the changing profession

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Against Thinking

PETER STALLYBRASS

By making "poems, essays, letters, journals, jottings, and images, along with biographies, interviews, reviews, and criticism of Whitman" "freely" available in the online *Walt Whitman Archive*, Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price are helping to liberate Whitman from the economic and social constraints that govern archival research: the grants, travel money, and time necessary to visit the depositories where the materials are held and the credentials necessary to see the materials when you get there. At the same time, my sense is that the archives are being used more widely than ever before. The difficulty of gaining access to at least some of the archives has been exaggerated. It is a pleasure to see the wide range of people (of whom I would guess academics are a minority) who now use the Public Record Office (PRO) in London, where they are not only allowed access to an extraordinary range of old and new documents but are also allowed to photograph materials without charge. Permitting photography has had a radical effect on the use of the PRO, since it encourages readers who may only be able to spend an hour or two in the library to work for days or years afterward on deciphering and understanding the materials they have photographed. Photography has also provided one of the main bridges between database and archive. Seeing online images of the *Mona Lisa* has done nothing to decrease people's desire to see the painting in the Louvre. Quite the contrary.

The same is true of the libraries that have begun making their materials freely available online. The small and magnificent staff of the Department of Special Collections at the University of Pennsylvania's Van Pelt Library are overwhelmed by the clamorous de-

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mands of undergraduates, graduates, and faculty members to work on texts ranging from the medieval manuscripts generously made available by Larry Schoenberg, to a fifteenth-century French chansonnier, to one of the three known copies of the poems of the sixteenth-century Venetian poet Veronica Franco, to the corrected typescript of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, all of which are accessible through the Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text and Image.

But if database has been an incitement to the use of archive, it has changed our relation to the ownership of knowledge. One of the most radical aspects of database is its power to separate knowledge from academic prestige and from its attendant regime of intellectual property. Scholarship, as traditionally conceived, has maintained its prestige partly through its privileged relation to the protection and retrieval of scarce resources. Now, however, millions of people who cannot or do not want to go to the archives are accessing them in digital form. And digital information has profoundly undermined an academic elite's control over the circulation of knowledge.

This circulation has created a panic among academic gatekeepers about plagiarism. The more knowledge circulates, the more energy goes into establishing a strict accountancy of mine and thine. Database and its resources are now used to track down plagiarism that previously could only be detected by scholarly labor. Academics who are more interested in producing knowledge than in reproducing the divide between their own knowledge and their students' ignorance should ask students to use good databases and reward them for doing so well.[1] Paradoxically, database will make the gatekeepers' work increasingly problematic. New programs, like the *Montaigne Project*, which I am using to analyze how Shakespeare read Montaigne, will allow us to compare any texts to trace the transmission of phrases. They will also reveal the extent to which the gatekeepers are themselves trespassers who do, perhaps unconsciously, what Shakespeare deliberately and shamelessly did in the construction of his poems and plays. He appropriated for his own use what he read or heard, as can readily be seen in his most famous soliloquy:

1573 Ralph Lever: "to be or not to bée" (67)
1584 Dudley Fenner: "to bee or not to be" (C1)
1588 Abraham Fraunce: "to bée, or not to bée" (86)
1596 William Perkins: "to be or not to be" (4)
1601 John Deacon: "to be, or not to be" (46)
1603 Robert Rollock: "to be or not to be" (*Treatise* 177–78)
1604 Henoch Clapham: "to be, or not to be" (A2v)
1604 William Shakespeare: "to be, or not to be" (G2)

1585 Thomas Bilson: "That is the question" (264)
1604 William Shakespeare: "That is the question" (G2)

1576 Thomas Rogers: "with a quiet minde to suffer" (folios 32v–33)
1582 James Yates: "a patient minde to suffer" (folios 72v–73)
1600 Robert Rollock: "with his owne mind to suffer" (*Exposition* 210)
1604 William Shakespeare: "in the minde to suffer" (G2)

[1540] Desiderius Erasmus: *Mare malorum*, *Kakôn thálassa* ("a sea of troubles" [1.3.28])
1566 William Painter: "a Sea of troubles" (folio 115v)
1585 John Norden: "raging sea of troubles" (folio 92v)
1590 Everard Digby: "a sea of troubles" (128)
1604 William Shakespeare: "a sea of troubles" (G2)

1578 Henry Bull: "sleepe of death" (182–83)
1581 John Merbecke: "the sléepe of death" (1035)
1600 John Bodenham: "sleepe of death" (233)
1604 William Shakespeare: "that sleepe of death" (G2)

Shakespeare consciously practiced his own form of database. It is only in a regime of originality that such techniques become secretive and shameful. The only shame that

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should attach to such "resemblances" when they are discovered is the extent to which the gatekeepers have tyrannized those less powerful than they for trespassing.

Database renews our sense of language as "a tissue of quotations" from which we cannot, even if we wanted to, remove ourselves (Barthes 146). And while downgrading knowledge from being the secret horde of archive haunters, database will place new weight on inventorying as a means of structuring knowledge. As Mary Carruthers argues:

> Having "inventory" is a requirement for "invention." Not only does this statement assume that one cannot create ("invent") without a memory store ("inventory") to invent from and with, but it also assumes that one's memory-store is effectively "inventoried," that its matters are in readily-recovered "locations." (12)

To rediscover the power of inventory is also to rediscover the forms of pedagogy that precede the regime of originality. The great Renaissance tradition of commonplacing was a systematic practice for overcoming the originality (i.e., unacknowledged repetitiveness) of one's own mind by organizing one's reading as a database. In this pedagogy, reading is a technology of inventorying information to make it reusable.

The major way of inventing knowledge in the Renaissance grew out of new forms of databases. Above all, Renaissance readers and writers followed the example of the bee. Francis Daniel Pastorius was still following the bee's example when, in Philadelphia in 1696, he began his massive *Alphabetical Hive of More Than Two Thousand Honey-combs*, compiled from "all remarkable words, phrases, sentences, or matters of moment, which we do hear and read" (1). The bee provided less a metaphor for understanding than a model for the note-taking practices and database organization that were the precondition for invention (see the table below).[2] Only after reading, "collecting, like Bees, from every flower," can the writer "hiue their hony on [his] tongue" (1).

While I do not question Ed Folsom's emphasis on the innovations of database in the age of the computer and Internet, it is significant that some of the most powerful modern databases draw on the development of a massive range of finding aids and databases in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Such finding aids and databases were produced above all for the study of the Jewish and Christian bibles. They provide a model for Web sites like Calvin College's *World Wide Study Bible*, which contains links to commentaries on every verse of the Bible. The first verse of the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews alone connects to commentaries and sermons from the Church Fathers (Ambrose, Augustine, Bernard, Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas), a medieval English mystic (Walter Hilton), sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ministers and exegetes (Jacobus Arminius, Lewis Bayly, John Calvin, John Donne, Mar-

The Bee's Work	*Material Support*	*Form of Writing*
1. Finding nectar in flowers	1. Books and their margins	1. Underlining, marginal marks, and notes
2. Gathering nectar from flowers	2. Small erasable tablets or waste books	2. "Promiscuous" notes
3. Putting pollen in the correct cell of the honeycomb	3. Large commonplace books	3. Notes under proper alphabetical headings
4. Making honey	4. Sheets or gatherings	4. Composing, writing

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tin Luther, Thomas Manton, John Owen, John of the Cross, Samuel Rutherford, Thomas Watson), and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commentators and preachers (Albert Barnes, Adam Clarke, James Denney, Jonathan Edwards, John Gill, Matthew Henry, Charles Hodge, Robert Jamieson, Philip Schaff, Charles Spurgeon, Isaac Watts, John Wesley). This for a single verse of the Bible.

To make database entirely a feature of the present is to ignore what information is stored and why. Christianity has had nearly two millennia of accumulating and organizing its databases, and there is nothing random about that—not even about how and why Christians began to organize their databases alphabetically to facilitate rapid retrieval.[3] Equally, there is nothing random now about the organization of databases around a canonical American poet. I do not mean this as a criticism of specific databases, any more than I mean to criticize Calvin College's Web site, which has transformed how I approach teaching biblical texts. But databases are neither universal nor neutral, and they participate in the production of a monolingual, if not monocultural, global network.

But at the same time databases can help free us from the tyranny of proprietary authors, solitary thinkers who produce knowledge out of their own minds. For the last few years, I have been experimenting with a pedagogy that explicitly opposes proprietary authorship and the model of thinking that supports it. The following, for instance, is one strategy I developed for a course, using databases to disrupt thinking:

AGAINST THINKING

Here is my vulgar recipe for working as opposed to thinking.

THINKING is
- Hard, painful
- Boring, repetitious
- Indolent

NB. Hard *and* indolent.

WORKING is
- Easy
- Exciting, a process of discovery
- Challenging

There is nothing mystical about working. I suggest breaking it down into a series of procedures. The larger the question, the greater the need to reduce it to practical steps.

(1) Always use *The Oxford English Dictionary* and other relevant dictionaries to develop your sense of language as an active, historical medium. For your exercises and projects, build up your own list of useful words (e.g., for Benjamin Franklin, I've been working with words like *accounting*, *almanac*, *binding*, *blank*, *books*, *broadsides*, *composing*, *compositor* (*sorts* and *out of sorts*), *copy*, *edition*, *ink*, *newspaper*, *pamphlet*, *paper*, *paper money*, *press*, *print*(*er*, *-ing*), *printinghouse*, *publish*, *publication*, *rags*, *type* (*typeface*), *uppercase*, *lowercase*, *warehouse*(*ing*), *woodcut*.

(2) After reading Franklin's *Autobiography*, download the text from the Web and use it and other Web resources to generate material. (Over 25,000 books are freely available from the *Online Books Page* on the University of Pennsylvania library's Web site.)

(3) Compare, when possible, different versions of the "same" book or image to train yourself to notice large and small linguistic and material differences. For instance, using online resources, compare John Foxe's Master Rogers story in an early edition of his *Book of Martyrs: Actes and Monuments* and in several editions of the American eighteenth-century *New-England Primer*. While teaching yourself to notice small differences, don't overlook the obvious (e.g., the massive difference in *size*—and, as a result, in cost and accessibility; the primers sold in millions).

(4) Compare visual depictions of the same text with each other and with the text on which they are based. Look at images of Genesis 3.7 (are Adam and Eve naked, wearing a fig leaf, or wearing fig leaves tied together?) and 3.21 (are Adam and Eve naked, wearing leaves, or clothed when they are expelled from Eden?). See Web sites of the Metropolitan Museum, National Gallery in Washington, National Gallery in London,

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etc. Having read Genesis 50.26 and looked at the depiction of the verse in the online *Brick Testament*, would you call the man who is mummified Joseph or Zaphnath-paaneah?[4]

(5) Spend more time on less. Databases create information overload (Blair, "Reading" and "Note-Taking"). It's good to browse so as to generate information and ideas, but then you need to focus on specific passages, images, theoretical problems, etc.

When you're WORKING, you'll be in the good company of the writers we'll be working on. None of them had a writer's block. When Shakespeare sat down to write a history play (say, *Richard II*), he made sure that his table had the right things on it: Holinshed's *Chronicles*, from which he took the plot, and a commonplace book that I imagine as having entries under *death*, *Ireland*, *Cain and Abel*, etc. Shakespeare and Anne Bradstreet *wrote*. They assembled the necessary materials (this was called "invention" in the Renaissance) and then got on with the job according to two fundamental principles:

(A) IMITATION: This means that you *read* (or listen) so as to write. If you look at scenes of medieval writing, you cannot tell if you're looking at a scribe, a translator, or an "author"—all have books around them from which, in their different ways, they are transcribing (or "translating" [Chartier 18–20]). Shakespeare (who invented in the modern sense at most one or two of his plots) "translates" Holinshed and other chroniclers. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare rewrote a ten-year-old play called *Hamlet* (which doesn't survive). In *King Lear*, he rewrote an earlier play called *King Lear* (which does survive).

(B) INSPIRATION: This is a complex way of rethinking imitation. It means allowing yourself to be "breathed into"—as your own voice has been breathed into you at school and by parents, lovers, those whom you aspire to be like, etc. When you're working, as opposed to thinking, ideas will indeed "come over you" (as in, "I don't know what came over me"). Thinking does, in that sense, take place, but dialectically. You are not, nor should you be, the origin of your own thoughts (any more than you are the origin of your own voice). Having your own thoughts in the literal sense is as impossible as having your own language. It's not only impossible; it's silly and unnecessary to attempt it. You should have better things to do with your life. When I'm tempted to think, I commonplace Pepys or Montaigne instead.

When you're THINKING, you're usually staring at a blank sheet of paper or a blank screen, hoping that something will emerge from your head and magically fill that space. Even if something "comes to you," there is no reason to believe that it is of interest, however painful the process has been. ORIGINALITY (an unhelpful concept connected with thinking and deep thought) is another name for repeating other people's ideas without knowing that you're doing so. What would it mean to speak with an original voice, if our voices are the (unique) combinations of hauntings through which we speak and through which we are spoken? In this sense, originality is not only a bad concept, it's a cruel one that would excise what makes us who we are—the voices that have taken up a local habitation and a name in our bodies.

There is no relation between the quantity of pain and the quality of the work produced. I can agonize for days—thinking—and still produce platitudes. The cure for the disease called thinking is work.

Learning requires imitation and inspiration, which today are marginalized by a concept of originality that produces as its inevitable double the specter of plagiarism, a specter rooted in the fear that we might have more to learn from others than from ourselves. Franklin made this clear when, in the longest pamphlet that he ever wrote during his career as a printer, he defended Samuel Hemphill, a preacher who had been accused of religious unorthodoxy, from the subsequent charge of plagiarism. Franklin noted that Hemphill's accusers

> endeavour to lessen [him], by representing him as a Plagiary, and say, *They are apt to think, that if he had honestly given credit to the several Authors from whom he borrowed much of what he deliver'd, it wou'd have made*

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> *a considerable Abatement of the Reputation he supposes he gain'd, &c.*
>
> But which of these Gentlemen, or their Brethren, is it, that does give due Credit for what he borrows? Are they beholden to no Author, ancient or modern, for what they know, or what they preach? . . . They chuse the dullest Authors to read and study, and retail the dullest Parts of those Authors to the Publick. It seems as if they search'd only for Stupidity and Nonsense. . . . But when Hemphill had Occasion to borrow, he gave us the best Parts of the best Writers of the Age. Thus the Difference between him and most of his Brethren, in this part of the World, is the same with that between the Bee and the Fly in the Garden. The one wanders from Flower to Flower, and for the use of others collects from the whole the most delightful Honey; while the other (of a quite different Taste) places her Happiness entirely in Filth, Corruption, and Ordure. (Franklin, *Papers* 2: 96–97)[5]

For Franklin, ideas were a common treasury to be shared by all. The problem is not imitation or even plagiarism but the claim to intellectual property, a claim that justifies itself by producing plagiarism (i.e., the possibility of shared knowledge) as its moral and legal antithesis. Franklin argued that the immorality lay in the fences that intellectual property erected, which, preserving knowledge for the rich and powerful, prevented its free circulation.

Database is beginning to make scholarly work (previously the mystified privilege of an elite) available to anyone who's interested in doing it. One group (much despised by the academy) doing such work is amateur genealogists who have trained themselves in paleography, codicology, databases, and a range of other subjects that academics do not have the time to learn because they are too busy accrediting students (and one another) and tracking down cases of plagiarism. I am no particular fan of genealogy. But it certainly produces more substantial knowledge than ranking academics and universities and persecuting students who are held to a standard of originality by which their professors manifestly do not abide. If you really want to learn something new, ask a librarian or a conservationist. Among other things, they're busier sharing information than trying to protect it from the prying eyes of their "competitors." For academics, the competitors are no longer just our colleagues; in the age of database, they are also the students whom we claim to be teaching. The imperative that was once ethical is now pragmatic as well: share your "original" knowledge if you don't want others to find out where you appropriated it from. Better still, think of knowledge as what we share for future creations rather than as the private property of past and present authors.

Notes

1. If you want to hear predictable responses that you can buy on the Web or, worse, to hear "original" responses, ask your students about "the redemption of *King Lear*" or "filial ingratitude in Shakespeare's *King Lear*" or "the theme of blindness in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*" or "*King Lear* and the fatal flaw" or, best of all, "self-discovery in Shakespeare's *King Lear*," which has the advantage of being the topic of a free paper, beginning, "Through the course of the play, King Lear goes through a process of attaining self-knowledge, or true vision of one's self and the world. With this knowledge, he goes through a change of person, much like a caterpillar into a butterfly" ("Self-Discovery"). It's easy to avoid such essays by asking your students to plagiarize better databases, like *The Oxford English Dictionary* or the online "Shakespeare in Quarto" at the British Library or the First Folio and promptbooks at the Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text and Image. If you ask silly questions, you deserve silly answers.

There is nothing silly in writing about blindness in *King Lear*. What is silly is for a teacher who has read, say, Stanley Cavell's brilliant analysis of the topic to expect students to come up with original versions of it, which will be judged by the degree to which they depart from Cavell and the degree to which they reproduce Cavell; they will inevitably fall short on both counts. It would be a better exercise to ask students to commonplace "eyes," "blind," etc., in *King Lear* and to see which passages Cavell has not commented on and what difference they might make to his argument.

2. For my discussion of the material practices of commonplacing, I am deeply indebted to Francis Goyet's

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account of Philip Melanchthon in an unpublished essay on *Hamlet*.

3. Folsom quotes Lev Manovich's "most provocative claim" that "the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list." But it's worth noting the profound shock caused to Christianity by the alphabetization of knowledge in the Middle Ages. The alphabet, as a technology of ordering knowledge, creates "a list of items" whose only principle of order is its randomness. When theologians and scholars alphabetized knowledge, they sacrificed a sense-making hierarchy (from God to the angels to humans and so on down the scale) for the sake of the easy retrieval of information. Indeed, the alphabetical system that we take for granted was at first resisted, because it led to arbitrary relations between words, to logical inversions in which the created preceded the creator (*filia* 'daughter' coming before *pater* 'father,' *angelus* 'angel' before *deus* 'God'), and to inversions of social hierarchy (*filia* 'daughter' coming before *filius* 'son,' *mater* 'mother' before *pater* 'father' [Daly 69–84]). The battle between narrative and database is a general structural problem in the ordering and retrieving of knowledge, not a specific historical event. And the desire to transform persistent synchronic tensions into a single moment of diachronic rupture replaces historical difference with a phantasmatic historicism.

4. See Genesis 41.41–45: "And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, See, I have set thee over all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph's hand, and arrayed him in vestures of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck; And he made him to ride in the second chariot which he had; and they cried before him, Bow the knee: and he made him *ruler* over all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, I *am* Pharaoh, and without thee shall no man lift up his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphnath-paaneah; and he gave him to wife Asenath the daughter of Poti- pherah priest of On. And Joseph went out over *all* the land of Egypt." For the relevant scenes in Lego in *The Brick Testament*, see Smith ("Pharaoh's Dream" and "Jacob").

5. I am deeply indebted to Michael Warner for drawing this passage to my attention and for his brilliant observations on it and on Franklin more generally. Franklin's account of the bee and the fly is itself "plagiarized," as he would have been the first to acknowledge, from Plutarch's *Moralia*:

> [L]ike as Bees have this propertie by nature to finde and sucke the mildest and best honie, out of the sharpest and most eager flowers; yea and from among the roughest and most prickly thornes: even so children and yoong men if they be well nourtured and orderly inured in the reading of Poemes, will learne after a sort to draw alwaies some holesome and profitable doctrine or other, even out of those places which moove suspition of lewd and absurd sense. (43)

That Franklin had no intention of deception in this, as in any of his other borrowings, is made clear by his proud claim to be imitating Plutarch for the modern age. For his other borrowings, see for instance Poor Richard's defense of the fact that "not many of [my verses] are of my own Making":

> I know as well as thee, that I am no poet born; and it is a trade I never learnt, nor indeed could learn. . . . Why then should I give my readers bad lines of my own, when good ones of other people's are so plenty? 'Tis methinks a poor excuse for the bad entertainment of guests, that the food we set before them, though coarse and ordinary, is of one's own raising, off one's own plantation, etc. when there is plenty of what is ten times better, to be had in the market. (*Poor Richard* 2)

For a fuller account of Franklin's writing practices, see Green and Stallybrass 3–23.

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