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Article

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THE DESTINIES OF LITERARY MANUSCRIPTS: PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE

David C. Sutton

The following essay is abridged and updated from a longer keynote address given on the occasion of the fiftieth birthday of the Beinecke Library, Yale University, in April 2013.

The nature of literary manuscripts

This essay reviews the ways in which literary manuscripts may be considered to be archivally unique, as well as valuable in all senses of the word, and gives a cautious appraisal of their future in the next ten to twenty years.

Literary manuscripts are not like other archives. Their importance lies in who made them and how they were made, the unique relationship between author and evolving text, the insights they give into the act of creation. The supreme example of this magical combination of form and content is provided by the manuscripts of Marcel Proust, lovingly preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 171 volumes of cross-hatched text, with later additions on small pieces of paper – the famous *paperoles* – glued onto almost every page: a wonderfully dreadful conservation challenge.

Literary archives often have a higher financial value than other archives. They are more likely to be found in libraries than in archives offices. In many countries of the world literary archives are housed in private foundations (such as the Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa in Rio de Janeiro), in literary museums (such as the Museum of Japanese Modern Literature in Meguro-ku, Tokyo), or in literary houses (such as the Maison de Balzac in Paris). In countries such as the USA, Canada and the UK, university libraries play a leading role, but this is by no means true in all countries. In France, for example, public libraries (often in the author's home town) are the principal repositories, together with the Bibliothèque Nationale. In contrast with most other types of archives — business archives, medical archives, architectural archives, religious archives or municipal archives — literary archives are often scattered in diverse locations without any sense of appropriateness or “spirit of place”.

In some cases the literary archives will have gone to another country and caused controversy in the home country — as with the Carlos Fuentes papers in Princeton or the literary papers of Leopold Sédar Senghor in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (with his political papers, however, remaining in the Archives Nationales du Sénégal). In other cases serendipitous acquisition or purchase has led to locations that would never have been guessed. There are well-known examples such as the Ernest Hemingway Archives which ended up in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library or the J. R. R. Tolkien Archive which found its way to the Marquette University in Milwaukee, and curious cases of personal initiatives in collection-building such as the fine set of Australian literary manuscripts to be found amongst the military training resources of the Australian Defence Force Academy. The examples abound, however, of literary papers in locations a long way from home: papers of Franz Kafka owned or jointly-owned by Oxford University; papers of Paul Claudel owned by Cambridge University; Jean Anouilh and Yehuda Amichai in the Beinecke Library at Yale University; Raymond Queneau, Evelyn Waugh and Wilson Harris in the Ransom Center in Austin; Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka in Harvard University; Mario Vargas Llosa and Giorgos Seferis in Princeton; Angus Wilson and Iris Murdoch in the University of Iowa; for John Betjeman, whose papers are in the University of Victoria, British Columbia, it would be difficult to be very much further from home. There are thousands of other examples.

In addition to their tendency to end up very far from home, literary papers are often found, for any one author, to be divided between several collecting institutions. This phenomenon of “split collections” will be familiar to almost all literary researchers. The University of Reading has an outstanding collection of papers of Samuel Beckett, for example, but it is a collection which can only make archival sense by constant cross-referencing to the Beckett collections in Trinity College Dublin and the Harry Ransom Center in Austin. Michael Forstrom of the Beinecke Library has given² a very complete description of the ways in which literary collections can be split, identifying no fewer than fourteen forms of division:

- Split between different collecting repositories
- Split between fonds and what survives
- Split by collecting strategy or agreement
- Split between early portion of papers and [living] creator
- Split by relocation and change in custody
- Split between portion of papers and component in private hands
- Split by provenance: papers versus artificial collection
- Split by accession(s)
- Split within institutions
- Split between personal, professional, and family papers
- Split between papers and media
- Split between papers and born-digital
- Split by reproduction
- Split between collection(s) and national interest

Anyone who works with literary manuscripts will be familiar with most of those types of split collections. For literary archivists, they imply a requirement for regular cross-referencing. For literary researchers, they imply complex research methodologies and significant travel budgets.

The diaspora of literary manuscripts

The scattering of literary papers in diverse and unpredictable locations is thus one of their defining characteristics. Colleagues have recently begun to apply the striking word “diasporic” to this feature, and a new network has been named accordingly: the Diasporic Literary Archives network, led by the University of Reading, with members including the Beinecke Library and institutions in France, Italy, Namibia and Trinidad, with involvement from UNESCO, the International Council on Archives and others. The partnership has been funded for three years from 2012 to 2014 by the Leverhulme Trust, a major British charity with a special interest in supporting innovative international networks.

The network certainly benefits from the growing propensity of literary archivists to work together and synergise their activities. To give a sense of the range of the new network, these are summaries of the themes of the five workshops prepared for 2012-2014. The first, held in Reading in June 2012, provided an overview of the topics to be covered in more detail in the following workshops and was entitled ‘Questions informing scattered legacies: an introduction to the ideas of diasporic literary manuscripts’. The second, ‘Examining split collections’ was held in Pavia in February-March 2013. ‘The stakes of public/private ownership’ was the title of the third workshop, held in Caen in May 2013, and the programme ranged over the ways in which literary manuscripts are represented in business, publishing and other non-literary collections. The fourth workshop was probably the most sensitive. Entitled ‘The politics of location’ and held in Trinidad in March 2014, it covered policies and policy-conflicts relating to

acquisition, including the loss by less wealthy countries of their literary heritage. The title of the fifth workshop (Yale University, October 2014) is ‘Diaspora and possibilities for digitization: new ideas, challenges and risks’.

At the end of the three years’ work, the network will have created a rich dialogue on the world of literary manuscripts, and ways are being sought to continue the network beyond 2014, perhaps working in cooperation with UNESCO and the Section for Literary Archives of the International Council on Archives.

One aspect of the diaspora which has become clearer recently, which I have debated online and in meetings³, after the archive of Jose Saramago found a fine new home in Lisbon, is that there are generally only four countries in the world which regularly and systematically collect the papers of non-nationals, namely the USA, the UK, Canada and France.

As the Diasporic Literary Archives network members witnessed in meetings in Pavia and Venice in 2013, there is a striking contrast with literary archival activity in Italy, where they have been diligently collecting their own literary papers since the time of Petrarch, nearly 700 years ago, but have no mandate to collect papers from other countries — although of course authors from other countries do find their diasporic way into Italian archival collections. The Petrarch manuscripts reside in the Vatican Library, and some of them can be definitely dated, such as the writings after Laura’s death in the plague of 1348. What is most striking about Petrarch’s manuscripts, however, is that they include alterations, amendments, rewritings, cancellations and different variants – all the features which make literary manuscripts most valuable for academic study today. Italian literary collectors and literary scholars thus have a clear and historically-based understanding of the significance of literary archives, but no notion that it might be acceptable or desirable to collect papers from authors of other nationalities.

Let us reflect upon what the four-country model for trans-national collecting means for the papers of some of the greatest late twentieth-century literary authors. My own list would start with Saramago and would certainly include Margaret Atwood, Samuel Beckett, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Elfriede Jelinek, Doris Lessing, Naguib Mahfouz and Orhan Pamuk. That personal list provides some interesting stories and some telling controversies from the world of modern literary manuscripts. The purchase by Princeton University of the Carlos Fuentes Archive provoked front-page outrage in Mexico, and the headline in the *Los Angeles Times* read “Mexican scholars lament the loss of writers’ archives to U.S.”. Similarly, the proposed Sotheby’s sale of Naguib Mahfouz’s papers in December 2011 caused controversy in Egypt, and the sale was abandoned. It seems that at least some of the family now want these papers to go to the American University in Cairo, or to another Cairo library. Meanwhile the archive of Margaret Atwood is arriving in regular instalments at the University of Toronto, and Elfriede Jelinek has a similar arrangement with the University of Vienna. Samuel Beckett’s papers in Reading, Dublin and Austin present a classic example of a split collection. In the same way, although some Doris Lessing papers have recently gone to the University of East Anglia, most are divided between the Universities of Texas and Tulsa.

Given that there is almost no interest in Turkish language and literature in the four big purchasing countries, there is every chance that the Orhan Pamuk Archive will stay in Istanbul, where it so obviously belongs. It could be said that Pamuk is to Istanbul what Saramago is to Lisbon and Mahfouz to Cairo. With a self-referential appropriateness, in 2012 Pamuk himself established a museum in Istanbul displaying his own novel ‘The Museum of Innocence’.

That leaves Gabriel García Márquez. He is clearly a highly marketable author-commodity, and Spanish-language manuscripts are actively collected in the USA, not only by Princeton. In November 2012, the first García Márquez manuscript to go on sale was auctioned at Christie's, with a price guide between \$80,000 and \$127,000. Unless García Márquez has left one final magical surprise for us in his will, it seems highly unlikely that the main García Márquez Archive will end up in his native Colombia.

The conclusion, in an international context, is that the language used by an author is a major factor in the eventual destination of his or her literary archive, and that the market in literary manuscripts, with so few countries involved in cross-border purchasing, is determined by considerations of language.

The future of literary manuscripts

Looking to the future, I will try to bring together some thoughts about twenty-first century literary manuscripts – both those created in the early years of the new century and those still to be created.

In 2011 and 2012, the British Location Register⁴ conducted a new survey of recent acquisitions of literary manuscripts, with a special focus on authors born in the 1960s and 1970s. We even found that both the John Rylands University Library of Manchester and the Brotherton Collection at the University of Leeds already have papers of the poet Caroline Bird, who was born in 1986, some years after we first started locating and registering.

Many of the letters, emails and manuscripts which have been recently added to the Location Register themselves date from the twenty-first century. This reflects a major shift in attitude by British literary archivists towards collecting modern papers. When the Location Register project began in 1982, there were still vestiges of some old and entrenched attitudes: above all, there was a belief that authors' papers should not be collected until they were safely dead and their reputations established. Now literary archivists are happy to collect papers which were created only months earlier, even though this brings with it difficult issues of data protection and privacy. The manuscripts of *The Greek anthology, book XVII* by Greg Delanty and *The choir outing* by Nigel Forde, both published in 2012, for example, were already found to be in the John Rylands Library, with the probability that the manuscripts had arrived in the Library before the books which derived from them. Discussions, under Chatham House rules, amongst members of the Group for Literary Archives and Manuscripts (GLAM⁵) have revealed the widest possible range of approaches to access to these very recently created manuscripts. The unifying source of comfort for British literary archivists is that the forms of access chosen have led to almost no challenges – legal or otherwise.

The nature of literary manuscripts is changing (as most authors use computers for at least part of their work) but at present the majority still appear to be on paper. The computer print-out with handwritten annotations is perhaps the most typical form of manuscript for the period 1990-2010. Archivists expect this to change and are ready to receive more and more manuscripts in the form of memory sticks, hard disks and other electronic media; but, so far, this is happening rather less than would have been predicted ten years ago.

Colleagues confirm that archivists are still unsure about how to come to terms with the prospect of acquiring significant numbers of digital archives, and that some recent acquisitions are in fact partly experimental in purpose — in other words, archivists are acquiring a few digital archives partly in order to test themselves, their cataloguers and their users. Archivists have

very little confidence that, for digital collections, the model so perfectly entitled “*If we build it they will come*”⁶ will work, and report that “it is not yet clear just how much scholars are using available digital collections”.⁷

One of the unresolved issues which presently adds great uncertainty to our consideration of born-digital archives is that of value.⁸ Most born-digital materials presently in archival collections have been either donated, or purchased as part of a hybrid archive with a substantial paper component, or purchased as a test-case, in this experimental mind-set. No systematic set of terms of reference for valuation of born-digital archival collections has yet been established. There is an absence, firstly of precedents and secondly of information about users and likely users. There is a natural concern that users of a costly digital manuscript collection may turn out to be very few.

Emails are much safer to collect. In fact emails are often more revealing than collections of letters. This is both because of the typical two-way nature of email threads and because of the lack of restraint which the email format often appears to generate in its users. Emails are certain to provide a highly-valued future trove for biographers.

But literary manuscripts in digital formats remain fraught with uncertainties. If the study of literary manuscripts is in large part a study of variants, versions and progress of composition, how can scholars be certain of the authenticity of the variants within digital media? And even if technology does provide such certainty (through very sophisticated hardware and software) will scholars want to use media of this sort which they cannot pick up and hold in their hands?⁹ It is widely perceived that there is little of the “magic” of paper manuscripts in digital materials, and that therefore digital study may hold less attraction, allure or prestige.

Moreover, the digital literary manuscript of ten years ago is already slipping away from us. Composition on smart phones and storage in various forms of cloud present different challenges, and archivists are having to open urgent discussions about the implications of Google and Microsoft Cloud Storage and similar platforms.

In 2014 the status and nature of literary manuscripts ten years hence is probably more uncertain than for any ten-year period since 1700, and the longer-term future similarly more difficult to predict. Very few specialists doubt that literary manuscripts have a fascinating and exciting future, but even fewer are prepared to forecast, between 2015 and 2025, exactly what form that future will take.

Notes

¹ The present essay is abridged and updated from a much longer keynote address given on the occasion of the fiftieth birthday of the Beinecke Library, Yale University, in April 2013.

² At the second workshop of the Diasporic Literary Archives network, ‘Examining split collections’ (Pavia, February-March 2013).

³ E.g. at the fourth workshop of the Diasporic Literary Archives network, ‘The politics of location’ (Trinidad, March 2014), and at <http://literaryartisticarchives-ica.org/2013/01/20/saramago-pamuk-mahfouz-and-others-language-and-location>.

⁴ <http://www.locationregister.com>.

⁵ <http://glam-archives.org.uk>.

⁶ Jon Rimmer et al.: ‘An examination of the physical and the digital qualities of humanities research’. *Information processing and management* 44 (2008), p. 1376.

⁷ Alexandra Chassanoff: 'Historians and the use of primary source materials in the digital age'. *American Archivist* 76 (2), Fall/Winter 2013, p.463.

⁸ Discussion at the first workshop of the Diasporic Literary Archives network, 'Questions informing scattered legacies' (Reading, June 2012).

⁹ For user's views on the "value of being able to touch and feel", see Jon Rimmer et al.: *op. cit.*, p. 1385.