

**“Back to the Future: The Preposterous Art of Collecting
Contemporary Literary Archives”**

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**Moving the Past into the Future: Special Collections in a
Digital Age**

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According to the Oxford English Dictionary (electronic version, 2009) the second meaning of the adjective ‘Preposterous’ is defined as: ***contrary to nature, reason, or common sense, monstrous, foolish, perverse, utterly absurd, ridiculous, and outrageous***. It is however, its first or older meaning which I invoke in the title of my paper – that is - ***as having or placing last what should be first, inverted in position or order***.

Contrary to the nature, reason, or common sense of my own title however, I intend – quite preposterously - to begin at the beginning, by providing you with a brief outline of how we’ve been collecting contemporary literary archives over the past two decades and giving you an account of who has helped in this quest and how they have helped us.

Then, I’ll explore how the literati generate literary works, and how their archives come into being. Here I’ll pause to reflect upon the preposterous processes at work in the production, manufacture and consumption of literary works, constructions of authorship and the formation of literary canons.

Finally, I’ll examine some of the challenges which literary archivists and manuscript curators face as they attempt to capture and collect the products of literary culture in an electronic age.

The Collection of Modern Literary Archives at the John Rylands University Library provides excellent sources for anyone with an

interest in 20th and 21st century literatures in English. It was established in 1991 and it has a six fold purpose to:

1. foster and promote the learning and enjoyment of modern, recent and contemporary literature amongst members of the public, special interest groups, students and scholars from Britain and abroad.
2. support the research, teaching, and learning of the staff and students of The University of Manchester.
3. make the Collection widely accessible by providing: a reader and enquiry service; exhibitions; 'close up' sessions; seminars; lectures; poetry readings, and other events.
4. collect archives and manuscripts in the field of modern literatures in English as described in the JRUL's collecting policy.
5. care for the Collection of Modern Literary Archives to approved professional standards of stewardship.
6. offer advice to professional peers relating to literary archive and manuscript curatorship.

IE why we are collecting – and who we are collecting for – how the material is going to be used.

Origins and Etymologies of the Collection

Modest origins – basis for collecting rested on 3 core collection formed the backbone of our collecting:

1. the Papers of the poetry magazine *Critical Quarterly* (begun in 1959) – Tony Dyson and Brian Cox (later to become John Edward Taylor Professor at the UofM).
2. the Personal Papers of the Cumbrian writer Norman Nicholson (1914-1987). Writer in the widest sense of the term – poetry (spotted by T.S. Eliot and published by Faber in the 1930s), he also wrote novels, verse-dramas, topographies, criticism and reviews.

3. and the Archives of the literary publishing house Carcanet Press. Today distinguished as a contemporary poetry-publishing house of international importance, Carcanet began life here in Oxford in the early 1960s before moving to Manchester. In addition to poetry it publishes novels, literary translations, life writing, literature from earlier periods, the premier literary magazine *P.N. Review* and books on art, and film.

Over the past 20 years the Collection of MLA has grown to encompass over fifty discrete archives and manuscript accumulations which include the personal papers of writers, literary figures and other individuals drawn from a range of literary communities, and papers generated by literary organizations or activities.

In our collecting we seek to show due consideration and respect for the acquisition policies of other institutions at local, and national level - we work co-operatively with Record Offices and Manuscript Repositories to reduce competition.

The methods we use to acquire material include – purchase, gift and deposit. There is no designated budget for the MLA and in most cases the material we have acquired has come as gifts. On only 2 occasions we have paid the full market value for a collection (with support from V&A purchase fund, The Philip Larkin Memorial Fund, Friends of the National Libraries, and our own Friends organisation). In the case of some of our archives, for example, that of Carcanet Press, we acquire them in the form of ‘snapshot accessions’, where we take in a year’s worth of material on an annual basis. In exchange we pay an amount of money which is considerably less than the archive’s actual current market value and a mere fraction of the monetary value it will accrue in the future.

So how have we managed to convince potential donors and depositors to give their precious literary records into our keeping?

The Advisory Board for the Modern Literary Archives Programme – its function and significance.

We are supported in our endeavours by an Advisory Board which meets annually. The Members of the Board are:

- Professor Michael Schmidt, OBE, FRSL, Polymathic - Poet, Novelist, Critic, Director of Carcanet Press and Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow
- Dr Chris McCully, poet and linguist, (Chair)
- John McAuliffe, Poet and Director for the Centre for New Writing, The University of Manchester
- Matthew Welton, Poet and Lecturer in Writing and Creativity at the University of Nottingham. Collaborates with composers and visual artists.
- Dr Bill Hutchings, scholar and pioneer in the field of Enquiry-based Learning/Research-like learning within the context of literary studies
- Dr Robyn Marsack, translator and editor, and Director of the Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh
- Dr Michael Powell, Librarian of Chetham's Library, Manchester
- Library personnel including – the University Librarian, the Head of Special Collections, and relevant curators.

Composition – figures drawn from a range of literary communities (writers, publishers, editors, reader, critics, etc) as well as professional peers – special advocacy role especially in the area of collecting – participate in the process of attracting potential acquisitions.

What Have We Collected?

We conducted a Collections/Content Analysis exercise during the mid 1990s and this revealed that as a whole the Modern Literary Archives contained a number of particular strengths:

1. An excellent representation of modern, recent and contemporary literatures in Englishes across the UK and Ireland and the English speaking world and Writing which acknowledges ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

2. An excellent representation of the history and development of publishing during the 20th and 21st centuries.
3. An excellent representation of translations into English of the works of significant 20th- and 21st-century writers from across the world.
4. An excellent representation of the materiality of visual and literary texts.
5. An excellent representation of literary and artistic networks especially where they engage with The University of Manchester and the North West region of England. In particular, the Collection demonstrates the strong contribution Manchester, and the North West region has made to the national and international literary scenes.

These strengths are clearly of relevance to a high proportion of the audiences that we are committed to targeting and working with (diverse public audiences, special interest groups, students and scholars from Britain and abroad and especially the staff **and** students of The University of Manchester) so the decision was taken that our future collecting should play to these strengths by consolidating and amplifying them.

Developing the Collection of Modern Literary Archives

The subject areas which are **actively sought**:

1. Papers and archives which develop and augment the breadth and depth of the Library's holdings in recent and contemporary poetries in English.
2. Papers of significant, twentieth century poets, and other writers, writing in English, especially where they, or their circle, are already represented in the Collection.
3. Papers and archives which articulate the histories and development of literary publishing.
4. Papers and archives which acknowledge the ethnicity, gender, or sexuality of creative writing.
5. Papers and archives which contain a representation of significant recent and contemporary poets, and other writers,

who have connections with Manchester University or the North of England.

6. Holdings of criticism, from the twentieth century and recent and contemporary periods.

7. Relevant printed books and magazines

This is a living document that is subject to change and revision as new challenges emerge.

So much for the past - Let's get Back to the Future

In my view the biggest challenge currently facing archivists as they practice the art of collecting literary archives, depends upon their ability to capture and preserve evidence of the impact which digital means of production are having in shaping new writing practices and creating new literary genres. Currently at risk from degradation or obsolescence, digital literary materials are beginning to problematize how literary works come into being. Archivists are actively encouraged to intervene into the record-making practices of archive creators at early stages in the production of their literary archives, and so archivists are becoming involved in the production of literary texts and the creation of literary coteries and canons.

By accessioning records earlier in their lifecycle their longevity is likely to be safeguarded. Yet adopting a 'snap shot approach' to collecting the personal papers of living writers is tantamount to throwing down a radical challenge to the authority of the Literary Canon since the timeframes which govern the lifetime of digital materials do not map neatly onto the traditional lifecycle of the creation of a literary work as it has been configured since post Romantic constructions of authorship began to dominate in the late 18th/early 19th century.

Let us swiftly take a closer look at how literary works gestate. These processes are at once literary, historical, philosophical, cultural, social, economic, political AND highly individual. Sometimes they take on material form and survive in archives in a range of formats (analogue and digital). From the records produced it is possible to construct an account that traces a

credible shape for the gestation of the literary text and the transformation of its writer into an Author (with a capital A).

Usually, the processes entailed in the creation of a literary work fall into **four** stages that can be subdivided into further phases. These phases relate to particular activities that can create a range of record types:

The Order of Things: Preposterous Lifecycle of Literary Creation

Stage 1 Avant-Texte (generated by the author)

Before a literary work is manufactured as an object and born into a world peopled with publishers, editors, and readers it must first take on a life in words that are crafted by a writer's skill through the many acts of inscription contained within 'the secret of writing, the back-and-forth of the text in the process of creating itself, pre-texts, supporting texts, drafts, crossings outs ...' (Drafts p. 3).

- The pre-compositional phase. Orientating, exploring, determining, conceiving, initial planning. Maybe references are made to an idea for a writing project in a diary, blog or email/letter.
- The compositional phase. Texturalizing, structuring, drafting, re-structuring and re-drafting. Committing pen to paper or fingertip to keyboard to produce notes, sketches, drawings, work plans, rough drafts, and reworkings as well as letters, emails, blogs, diaries etc. Poetry backward at coming forward – writerly superstitions.

Stage 2 Texturalization (generated by the author, editors, publishers)

- The pre-publication phase. Author's re-workings, polishing and preparing the work for publication phase – producing corrected fair copies and annotations.
- Publication phase. Editing, manufacturing, publishing - producing author's proof copies, editor's proofs, collated

proofs, other production records such as those relating to book jacket designs (potentially analogue and digital).

Stage 3 Post-Text (generated by writers, readers, critics)

- Post-publication phase. Posthumous editions. **post-publication phase** (author's annotated editions of a printed work/electronic edition/interactive literary works in web-based formats, reviews, critical response, reader's responses – blogs, commentaries, readers' groups, electronic social networks).

Stage 4 Posthumous Reputation of the work and its Author (generated by Literary Community - critics and scholars sometimes many generations after the author's death)

- Becoming a significant writer – an established figure of the age whose reputation has gained him or her a place in the Literary Canon and academic studies.

What emerges is a sequence of processes in which a reader experiences a literary work as a beginning only after it has assumed its autonomy from the processes from which it was conceived. Preposterously for its author, the literary work is the end of a series of processes.

A host of agents, within the literary community, are involved in the systems of production, circulation and consumption (Bourdieu p.162 & 77) which constitute the "circle of belief" which "creates" the literary work and the prehistorical and intertextual residues of the text preserved in literary archives.

As Pierre Bourdieu (in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, 1987, pp162-3) has noted the literary community or field is:

... an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific relations of force, its dominants and its dominated, and so forth. Put another way, to speak of "field" is to recall that literary works are produced in a particular social universe endowed with particular institutions and obeying specific laws...

This universe is the place of entirely specific struggles, notably concerning the question of knowing who is part of the universe, - - who is a real writer and who is not?

The transformation of a text into a classic Literary work (with a capital “L”), and the attendant canonization of its author into a Great Writer, takes place usually many years after the first drafts of the work were first produced.

In the paper-based systems of the past this was not a pressing issue as the Great Writer was able to accumulate the detritus of their creative practices over a lifetime, and having secured their reputation in the Literary Canon, they would then sell or donate their papers to a chosen institution. Now, in our electronic era the lapse in time (between the creation of the work and the accession of its archival traces in a suitable repository is becoming crucial. But how are archivists expected to intervene in the record-making practices of writers before the literary community has ordained their work as worthy of preservation? Does this mean – to borrow a concept from Roland Barthes - the Death of the Literary Archive? No, not necessarily ...

What do we do?

We embrace the ‘snap shot’ method of collecting and:

- Surround ourselves with advisors and advocates who are already embedded within the literary community – publishers, editors, writers, literary agents, translators, teachers of creative writing. We need to pick our advocates wisely and trust to their judgement.
- Resist the allures of the purely Imperial Mode of Collecting which privileges the papers of writers of a canonical calibre over all others. Work with our advisors to determine which contemporary writers we should seek to work with (bearing in mind that this is likely to be a lifetime’s commitment).
- Acquire a mixture of different types of archives which record a range of literary activities including those generated by magazines, literary organizations, festivals, literary agents, readers groups and **PUBLISHERS**.

The mention of publishers brings us neatly back to Carcanet (necklace, collar, noose), and a story of the rewards of the 'snap-shot' method of acquisition.

In the late 1980s when Carcanet agreed to translate and publish an early novel of a Turkish writer it would have been preposterous (in all senses of the word) to assume that one day he would be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. But this came to pass in 2006. Happily for us, Orhan Pamuk's English is superior to mine so he took a very close interest in Victoria Holbrook's translations of *The White Castle*. Sitting in the buffet at Victoria Train Station in Manchester he retranslated many passages of his novel prior to its publication. The material evidence of these transactions were laid down within the stratigraphy of the Carcanet Archive now safely preserved in the Rylands' stongroom. So, it seems to be that the 'snap-shot' mode of acquisition can ensure that the stories of literary archives live happily even after ...