



Literary Manuscripts and Autographs

HERBERT CAHOON

WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS the purchase of autograph manuscripts and letters by libraries has been confined to this century. In earlier years, historical societies, university and public libraries frequently acquired manuscript material by gift or deposit but their purchases of manuscripts from dealers or at auction were infrequent in comparison with the present-day activity of a score or more institutions. In assembling manuscripts, literary and historical, the private collectors of nineteenth-century America bought, exchanged, and often begged desirable items; they set the pace. Some of their collections, such as those of W. B. Sprague, Israel K. Tefft, L. J. Cist, and Robert Gilmor, were dispersed at auction; others, including those of T. A. Emmet, G. L. Ford, and F. J. Dreer, became part of institutional collections. There are still important collectors today, but the role of the library as purchaser of manuscripts is much greater than ever before; it is a factor of considerable importance in every sale.

Libraries which receive significant manuscript material by gift often, but not always, find funds for additions to the collection. These additions are usually made with careful attention to the subject fields or authors already represented so that an existing collection can become stronger and thus of greater value to scholarship. A number of libraries are financially able to engage in "high-spot" collecting—the purchase of a manuscript or letter of outstanding importance even though it may relate to the library's other holdings only in a general way. Also, a few libraries can acquire and eventually prepare for use elephantine masses of the personal papers of a literary or historical figure which may dwarf anything previously acquired.

Once a library is committed to a policy of collecting manuscripts and autographs it becomes the responsibility of the librarian or curator

The author is Curator of Autograph Manuscripts, The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

Literary Manuscripts and Autographs

to be thoroughly familiar both with the items under his charge and with as many details as he can learn of how and why they were brought together. The library's attitude toward collecting will probably differ from that of the private collector but it will inevitably reflect some characteristics of the latter, especially if it is an endowed collection. And there will be one common denominator—the dealer.

There are in the United States, England, and on the Continent, less than a dozen dealers who devote themselves exclusively to autograph materials and who may be said to be knowledgeable in a field which may range from the sign manual of Frederick Barbarossa to the signature of John F. Kennedy. Among these are Walter R. Benjamin Autographs, Emily Driscoll, and Charles Hamilton Autographs, Inc., of New York City, Forest H. Sweet, of Battle Creek, Michigan, and Winifred A. Myers (Autographs) Ltd., of London. But the antiquarian book trade in general also has a considerable interest in autographs; this may vary from an occasional listing or offer to extensive catalogs devoted solely to manuscripts and autographs. It is essential that the manuscript librarian be on the list to receive catalogs from both the specialized dealers and those who offer manuscripts from time to time. Whenever possible a personal acquaintance with dealers is to be recommended; such an association may be of value to both parties in any number of ways, not the least of which is the opportunity to discuss mutual problems in a congenial atmosphere.

The dealer may rightly expect from the librarian services similar to those required by the scholar. Books, manuscripts and autographs, as well as catalogs and collections of facsimiles should be made available to him. Consultations on manuscript problems between dealer and librarian are very much in order; the librarian, however, should not take it upon himself to authenticate a manuscript or letter, even when well qualified. It goes without saying that items which the librarian has on approval from the dealer should be reported on at the earliest opportunity, and that manuscripts that are not purchased should not be photographed or otherwise copied. Unless other arrangements have been made, payment should be made as soon as possible—dealers will naturally tend to favor the buyer who pays promptly. The librarian should confine his activities to those of his own profession and not engage in book or manuscript selling "on the side."

From the dealer the librarian may expect a variety of services. These include confirmation of title (to make certain a manuscript or

letter has not been stolen—at least recently), setting a price, and a guarantee that the item is not a forgery or facsimile. When the librarian enters into a private contract the burden of proof as to title and genuineness usually falls on himself, and in such negotiations settlement on a price can be a time-consuming matter. The advice of a dealer concerning items which appear at auction as well as his representation at sales are services appreciated and used by most librarians.

The above paragraphs are but a brief outline of a relationship that has in several instances developed to such a degree that more than one university or public library owes to the dealer not only the discovery of manuscript material (and not infrequently its preservation from destruction) but the discovery of a donor for the material as well. As in the antiquarian book trade in general, the dealer knows collectors and their interests better than many librarians and can often bring them together in an acquisition of great value to scholarship.

The current situation in the field of manuscript and autograph collecting is generally discouraging for libraries both from the point of view of prices and that of the amount of first class material appearing for sale. But this is a familiar complaint and acquisitions do continue to be made. Perhaps the most surprising development of recent years has been the marked increase in the value of manuscripts of contemporary authors. Competition at auction for the manuscripts of such figures as Somerset Maugham, E. M. Forster, Sir Max Beerbohm, and T. S. Eliot has driven their prices to record highs, and these prices have been reflected in private sales of the manuscripts of other authors, such as James Joyce and Dylan Thomas. Very few libraries can afford to compete in this market but those that can seem to enter wholeheartedly into the competition.

The philosophy behind many of these purchases at prices which are continually setting new records appears to be one of investment even when the buyer is an institutional library. The private collector finds that his money invested in manuscripts or books may bring a high rate of return; he enters into competition for the most desirable items and prices go up. On the other hand it is only fair to state that values in this field may also go down as many buyers at the Jerome Kern sale in 1929 have reason to remember. Institutional libraries recently founded and/or recently endowed with large sums of money often feel that there is not enough desirable material left relating, for

Literary Manuscripts and Autographs

example, to the Renaissance or the American Revolution for them to acquire. They turn their attention, therefore, mainly to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for which choice collections and pieces are still available and pay large sums in the belief that this investment in first-class manuscripts will pay dividends in providing the raw material of scholarship and in attracting the scholar to their institutions. It is inevitable that the institution and the private collector sometimes find themselves in competition.

But manuscripts of the quality and importance of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* or Voltaire's only surviving letter to Alexander Pope do not occur for sale every day. The librarian in his reading of auction and dealers' catalogs or consideration of special offers finds much that is far afield or not of interest to him, but if he finds a letter relating to one of his manuscripts, for example, and buys it, he is serving his institution in the best possible way. Publishers, heirs, and even the authors themselves have given manuscript pages away as souvenirs, to the great discomfort of posterity. Manuscript pages of Thackeray, Lafcadio Hearn, Lew Wallace, Robert Louis Stevenson, Frank Norris, and Stephen Crane, among others, appear on the market from time to time and are often reunited with the surviving portion of the manuscript to which they belong. And the satisfaction derived from adding a relevant letter or a missing page is in its own way comparable to that of the purchase of the Forster or the Voltaire; it is also a satisfaction that dealer and librarian can share.