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Fine and Private Places: An English Professor’s Perspective on Evolving Library Collections

by Thomas Herron (Associate Professor of English, East Carolina University)

But the fruit that can fall without shaking/Indeed is too mellow for me.
— Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Letters and Works

We live in a tired time of technological saturation, spoiled expectations, and not inconsiderable danger to our moral and political selves. According to techno-prophet Marshall McLuhan, writing well before the dawn of the Internet, if we do not attend to the moral implications of a hyperwired world, then “we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence.” How wonderful it is, then, to retreat to a library and read a book or journal issue on one’s own. Our individuality would seem to depend on it.

Libraries, in truth, are not fine and private places, but very public ones. But, take a book or journal from a shelf and find a quiet corner or nook in the vast “temple” of campus (or civilization) that is the traditionally organized library, and you enter a little paradise that is shielded from daily cares, the PATRIOT Act, and prying eyes.

Electronic databases of course have the angelic potential to bring flowers of learning to your door and to make collections yet more public, or (at least) accessible to people wide and far. All can now access library collections without entering the building or campus itself. Aren’t we all happy when, in the middle of a cabin in the wilderness with our families, we can finally get that pesky footnoting done?

Thanks to off-campus access, we can read when and wherever we like and, if desired, deshabillé. By contrast, most libraries post a security guard at the gate to turn away the shirtless and the thieving. Issues of geographical proximity further restrict traditional patronage, as counted in real bodies entering real library doors.

Once in the library, however, these people are free to travel intellectually wherever they choose. Walled and chartered cities in the Middle Ages insulated the rights and pocketbooks of their citizens from royal predations, thus becoming cradles of today’s democratic states. Libraries, similarly, can keep out encroachments of authoritarian tyranny prying into our intellectual (and other) habits; they can indeed become fine and private places. They are citadels protecting valuable and controversial ideas, in part because they protect our right to access a (de facto restricted because selective, but nonetheless widely varied and valuable) pool of information, unmolested and untracked by technology (including Kindle) that monitors who accesses what and when. I murmur with secret pleasure whenever I reshelf a book instead of lying it on a cart to be counted.

Thanks to our truly astonishing electronic databases, books and journals are, of course, much more widely available, searched, and archived than ever before. But what if the web comes under central state control? So will books and ideas; there is already a great firewall of China. A “switch” turned off the Internet in Egypt during the recent “Arab Spring” of revolution. And what do you do when a virus completely takes over your computer banks, or the power goes out in your city (as it does

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http://chronicle.com/article/Hot-Type-At-U-of-California/12860/
regularly in Baghdad, and your laptop batteries run down? Take your laptop to read it outside! In a famous Twilight Zone episode, Armageddon occurs (an H-bomb) and the last man on earth, a bookworm played by Burgess Meredith, consoles himself with unfettered access to the New York Public Library. Then he breaks his glasses and can’t read. In a future scenario, he’d be left with nothing tangible to read in the first place.

One purpose of a library is to encourage people to read. The collective fear that people are reading less than they used to doesn’t make sense; given our public and private schools and our collective addiction to email, texting, and twitting, we’re reading all the time—we’re reading now while driving, for goodness sake—but we should rightly fear that few people are reading quality creative literature anymore. I’m sure this has always been the case, that the time, education, and enthusiasm to appreciate intellectually difficult and verbally creative works has never been plentiful. It has always been difficult and rare to find golden worlds—or convincing and sensitive, intelligent human worlds—in fiction, until such works become classics.

Nor are we reading enough at a slow, thoughtful pace for the purpose of spiritual and/or intellectual pleasure and stimulation: slow reading to match the slow eating movement. Despite being an English professor, I am (like anyone) rushed to get work done. Graduate school and the tenure-track nearly destroyed my enjoyment of a good book for life. Recently, for the first time in a long time, I read a long classic, The Divine Comedy, at a leisurely— that is, thoughtful and intellectually rewarding—pace (I read it while sitting in on an undergraduate class and following the syllabus). I took the Greek root of leisure, or school, to heart.

Like many others, however, I have a worry, gnawing like hungry Ugolino at the back of my head, that books as leathered, finger-in-the-spine, library-stacked, typeset, raggy, musty, textured, physical, beautiful, skillfully back of my head, that books as intellectual difficult and verbally creative works as human worlds—in fiction, until such works become classics.

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It is a growing trend in university libraries, including my own at East Carolina University. ECU has been steadily reducing its acquisitions of hard-copy books and is gradually turning its current journal collection into e-only format.

This saddens me because a great intellectual pleasure in my life is browsing the journal stacks on a Friday afternoon, finding journals in and outside of my profession, including some with terrific production quality, design, and art spreads, like Word and Image. Now we’re down to a couple of short aisles of journals, covering all disciplines. Word and Image vanished into the databases (back copies into the stacks) last year. I have less reason than ever to enter the library now, to gaze on hard-copy and to casually meet students and other faculty there. Strangely, I am becoming less social and collegial as a result of becoming less bookish in the library on Friday afternoons.

However slowly I read, I do not enjoy reading off of a computer screen; I do it because it’s practical, not enjoyable. I wonder about long-term effects on my eyesight and health.

More and more novels and poems will presumably go straight to e-readers like Kindles and Nooks. I fear this means that, sooner or later, in one form or another, especially in worst-case scenarios, many books will come with a permanent, renewable user fee. I am equally worried about the democratic pleasure principle: losing a sense of campus community focused on the library “temple” near many of our hearts. We will also lose the delight in the nature of books themselves, our clasp-able bosom buddies we can smell, take to the beach, stretch under trees, shake sand from, spill coffee on, and read on sultry evenings, or — like a ten-year-old — read half- upside-down in the backseat of a car; or, like the immortal lovers Paolo and Francesca in Dante’s Inferno, first fall in love over when reading aloud about Lancelot and Guinevere. I just don’t see those two kindling anything with a Kindle between them. If they did, who would be watching?

Reader, enjoy your hard copy! *}