



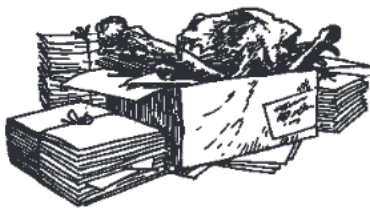
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## BONES OF THE LION

SELLING THE GEORGE PLIMPTON PAPERS

DISCUSSED: *Authors' Estates, Literary Appraisers, The Virtues of Bulls, Tax Law, The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Susan Sontag, Joyce Carol Oates, Christie's, The Paris Review, Playboy Photo Shoots, Infantry Uniforms, The Aesthetics of Junk Mail, Andy Warhol, Failed Consumer Products, Jack Kerouac's Barroom Scribblings, Irrational Buyers, J. D. Salinger's Letters, Hunter S. Thompson, Allen Ginsberg, Sotheby's*

**A**t the end of a maze of narrow corridors on the sixth floor of a storage facility on the east side of Manhattan, John Payne, an archival appraiser from Texas, opens a padlocked metal door to reveal a corner room packed with more than a hundred archival boxes of papers once belonging to George Ames Plimpton. At 11" x 13", with windows to the south and east (too high to see out of, but affording a dim illumination when the movement-activated lights time out), the room is the facility's honeymoon suite and is about as large as the editorial office of the *Paris Review*, where Plimpton edited the magazine until



his death two years ago at age seventy-six. Eight-foot metal shelves line the four walls, with three archival boxes side by side on the lower shelves, and up to three-box-high stacks on the top shelves. More

boxes, along with two jumbo-sized Tupperware containers, are piled in the middle of the room. The only sound comes from the buzzing lights, and the rustle of someone two aisles over trying to make space for one more ugly painting. Standing at the threshold to this room, one registers an unsettling sense of trespass, as though having intruded on a king's barrow.

Plimpton's papers have not always enjoyed such a clean, climate-controlled existence. Until a few years





ago, when a *Paris Review* intern was engaged to box them up and get them into some sort of order, the papers lived in a big dusty pile in the basement of Plimpton's 72nd Street townhouse. After Plimpton's death, his widow Sarah arranged to have the papers moved to their current location, where the danger of flooding, mildew, shoddy wiring, vandalism, and damage from vermin was significantly reduced. Now that everything was securely stored, the next task was to figure out what to do with it all. It's the kind of difficult decision—informed equally by grief and expediency—that every widow or widower must face. But not every widow was married to a famous writer, among whose papers one could expect to find personal correspondence with the likes of Terry Southern, Marianne Moore, Jackie Onassis, and George H. W. Bush, among a host of others. Mrs. Plimpton's primary option at this point would be to sell the material, either in bits and pieces, at auction, to private collectors, or as a whole to a research institution. In either case, it would first be necessary to estimate the archive's worth.

The thought that there somewhere exists a dollar amount expressive of the material in this room might not, at first, seem all that unusual. Writers, after all, are always selling their work. But then this work—be it a novel, a play, or a work of nonfiction—is a prepared product, whereas archives are valuable precisely because they are not prepared. Vast and variegated,

riddled with fascinating ephemera, compromising correspondence, and manuscript pages blooming with marginalia, archives document the middle ground between the public writer and the private one. Diaries and journals track everyday thoughts and observations, some of which relate to a work in progress, while others are given over to shopping lists and dental appointments. Incoming letters from other writers or artists reveal the personality clashes that lurk beneath artistic differences, as well as offer a broader picture of a writer's milieu. Taken as a whole an archive has the power to undermine a literary reputation or else build one up.

In April 2004, Christie's put up for auction a Hemingway letter to Ezra Pound featuring a deliciously cartoonish tirade on the virtues of bulls ("To me bulls ain't exotic. They are normal. And such a goddam relief from all this horseshit about Art etc [...] To hell with delicate studies of the American scene. Fuck the American scene. Fuck moers [sic], manners, customs all that horse shit. Let us have more and better fucking, fighting and bulls."). In the end the letter sold for more than \$43,000. A few notes by Kerouac, scrawled despairingly on the back of a Ballantine beer label as he waited in Flynn's Bar for a lass named Celene ("I cannot be practical and I cannot die and I am an apprentice nihilist... this, then, is hell. Oh Celene, come, come!") are expected to bring upwards of \$18,000. The amounts are baffling, and further-

more (the impassioned reader feels) *irrelevant*—for how can you put a price on such a singular artifact of literary sentiment?

**E**dgging around the Plimpton storage room in his long black coat, John Payne opens boxes here and there, thoughtfully sampling flavors, like a cook. Payne is the appraiser hired by Mrs. Plimpton to catalogue her husband's archive and consult with her about her options. Soft-spoken and reserved, with a maestro's white hair and a great Twain mustache, Payne embodies the southern gentleman, and one can't help but think that his presence is a great consolation to grief-stricken widows. He has worked on the archives of everyone from Chuck Yeager to Richard Nixon, whose papers numbered more than forty-five million and took five years to appraise fully. Compared with that, the Plimpton archive is a weekender.

"The easiest things are those that have sold elsewhere," Payne says. "A Lincoln letter is very easy to appraise. George's archive is more difficult because I suspect that none of his materials have sold. Maybe some of his correspondence might have sold, if Norman Mailer had some of it. But generally, for contemporary archive appraisals, there's not that kind of price record to go on. And in that instance I think there are three things that underlie value. One is the overall historical significance of the writer and his work. And another way of saying that is:





how important is the story told in that archive? And the second is how comprehensively that story is told. If there is a huge archive that documents everything that the guy did, and it's an important story, and you've got an important story that's very well documented, then the third element is the condition of the materials. Have they been rained on, are they in storage, are they in pretty bad shape. And that affects value. So a good story, well told, in fine condition, would generally total up to a pretty good appraised value."

The valuation and sale of the archives of contemporary writers is actually a relatively recent phenomenon. Until the 1960s, the working papers of most writers were considered of no more importance than a sculptor's unused clay or a painter's leftover paint. Perhaps the material was thrown away, or else donated to an alma mater, but rarely was it actually sold for cash money. Two things contributed to change all that: Texas and taxes.

Texas is the University of Texas—specifically, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, which transformed the market for literary archives in the late 1950s when it began ramping up its research program. Until then, institutions focused largely on collecting the works of writers already vetted by posterity—Melville, Baudelaire, Shakespeare, etc. Texas—responding to a broadening interest among the academic community to teach and study contemporary literature—was the first

to begin collecting the work of living writers, and in so doing introduced a new level of aggressiveness to the field of manuscript acquisition. In the words of Warren Roberts, the director of the Humanities Research Center from 1961 through 1976, "Once we decided that we were willing to pay good money for it, it became valuable overnight."

Taxes refers to the tax laws, which changed in 1969 so that suddenly writers could no longer donate their archives in exchange for a deduction. With the incentive for donating their archives gone, more writers began selling their archives for a quick dime. Gradually the more traditional institutions like Harvard and Yale awoke from their slumber and began competing for the archives, and prices boomed. In the space of a decade the trashy drafts and scribbled musings littering attics of authors everywhere were transformed into valuable global commodities.

Today, new literary archives are coming on the market all the time, and research institutions are paying top dollar. Allen Ginsberg's archive sold for \$980,000 to Stanford University in 1994; Saul Bellow's went for more than a million—as did Susan Sontag's. Andrew Wylie of the Wylie Agency sold Norman Mailer's archive for \$2.5 million. In the words of Andreas Brown, a colleague of Payne's, and the owner of the Gotham Book Mart in Manhattan, the market has developed to the point where "a manuscript by a well-known writer can be ap-

praised with some certainty, just like a diamond or an automobile or a piece of real estate."

The key concept here is what the IRS calls "fair market value"—"the price that would be agreed on between a willing buyer and a willing seller, with neither being required to act, and both having reasonable knowledge of the relevant facts." When these two idealized beings come together under the conditions specified (a kind of holy moment, one senses, in the eyes of the IRS), fair market value is achieved. It remains to understand only what is meant by "relevant facts." In the case of literary archives, the relevant facts are roughly those outlined by Payne (good story, well told, in fine condition) but—particularly with contemporary writers—these facts can sometimes be rather difficult to determine.

"If it's a first draft," says Brown, who specializes in literary archives, "and it differs considerably from the published version of the book, and it's got a lot of annotations and corrections—what I call a 'dirty manuscript'—that's the most valuable. The least valuable is an absolute clean typescript of the final draft which matches the published book perfectly." Generally, the appraisal is easier if the writer is dead, and easier still if they are long dead. Dead writers have more sales precedents, and precedents are an appraiser's best tool (determining value is really less a matter of answering the question of a manuscript's worth than copying the an-







swer from someone who has determined it previously). Also, a dead writer's reputation is less subject to the fickle winds of fashion. "You look at the rare book dealers' catalogues—tons of Hergesheimer and George Ade and Booth Tarkington. When was the last time you read Hergesheimer?"

On the other hand an appraisal can sometimes suggest the beginning of posterity's judgment. Brown describes a somewhat embarrassing moment in the course of appraising Christopher Isherwood's archive. "It got to a point where I had to tell Don Bacardi [the executor of Isherwood's estate], 'You know, Christopher's correspondence with Auden alone is probably worth as much as his manuscripts.' And he was shocked by that. And I said, 'Well, Christopher Isherwood is a significant writer, but Auden is a great poet.'"

In his mid-sixties, with patrician features, but still boyish-looking somehow with his light hair and untucked oxford shirt, Brown's previous clients include Tennessee Williams, Saul Bellow, and Arthur Miller, and it was he that Mrs. Plimpton initially approached to appraise her husband's archive. As it turned out he was too busy (he had just passed on a job for Bernard Malamud's widow), and was obliged to refer Mrs. Plimpton to Payne. Payne and Brown have worked together on a number of jobs in the past, among them Joyce Carol Oates ("It looked like the beaches of Dunkirk," says Brown; "I mean, there was just

*mountains* of stuff everywhere!"), but in temperament they are as different as night and day. Payne: Southern, soft-spoken, dignified; Brown: Northern, voluble, a natural anecdotist. One of the things that distinguishes John Payne is that, unlike Brown and most other private appraisers, he is not a book dealer. He is free of the collector's mania, and his exclusive focus on appraising safeguards against potential conflicts of interest. Also, he is less particular in terms of what sorts of archives he is willing to work on.

"I do things that Andreas would never dream of doing," Payne soberly says. "A professor's collection in petroleum geology, for example."

Brown began his career as a collector—first comic books, then literature. Salinger was his first obsession—it was because he knew Salinger hung out at the Gotham that Brown first became interested in the place, back in 1969. Talking to Brown and listening to his endless anecdotes, often repeated, and told always with equal enthusiasm, one gets the sense that he is motivated largely by the unique level of access that his work allows. If there is a flagship anecdote in Brown's collection it's probably the one about Tennessee Williams's mother, in whose basement the playwright's archive was stored.

"She hovered over you all the time and worried about whether the light was good enough for your eyes, and that you should stop and have something to eat, and

shouldn't she stop and take a little nap and rest now, and she wanted company, and she wanted someone to talk to. But she was one of these fussy mothers, you know, and there are couple of scenes in *Glass Menagerie* where the mother's doing that to Tom, the character, and she was doing it to *me*, constantly hovering over me and bringing me lemonade and wanting to feed me cookies, and fussing, and constantly nonstop talking while I'm trying to work."

"That was one of the more amazing experiences of my life," Brown says, "dealing with this extraordinarily eccentric and interesting woman. And Williams was fascinated. When I got back he wanted me to tell him everything that I observed about his mother.... It was quite fascinating to me that I could tell him little anecdotes about his mother, some of them were hilarious, and he just listened and laughed, but eight years later he wrote something about it, and he remembered everything I had told him in minute detail."

That was Brown's first appraising job, in 1968, and the one that got him hooked. For someone with a collector's temperament, the appeal is obvious: the opportunity to interpose oneself between literature and its maker, to get closer to literature's source. Nor is this a fixation limited to collectors—Plimpton's own *Writers at Work* interview series in the *Paris Review* has been fixated with the subject of "where literature comes from" for more than fifty years. One answer would





be the writer's muse, which may be why letters to or from a writer's muse are considered among all literary artifacts to be the most desirable. For a collector, there can be no more exalted hope than to participate in the relationship between a writer and his or her muse—nor one more worth paying for. In 2001 a letter from Lewis Carroll to Alice Liddell sold for \$128,684, exceeding the existing world record for the sale of a single letter by a factor of eight. "Almost anything written by the author to their muse is going to have an extraordinary appeal to the collectors," said Peter Selley, a Sotheby's appraiser, "even before you start looking at the content and the research value."

In the spring of 2004 Selley found himself holding a Joyce letter—the first in a series of infamously saucy letters to Nora Barnacle—that had long been thought destroyed. Along with this was a telegram from Barnacle, consisting of a single word, "si" (in English the last word of Molly Bloom's soliloquy and of *Ulysses*), that Joyce wore in a purse around his neck. "My hands were shaking when I held these things," Selley said.

If modern literature can be said to have a source, one could get no closer to it than a letter from the father of modern literature to his muse. Such material belongs to a different class of item altogether, something closer to a religious relic—physical evidence pertaining to events of such consequence that at times it can be hard to believe they actually happened.

It is precisely this sort of item that sends the ever confident compass needle of fair market value into an oddly gratifying spin. And it's easy to see why. Along with "comparable prices" and "the opinion of experts," the IRS also lists "replacement cost" among the factors to consider when determining an object's value. But what could replace Nora Barnacle's single-word telegram? An object that cannot be replaced is infinitely fragile, and a fragile object is one that you can have power over and therefore protect in a way that you could never protect, say, a roll of Scotch tape, or a box of Band-Aids. In a sense it is this privilege that collectors are paying for, like the \$156,000 that one collector paid for fourteen Salinger letters—twice the estimated price—only to turn around and give them back to Salinger in the interests of protecting his privacy.

Though Andreas Brown is surely one of Salinger's biggest fans (speculating with boyish hopefulness that Salinger has continued to write over the years, and that the day may yet come when the great man asks him to help organize his archive), he can get impatient with amateurs. And he reserves a particular disdain for compulsive collectors. "I know many, many collectors," he says, "of, say, Hemingway, who have to have a fix, once a month, like a drug addict. If they can't add something to their Hemingway collection they start to have a nervous breakdown. *They gotta have a*

*fix*. I mean it's just ingrained in the collecting instinct. Those people do not set market value because it's not rational buying."

Nevertheless, "irrational buying" happens all the time. In July 2004 the Joyce letter sold for nearly \$450,000, more than quadruple the estimate. A breakdown of the auction in which the letter sold (Churchill, Darwin, Coleridge, Beckett, Conrad, Wilde, and J. K. Rowling were among the many authors represented) revealed that only 42 percent went for prices within the appraisal range. Forty-six percent exceeded the appraisal range, and 13 percent exceeded the appraisal range by a multiple of two or more. If you use the official Sotheby's appraisals as indicators of fair market value, then only 42 percent of the buyers were rational, and an interesting 13 percent were highly irrational—the purchaser of the Joyce letter among them.

The auction results represent a continuum of buyers, ranging from more rational to less, all the way to the end, that truly loony 3 percent who willingly paid more than four times the object's appraised value in order to possess it. One can conclude only that these great multiples are due less to some characteristic of the auctioned item than to a characteristic of the person buying it—a particular love for the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, for instance (whose annotated copy of *Lord of the Rings* sold for more than six times the estimate)—and these sorts of characteristics, potent as they are, are beyond the scope of any appraiser.







The rare manuscript, then, is something like a failed consumer product. The ideal product is one that most closely emulates the exchangeability of the money that is used to pay for it—to know one dollar is to know them all; ditto any roll of Scotch tape—whereas the exact opposite is true of the rare manuscript. You might even say that it is the disconnect between the price of a rare manuscript and the object itself that is the hallmark of its value. It's the collision of the exchangeable and the unique in the sale of rare manuscripts that makes such a jarring spectacle of their sale, a spectacle in no way diminished by the relatively modest prices (compared, for instance, with paintings of comparable caliber). The collision puts one in the mind of Andy Warhol, who exploited the same sort of jarring effect in his soup can paintings, reproducing images of consumer products in a context traditionally given over to celebrating all that was singular and unique. Like most art movements, pop art began with a blasphemy.

Fittingly, Warhol's own archive was appraised by John Payne. Brown's anecdote on the subject is a classic of the genre. It begins with a call that he received from Payne, who was looking for advice. The trouble amounted to three hundred and fifty-odd boxes filled with nothing but the artist's junk mail.

"Warhol, being the kooky guy that he was, never threw anything away because he thought he might be able to sell it," Brown says. "I said, jeez, John, there's no way to

win on that. If you come in low, they're gonna be pissed off because they think it's important; if you come in high and it gets into the press or the IRS, this might be your undoing. This is stuff that should have been thrown away and you're putting \$500 per bag on it? And now, down at the Warhol Museum they're making very popular exhibits out of this. They open like one bag a month and put it on display and everybody oohs and aahs."

Warhol called the boxes of junk mail "time capsules," and today the Warhol Museum refers to them as the "highlight" of their archival collections. Not surprisingly, the foundation was unwilling to disclose the amount the capsules were appraised at.

"That's the last thing in the *world* they're going to tell you," Brown said.

**I**n 1999 Plimpton, having edited (and often underwritten) the *Paris Review* for nearly fifty years, managed to sell the magazine's archive for \$500,000 to an anonymous buyer, thus helping to ensure the magazine's continued existence. The buyer then donated the archive (as per arrangement) to the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. Like a snake that has swallowed an egg, the library is currently absorbed in digesting the huge archive, cataloging the hundred-odd boxes one manuscript at a time, with plans to feature highlights in a public exhibition when the library (currently closed for remodeling) reopens in 2006.

The Morgan is the logical choice for Plimpton's personal archive, as well, not just because the same anonymous buyer might be prevailed upon to underwrite the sale, but because the two archives simply belong together. It's a rule of thumb among institutions (for whom the value of a manuscript is largely a function of its use, i.e., research) that the greater the volume of related archival material, the better the research will be.

The alternative would be to turn the archive over to Sotheby's or Christie's and let them select the juicy bits to sell in separate lots. Such a solution would cater more to private collectors, at the expense of scholars, but generally institutions don't worry. Even if an archive is broken up, they know they'll get it in the end, one way or another. The thought is somewhat less consoling for the grief-stricken widow, for whom the body of her husband's work is still possessed of a kind of living wholeness, and for whom the thought of breaking it up is not unlike dismemberment.

Back at the storage space on Manhattan's East Side, John Payne moves from one box to the next, delicately lifting lids. The amount of material gathered in this room represents around fifty years of work, and there's something a bit upsetting to one's sense of proportion to behold it all at once. Like the price of the Hemingway letter, it seems at once far too much and far too little. In our minds we carry the idea of the writer, a suave, inci-





sive fellow with an eye for detail, but surrounded by so much material this notion pales as you realize that it is not intelligence that sets a writer apart, primarily, nor a facility with words, nor any amount of witty cocktail chatter, but rather—on a much deeper level—this lasting compulsion to make marks on paper. It is this compulsion, even more than Tennessee Williams’s mother, that one might identify accurately as the beginning of literature.

Lying on top of one of the boxes in the middle is a scratch inventory prepared by the *Paris Review* intern. The inventory runs to more than thirty pages and is by no means complete. Still, even the briefest look gives evidence of Plimpton’s extraordinary life. “Zelda, Scott, and Ernest,” says one box (17B). “Kennedy Letters, Paper Lion notebooks, etc.” says another (26B). Another section of the inventory goes into much more detail, listing such items as an irritable postcard from Raymond Carver wondering when he can expect payment, a letter from Hunter Thompson raving about the Spinks-Ali fight, the manuscript of an interview with Salvador Dalí, slides from a *Playboy* shoot (participatory journalism at its best), a 1/4" tape of fifteen bird sounds, a letter from Woody Allen recounting a recurring nightmare in which he’s suffocated by a man wielding a pillow, the jumpsuit Plimpton wore for a stock car race, and so on. And then there are boxes of manuscript pages, and dozens of

notebooks filled with Plimpton’s neat but indecipherable hand.

It’s a room full of stories, in fine condition, and well told. Anyone who knew Plimpton knows that he loved a good story well told. Like Brown, he was an anecdotist. A few months before he died he fainted one night in the lobby of the River Club. Despite being unconscious he still somehow managed to capture the incident and work it into an amusing story. The paramedics were called, so the story went, and when they finally arrived they rushed up to him, and one of the paramedics must have recognized him because he exclaimed, “George!” at which point the doorman, a man famous for his rectitude, approached the paramedic and leaned down to admonish him, “We do not refer to members by their first names. I must ask that you address him as *Mr. Plimpton*.”

Anecdotes like this are meaningful because they are, like their subject, ephemeral. And there is a kind of accord between such stories and their subjects, as there is between consumer products and their prices. A price evokes nothing. But stories can be written down, preserved, and later that ephemerality can be recaptured, like the faint but unmistakable rose perfume that one Texas curator, using a scientific process called “Solid Phase Micro Extraction,” discovered in the mold growing in the archives of an early-twentieth-century theater critic.

It seems particularly unreason-

able that a writer should die. How odd that the *paper* should remain while the writer must perish, that this great engine of creativity and insight should stop, all at once, while his work hurtles on without him. In what may have been the last addition to the Plimpton archive—a five-page document of miscellaneous notes, reminders, and the beginnings of letters found on his computer in the days after his death—the following fragment appears: “When he was nine... he made his first purchase at what would be called a ‘garage sale’ now—a complete uniform of the local (Walpole, Mass.) light infantry—red coat, tall hat with a plume, knapsack, and powder horn—all for twelve cents. It was the start of an extraordinary”

The fragment ends there, and with new outrage one realizes that death interrupts man and sentence both. This sentence in particular may have marked the beginning of a memoir that Plimpton was said to be embarked on. Box 22B sits on the south wall of the storage room, on the second shelf, and is listed as containing “Material for G.A.P. memoir.” Payne was not at liberty to reveal his appraisal of the Plimpton archive, but perhaps its primary value lay in this: the capacity to provide its creator with an occasion to revisit his various muses and reflect on his life’s accomplishments. Unfortunately for us all, Plimpton barely had time to begin the task, but at least his archive remains, in all its priceless variety. ★

