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THE ROLE OF THE ARTIFACT IN A FACSIMILE AGE

I RECALL IN GRADUATE SCHOOL one particular professor whom some of us suspected had spent most of his adult life in Park Hall engaged in an editorial project that seemed to have no end. One afternoon, he confessed to our class that he would not work from photocopies or microfilm but, rather, only from original manuscripts. For those of us in the class—all of us eager, “with it,” and drunk on the latest theory—the statement seemed to confirm the extent of his senility. The question the editors of *RBM* have put to us, however, brings to mind that afternoon seminar and revives for me the question, What did Professor Moore know that my fellow graduate students and I did not?

Within the library, facsimiles serve a wide variety of needs, some of which could not be met any other way. In the absence of archival standards for electronic files, microfilm remains a familiar and largely effective preservation medium for fragile materials. Digital images, on the other hand, provide an accessibility that is revolutionizing the way library collections are used. Photocopies continue to offer a convenience that seems unlikely to be replaced, whereas faxes allow a speed of transmission that we have come to take for granted. In our libraries, photocopy machines consume reams of paper and fax machines hum night and day. Our cultural values, like those outside the library, are increasingly defined by speed and convenience.

In hindsight, what Dr. Moore understood, I believe, was that speed and convenience are not values that inform the best scholarship. He insisted on working from original materials not because doing so was fast or convenient but, rather,

because it grounded his work in a scholarly method that could withstand any challenge. This, too, may seem to our contemporary senses a quaint idea. After all, scholarship is not a stable enterprise but one more often defined by the clash of thesis and antithesis. Although this is certainly so, it is also to miss the point. For all the energy spent in scholarly debate, the aim remains, elusive as it may be, a certain still point where what we think we know is fixed and lasting.

From my current vantage point as a special collections curator, what interests me now are not Dr. Moore's conclusions about Henry James but, rather, the values that are implicit in his method. His work with original manuscripts was an effort to demonstrate, as Adam Gopnik has expressed it, "that something once happened," or put most simply, "that someone once passed this way." However divergent the critical enterprise may become, there is no denying the materiality of its starting point. By their very existence, special collections libraries affirm a belief in a past that is in some measure knowable.

In a time when respected journalists are caught fabricating sources, documentary filmmakers substitute "stock" archival footage for historical events where no camera was present, and Web-based information flashes across computer screens largely without attribution, it is worth remembering Dr. Moore's commitment to a scholarly method grounded in the archival record. What his work still has is a degree of accountability that our own ephemeral culture seems to have all but lost. What is so special about special collections? They remain our last best chance for recovering that which has been lost.