OUR CONTEMPORARY FASCINATION with origins, with the creative moment itself, goes back at least as far as the Romantic period, which, more than any other, enshrined the literary fragment as a relic of original artistic inspiration. Though Samuel Coleridge’s unfinished poem “Kubla Khan” is perhaps a familiar example, it is nevertheless worth retelling his account of that poem for what it conveys about romantic notions of creativity. When the poem was first published in 1816, Coleridge prefaced the text with a note explaining the circumstances of its composition and the reason the poem remained unfinished. As he explained, he composed the poem while staying at a remote farmhouse on the edge of Exmoor. He had been in ill health and had taken an anodyne, which had made him drowsy. As he slept, a vision of a fabulous walled garden, with chasms, forests, and caverns “measureless to man,” came to him. When he awoke, he immediately took pen and paper and began to record this vision as it had come to him in the dream. However, he was interrupted by a visitor knocking at the door. When he was able to return to his desk an hour later, he found that he could recall no more of the poem than the fragment that we know as “Kubla Khan.” That poem, and Coleridge’s account of it, is a parable of

1. Jack Stillinger has argued that without the prose note, the poem would never have been perceived as unfinished at all, that the very idea of its incompleteness is one that Coleridge is manipulating. See Jack Stillinger, *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1994), 74.
poetic inspiration. The poem’s unfinished state speaks more than a well-crafted whole possibly could about the very elusiveness of artistic creativity and the inadequacy of human agency.

But if the spirit of the Romantic Age was partly expressed in an inward exploration of the very sources of inspiration, it also inherited shades of that antiquarianism reflected in such earlier works as Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1764) or Sir Walter Scott’s similar efforts to collect and document the border ballads of his native Scotland. Percy had set out to collect widely “all sorts of ancient poetry, whether printed or manuscript,” especially those “fine old historical songs, which are,” in his words, “only preserved in the memories of old people.” He adds, “these are in so perishable a state, that I apprehend it is nearly as much merit to retrieve them from oblivion … as to compose them at first.” Indeed, one of the printed ballads Percy recovered was said to have been rescued from a Staffordshire country house just moments before it was to have been used to light the evening fire.

These dual impulses—Coleridge’s inward gaze and Percy’s outward—have held sway over our own institutional practices of collecting literature in the twentieth century. In the space available to me here, I would like to consider our lingering preoccupation with origins and the cultural values we have attached to the literary artifact in the century just passed.

The preoccupations of the Romantic period helped to bring about a vogue of collecting that led to—and shaped in numerous ways—our own early practices of collecting. To see how far we have come, one only needs to consider the common nineteenth-century practice of clipping autographs from the letters of politicians and poets to paste

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into the autograph albums that many of us still hold in our library’s collections. The literary autograph became so desirable that Rudyard Kipling discovered his checks were being kept by collectors who placed more value in his signature than in the bank draft itself. By the late nineteenth century, the vogue of collecting was so common that Henry James could make it the main narrative thread of his novel, *The Aspern Papers*. When collectors were not wooing the daughters of elderly matrons in pursuit of their love letters—as James’s protagonist does in that novel—they were likely to be found soliciting autographs or fair copies of well-known works to add to their personal collections. Publishers recognized the depth of this popular fascination and began reproducing facsimiles of the author’s hand in turn-of-the-century editions of English and American authors. Like the nineteenth-century practice of phrenology, autography, too, seemed to offer evidence of an author’s inner character and traces of his or her genius. According to the wisdom of the day, letters expose one’s “breeding, sense, and abilities.”

At the turn of the century, when G. P. Putnam & Sons contracted with the Knickerbocker Press to issue a manuscript edition of Walt Whitman’s complete works, the publisher incorporated a single sheet of Whitman’s manuscript in each of the thirty-two sets, thereby scattering this group of holograph drafts among far-flung libraries and collections, including copies now at Harvard, New York Public, Iowa, and my own university. Opening Emory’s copy, one finds in an attractive hand “G. P. Putnams Sons” on the limitation page (an attempt, it seems, to anthropomorphize the corporation by giving it its own distinctive signature), as well as the seal and signature of one Annie B. Walters, a New York City notary public who testifies, with all the authority of her office, to the authenticity of the manuscript page.

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In the Author’s Hand

that follows. What interests me in this volume are not its handsome features—not the handmade paper, the full leather, the tooled binding—but, rather, the notary seal itself and what that legal device conveys about the turn-of-the-century anxiety over the authentic.

From our present vantage point, we can see numerous traces of the value that attached to the literary artifact at the opening of the twentieth century. As one early collector put it, “I would no more think of composing any kind of writing directly on the typewriter than I would of kissing a girl through plate glass.” More has changed since that statement than our understanding of sexism in language, but before we condemn the practices I’ve been describing or otherwise distance ourselves from them, we should recognize in them a craving for the authentic that our own culture largely shares. Our collections are filling not with the handmade fascicles, like those Emily Dickinson left at her death, but with reams of twenty-pound multipurpose bond with all the historical resonance of this quarter’s corporate sales report. Here at the end of the century, as at its beginning, we share an anxiety of authenticity, one that has been compounded by dramatic changes in the very manner and modes of textual production.

The growth of our institutions’ literary collections in the century just past—and the increasing professionalization in our stewardship of them—has been one of our profession’s most dramatic success stories. The literary artifact holds a particularly privileged status in many of our libraries’ collections, and the collections our predecessors assembled have helped to shape twentieth-century literary studies even as our practices of collecting have, in turn, been shaped by them. In the early years of the twentieth century, academic literary study was shifting

5. Emory owns copy number 9, which includes a single draft of Whitman’s poem, “The Moon.”
away from classical studies, and institutions such as Johns Hopkins, Harvard, Yale, and the University of Chicago were beginning to establish new departments of language and literature. For the first time, English and American authors began to appear on college entrance exams.\(^7\)

However, the new discipline had not yet developed the research methods that would make possible the rapid expansion of literary studies in the middle decades of the new century. Instead, a kind of anecdotal historicism dominated literary scholarship, a form of scholarship that one early critic dismissed as “only chatter about Shelley.”\(^8\) Another lamented “the useless antiquarianism, the dreary factualism, the pseudo-science combined with … a lack of critical taste.”\(^9\) Whereas the growing professionalization of literary studies has been well documented by historians of the academy, less often addressed has been the growth of research collections and their role in making this professionalization possible.

The collections that our predecessors were assembling were not only creating a body of source material for a new generation of literary scholars, but they also were promoting specific forms of scholarship based, in large part, in our libraries’ rare book and manuscript reading rooms. Persistent preoccupations of the new profession were to describe, to authenticate, and to reproduce. The Bibliographical Society of America, established in 1904, set out to establish the body of texts that the young profession would later make its own. The Facsimile Text Society, the early predecessor of the Center for Editions of American Authors, followed in 1930 and sought to democratize literary scholarship by making accurate and authoritative texts more readily avail-

\(^7\) Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1987), 44.
\(^8\) Ibid., 123.
\(^9\) Ibid., 68.
able. At the heart of these initiatives was the desire to stabilize and order the chaotic and otherwise disordered field of literary studies.

We can measure the growth of the field in the first half of the twentieth century by any number of measures: by the sharp rise in the number of faculty; by the growing number of universities granting doctoral degrees; and, I would add, by the rapid growth (especially after World War II) of our libraries’ special collections. By mid-century, the special collections department was, in the words of Joseph Jones, “not a warehouse or a show-window, but a plant for production.” In an effort to make our libraries’ unique source materials more readily accessible to the new generation of young scholars in the postwar years, in 1951, the American literature group of the Modern Language Association (MLA) initiated a census of manuscripts held in the nation’s research libraries. (The initiative preceded LC’s more sweeping and ambitious project, the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, by just a few years.) When the results were published (under the descriptive, but prosaic, title *American Literary Manuscripts*) the MLA committee was able to report significant literary holdings in 270 college and university libraries.

The conference held in 1956 at the University of Texas to hear reports on the project was not only an occasion to measure how far libraries had come in just a brief span of time, but it also was an event that anticipated a second wave of extraordinary growth, certainly for Texas, but also for a number of young and ambitious institutions across the country seeking to put in place the intellectual infrastructure that would support original research in literary studies. Among those that would follow the Texas example in just a few years were Indiana,

10. Many of the concerns vigorously debated at the formation of the Facsimile Text Society bear a remarkable resemblance to our current discussions over digitization.
Washington University, SUNY Buffalo, and, belatedly, my own institution. The emergence of these and other new institutional collectors not only significantly increased the competition for original literary materials, but it also contributed to a shift toward contemporary collecting. Harry Ransom acknowledged to the gathered attendees at the Texas conference that one of their aims at Texas would be to collect the contemporary; and in the years that followed, Texas indeed made a series of quite remarkable acquisitions of living writers. This development is all the more noteworthy when one considers that American literature itself had only gained widespread acceptance as a discipline within the previous 25 years.  

The extraordinary growth of our libraries’ research collections made possible a range of scholarly practices, including by the mid-1960s initiatives such as the MLA’s Center for Editions of American Authors (CEAA). As one early director of the center outlined the scholarly food chain, “Editorial work is based on bibliographic research, which is preceded by the building of book and manuscript collections. Those who still question the usefulness of such collections,” he added, “will find their rebuttal here.”

The CEAA’s stated goals were nothing less than the recovery of “the author’s full intentions.” Among the earliest projects endorsed by the center were newly edited editions of Stephen Crane, John Dewey, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Dean Howells, and, I should add, the papers and works of Mark Twain, which, since 1967, have been based at Berkeley in the Bancroft Library. That project, which remains ongoing,

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12. The journal *American Literature* was not established until 1929. As late as 1927, the American literary scholar Jay Hubbell discovered that his own university library did not even own a copy of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. See Kermit Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy: The Roots, Growth, and Maturity of a Profession* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Pr., 1980), 391.


14. Ibid., 27.
has only this past month marked an important milestone with the publication of a newly edited edition of Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, incorporating the previously lost manuscript of the beginning of that novel.

The aim of these projects has been to establish authoritative texts of these and other authors, and one of the tangible contributions of the center’s work, aside from the editions themselves, has been the standardization of a set of editorial procedures that must be followed to earn the center’s seal of approval. Like a latter-day Annie Walters, the center plays a certifying role in establishing our very notions of the authentic.

Even as these initiatives were expanding in the late 1960s, two challenges to the center’s practices of textual scholarship emerged. The first was raised by the distinguished literary critic and journalist Edmund Wilson in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*. As Wilson saw it, the center’s editions—the first of which were just then beginning to appear in print—were an ill-conceived “boondoggle” that were priced far beyond the reach of ordinary readers (never mind that an affordable edition was not the point of the project). He noted that the center’s approved edition of Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage* ran to a staggering 424 pages, only 135 of which were devoted to the novel itself. He objected to the use of taxpayer money to support such textual projects, which he characterized as “prolonged payment for boring work,” and he seemed to take a perverse delight in the thought of project staff diligently reading Mark Twain’s works backwards. Nor was Wilson above personal attack. He singled out for particular venom Fredson Bowers, who, he charged, in the course of editing *Leaves of Grass* had done “everything but read it.”

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17. Ibid., 17.
I hope each of us recognizes the injustice of that remark; nevertheless, I repeat it here because it underscores an all-too-real schism that has emerged between textual and interpretive studies. Put another way, Wilson’s attack raises, in a highly visible way, that question that we are looking at here: Just what does one do with a text? What work is it that our libraries’ rare book and manuscript collections support?

Indeed, our perception of the work at hand has shifted noticeably over the past century. A more substantive challenge to our practices of textual scholarship would come in the wake of the poststructuralist reconfiguration of our reading practice. In his influential *Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (1982), Jerome McGann charged that we had lost our way, that the entire discipline of textual studies had been hurt by an overemphasis on, what he calls, “a religion of technical expertise and positive knowledge.”

McGann’s critique posed, and indeed continues to pose, a more serious challenge than Wilson’s ill-tempered grumbling. In it, he posits a social theory of texts, arguing that “literary works are fundamentally social rather than personal or psychological.” In McGann’s view the author is only one of a number of agents who contribute to that entity called “the work.” In his view, “the definitive text, like the author’s final intentions, may not exist, may never have existed; it may be, in McGann’s words, merely “a chimera.”

Later revisionists have argued that McGann “did not intend in the *Critique* to unseat the author as a source of authority and meaning but, rather, to place the author in the historical continuum and to attempt to overcome the Romantic ideology of the solitary originator.”

19. Ibid., 43–44.
20. Ibid., 52.
21. Ibid., 89.
22. Ibid., xv.
Whether our object is the author’s original intention or McGann’s social text, the contemporary archive remains a privileged site indeed. Such trends in academic scholarship, though they may shift the focus of our attention, do not in the end diminish their research value.

The broad shifts I am describing (and I should acknowledge that those I have chosen are highly selective) have been neither linear nor progressive. We mislead ourselves if we perceive the movement of intellectual history as a straight progression from naïve simplicity to ever-more-advanced sophistication. Accommodated between the opening of the twentieth century and its close, between the autograph album and the archive, are a wide range of scholarly practices that continue to serve our intellectual curiosity and, on another level, continue to gratify.

The author may indeed be dead, as current interpretive practices remind us, but those of us who work in literary archives have, frankly, long grown accustomed to the fact. I do not mean to be glib, but the author is dead in a far more profound way than our poststructuralist minds have been able to fathom. The one person we most want to find in the archive is, after all, the one person we can be sure we will not find, but look we must for some transubstantiation of pen and paper that may yet fill that unfillable space.

On some level, what compels our collecting of literary manuscripts has little to do with the artist’s personality, skill, or genius, or even the intricacies of textual production that McGann describes. What compels us, I believe, is fundamentally mystery, the very thing that Coleridge could not summon again.

As the fame of the poet and novelist James Dickey grew in the late 1960s and early 1970s—and with it, his own ambition to produce more and greater work—he sought ways to stop the slippage that Coleridge chronicled in “Kubla Khan.” Visitors at the time noted how he filled his
home with typewriters, each of which held the latest sheet of a separate work in progress. When he suddenly saw his way forward in a particular manuscript, he could turn to that particular typewriter and begin where he had left off without any delay whatsoever.

Dickey was convinced that if he could only capture the flow of creative thoughts that came to him in the course of a day, he could produce more and better work. In the late 1970s, he adopted another strategy to capture those moments before they themselves dissipated in mere chimera. He purchased an executive dictaphone and a supply of microcassettes and began dictating his new novel, *Alnilam*, directly into the recorder, which his secretary, Fay, later transcribed for him (what is this but McGann’s social text taken to its corporate extreme). As he explains in his very first recorded entry, “for every one idea I ever succeed in writing down in a notebook or on a scrap of paper or in the margin of a book or something of that sort, fifty or a hundred get away from me simply because I don’t have the means of recording them as they occur to me … don’t be alarmed if I go off afield chasing rabbits all over… because that is part of the method or non-method of working in this manner.”

Similar fears over the loss of the creative moment prompted Jack Kerouac to fashion a continuous paper scroll so that he could type his Beat classic, *On the Road*, without even pausing to change the paper. Reflected in each of these practices is a deep-seated anxiety over the loss of a fickle and elusive inspiration. When that inspiration falls silent—as it often does—others have been known to employ even more desperate measures. Yeats turned to his wife’s exercises in automatic writing and James Merrill to the Ouija board. For the artist, the creative moment is to be tended, pampered, and, if necessary, cajoled. Yet,

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24. James Dickey, papers, tape no. 1, Special Collections Division, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta.
for the collector too, among the most valued literary artifacts is the manuscript that bears some trace of the writer’s solitary struggle with his own difficult muse. If the book is a social text, what the manuscript offers, in contrast, is something “intimate and individual.”

Forgive me if I use an example that is, for me, near at hand, but among those writers who have written revealingly of that most private of moments is the English poet Ted Hughes, whose papers my university recently acquired. As many of you are aware, Hughes not only served as England’s Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death, he also was the husband of the American poet Sylvia Plath. After Plath’s tragic suicide in 1963, Hughes unexpectedly found himself the executor of all of Plath’s literary papers. In the years following her death, Hughes saw into print four major collections of her poems including *Ariel*, more than any other the volume on which her posthumous reputation rests. Yet Hughes also found himself the custodian of her literary papers, and in 1981, the year her *Collected Poems* were published, he sold them to Smith College. In letters that Emory now holds in Hughes’s own archive, Hughes tries to express something of the value that he attaches to the literary manuscript. “I know that Dylan Thomas’ miraculous early notebooks, from which he drew all his major poems, went for a few pounds,” he writes, “while in 1963 Roethke’s papers went for [a] quarter of a million. These things have no absolute value,” he writes, “They are simply priceless.”

Hughes recognizes the literary manuscript’s market value and its fluctuations, but he also insists that the manuscript occupies a place outside the marketplace altogether. “Miraculous” is how he describes Dylan Thomas’s early notebooks; and if we trace that

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26. At the time of her suicide, Sylvia Plath had published only one collection of poems, *Colossus and Other Poems*, and a single novel, *The Bell Jar*, which had been issued in England under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas.

27. Ted Hughes to Prouty Smith, TL, 12 May 1975, Ted Hughes papers, Special Collections Division, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta.
quality to its source, we find it rests, in Hughes’s mind, in the trace the manuscript offers of that original creative moment. “The first drafts in hand,” he writes, “are astonishing documents of inspiration.”

This subject was a compulsive one for Ted Hughes, and a few years after the sale of Plath’s own papers to Smith, he returned to it in an extended essay he composed on the manuscripts of Plath’s late poem “Sheep in Fog.” The essay is notable in a number of respects, but primarily for its description of three types of poetic composition, three degrees really of poetic inspiration. In the first, the poem springs complete from its initial inspiration. As Hughes puts it, “the poem seems to write itself, and takes the poet completely by surprise, as if he had no idea where it came from. Once here, it cannot be altered.”

In the second instance “the poem can half rise” and the poet “struggles to help it, offering it words, images, anything from his bag of tricks, trying to anticipate it and take its slightest suggestions from the bits that have appeared.” In the third, the initial inspiration offers the poet no more than an odd phrase or line, and the poet “goes after it” with deliberate skill. “The final work can often carry a strong poetic charge, it may well be rhetorically powerful and carry striking phrases, lines, felicities, and at the very least can be an admirable piece of craft[s]manship. But we have to ask: what relation does it bear to the first inspiration, to the unique psychic materials that were pushing for expression?”

The explication “Sheep in Fog” that follows these observations is more than an exercise in close reading; it is, I would insist, an effort on

28. Ted Hughes to Prouty Smith, TL, 12 May 1975, Ted Hughes papers, Special Collections Division, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta.

29. Hughes identifies four types of poetic composition in the published essay “Sheep in Fog”; however, his early drafts of the essay in the Ted Hughes papers describe only three.


31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.
Hughes’s part to reimagine Sylvia Plath, his late wife, at her most vital moment, that is, when she was most in touch with her own sources of inspiration, when she was writing at a white heat. Although the collections that we and our predecessors have assembled support a wide range of scholarly practice, they also possess a form of value linked to the very presence that Hughes attempts to evoke, a form of value that we have not always articulated well.

I opened these reflections with Coleridge’s unfinished poem “Kubla Khan,” and I would like to close them now with another unfinished poem, this one a single manuscript fragment that I recently came across in the Hughes papers at Emory. Like Coleridge, Hughes, too, writes from a remote farmhouse, Yorkshire this time, not Exmoor. Hughes has traveled there after learning of the death of his partner, Assia Wevill, who has just taken her own life as Sylvia Plath had seven years earlier. It is night, he is alone in the house listening to the wind in the eaves and trying to frame some response to this latest tragedy that seems so much an echo of the first:

So here I sit composing futile poetry
While the wind in the eaves is like a paper-fed furnace

Meanwhile, while I sit trying to catch my soul by the tail,
Trying to coax one word out of it,
My life goes to hell.
Sobbings and desperate faces are the ornaments of the same.

I am not composing poetry. I am trying to get out of the flames.33

One could subject this document to any number of reading practices, yet we read very poorly indeed if we fail to acknowledge its pain and its power.

Those of us who value such records of the lived life come back to the

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33. Untitled (“So here I sit composing futile poetry” ), Ted Hughes papers, Special Collections Division, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta.
literary artifact time and time again not simply for evidence, valuable though that may be. We also come to the archive, I believe, to feel the heat of those flames. As the cultural critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin reminds us, the material artifact draws its authority and its power from its presence in time and place. “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.” Put most simply, the literary artifact satisfies a desire to touch and to hold. “Whoever touches this,” Whitman once wrote, “touches a man.” Yes, the literary artifact draws its power not simply from a poetics, but also from an erotics that we have not always fully acknowledged or expressed.

It is no coincidence that the late-nineteenth-century vogue of the autograph coincided with an explosion in print culture, nor should we be surprised to find at the end of the twentieth century a similar craving for the authentic expressed in initiatives such as the MLA’s 1995 “Statement on the Significance of Primary Records” or in the more recent Council of Library and Information Resources’s draft report, circulating now, “The Evidence in Hand.” As Mark Slouka has put it, ours is a culture that gets nothing first-hand, and that very feature of our contemporary life has contributed to widespread anxiety over our own professional practices and to a self-examination of the work we are engaged in.

What seems clear to me, however, is that we have not outlived the very fundamental need for a direct and unmediated experience of our past. The literary manuscript may, indeed, be adapted to a wide range of scholarly practices, or it may simply let us, for a moment, hold that which cannot be held, touch that which is beyond our reach, feel that which is past all feeling.