



"Session two: Discussion" in "Rare book and manuscript libraries in the twenty-first century, Session two: Rare book and manuscript libraries as centers for research and teaching"

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Session Two: Discussion

DAVID MCKITTERICK

So far, we have looked at very different kinds of words, or images, and not simply at alternative forms of the same words. We have spoken, or thought, almost in the same breath, about the manipulation of information, and the very different questions that affect the manipulation of historical or literary texts. The two are by no means synonymous. But they each, in their different measures, have to do with the representational values of words in different forms, whether in the form originally recorded, or circulated in the first years of existence of a document or book, or as we encounter them in modern editions or in the quintessentially alien environment of a library, or, increasingly, on screen. Alien, because for most books such places or forms of encounter were certainly never envisaged by the author.

In these representations, we seek to recover the past. But much the most difficult part of that process of recovery is in seeking to regain a sense—however partial, and however insecure—of context. This context (literary, formal, and material) involves (among much more) inscriptions, graffiti, and street signs: verbal or representational texts just as much as those to which we refer under the broad brim of the umbrella term “book.”

Provided we realize their limitations and purposes, as well as their advantages, the introduction of screens, databases, and the paraphernalia of computers can only be an advantage. Indeed, we have spoken of a kindred transition from manuscript to print. But we would speak more accurately if we returned several centuries earlier, to the change from roll to codex in early Christian Egypt. The Word remains, but it is being capable of being re-ordered: no longer linear, but spatial, whether in codices or in our new abilities to manipulate texts. Thus the questions begin to concern ordering, as well as context, and we

move to that compromise we find enshrined in surviving books.

It is here that not just “reading,” but different kinds of and approaches to reading, and individuals’ different responses to the same object, become of paramount interest. To date, work on the history of reading (a subject of which we shall hear much in the next few years) has paid only subdued attention to Professor Carnochan’s “archaeology” of the book—a term that we might do well to treat with circumspection, lest we be drawn into the kinds of arguments currently being fought over “new” archaeology, with its emphasis on scientific analysis allied to ideas drawn from sociology and anthropology, and “archaeology” as it was understood at the time when modern textual and analytical bibliography were being defined in the last years of the nineteenth century.

But, as Tom Tanselle and several others have reminded us, we cannot reasonably take brevity as our ally and leave some aspects to one side. We think of the creation, with paper, ink, leather, cloth, type, and money, of the object that appears in a particular material form, and that can in turn be related to other similar objects created from the same resources. Both inside and out, that form will affect any meanings we may attribute to or extract from it. Libraries are just as much guardians of that material form as of the particular ordering of the words it contains, whether as manuscript, broadsheet, picture, printed book, film, tape, or disc. For books as they are now generally known, neither microfilms, CDs, nor screens are satisfactory media by which to preserve that form.

Questions of reading are inseparably related: in particular, how much, and in what ways, reading itself is undergoing a sea change. The answers to this are varied, for they depend very much on what we think of as a literate society. We may distinguish, for example, between a society in which most people can read, and one that depends, via an



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