

CHAPTER 5

Rare Books

If we encounter a man of rare intellect, we should ask him what books he reads.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

LIBRARY: BERG COLLECTION OF THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Address: Fifth Avenue at 42nd Street, Third Floor, Room 320, New York, NY 10018

URL: <http://www.nypl.org/about/divisions/berg-collection-english-and-american-literature>

Telephone: (212) 930-0802

E-mail: berg@nypl.org

Access: Open to researchers by appointment

Before I started this project, I had no idea how many deep specialty collections were lurking behind the lions of the New York Public Library (NYPL). A visit to one of the first libraries netted me a clue that I should look into things like the Pforzheimer Foundation's Shelley and His Circle Collection and the Berg Collection of English and American literature. I held out until close to the end because I wanted access as an author writing a book about special moments that could be had in New York City libraries, but I could never establish a dialog with the one person who could control such access. That led me to plan B. I just used my credentials as a card-carrying NYPL patron (and the fact that Google Scholar shows me as having written more than 70 articles, cited 150 times) and had no trouble arranging a visit.

The excuse for this visit was to see a book that I had actually wanted to see for some time—*All Strange Away*, written by Samuel Beckett, illustrated by Edward Gorey, and signed by both. This was a case of two men whose work I had admired for decades, and it was a surprise to find that they had worked together. Even though the prose is available in reprint, I wanted the

experience of reading it for the first time in a room with a very special ambience, surrounded by first editions of Dickens and Thackeray.

In confirming my reservation, the librarian told me that I should pay special attention to the rules for this visit, detailed in great length on a special Website. This page told me that I could not bring in outerwear, a briefcase, or a pen. I could bring in a laptop and a camera. I decided to just go with a smartphone, since it could do the work of both. The Web page also told me that just bearing a valid NYPL card was not enough. I needed a special Berg Collection card to use the collection.

Came the day of my visit, I went to the coat check to leave my coat and my briefcase, but the desk was empty of staff. A nearby security guard told me that the attendant was in the bathroom and should be back soon. Soon turned out to be at least 10 minutes. Then I went up to the third floor to get my special Berg card in Room 318. That room was boarded up for renovations, but I was directed to Room 217 on the second floor, and they would take care of everything. That turned out to be a service desk with one attendant and lots of patrons waiting. Finally I got to the front, where I was told that there was no such thing as a special Berg card. I went back up to the third floor and was eventually let in to the Berg. The rather pleasant young librarian signed me up for the card, and I was ready to see my book. By the time I had filled out the request form and the request form to request a request form, the book was waiting for me, and I sat down to enjoy it.

The book was in a slip case, and I transferred the immaculate copy to a foam wedge book holder. The story began with these words: “Imagination dead imagination. A place, that again. Never another question.” The irony was duly noted. Gorey’s illustrations were about three inches square—moody, abstract scenes reminiscent of his illustrations in *The West Wing*. I was surprised not to see the autographs on the title page, but it turned out that they were the last thing in the book. Beckett personally inscribed it to the Berg Collection.

A volunteer downstairs had told me that if I asked nicely I could see the collection’s flagship holding—the original manuscript of *The Waste Land*. Sadly, that was the one thing they would not let me see. Only the chief librarian could authorize *The Waste Land*, so April truly became the cruelest month.

Next I checked the card catalog for T.E. Lawrence. They had a numbered edition of *The Mint*, but so does my shelf at home. I was really excited to see a listing for the 1926 edition of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. This was a

subscriber's edition for people in the Downton class, containing full-color illustrations throughout. However, I was quickly told that it was miscataloged. The actual book in the stacks is the 1935 edition that was printed right after Lawrence's death. I checked to see if they have the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, but they do not.

While this was going on, there was a frequent uproar at the glass door to the room. Lots of people would love to go in and check out these treasures, but few of them will take the trouble to make a reservation. Every so often a librarian would go to the door and calmly explain what is needed for eventual access to the room.

I took a good look around the perimeter of the room—glass cases filled with first editions in fine bindings. Also, in the northeast corner of the room you will see Dickens' desk and lamp. Dickens' portable writing desk is also in the glass case on the south wall.

I made sure that the Berg card was good for a year, because I intend to go back and catch up with *The Waste Land*.

LIBRARY: MORGAN LIBRARY

Address: 225 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

URL: <http://www.themorgan.org/>

Telephone: (212) 685-0008

E-mail: <http://www.themorgan.org/research/reading-room-application>

Access: Open to researchers by appointment

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/morganlibrary>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/MorganLibrary>

When we first moved to New York in 1990, the Morgan Library was high on our list of sites to visit. One day in the early 1990s we made the journey and, arriving at the south entrance, the first thing we saw was a copy of the Gutenberg Bible. That set the tone for the visit, which also included a copy of the signed Declaration of Independence; manuscripts by Mozart, Beethoven, Mark Twain, Steinbeck, and others; topped off by a selection of medieval manuscripts that were visually in the same league as the *Book of Kells*.

Even though I had placed the Morgan on the original list of libraries, I was on the fence about including it as the project wound down. Was it a library with public access to specific research materials or was it a museum about great books and manuscripts? One day when visiting the American

Kennel Club library across the street, I paid it a visit to make sure. I found to my relief that it did have a reading room. Even though I had to justify my visit, it met my criteria for inclusiveness. I was quickly able to contact John Vincler, Director of the Reading Room, and we arranged for a visit several weeks in the future.

To begin a visit to the reading room you must first choose an object or objects that you would like to see. I chose an illustrated edition of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* from the mid-nineteenth century. I also chose a manuscript by Mark Twain writing to his publisher with a brief biography of his life that included a very detailed account of how he came upon his pseudonym.

The Morgan library is a fairly easy walk from Penn Station. If the weather had been bad, I could have taken the M4, which loads on 32nd Street outside the station door, and taken a ride right up to the library. Like the special collections of the NYPL, the Morgan has a large set of rules for using the reading room, and like those of its neighbors, the results are well worth it. I was told to use the staff entrance, from which a security guard escorted me to the elevator, which let me off outside the room. I took advantage of storage lockers to eliminate every bit of baggage but the clothes on my back and my cell phone.



The southern entrance to the Morgan Library.

The reading room is a two-story modern facility, with tables on the lower floor and every bit of shelf space taken up with precious volumes. The librarian told me that I may take pictures for my own use (but not

publication), but if I did, I must include a strip of paper in each shot identifying the work as an item in the Morgan collection. The photographer in me had to take a back seat to the writer in this case.

The next item really gave me chills. It was a manuscript letter by Mark Twain. It begins oddly enough in the third person and then slips into the first person about the time he is describing his first trip west. He explicitly describes how he took the name from an old steamboat captain who used it for writing humorous bits about the river. The old man died shortly after Clemens moved west and, he writes, “The body was not cold in the ground before I took that name.”

Now I was met by John Vincler, a surprisingly young director of the reading room. At my age (let us just say that I remember when Truman was President), many people look young, but he appeared to be in his mid-thirties. He began by taking me down to the heart of the enterprise—J.P. Morgan’s personal library. The room faces Madison Avenue, and it is dark—probably deliberately so to prevent fading of the spines of the very precious volumes. “A few shelves near his desk can be turned to reveal their true contents—art books from the centuries past.”

A room to the side looks into a large stack area, filled with the best of the best items. As I looked through the rows of leather-bound volumes, I saw a riveting sight—something that looked like a baseball in a glass cube. The founder of my bank was known to play hardball with the best of them, but was he a Yankees fan? It turns out that the object was a tiny world globe.

Walking out and just down the hall there is a room that is used for special displays, but Vincler was quick to point out that this room has some very special history. It was the office of Belle da Costa Greene, a mixed-race woman hired by Morgan to be his private librarian. She was famous for her competence and her devotion to Morgan. Among her other after-work accomplishments, Vincler told me that she was said to be the lover of Bernard Berenson. He said that there is quite a bit of information about Greene and the Morgan in general in the book *The Making of the Morgan*.

Next we went into the main reading room, which is the showcase for the public displays of their greatest treasures. Again, there was a Gutenberg Bible on display. “We actually have three of them,” said Vincler. As in the reading room, there is a second story with more books, but no visible way of getting to them. Vincler tugs at a shelf near the door and it swivels open to reveal a secret stairway leading up.

During the visits to libraries for this project I would see many amazing things, but it is hard to top the Morgan for your basic “wow factor.” I

speculated that this young man must wake up mornings in sheer disbelief that he gets to do this for a living. At the end, as I was getting back to the locker to retrieve my bag, I happened to mention that one library had a card catalog showing that they owned the precious 1926 privately printed version of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, but that turned out to be a mistake. They really had the 1935 version, which is also on my shelf at home. Vincler looked it up and confirmed that they really do have the 1926. I am compiling a list of things to do after I finish this book. The Morgan Library is high on that list.

FURTHER READING

Article about John Vincler: http://www.finebooksmagazine.com/fine_books_blog/2014/06/bright-young-librarians-john-vincler.phtml.

Google Books preview of *Making of the Morgan* by Paul Spencer Byard: <https://books.google.com/books?id=5BA5yC6tA78C&lpg=PA26&dq=belle%20da%20costa%20morgan&pg=PA26#v=onepage&q=belle%20da%20costa%20morgan&f=false>.

Kelmscott Chaucer online: <http://www.rarebookroom.org/Control/chkwks/index.html>.

Page containing an illustration from Lawrence's subscriber's edition: <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/collections/books/holdings/telawrence/>.

Review of Beckett/Gorey's *All Strange Away*: <http://www.english.fsu.edu/jobs/num05/Num5murphy.htm>.

Rime of the Ancient Mariner: http://nzm.vnu.edu/faculty/trearick/english/rearick/readings/works/lyric_po/rime.htm.

University of Virginia page about the Waste Land: <http://people.virginia.edu/~sfr/enam312/tsehp.html>.