

The Hermeneutics of Screwing Around; or What You Do with a Million Books

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According to the World Wide Web, the phrase, “So many books, so little time” originates with Frank Zappa. I don’t believe it, myself. If I had had to guess, I would have said maybe Erasmus or Trithemius. But even if I’m right, I’m probably wrong. This is one of civilization’s oldest laments—one that (in spirit, at least) predates the book itself. There has never been a time when philosophers—lovers of wisdom broadly understood—have not exhibited profound regret over the impedance mismatch between time and truth. For surely, there are more books, more ideas, more experiences, more relationships worth having than there are hours in a day (or days in a lifetime).

What everyone wants—what everyone from Sargon to Zappa has wanted—is some coherent, authoritative path through what is known. That’s the idea behind Dr. Elliot’s Five Foot Shelf, Adler’s *Great Books of the Western World*, Modern Library’s *100 Best Books*, and all other similar attempts to condense knowledge into some ordered list of things the educated should know. It’s also the idea behind every syllabus, every curriculum, and most of the non-fiction books that have ever been written. The world is vast. Art is long. What else can we do but *survey* the field, *introduce* a topic, plant a *seed* (with, what else, a *seminar*). Amazon.com has a feature that allows users to create reading guides focused on a particular topic. They call it, appropriately, “Listmania.”

While the anxiety of not knowing the path is constant, moments of cultural modernity provide especially fertile ground for the creation of epitomes, summae, canons, and bibles (as well as new schools, new curricula, and new ways of organizing knowledge). It is, after all, at the end of history that one undertakes summation of “the best that has been thought and said in

the world” (190). The aforementioned “great books” lists all belong to the early decades of the twentieth century, when U.S. cultural anxiety—especially concerning its relationship to Europe—could be leavened with a bold act of cultural confidence. Thomas Jefferson had said something similar at a time closer to the founding of the country, when he noted that “All that is necessary for a student is access to a library, and directions in what order the books are to be read.” But the same phenomenon—the same play of anxiety and confidence—was at work in the writing of the Torah, the *Summa*, Will Durant’s *Story of Civilization*, and all efforts of similar grandeur. All three of those works were written during moments, not just of rapid cultural change, but during periods of anxiety about change. “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them” (Deutonomy 5:1); “[W]e purpose in this book to treat of whatever belongs to the Christian religion, in such a way as may tend to the instruction of beginners” (1); “I wish to tell as much as I can, in as little space as I can, of the contributions that genius and labor have made to the cultural heritage of mankind” (?) This essay will not aim quite so high.

Even in the very early days of the Web, one felt the soul-crushing lack of order. One of the first pages I ever visited was “David and Jerry’s Guide to the World Wide Web,” which endeavored to, what else, *guide* you through what seemed an already impossibly vast expanse of information (you may have heard of that particular compendium; it’s now called Yahoo!). Google might seem something else entirely, but it shares the basic premise of those quaint guides of yore, and of all guides to knowledge. The point is not to return the over three million pages that relate in some way to Frank Zappa. The point is to say, “Relax. Here is where you start. Look at this. Then look at that.”

We might say that all such systems rely on an act of faith, but it’s not so much trust in the search engine (or the book, or the professor) as it is willingness to suspend disbelief about the yellow wood after having taken a particular road. Literary historian Franco Moretti states the situation starkly:

[W]e’ve just started rediscovering what Margaret Cohen calls the “great unread.” “I work on West European narrative, etc. . . .” Not really, I work on its canonical fraction, which is not even one per cent of published literature. And again, some people

have read more, but the point is that there are thirty thousand nineteenth-century British novels out there, forty, fifty, sixty thousand—no one really knows, no one has read them, no one ever will. And then there are French novels, Chinese, Argentinian, American . . . (55)

Debates about “canonicity” have been raging in my field for as long as the field has been around. Who’s in? Who’s out? How do we decide? Moretti reminds us of the dispiriting fact that this problem has no practical solution. It’s not just that someone or something will be left off; it’s that our most inclusive, most enlightened choices will fail against even the most generous requirements for statistical significance. The syllabus represents the merest fraction of the professor’s knowledge, and the professor’s knowledge is embarrassingly slight. It’s not that the emperor has no clothes (that would be fine); it’s that no one knows what the emperor looks like.

Greg Crane, who held a series of symposia on the general question, “What Do You Do With A Million Books?” a few years ago, rightly identifies it as an ancient calculus:

The Greek historian Herodotus has the Athenian sage Solon estimate the lifetime of a human being at c. 26,250 days (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.32). If we could read a book on each of those days, it would take almost forty lifetimes to work through every volume in a single million book library. The continuous tradition of written European literature that began with the Iliad and Odyssey in the eighth century BCE is itself little more than a million days old. While libraries that contain more than one million items are not unusual, print libraries never possessed a million books of use to any one reader.

Way too many books, *way* too little time.

But again, the real anxiety is not that the Library of Congress contains over 500 human lifetimes worth of reading material (I’m using the highly generous Solon-Crane metric, which assumes you read a book every day from the day you’re born until the day you die). The problem is that that much information *probably* exceeds our ability create reliable guides to it. It’s one thing to worry that your canon isn’t sufficiently inclusive, or broad, or representative. It’s another thing when your canon has no better chance

of being these things than a random selection. When we get up into the fourteen-million-book range, books that are known by more than two living people are already “popular.” A book like *Hamlet* has overcome enormous mathematical odds that ruthlessly favor obscurity; the fact that millions of people have read it might become a compelling argument for why you should read it too. But in the end, arguments from the standpoint of popularity satisfy neither the canoniclast nor the historian. The dark fear is that no one can really say what is “representative,” because no one has any basis for making such a claim.

Several solutions have been proposed, including proud ownership of our ignorance and dilletantism. A few years ago, Pierre Bayard famously—and with only the barest sheen of satire—exposed our condition by writing a book entitled, “How To Talk About Books You Haven’t Read?” In it, intellectual facility is presented as a kind of trick. “For knowing how to speak with finesse about something with which we are unacquainted has value far beyond the realm of books” (184). It is a lesson thoroughly absorbed by anyone who stands on the right side of a Ph.D. oral exam. But amazingly, even Bayard sees this as a means toward *guiding* people through knowledge.

[Students] see culture as a huge wall, as a terrifying specter of “knowledge.” But we intellectuals, who are avid readers, know there are many ways of reading a book. You can skim it, you can start and not finish it, you can look at the index. You learn to live with a book. [...] I want to help people organize their own paths through culture. (“Read It?”)

At some level, there is no difference at all between Pierre Bayard and, say, Mortimer Adler. Both believe in culture. Both believe that one can find an ordered path through culture. Bayard just thinks there are faster ways to do it than starting with Volume 1 of *Great Books of the Western World*. Indeed, Adler himself almost seems to agree; books two and three of *Great Books* present what he calls a “Synopticon.” What could such a thing be but the *Cliff’s Notes* to the main ideas of Western civilization?

There also isn’t much of a difference between Bayard on the one hand and Crane and Moretti on the other. All three would like us to dispense with the silly notion that we can read everything, so that we can get on with the task of organizing our own paths through culture. It is true that the latter—as well as Digital Humanists generally—propose that we use computers, but I would like to argue that that difference is not as crucial as it seems.

There have always been two ways to deal with a library. The first is the one we're most used to thinking about. I am doing research on the influence of French composer Edgard Varèse on the early work of Frank Zappa. I go to the library and conduct an investigation, that might include the card catalog, a bibliography or two, the good people at the reference desk, or any one of a dozen different methods and tools. This is search. I know what I'm looking for, and I have various strategies for locating it. I can't read everything on this subject. I can't even locate everything on this subject. But I have faith in the idea that I can walk out of the library (this afternoon, or after ten years of focused research, depending on my situation) being able to speak intelligently and convincingly on this topic.

The second way goes like this: I walk into the library and wander around in a state of insouciant boredom. I like music, so I head over to the music section. I pick up a book on American rock music and start flipping through it (because it's purple and big). There's an interesting bit on Frank Zappa, and it mentions that Zappa was way into this guy named Edgard Varèse. I have no idea who that is, so I start looking around for some Varèse. One look at the cover of his biography—Varèse with that mad-scientist look and the crazy hair—and I'm already a fan. And so off I go. I check out some records and discover Varèse.

This is called browsing, and it's a completely different activity. Here, I don't know what I'm looking for, really. I just have a bundle of "interests" and proclivities. I'm not really trying to find "a path through culture." I'm really just screwing around. This is more or less how Zappa discovered Varèse. He had read an article in *LOOK* magazine in which the owner of the *Sam Goody* record chain was bragging about his ability to sell obscure records like *The Complete Works of Edgard Varèse, Vol. 1* (Occhiogrosso 31). The article described Varèse's music as, "a weird jumble of drums and other unpleasant sounds." The rest is history (of the sort that you can search for, if you're so inclined).

We think of the computer as a device that has revolutionized search—"information retrieval," to use the formal term—and that is of course true. Until recently, no one was able to search the content of all the books in the library. There was no way to ask, "Which of these books contains the phrase 'Frank Zappa?'" The fact that we can now do that changes everything, but it doesn't change the nature of the thing. When we ask that question—or any question, for that matter—we are still searching. We are still asking a question and availing ourselves of various technologies in the pursuit of the

answer.

Browsing, though, is a different matter. Because once you have programmatic access to the content of the library, screwing around suddenly becomes a far more illuminating and useful activity. That is, after all, why we called the navigational framework one used to poke around the World Wide Web a “browser.” From the very start, the Web outstripped our ability to say what is actually there. Dave and Jerry couldn’t do it then and Google can’t do it even now. “Can I help you?” “No, I’m just browsing.” Translation: “I just got here! How can you help me find what I’m looking for when (a) I don’t know what’s here and (b) I don’t what I’m looking for?” The sales clerk, of course, doesn’t need a translation. He or she understands perfectly that you’re just screwing around.

And that is absolutely not what the people who are thinking about the brave new world of large-scale digital corpora (Google Books, or the Web itself) want to talk about. Consider Martin Mueller’s notion of “not reading”—an idea he puts forth during a consideration of the power of the digital surrogate:

A book sits in a network of transactions that involve a reader, his interlocutors, and a “collective library” of things one knows or is supposed to know. Felicitous reading—I adapt the term from John Austin’s definition of felicitous speech acts—is the art of locating with sufficient precision the place a given book occupies in that network at a given moment. Your skill as a reader, then, is measured by the speed and accuracy with which you can do that. Ideally you should do it in “no time at all.” Once you have oriented a book in the right place of its network, you can stop reading. In fact, you should stop reading. (Mueller 9–10).

Perhaps this isn’t “search,” classically understood, but it’s about as far from screwing around as the average game theory symposium is from poker night. You go to the archive to set things right—to increase the likelihood that your network of associations corresponds to the actual one (or, as seems more likely, the culturally dominant one). That technology could assist you in this august task—the task of a lifetime for most of us—should not obscure the fundamental conservatism of this vision. The vast digital library is there to help you answer the question with which you began.

Greg Crane imagines a library in which the books talk to each other—each one embedded in a swirl of data mining and machine learning algorithms. What do we do with a million books? His answer is boldly visionary: “[E]xtract from the stored record of humanity useful information in an actionable format for any given human being of any culture at any time and in any place.” He notes that this “will not emerge quickly,” but one might legitimately question whether, strictly speaking, such a thing is logically possible for the class of problems traditionally held within the province of screwing around. What “useful information” was Zappa looking for (in, of all places, *LOOK*)?. He didn’t really know and couldn’t say.

Zappa would have loved the idea of “actionable formats,” however. As it turns out, it took him over a year to find a copy of a Varèse record, and when he finally did, he didn’t have the money to buy it. He ended up having to convince the salesman to part with it at a discount. Lucky for us, the salesman’s “network of transactions” was flawed.

How would Zappa’s adventure have played out today? *LOOK Online* mentions Varèse, and the “actionable format” is (at best) a click away, and at worst, over at Pirate Bay. And it’s better than that. If you like Varèse, you might also like Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time*, which Messiaen actually wrote in a prison camp during the Second World War, the fifth movement of which (the piece, not the war) is based on an earlier piece which uses six Ondes Martinot, which is not only one of the first electronic instruments, but possibly the most beautiful sound you have ever heard. And I don’t believe this. There’s a guy in Seattle who is trying to *build* an Ondes, and he’s already rigged a ring controller to a Q125 Signal Processor. And he’s got video.

This is browsing. And it’s not like being in a library at all.

Is it possible to imagine this kind of highly serendipitous journey replacing the ordered mannerism of conventional search? It’s important here to note that the choice is not between Google and Stumble—between surfing and asking Jeeves. It’s not a matter of replacing one with the other, as any librarian will tell you. It is rather to ask whether we are ready to accept surfing and stumbling—screwing around, broadly understood—as a research methodology. For to do so would be to countenance the irrefragable complexities of what “no one really knows.” Could we imagine a world in which “Here is an ordered list of the books you should read,” gives way to, “Here is what I found. What did you find?” Because that is the conversation I and many other professional scholars and intellectuals are having on Twitter

every single day, and it's not clear that we are worse for it.

There are concerns, of course. A humanist scholar—of whatever discipline, and however postmodern—is by definition a believer in shared culture. If everyone is screwing around, one might legitimately wonder whether we can achieve a shared experience of culture sufficient to the tasks we've traditionally set for education—especially matters such as participation in the public square. Concerns about a media landscape so ramified as to allow you to listen only to those ideas with which you already agree are not without foundation. But these questions are no sooner asked than answered by the recent history of the World Wide Web. Today, the dominant format of the Web is not the “Web page,” but the protean, modded forum: Slashdot, Reddit, Digg, Boing Boing, and countless others. They are guides of a sort, but they describe themselves vaguely as containing “stuff that matters,” or, “a directory of wonderful things.” These sites are at once the product of screwing around and the social network that invariable results when people screw with each other.

As usual, they order these things much better in France. Years ago Roland Barthes made the provocative distinction between the “readerly text” (where one is mostly a passive consumer), and the “writerly text,” where, as he put it, the reader, “before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages.” Many have commented on the ways such thoughts appear to anticipate the hypertext, the mashup, and the Web. But Barthes himself doubted whether “the pleasure of the text”—the writerly text—could ever penetrate the institutions in which readerly paths through culture are enshrined. He writes:

What relation can there be between the pleasure of the text and the institutions of the text? Very slight. The theory of the text postulates bliss, but it has little institutional future: what it establishes, its precise accomplishment, its assumption, is a practice (that of the writer), not a science, a method, a research, a pedagogy; on these very principles, this theory can produce only theoreticians or practitioners, not specialists (critics, researchers, professors, students). It is not only the inevitably metalinguistic nature of all institutional research which hampers the writing of textual pleasure, it is also that we are today incapable of conceiv-

ing a true science of becoming (which alone might assemble our pleasure without garnishing it with a moral tutelage). (60)

Somewhere in there lies a manifesto for what the world looks like when digital humanities becomes the humanities. Have we not already begun to call ourselves “a community of practice,” in preference to “a science, a method, a research, a pedagogy?”

But the real message of our technology is something entirely unexpected—a writerly, anarchic text that is more useful than the readerly, institutional text. *Useful* and *practical* not in spite of its anarchic nature, but as a natural consequence of the speed and scale that inhere in all anarchic systems. This is, if you like, the basis of the Screwmeneutical Imperative. There are so many books. There is so little time. Your ethical obligation is neither to read them all nor to pretend that you have read them all, but to understand each path through the vast archive as an important moment in the world’s duration—as an invitation to community, relationship, and play.

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