

Classification and the Scholar

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LIBRARIANS have written much on classification; the scholar—the layman in the stacks—is yet to be heard from.

The librarian, Mr. Bliss no less than Mr. Dewey, is essentially an ambitious theorist concerned with working out an elaborate general scheme for the organization of all knowledge. This because he assumes that a book is most easily found when its place on the shelf is determined by the logical relation of its subject matter to all subject matter. Like a modern Alexander he dreams of the fusion of all culture into an harmonious whole. But the scholar of today can no longer take all knowledge for his province. He is a busy man in a tiny corner, a princeling in the librarian's far-flung empire. Lofty talk of sweeping organization for the accomplishment of ultimate universal ends leaves him cold; he hopes only that the talkers will not prevent him from working efficiently in his own little world.

The scholar's stack permit is useful to him only if the librarian's classification shelves the books that he needs for his research where he can easily find them. The moment he must walk out to the card catalog in order to locate a book whose general subject he knows, the classification scheme has failed him. It would be more practical for him in that case to have the books on the shelf in the simple order of

their accession. The catalog card could give him an accession number as readily as a classification number, and once he had found the book he would know the exact place on the shelf where it would be forever. Moreover, the money now spent on classification could buy him more books.

The traditional library classification is a philosophical scheme; what the scholar wants is functional classification—an arrangement of books according to needs as those needs appear as the result of experience. Law, business, and even library administration are based on constant experiment, but library classification is still based on a priori reasoning. Yet functional classification is not a particularly new notion. The bookseller has always shelved his books not by logic but according to prospective buyers' wants. A few years ago Grace O. Kelley clearly demonstrated that traditional shelving does not serve library patrons nearly so efficiently as has always been assumed,¹ and in the Detroit Public Library Ralph Ulveling has for some time been urging that books on open shelves be arranged according to readers' interest.²

To the scholar good classification means only two things: (1) One section of the general stacks must be given over entirely to his books, and (2) The books in that

¹ Kelley, Grace O. *The Classification of Books; An Inquiry into Its Usefulness to the Reader*. 1937.

² "Should We Classify and Catalog from the Reader's Point of View?" *A.L.A. Bulletin* 32:55, January 1938.

section must be arranged in an intelligible (not necessarily logical) sequence.

The implications of these general observations will become more apparent with a casual examination of the "language" and "literature" groups in classification schemes.

Both the Dewey Decimal Classification and the Library of Congress Classification have held to the peculiar but common conceit of a series of separate static languages and a series of separate static literatures. There are, indeed, such things as "the science of philology" and "great literature;" and the scholar does edit a text and interpret a literature. But if he is to do these jobs well he must know the folk who spoke that language and wrote that literature, and he must exhaust every possible source in his endeavor to reconstruct their lives and their culture, their problems and their mistakes.

Inscriptions

A book of inscriptions, for instance, is an innocent enough affair. Normally a classifier would tuck it into a special nook where none but a linguist might find it with ease. But what of the classical scholar who traces the increase of prices

and decrease of wages in Greece of the third century before Christ by means of a series of inscriptions?

Erasmus' editor must know something of Luther and the Reformation and the Peasants' Revolt. Understanding of Vergil's *Aeneid* or the poetry of d'Annunzio is not complete without some consideration of Augustus and Mussolini.

More's *Utopia*, no less than Swift's *Gulliver*, is a product of its author's milieu and may properly be studied only with that entire milieu in mind—historical, social, and economic. The student of modern literature must be acquainted with Marx and Darwin and Freud as well as Sinclair Lewis and Kipling and George Bernard Shaw.

All this, of course, is obvious.

But classifiers have ignored it. Inscriptions are language, while prices and wages are economics; Erasmus is literature, but Luther is religion; Vergil and d'Annunzio are poetry, but Augustus and Mussolini are history.

This is not just captious criticism. The following table shows how D.C. and L.C. treat certain subjects of interest to the scholar in a specific field, the study of the classics:

Greek and Latin Subjects

| | | <i>L.C.</i> | <i>D.C.</i> | |
|----------------------------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|---------|
| Language and Literature | | P—PA | Language: | 470-480 |
| Epigraphy and Palaeography | Epigraphy: | CN | Literature: | 870-880 |
| | Palaeography: | Z114 | Latin: | 471.7 |
| Early Christian Literature | | BR60-67 | Greek: | 481.7 |
| | | | | 281.1 |

| | L.C. | D.C. |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Geography, Antiquities, and History | Greek: DF10-289 Roman: DG11-365 | Antiquities: 913.37-913.38 History: 937-938 |
| Numismatics | CJ201-1143 | 737.37-737.38 |
| Bibliography | Z7016-7026 | 016 |
| Periodicals and Society Publications | Classed according to subject | Classed according to subject |
| Art | N5605-5896 | 709.37-709.38 |
| Law | K | 349.37-349.38 |
| Philosophy | B165-708 | 180 |
| Mythology and Religion | BL700-820 | 292 |

The consolidation of the major group of books, "Language and Literature," is much better than D.C.'s curious assumption (common though it is in classification schemes) that all languages belong together and all literatures together. Moreover, L.C.'s internal arrangement is excellent: In two large alphabetical files every Greek author and every Latin author has, or can easily find, a place. D.C., on the other hand, insists upon its "mnemonic" singsong of nine points in Greek and Latin literatures. This produces a curious result. In each literature "Miscellany" is heavily laden while the other eight groups have only one or two reputable authors apiece to justify their existence. D.C.'s shelving of "Epigraphy" and "Palaeography" in the language section is more useful than L.C.'s treatment, but both systems separate classical Greek and Latin literature from "Early Christian Literature."

The second major group, "Geography, Antiquities, and History," is split by both

systems, although the theory of splitting differs. Probably the D.C. arrangement is more useful, but neither is satisfactory. Books on the minor allied subject, "Numismatics," are to be found in still a third section.

The importance of "Bibliography" and "Periodicals" cannot be overemphasized. In a careful analysis Grace O. Kelley has demonstrated that not more than one third of the material brought out under a specific subject in a dictionary catalog is shelved under that subject's specific class number.³ Of *all* literature upon a subject, the share brought out by classification is, of course, considerably less than one third. "Bibliography" and "Periodicals" are the scholar's key to the great bulk of material which classification cannot locate for him. But in neither scheme are classical bibliographies shelved with any group of classical books, and in both schemes classical periodicals are scattered through the stacks

³ Kelley, *op. cit.*, 100-25.

according to specific subject.

"Art" and "Law," on the other hand, are examples of minor subjects whose segregation is merely irritating. Finally, "Philosophy" and "Mythology" represent borderline groups of books to which the classical scholar can lay claim only if they have been purchased with funds at his disposal.⁴

To the classical scholar this scattering is senseless chaos; to the librarian it is justified by the very good reason that in the theories of the organization of universal knowledge upon which these systems are based Latin and Greek culture is not a unit.

Theory Costly

In a large library, theory costs the classical scholar many a weary mile. Now it is true that H. E. Bliss presented the field of the classics as a "peculiar" problem, "one of the most difficult that the classifier has to face," because "the philological study of the culture has largely coalesced with the archeological study of the civilization."⁵ But this "peculiarity" is in reality typical of the study of every literature. For the present it need be pointed out only that the Elizabethan scholar (to take the specific case of a modern literature) works with Elizabethan handwriting (palaeography), Francis Bacon (philosophy and law), Elizabeth and Essex (history and biography), "rogues and vagabonds" (sociology and economics), and Thomas Cartwright (religion), as well as with the

⁴ Indeed, the distinction seems a bit hazy in the systems themselves. In D.C., for instance, under "Plato" in the 180's there is a note, "Class his works preferably in 888.4, but discussion of his philosophy here." Is Plato's *Republic* Greek literature, but Paul Shorey's *What Plato Said*, Greek "philosophy"?

⁵ Bliss, H. E. *System of Classification*. 2d ed., rev. (1936) 38.

plays of Shakespeare (literature).

The librarian treats of one vast world whose parts he calls language, art, science, literature, history, philosophy, economics. The scholar busies himself, not with some small atom of these larger units, but with a cross section of that entire world—language, science, literature, history, and all. The librarian's classification is, so to speak, vertical; the scholar's, horizontal.

The significance of this conflict cannot be overemphasized. The stacks are where the scholar comes into most intimate contact with the library. If that contact day after day invariably perplexes or infuriates him, he cannot fail to entertain some peculiar notions about librarians. And the scholar is a powerful library patron. Both the small college and the large university find that books, no less than salaries, keep able men on their faculties. By the same token, the librarian of the small college or the large university finds that the scholar often dominates faculty library committees. The A.L.A. figures on salary and tenure in university libraries as compared with the salary and tenure of university instructors can have no great significance so long as this fundamental difference about classification remains. The scholar will continue to feel, and with some justification, that the librarian whose stacks cause him all this trouble must persist in error because he is at worst mentally inferior or at best stubbornly pedantic. On the faculty library committee and in his conferences with other faculty members and with trustees, he will certainly voice his dissatisfaction.

Clamorous Minority

By way of defense the librarian may urge that the scholar represents only a

clamorous minority of the library's patrons. This is to forget that he is the only patron with direct access to the stacks. So far as the stacks are concerned, a classification scheme which serves the scholar cannot discommode other patrons; their books from the stacks are secured for them by library-trained stack attendants who could easily find their way about stacks arranged for the convenience of a layman.

A more valid objection is expense. Practically every large library in the United States has long since been saddled with some form of D.C. or L.C. shelving. To change now—even to a perfect system of classification—must involve great expenditure of money and time. Moreover, in a functional classification determined by experiment, revision would have to be continuous as new needs develop and old needs disappear. But classification exists only to serve; any system of classification which does not serve the reader is itself a tremendous expense for which little is received in return.

Finally, the librarian may contend that the scholar proposes to enrich the class of books in which he is interested at the expense of other classes in which other people are interested. It is, however, the fundamental principle of functional classification that classes are built up or weakened only as experiment shows reader interest in those classes is strong or weak respectively. No two libraries can use exactly—or even nearly—the same system. It is well known that one school, for instance, specializes in the humanities, another in science; one in arts, another in social sciences. And within each major group there are weak and strong classes. Every librarian will have to build his own scheme about the major interests of his patrons. Cer-

tainly he will do well to invite and carefully consider the scholar's suggestions.

Functional shelving, then, is the only classification with which the scholar will be content. How secure it?

Special Reading Room

The simplest expedient is, of course, the special reading room. The classics reading room of the University of Illinois is an excellent illustration. Into one room have been gathered nearly all books and periodicals relating to classical civilization. The shelf arrangement follows D.C. in general with the notable exception that the literature classification has been discarded. All Latin authors are classed straight 871, all Greek authors, 881. Thus, the authors of each literature form one large alphabetical group, as is the case with L.C.'s treatment of the classical literatures. Philosophy, church fathers, economics, the languages, the arts, the literatures, antiquities, history—the order of things is readily learned and the numbers which bring it about may be readily forgotten. The card catalog has been shoved into its proper subordination, for even first-year graduate students after a short time begin confidently to ignore it and to "feel their way around." In all this the classifier notes only one disquieting fact: the assembling of books is achieved, not by classification, but in spite of classification. The special reading room is a classification scheme's final confession of failure.

Something might be gained in D.C. by a further application of the theory behind the Illinois revision of the classical literature groups. Confining the literatures to two numbers makes eighteen numbers

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largely eliminate both. We know, because it has been done. But it takes courage, determination, realization of need, and vast patience to overcome the problems and obstacles which lie on the road to success. Chief among them would seem to be the inability of administrators to see the advantages of cooperation and their unwillingness to enter into agreements, the fear of librarians that they will lose prestige

or authority, and the difficulty of making legal and financial arrangements.

The two volumes which have served as pegs upon which to hang these notes should be required reading for everyone interested in higher education. Their contents are, if the writer is any prophet, signposts of the future.—*J. Periam Danton, librarian, Sullivan Memorial Library, Temple University, Philadelphia.*

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available in the emptied 870's and 880's, possibly enough to take care of all phases of classical study. By such a scheme classification, unaided, might bring together books according to their use. Similar revisions might be worked out in various other classes, both in D.C. and in L.C. Of course such a system of revision might soon cost more than to devise and install an entire new scheme of classification.

Certainly, reshelving without a revised classification can never succeed. "Objections to the order of the D.C. tables,"

Dorcas Fellows argued, "can be largely and easily overcome by adjustments in shelving, *e.g.*, English philology (420) may be shelved next to English literature (820), travel in Italy (914.5) next to Italian history (945), etc."⁶ The same "solution" could, of course, be worked out in L.C. But if classification does not indicate where a book may be found and if the stacks are to be a maze of jumbled letters and figures penetrable only to the initiated—why classify?

⁶ Fellows, Dorcas. "Library of Congress Classification vs. Decimal Classification." *Library Journal* 50:292, Apr. 1, 1925.