility of error and of visual alteration caused by the reproductive process). They are new artifacts, which take one back to the time of their own production, not to the time when the originals were produced. They can nevertheless be useful supplements to the originals when their technology uncovers evidence not visible to the naked eye.*

Once the value of studying the physical evidence in books is recognized, it becomes axiomatic that no textual reproduction can substitute for the original artifact (except temporarily, as an interim convenience or as a way of protecting the original). Unless the subject is one’s own remembered experiences (including recollections of oral texts), an original source must be defined as a physical object dating from the specific moment that is the focus of one’s research. There are scholars who speak of photocopies or digital reproductions as “originals,” but that term would be correct only if the photocopies or digital reproductions themselves were what was being investigated. A tangible verbal text cannot escape the object that makes it tangible. Any tool that helps one to examine an original is welcome, and some of these tools are in fact reproductions (such as high-resolution photographs or scanned images that allow for magnification). But the original remains central.

17.

*Because originals are required for studying production and publication history, the arts of the book, textual evolution, and the meanings conveyed by book design, among other topics (probably including some not yet imagined), there is no justification for the practice, followed in many institutional libraries, of deaccessioning originals (mostly of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), and then frequently discarding them, when space-saving reproductions of their verbal texts become available.*

Many of us have heard stories of the destruction of important library materials after microfilming, and now after digitizing; and some scholars have had the experience, when looking at a reproduction of an item once locally held, of asking to see the original and being told it no longer exists. Newspapers and magazines are a particularly sad case, but there are numerous less publicized examples, including great runs of reference books and whole collections of pamphlets. Even when deaccessioned books are not immediately destroyed, their eventual fate is very uncertain. I predicted long ago that the only way to save the contents of many library stacks would be to let special-collections departments take over everything. Unfortunately I see no reason to revise this view. It seems ridiculous that we are constantly struggling to save the new rarities that were ignored when they were more plentiful. Although there is no way to predict what directions future research will take, we can be sure that anything we discard (however trivial or superfluous it may seem to us) will at some point be sorely missed, just as we now lament what was lost in the past. It is a distressing irony that the period we are living through, when consciousness of the need for historic preservation has supposedly been raised to new heights, will be cursed by future researchers as a time of particularly extensive book destruction.

18.

*One consequence of the frequency with which copies of an edition vary is that there is no way to support the belief, held by some library administrators, that only a few copies of an edition need to be preserved (somewhere) as an archival record, once textual digitization (normally of one copy) has occurred.*

The suggestion that a few copies of every edition should be put in a safe place is primarily a means for book-discarders to try to meet the criticisms leveled at them by book-savers. (It also constitutes an admission that things can go wrong with reproductions and that reference to originals might be needed just to correct the reproductions.) Of course, two or three saved copies would be better than none, but the choice should not have to be made. Not only are a few copies a totally inadequate representation of a

whole edition; there is also the matter of access. The proverbial goals of librarianship are preservation and access; a failure of the first clearly assures a failure of the second. Yet the scholarly need for broad access to what originals convey makes preservation all the more imperative. Even if copies of a particular edition did not vary in verbal text (and how could one even be able to suggest this possibility without access to a large number of copies?), there would still be a crucial reason for preserving as many copies as possible in as many locations as possible: originals transmit much information (including details relevant to the study of verbal texts) that is not retrievable from reproductions, information that should not be made difficult to locate. Thus it is a duty of the library world to prevent further reduction in the widely dispersed holdings of originals. Those holdings exist in public libraries as well as research libraries. Scholars tend to think that public libraries (with a few great exceptions) have nothing to offer them. But the books in public circulating libraries, including those in small villages, are part of the total stock of books; such libraries obviously contain bibliographical evidence, and one can never see too much of it. Discoveries can be, and are, made there.

#### 19.

*Even persons who recognize the scholarly uses of originals often hold the condescending view that ordinary readers need not have access to them (and thus that originals need not be easily available, even in the libraries where they are held). The effect of this position is to deprive most people of a revealing educational experience, one that can be continually repeated with increased historical insight as copies of different editions are looked at.*

Undergraduates, when they enter college libraries, and the general public, when they enter public libraries, deserve to have available to them books of various periods, so that they can gradually get a sense of what different reading experiences of the past were like. Even if much of their own reading is done with electronic screens, the knowledge of other styles of textual presentation can help them begin to grasp the distinction between verbal works and the multiplicity of physical texts meant to represent those works. One of the roles of librarians is to be teachers, and they can assist in this process (both directly as individuals and through the exhibitions and publications they produce, as well as the conferences and lectures they sponsor). But there is no substitute for the self-education that can come from browsing in a bookstack, with its layers of history reflected in bookmaking styles. Libraries are inevitably museums: places where the past, preserved in objects, is studied. Off-site storage, which is only an inconvenience to readers in closed-stack libraries, seriously diminishes the educational function of open-stack libraries by reducing the opportunities for serendipitous discoveries.

*Collecting, by individuals as well as institutions, is a necessary activity for the understanding of human culture. Indeed, it can be called an obligation, if we are to play our part in transmitting our cultural inheritance to the future. This point applies to all objects made with human skill and effort, but those containing verbal texts have a special significance because of the explicitness with which language can give access to the thinking of the past.*

Book collectors and their natural collaborators and mentors, the sellers of used and antiquarian books, are scholars by virtue of their activities: they preserve objects, investigate them, and arrange them in a meaningful order, which can bring out aspects of the past that had not previously been recognized. They also write catalogs, essays, and other studies that reflect their knowledge and the connoisseurship that develops from it. Catalogs, indeed, have never been accorded their rightful place among scholars' reference sources; nor have most libraries saved book-trade catalogs in quantity or made them accessible. Yet all scholars who have worked in research libraries are aware of the debt they owe to past collectors (including those on library staffs) and to the dealers and auctioneers who supplied them with material. Moreover, collections as entities are themselves artifacts: each collection demonstrates that a particular person at a given time assembled a certain group of books and treated them in a distinctive way (a fact that makes a contribution to cultural history), and it also preserves the means for learning from that specific juxtaposition of items. It is always regrettable when a collection does not survive intact, whether it is a gathering of rarities or a scholar's working library. Understandably, however, many have not survived, though a few of them can be glimpsed in contemporary or reconstructed catalogs. It is a good sign that some of the national histories of the book and other monographs on book history have been taking note of collecting and antiquarian bookselling (and of the scholarly organizations and social clubs that derive from bibliophily).

As for books being a special category of artifact, I should make clear I am not suggesting that books as a class get us nearer to the truth of the past than other artifacts do. I once criticized an excellent scholar of material culture for saying that facts are transmitted better by verbal documents than by other objects, and I stand by that criticism. (His comment calls to mind the misleading terminology used in the distinction one sometimes hears between the "archaeological record" and the "historical record," as if the nonverbal archaeological record is not as much a part of the historical record as verbal documents are.) When we look at a building, a sculpture, a painting, an urn, or a utensil, we do learn facts: we not only come close to seeing what people were looking at in the past (depending on the intervening effect of time and human action), but we also have in front of us the results of thinking. These points



apply equally to books as objects. What makes books different is not that their verbal texts allow them to convey facts more clearly or ideas less ambiguously (for they do not necessarily do so) but simply that those texts normally consist of words in syntactical arrangements—the same tool that we ordinarily use for analyzing thought. Therefore most of us are likely to feel, as a result of this congruence, that the verbal content of books (whether taken literally or figuratively) can bring us more directly in touch with the process, and not just the results, of thinking in past times. It enables us, in other words, to experience, rather than merely infer, sequences of thoughts from the past. Our literary heritage, which is primarily preserved in books, is an illustration of this capability of language.

21.

*Aside from all the other reasons for collecting, preserving, and studying multiple copies of printed editions, there is the fundamental fact that every copy is a unique tangible link with a series of distinct past moments—not only from its production period (as revealed by design choices and manufacturing clues), but also from its subsequent life (as sometimes evidenced by inscriptions, annotations, bookplates, inserted items, special bindings, fore-edge paintings, library and bookstore markings, and the like). Each time a copy vanishes, our ability to learn about the past is diminished, for every copy of every edition makes its own contribution to our knowledge of what preceded us.*

All the objects, natural and artifactual, that make up the archive of the world have traveled through time; and whether their journeys have been long or short, they bring with them traces of what they have experienced. (As Nicholson Baker put it, the “oldness” of old things “is part of what they have to say.”) Although human beings have left their marks on natural objects (usually with unfortunate results), the human story is more thoroughly documented in the objects human beings have created. Not all of them can be saved—a fact guaranteed by the realities of time-travel and of human nature. Yet we can at least do our thinking in a framework built on the recognition that every loss is significant rather than the belief that some losses are unimportant. How the objects that do survive were produced is generally recoverable, in varying degrees. What has happened to them since the time of their production, however, can be more richly observed in books than in other artifacts because people have had a greater urge to personalize them. The reason is in part that books contain appropriate surfaces for adding more words to those already present. But people probably also sense, at some level, that books are vehicles for approaching intangible works and thus that added marks and labels are not as intrusive as they would normally be on other objects.

W. W. Greg, in a well-known essay of 1945, recognized this whole story as the province of bibliography: “the object of bibliographical study,” he said, is “to reconstruct for each particular book the history of its life, to make it reveal in its most intimate detail the story of its birth and adventures as the material vehicle of the living word.” Bibliographers may choose to specialize in part of the story, as Greg did in production history. But the context of a continuous narrative is always there for those who understand the comprehensive vision of the field: bibliography studies the manufacture and dissemination of books and related artifacts, revealing in the process the vicissitudes of textual evolution and reception. Once we have learned that every book (that is, every copy of every edition) is an independent entity with a unique history, we have learned the essence of bibliography. Each book has its own story of what befell it (along with its verbal text) in the printing process, of how it later passed from one location to another, and of how it was treated and used. The resulting insights into economic and labor history, intellectual and literary annals, and social and professional relationships add to the stock of details from which various pictures of the past are constructed. Like other readers, bibliographers read the verbal texts in books for the meanings that language conveys and for the experience of the verbal artistry and intellectual stimulation offered by the works represented there. But they also read books in another way, as objects with nonlinguistic texts, and that is how they contribute to scholarship. Their example shows us that every book is a fragment of the past to be cherished.



George Parker Winship in the Widener Memorial Room, ca. 1920.  
Detail; original photographic print, 25 x 20 cm. Harvard University Archives, HUP Winship, George  
Parker. By permission of Harvard University Archives.

## Contributors

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