Statement on the Significance of Primary Records

Modern Language Association

The Modern Language Association of America applauds two developments aimed at ensuring the future accessibility of texts from the past. One is the organized effort to microfilm the texts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century books containing acidic paper that is now, or will become, brittle; the other is the systematic transference of printed and manuscript texts of all periods to electronic form. Everyone who cares about the past should be grateful to the library world for the way it has responded to the challenges of textual preservation. Frequently, however, discussions of these developments imply that, once reproductions exist, many of the artifacts from which they derive need no longer be consulted or saved. In this climate of opinion, the MLA believes that it is crucial for the future of humanistic study to make more widely understood the continuing value of the artifacts themselves for reading and research. The advantages of the new forms in which old texts can now be made available must not be allowed to obscure the fact that the new forms cannot fully substitute for the actual physical objects in which those earlier texts were embodied at particular times in the past.

Without broad public perception of the significance of this point, sizable portions of certain classes of textual artifacts face destruction. The MLA is expressing no opinion about the relative desirability of different forms of dissemination for future writing; rather, it is strictly focusing on the future study of texts that appeared in the past in handwritten or printed form on paper or parchment. By outlining the theoretical reasons for the importance of physical evidence in textual artifacts, the MLA wishes to promote awareness of the issues and to stimulate practical recommendations for taking action on them.

Texts are inevitably affected by the physical means of their transmission; the physical features of the artifacts conveying texts therefore play an integral role in the attempt to comprehend those texts. For this reason, the concept of a textual source must involve attention to the presentation of a text, not simply to the text as a disembodied group of words. All objects purporting to present the same text--whether finished manuscripts, first editions, later printings, or photocopies--are separate records with their own characteristics; they all carry different information, even if the words and punctuation are indeed identical, since each one reflects a different historical moment. Any such record may be a primary source, but an object that is primary as a source for one purpose is not necessarily so for another. A *primary record* can appropriately be defined as a physical object produced or used at the particular past time that one is concerned with in a given instance.

Physical evidence in manuscripts and printed matter is indispensable in two ways. First, physical clues (such as the structure of the folded sheets in a book) reveal facts about how an item was produced--facts that can in turn lead to the discovery of textual errors and contribute to a knowledge of contemporary textual, printing, and publishing practices. This kind of evidence has primarily been used by analytical bibliographers and scholarly editors. Second, elements of a book's physical design (such as paper quality, page size, textual layout, choice of letterforms, and arrangement of illustrations) can be significant indicators of how the text thus displayed was regarded by its producers and how it was interpreted by its readers. This category of evidence is currently being used by those investigating the history of reading and the social influence of books.

Not only do editions differ from one another, but also copies within an edition (of any period) often vary among themselves; as a result, every copy is a potential source for new physical evidence, and no copy is superfluous for studying an edition's production history. Furthermore, since the shape, feel, designs, and illustrations of books have affected, and continue to affect, readers' responses (some of which have been recorded in the margins of pages), access to the physical forms in which texts from the past have appeared is a fundamental part of informed reading and effective classroom teaching; if

that access is to be as widespread as it can be, the number of available copies of past editions, held in libraries of all kinds, must be as large as possible. The existence of community libraries along with academic libraries has been, and will continue to be, essential for bringing historical embodiments of texts--and the sense of the past they impart--to a wide readership. The loss of any copy of any edition--from the earliest incunables to the latest paperback reprints (regardless of whether its text is considered interesting or consequential at the present time)--diminishes the body of evidence on which historical understanding depends.

There is an obvious practical consideration that also supports the retention of textual artifacts (handwritten as well as printed) after their texts have been copied: the fact that the accuracy and stability of reproductions can never be guaranteed. For this reason, the preservation of the sources of photographic or electronic reproductions would seem a prudent course even if those reproductions were the equals of the sources; but since they cannot possibly be, a concern for maintaining our inheritance of textual artifacts is not simply desirable but imperative.

It is clearly unrealistic to expect that all currently surviving manuscripts and printed books can be saved. They are subject to the same vicissitudes as every other physical object, and their survival depends both on the materials out of which they are made and on the nature of the events that befall them. But the attitudes that people hold about them can be instrumental in either mitigating or exacerbating the destructive effects of these factors. As more people come to see the importance of primary records, more use will be made of them in reading and teaching, and more constituencies will join together in the search for ways of financing artifactual preservation, storage, and access. More records will then be saved because there will be wider support for the allocation of resources to this purpose. Decisions about priorities for preservation will still have to be made, by individual as well as institutional owners of material, but those decisions will be reached in a framework that recognizes the artifactual value of every object. An appreciation of the significance of physical evidence also necessitates the adoption of standards for the creation and identification of reproductions, in order to minimize the damage done to primary records by the processes of reproduction and to maximize the usefulness of the reproductions.

Readers find themselves turning continually to reprints or reproductions of some kind. As they welcome the benefits conferred by new technology for creating reproductions, they must remember the distinctive limitations of every form of reproduction and the continuing need for the artifactual sources on which the reproductions are based. Not only do those artifacts provide the standard for judging the reproductions; they also contain, in their physicality, unreproducible evidence that readers (scholars, students, and the general public) need for analyzing and understanding, with as much historical context as possible, the writings that appeared and reappeared in them. If we approach the electronic future with these thoughts in mind, we will be more rigorous in our demands of new forms of textual presentation and more vigilant in our protection of the artifacts embodying the old forms. Both these actions are necessary to ensure the continuation of productive reading, teaching, and scholarship.

The Modern Language Association of America recommends that representatives of library, conservation, and scholarly organizations form a task group to promote continued thinking and cooperative activity leading toward

> *(1) the maximum retention and preservation of textual artifacts, as well as a refining of the selection criteria necessarily entailed, and*
> *(2) the use of responsible procedures in the creation and identification of photographic and electronic reproductions based on those artifacts.*

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Also published in *Profession 95* (New York: MLA, 1995), pp. 27-28, and G. Thomas Tanselle, *Literature and Artifacts* (Charlottesville: Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1998), pp. 335-337.