



## A Negation and Some Affirmations

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IF THIS SHORT DISCUSSION of the rare book library has any underlying thesis it is one that must be stated negatively. Briefly it is that there is nothing of the ineffable about the rare book library. It is an institution with a job to do that differs only in certain procedures from that of the general reference library or the municipal circulating library. And there is no secret about library purposes. As long ago as 1750 the Company of the Redwood Library of Newport described their newly established institution as a place "whereunto the curious and impatient inquirer after the resolution of doubts and the bewildered ignorant might freely repair . . . to inform the mind . . . in order to reform the practice." To this somewhat austere statement we may add that a Cavalier clergyman had said a century earlier that one of the functions of a book was "to entertain the Reader with delight." The rare book library may not go further in statement of purpose. Like other libraries it exists to inform, to enlighten, and to delight its readers through collecting books, preserving them, and making them available for use.

In defining the place of the rare book collection in the community of which it is a part, whether that community is the library of a noble university as in the case of the Houghton Library, a great general library as is the case of the Rare Book Division of the Library of Congress, or the more loosely organized bibliothecal communities of the Huntington and Morgan Libraries, the concept of integration between the part and the whole is not to be lost sight of. In one mood the rare book library may be regarded as the apex of the pyramid formed by the whole store of books of its particular community; in another it may be thought of as the base of that pyramid. But apex or base there is one aspect of it that may not be forgotten—every book upon its shelves is integrated with some other book or group of books, or, it might almost be said, with every other book in the general collection. The existence of this kinship, this subtle but direct inter-

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relationship with the general collection must always be remembered in thinking of and planning for the rare book collection.

Why then, if books are books, if there is no essential difference between the rare book and the common book, need the special collection be set up and maintained? True enough, books are books by genus, but undeniably there are species of the larger family which require special consideration. There are books which have survived the centuries in unique examples or in very small numbers; there are books—and they are always rare in their early editions—which, unloosing new forces, have affected the destinies of men and nations; there are books become fragile through age; and there are those of transcendent beauty in design, printing, illustration, or binding. If these books are to be preserved for the scholars of today and tomorrow, they must be segregated and given, in their physical and all other aspects, particular and loving care. It is not necessary in our time to put forward arguments for the segregation of such books as these. The principle is accepted even though there is occasional resentment that the segregated books become automatically less accessible to the student. It is the part of the rare book librarian to recognize this feeling and strive to counter it by easing access to his treasures without relaxing his care of them. This is not easy, but he can and does do it if he is careful not to segregate himself as well as the books. It is his pleasing experience to learn that in this delicate operation most people if met half way will cheerfully come the other two-thirds.

But mere segregation and air conditioning are not enough. These books require special, individual treatment in cataloging and in bibliographical study. The rare book librarian must employ the principles, at least, of those technical, and very American, cataloging procedures which have enriched scholarship everywhere by bringing out and recording the hidden as well as the obvious meaning of texts. He must employ all the recommended and approved methods of record keeping—order and accession records, shelflists, and other complexities of which some are less necessary than others. But having done all these things, having put his book through the assembly line, he must enlarge and prolong the procedures of his brother in the general library. He must bring into use the procedures of descriptive bibliography. His books on the average may cost in the neighborhood of \$100 each. Up to the point just reached in their processing he has treated each one as if it were a three-dollar trade book. Thereafter he goes to work upon it for what it is, applying to it the precepts and

practices of descriptive bibliography, using bibliography as a means rather than an end in itself, using it, indeed, as "a process in the study of the transmission of texts," and thinking of texts as expressions of the human spirit. He sometimes finds that used in this fashion and for this purpose bibliography becomes a light in a dark place.

But he may not stop with a formal bibliographical description of his book. He makes a card to be filed under its date of publication so that the chronological place of the text in the development of ideas may be fixed, and he files that card in a catalog as comprehensive in size as his shelflist. He makes a card for its printer and a card for its publisher and a card for its place of publication, and he files these in three separate catalogs. He then accumulates in another file such bibliographical data concerning it as may be available, and supplements these by his own discoveries and observations. To this he adds, and here is a continuing process, any bibliographical references to it which may be found in his own correspondence with booksellers and scholars. In this or separate files he records binding characteristics, if worthy of note, and notes upon provenance and association. The fact that a not too important book is found in a gorgeous and truly notable binding may mean little, but it may mean a good deal to a reader who encounters a note concerning it. The circumstance that a Venetian book of 1504 with important American reference is found in a contemporary German binding tells the reflective scholar something about the dissemination of information in the Europe of that period and thus becomes a small element in the history of ideas. A seventeenth-century European book attacking witchcraft inscribed by its author to an American opponent of the great delusion may in that very copy have been an element in the advance of man from darkness to the light. Truly a record of provenance or association should be kept. Only when these and similar investigations have been made and their results recorded can the librarian put the book in its place upon the shelves with the feeling that to the best of his ability and knowledge his library is prepared to say that it is carrying out its function of giving its clientele information, enlightenment, and delight.

The intensive studies described in the foregoing paragraphs underlie the special services of the rare book library. The identity of function of the rare book library with that of the general library, the necessity of using the library science procedures of the general library means that its head is basically a librarian and that he should keep in close touch through the library associations with the concepts and developments of his profession. He need not approve all the acts of these

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organizations but he should not separate himself from their aspirations.

Personally this author wishes the rare book library curator would continue to call himself by the honored name "librarian" rather than by the popular and high-sounding title of "director." He is the keeper of books, the library keeper, the bookman, the librarian. There are institutions so diversified in the genres of their collections and in their aims and activities that "director" seems to be a logical title for their heads, but in most cases no such conditions exist, and it would be a pity should the old term with its happier connotation be generally discarded. There are those of us who are fiercely proud of it and who think of the alternative title as without specific implication, something brought in from the world of commerce and industry, not applicable to the work of the bookman.

The special library with its fundamental identity of function with the general library must go on to more complex procedures than the latter employs to make itself effective. A new procedure—the bibliographical—is added to its primary function. But there is no dichotomy thus brought into being. The two procedures merge into the one purpose. The increase of responsibility brings with it the heightening of privilege, the privilege of rendering to mature readers, to scholars, to bookmen, to advanced students a peculiar service, and with institutions as with men life without service is life without meaning.