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The Pride and Prejudice of the Western World: Canonic Memory, Great Books and *Archive Fever*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines controversies arising from the perception of the instruments of cultural memory and the logic of their transmissibility. On the one hand, we have a carefully selected, temporally and geographically orchestrated body of texts, the Great Books, which are an enduring testament to the authority of Western intellectual artifacts. On the other hand, Jacques Derrida's Archive Fever locates a furtive transformation of collective memory in the informal practices exemplified by oral narrative and public discourse. Not only do both models rely on archives as a functional instrument of collective identity, but they also value them as institutions circumscribing social and cultural conventions. However, when synchronizing the traces embedded in oral discourse and written documents, the repositories are frequently subject to manipulation by interpretive communities. Recognizing the processes underlying archives and artifacts is essential to comprehending how canons and canonic practices impact Western cultural memory.

Keywords

Great Books Movement

These books are the means of understanding our society and ourselves. They contain the great ideas that dominate us without our knowing it. There is no comparable repository of our tradition.

Robert M. Hutchins, *Great Books of the Western World*

Theories of archives and textual repositories

For the past 4,000 years, written archives have regulated the politics of cultural memory, since such repositories contain the textual capital to transmit collective wisdom and social norms from one generation to the next. Endowing cultural orders with common identities and mnemonic markers, a collection of texts also serves as the basis for tracing the processes of cultural memory and conjecturing how mnemonics mold collective desire. Because of their mobility, written artifacts are also the starting point for investigations into the transmissibility of collective meanings as signifiers that either work to consolidate the mnemonic objectives inscribed into the texts or induce transformations of cultural traditions. Specifically, commentary and exegesis substantiate the spatial and temporal dispersion of literate traditions, which, while they do not contest the difference between thought and language, words and things, verbal language and active response, they expose these as adaptable effects of historical approaches to collective knowledge.

Although confidence in literate memory as a stabilizing agent seems justified, textual memory does not always keep up with the proliferation of media in the age of global communication. Rather, the mobility of textual archives seems to be neutralized by the sheer velocity of new media, which infuses objects and events with a temporal immediacy belying the apposition of past and present. Because they demand instant disclosure, new media usurp the time lag attributed to written artifacts, given that these depend upon being deciphered and interpreted before their meaning becomes apparent and the remnants undertake an active role in defining collective memory spaces. More specifically, if one focuses on texts that have the invariable attributes of canons, suggesting that the semiotic markers have been fixed in an immobile memory mode, these may still be intelligible, but they also become inaccessible to future signifiers. As iconic repositories, canonic archives encapsulate a discrete mnemonic practice that stimulates performative and ritualistic approaches to cultural memory. Accordingly, they are blind to the exigencies of the dissemination process and the multiplicity of discourses in a global society undergoing perpetual transformations.

In connection with the challenges of the post-war era, Robert M. Hutchins' portrayal of the Great Conversation in the introductory volume of Encyclopedia Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World* is emblematic of an iconic repository, since his encomium accentuates the importance of the canon of the Western World for intellectual paradigms based on

European traditions. Although the famous educator appeals to the need for dialogue, his plea is couched in logocentric and moral terms, accentuating an ideology that lionizes Western heritage and dissociates itself from non-Western cultural traditions.

The tradition of the West is embodied in the Great Conversation that began in the dawn of history and that continues to the present day. Whatever the merits of other civilizations in other respects, no civilization is like that of the West in this respect. No other civilization can claim that its defining characteristic is a dialogue of this sort. No dialogue in any other civilization can compare with that of the West in the number of great works of the mind that have contributed to this dialogue. . . . The spirit of Western civilization is the spirit of inquiry. Its dominant element is the Logos. . . . The exchange of ideas is held to be the path to the realization of the potentialities of the race. (Hutchins 1952)

The archive models discussed in the following essay (see also Larson in this volume) articulate controversies with regard to the perception of the instruments of cultural memory and the logic of their transmissibility. On the one hand, we have a carefully chosen, temporally and geographically orchestrated body of texts, the Great Books, an enduring testament to the legitimacy of Western cultural traditions. On the other hand, there is the clandestine, surreptitious transformation of collective memory that Jacques Derrida locates in the “archival problems of oral narrative and public property, of mnemonic traces, of archaic and transgenerational heritage, of everything that can happen to an ‘impression’ in these at once ‘topic’ and ‘genetic’ processes” (1996, 34). Not only do both models identify archives as a functional part of collective traditions, but they also praise them as social institutions circumscribing socio-cultural conventions that can be manipulated by interpretive communities or modified by redefining the memory traces embedded in oral discourse and written documents. Even within this mnemonic context, though, dogged devotion to a finite collection of signifying artifacts ignores a primary disposition of textual storage spaces (Assmann 1987, 21): in contrast to theological or legal canons, intellectual texts represent a system of norms that facilitate didactic and political objectives. According to the cultural memory experts, Jan and Aleida Assmann, the function of canonic texts is coupled with social integration, and anything that counteracts that objective must be regarded with suspicion. With this mediating quality of the canon in mind, the perseverance of the Great Books reveals itself as a transatlantic transfer that resists the porosity of transcultural currents in today’s global network. Provocations, such as the dissemination of new mean-

ings, the acceleration of transcultural exchange, and the reciprocity of regional epistemologies, do not take place. Perceived through the lense of Derrida's Freudian approach to collective repositories in *Archive Fever*, misgivings arise as to the subconscious appropriation of a European intellectual tradition that guards against alien ideas and manipulates texts to comply with parochial or even liturgical doctrines of memory.

St. John's College: the *Great Books* program

Triggered by a national crisis in the educational sector following the First World War as well as the economic crisis in Europe and the USA, several American universities investigated the viability of compiling a European archive and transforming it into a four-year undergraduate curriculum. Two reasons were cited as the driving force behind the project. The first reacted to a perceived intellectual corrosion instigated by the system of electives at American institutions of higher learning, which a canonic syllabus devoid of superfluous courses would offset with a comprehensive curricular strategy. The second motivation was spurred by Fascism in Italy and Germany and the destructive impact that totalitarian orders had on the artifacts of Western civilization. The most promising projects were launched by Alexander Meiklejohn at the University of Wisconsin, John Erskine with the assistance of Mark Van Doren and Mortimer Adler at Columbia, and Robert M. Hutchins at the University of Chicago (Nelson 2001, 3–63), all of which adapted models that had been developed for adult educational programs on both sides of the Atlantic.

In 1936, two unknowns in American academia, the philosopher Scott Buchanan and the historian Stringfellow Barr, who had compiled a comprehensive Great Books reading list at the University of Virginia, were given the opportunity to test the merits of their canon at a small college in Annapolis, Maryland. Although the New Program, as the Great Books curriculum was designated, was highly controversial from the start and the program did not gain national recognition until after the Second World War, St. John's College has since become the flagship of *Great Books* institutions the world over. Internationally acclaimed, the college maintains two campuses on the American continent; in the early 1960s, the Annapolis campus was augmented by a satellite in Santa Fe, which has in turn encouraged its graduate academy to open up the canon of texts to artifacts stemming from Eastern, as well as Western, cultural traditions.

The core of the four year undergraduate curriculum in Annapolis and Santa Fe is comprised of works considered indispensable to the Western European intellectual canon, from Homer to Joyce, Plato to Heidegger,

Euclid to Einstein, and Palestrina to Stravinsky. In addition to philosophical and literary documents, the reading list also focuses on mathematical, scientific, and musical texts which were chosen in compliance with the seven liberal arts fundamental to scholastic traditions. From the beginning of the new program at St. John's, one of its ambitions was to integrate the natural sciences into what was seen as a revival of a traditional liberal arts education, of a *studia liberalia*, as it was designated in the Middle Ages. As Scott Buchanan elucidates in his study *The Doctrine of Signatures*, in which he endeavors to bridge the rift between the humanities and modern medicine, the trivium and quadrivium form the basis for a structural and semiotic approach to cultural memory.

The trivium deals with the gross distinctions in the modes of signification that are to be found in the use of symbols. The quadrivium deals with those finer distinctions which are necessary for the special use of symbols that we have in mathematics. The distinction, the making of the trivium and quadrivium, is the feature in medieval thought that is often referred to by modern writers as logic-chopping and endless argumentation. Both these epithets are just, but neither logic-chopping nor endless argument should be objected to by moderns who become unintentionally tangled in their own symbols in simple conventional discourse. (Buchanan 1991, 6)

Not unexpectedly, the first statement of the St. John's program impugns modern science for the departure of undergraduate colleges from their mission to provide a liberal education founded on the canonic texts of the Western world. Accordingly, the great books that focus on an understanding of nature, ancient as well as modern, are read in seminar, while laboratory activities are organized as practical introductions to scientific investigation and experimentation. The ambition to include the sciences within the liberal arts is mirrored in the seal of the new program, which features seven books depicting the late Classical and medieval enumeration of the liberal arts. The seven books encircle a scale as an allegory for how the arts should embrace the experimental methods characteristic of modern science, balancing out the discord between the disciplines that was generated by Cartesian duality. What becomes manifest here is that, thanks to a unity of purpose, the Great Books represent an extreme case of a literate cultural tradition, since the texts derive their value from their privileged status within the interpretative community. The acculturation they endorse is *kat exochen*, implying that it is at odds with transcultural theories of socio-cultural interaction. Expressions of alterity and otherness, including numerous artifacts and branches of learning beyond the canon, as well as the allpervasiveness of today's visual culture, are subject to censure. This elitist approach to the mnemonic repository is a signifi-

cant factor, since canon and censure are usually manifest in societies in which a selective return to the past and the recovery of traditions both stimulate and are instigated by didactic aspirations.

Another origin for the kind of iconicity that St. John's propagates harks back to one of the nation's founding fathers and its third president, Thomas Jefferson, who compiled a Greco-Roman canon for the University of Virginia. Couching the liberal arts tradition that Jefferson tried to codify for a nascent nation in purely apolitical terms, one of the college's eminent scholars contends that the canon at St. John's includes "neither the old customs nor the recent routines, neither the sedimentary wisdom nor the petrified habits of communities. I mean [simply] a collection of books" (Brann 1989, 64). On the one hand, the Greco-Roman canon forms the intellectual sediment for an enduring curriculum at St. John's College; on the other, the hermetic handling of the material is fortified by an instructional method that **shuns critical annotations or historical analyses** of the institutional, socio-cultural, and rational contexts in which the documents were written. Speaking for themselves, the texts are expected to resonate with each other as the readings progress from Homer to Heidegger. Carefully safeguarded from external influences, they limn the ideas and the **motivation for a cultural paradigm that is mimetically anchored to Western European intellectual memory.**

In order to initiate the Great Books curriculum and accomplish their program goals, Barr and Buchanan became highly proficient administrators, instituting a state of exception within which they were not only able to enforce their curricular reforms, but also to circumvent the restrictions imposed on them by the college's Board of Visitors and Governors. Their strategy was at once radical and paradoxical, especially if one calls to mind that a primary motivation for the canonic curriculum was the emancipation of Western thought from fascist manipulation and the state of exception was the primary political tool of Nazi Germany. After Barr and Buchanan turned their backs on the college in 1947 (apparently they were no longer able to advocate for the new program after a decade of conflict), responsibility for the canon was delegated to the German-Jewish philosopher and mathematician Jacob Klein. A student of Martin Heidegger at the Universität Marburg and a long-standing friend and colleague of Leo Strauss, Klein corresponded extensively with some of the world's most prominent intellects, among them Gadamer and Strauss. The latter's assessments of the canon during its nascent years are enlightening and he spent his final years in Annapolis. The Klein-Strauss correspondence confirms how painstakingly the philosophers pondered the

canonic texts, many of which were not at all or only partially available in English translations at the time. The letters also provide practical insights into the philological concerns behind a compilation of great texts. They detail the transformations of the curriculum during the years in which McCarthy attempted to purge American intellectual circles from foreign influence.

While canonic repositories are not only advantageous for developing cultural literacy, they are also effective mechanisms for improving text immanent methods of interpretation and for inculcating written and oral competency. Acquiring these skills is reminiscent of the value canons had in Classical antiquity (Casement 1996, 1–39), during which the archived material was used to instill moral, social, and political maxims serving the collective identity of the group. Skilled readers, as the champions of the Great Books assert, have every chance of becoming civilized men and effective citizens, although the underlying dominance of the patriarchy is irrefutable and the role of women readers nebulous. In keeping with the subordinate role of women within the social fabric of the Classical polis, women writers, with the exception of Jane Austen, have not been incorporated into the reading list. As disconcerting as that lapse may be, the greatest paradox is that the canonic project appropriates European texts for a cultural framework that has been rededicated and promoted as intrinsically American. Feeding into the exclusivity of the Great Books supporters, the transcultural trajectory of the documents is abandoned, especially when the iconic attributes of the texts and the didactic handling of the material precludes transatlantic or, at the very least, cosmopolitan exchanges of ideas. Since the impetus for this American-European epistemology can be also traced back to the prominent emigrants, among these Klein and Strauss, who brought Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenological methods to bear on the configuration of the canon, three questions with regard to the iconicity of the Great Books project come to mind: the first focuses on the degree to which liberal mnemonic cultures are also premeditated systems of knowledge; the second queries the discrepancy between meanings that have become entrenched and the prospects for differences of opinion, that is, the relationship between canon and censure; and the third scrutinizes the application of canonical instruments to mold national cultural memory goals. With these three questions in mind, the following section sheds light on the inception of the *Great Books of the Western World*, one of the most ambitious publication projects with an overt canonical trajectory.

Hutchins and Encyclopedia Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World*

On November 30, 1943, Robert M. Hutchins invited Stringfellow Barr, Scott Buchanan, Mortimer Adler, and other proponents of the Great Books movement to attend an Editorial Advisory Board Meeting at the corporate offices of Encyclopedia Britannica in Chicago. Scheduled for mid December, the meeting followed a series of memos regarding the contents of the multi-volume *Great Books* project that Encyclopedia Britannica was to release nearly a decade later. Initiated by the University of Chicago, where university president Hutchins had joined with Adler to develop a curriculum originally aimed at educating businessmen, the series was designed to close intellectual gaps and familiarize a lay readership with the great ideas of the past three millennia. Among the program's first students was William Benton, the future Senator and later CEO of Encyclopedia Britannica. Benton proposed drawing the greatest books of the canon together, complete and unabridged, as a compendium of Western thought and suggested that Hutchins and Adler edit the series for distribution to a national readership. Hutchins responded disapprovingly at first, fearing that the series would be sold by subscription and suffer the indifference that is the common to many reference works and lexicons. His greatest concern, however, was a devaluation of the formative influence that the great texts had exercised on Western culture and the transmissibility of a body of incomparable ideas to a mass audience. After many debates about what to include as well as how to present the material to an American public, the project was completed in 1951. Introduced at a gala in New York on April 15, 1952, Hutchins reinforced the iconic quality of the compendium, claiming that the collection was more than a set of books and an instrument for a liberal education, but an act of piety. Here, he asserted, were the sources of the Western World; indeed, this was the Western archive in its purest form as well as a reflection of its heritage and significance, compiled for all to scrutinize. In their own way, the sixty volumes that comprise the *Great Books of the Western World* have taken on the status of iconic books in a post-war secular society lacking a true awareness of its textual heritage.

The five premises postulated at the beginning of the highly competitive selection process were codified in Hutchins' invitation to the members of the selection committee. Beyond providing methodological assumptions to steer the efforts of the search committee, the criteria shed light on the derivation of an intrinsically iconic approach to the canon of Western thought.

1. Each book must be important in itself and without reference to any other; that is, it must be seminal and radical in its treatment of basic ideas or problems.
2. Each book must obviously belong to the tradition in that it is made more intelligible by other great books, as well as increasing their intelligibility.
3. Each book must have an immediate intelligibility for the ordinary reader even though this may be superficial.
4. Each book must have many levels of intelligibility for diverse grades of readers or for a single reader re-reading it many times.
5. Each book must be indefinitely re-readable; that is, it should not be the sort of book that can never ever be finally mastered or finished by any reader.

As spelled out by Hutchins, these criteria not only summarize the project's guiding principles, but also provide evidence of the iconicity of the books as an instrument of cultural memory. Broadly, the five points endorse the ideological and performative features of the repository by emphasizing: 1. the uniqueness of the material selected; 2. the close interplay between documents that resonate with one another; 3. the 'auratic' effects that the texts have on an uninitiated readership; 4. the plurality of interpretative positions that could and should be applied to a culturally iconic text; and, 5. paradoxically, the intellectual and spiritual nucleus of the texts that precludes their exhaustive interpretation. Pinpointing these mystical attributes of the canon, Hutchins exposes the epistemological gap between a collection of textual artifacts and a space of transmissibility, between an empirical body of signs and a transcendental approach to their substance. In the spirit of pasts and presents that belie codification and preclude closure, he appeals to an eschatological and messianic reception of the canonic texts. Although the approach may be one of shared meanings and mutual articulation, the books ultimately remain elusive to everyone except the arbiters who have selected and assembled the canonic artifacts. Hence, the liminal space in which the archive arises is peculiarly reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's appraisal of Franz Kafka's enigmatic work, "its widely spaced focal points are defined, on the one hand, by mystical experience (which is, above all, the experience of tradition) and, on the other hand, the experience of the modern city-dweller" (2005, 325). Indicative of the debris that natural or man-made catastrophes leave behind, Kafka's texts aspire to index the signs of a modern era that, as Benjamin is careful to point out, has lost all consistency of

integrity and intellectual rigor. Writing a decade later, Hutchins expresses analogous sentiments at the outset of the post-war era, emphasizing that the Great Books had salvaged, preserved, and transmitted the tradition on many occasions similar to the challenges posed by the reconstruction of the Western World after 1945. This approach to a literate enculturation reflects the distinctiveness of a community of readers as well as the need to reinforce truths by recuperating textual traditions from the past. Mobilizing celebrated textual artifacts and promoting lofty conversation, Hutchins aspires to a practice of cultural memory that unites uncommon communities under the baldachin of Western European intellectual supremacy.

By the time the Advisory Board met on October 19 and 20, 1944, it found itself immersed in discussions about the choice of specific texts to be included in the compendium. Their deliberations exist in the form of minutes that reveal how scrupulous the committee was in shaping the canon for an unseen and uninitiated readership in need of interpretative stewardship. “Mr. Hutchins felt there should be extended essays in the various large sections. The use of minimal aids to the reader was cautiously agreed upon.” Dwelling on edifying tools that would assist the reader in deciphering the texts, the Advisory Board raised questions about whether the members of the selection committee were in a position to measure the greatness of the documents they endorse, “whether the choice of books may be supposed to represent the experience, to date, of the committee of selection. If so, is the educative value of the books proved—or is this a sign that those who have taught the great books have been imperfect users? If the sign is confirmed, might that not call in question the entire validity of the list?”

The concerns expressed have credence within the iconic approach to the texts that the Advisory Board selected and archived, one that purports to authenticate how texts recount the collective memory of the Western world. In essence, the mnemonic artifacts are a reminder of an endeavor to unite a community of readers spread across the American continent, pointing subliminally to the synthesis of a diasporic collective. The suggestion is that the Great Books could have succeeded in keeping Western civilization intact, had real attempts been undertaken to prevent the corrosion of scriptural traditions. Accordingly, the economic strategy behind the Encyclopedia Britannica project requires marketing the canonic texts to remote regions of the nation where individual readers could close the gaps in their intellectual background. Superimposing historical and existing realities, European pasts and American presents, Hutchins mourns the

state of Western culture after the Second World War, maintaining that the autonomy of the canon should redeem mankind from its folly.

Essentially, the canon is the directive of an interpretative community struggling to remain objective as it wields an unbridled authority over the reader. With regard to the many questions about cultural beliefs and secular objectives, inner strength and exterior security, and individual and collective memory that canonic archives kindle, the belief in interpretative empowerment remains controversial. Since the texts aspire to go beyond the issue of a collective that rallies around a specific admiration for Western civilization, they also become an allegory for the many flaws characterizing modernity. At once profane and sacred, Hutchins' stance is mixed in unholy confusion with the primeval, given that the technological advancements of the Western World counteract a cultural origin that has long been forgotten. Hence, the proponents of the Great Books search for the constellation between the present moment and obscured fragments from the past that are torn out of their original contexts; these, then, represent the hidden source of textual authenticity within the profane mnemonics of a post-modern global society that commands a broad ensemble of media opportunities. Once again, this dialectic between old and new is reminiscent of Kafka's legacy to a world confronted by the loss of authority, given that "like the haggadic parts of the Talmud, these books, too, are stories; they are a Haggadah that constantly pauses, luxuriating in the most detailed descriptions, in the simultaneous hope and fear that it might encounter the halachic order, the doctrine itself, en route" (Benjamin 2001, 496). For Benjamin and Hutchins, the space in which form and content, literature and dogma converge can only be the revelation of a messianic truth that emboldens Western cultural traditions.

Archive Fever and Derrida's archive beyond the archive

In contradiction to the mnemonic autonomy that is inscribed in Hutchins' *Great Books of the Western World*, Derrida expresses misgivings about the mnemotechnical conclusiveness of the archive as an agent of cultural memory, arguing in *Archive Fever* that the texts "will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of the originary and structural breakdown" (Derrida 1996, 11) of the commemorative process. A latent force working from some remote venue, the genuine archive or the fever that launches the visible repository becomes a subconscious longing for memorization, repetition, reproduction, and re-impression. As Derrida teaches us, the term is derived from the Greek *arkheion* and means house,

dwelling, or address. Moreover, it was used to denote the residence of the higher magistrates, the archons, who were not only entrusted with the physical security of the documents deposited in their homes, but were also accorded the privilege of consulting and interpreting them. Situated in a liminal space between the private and public sector, archontic power incorporates the “functions of unification, of identification, of classification” and reveals the human infatuation with consignation. On the one hand, a form of written proof, on the other, something presupposing a hermeneutic authority, consignation is often misunderstood as “a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration” (Derrida 1996, 3).

Although the act of consignation involves gathering objects together, these are usually nothing more than signs, since almost any object can be transformed into a signifier if it represents something other than itself. A collection of signs implies that the material elements of the archive are correlated to arbitrary meanings. Formally, this characteristic of the archive is receptive enough that what might or might not be included in the repository can be adapted to new meanings. However, the consequence is that the configuration of signs is by no means a synchrony, an ordered storage area, but a myth, since the signs are often lodged in an interstitial, indeterminate space that is as fertile as it is inchoate. “Institutive and conservative,” the dialectic of consignation becomes “revolutionary and traditional. An *eco-nomic* archive in this double sense: it keeps, it puts in reserve, it saves, but in an unnatural fashion, that is to say in making the law (*nomos*) or in making people respect the law” (Derrida 1996, 7). Included in these explanations of archival space are political, social, and economic deliberations, as well as the misconception that the logos has a direct impact on how the signs in the repository are collected, salvaged, and interpreted.

The archive’s sole obligation is to leave a trace, one that is decipherable for future generations, but this obligation also requires that the traces take part in a never-ending process of displacement and suppression. By the same token, both displacement and suppression embolden the prolongation of the act of writing, since generating signs “inflects archive desire or fever” as well as the tendency of the signs to liberate the future, “their dependency with respect to what will come, in short, all that ties knowledge and memory to promise” (Derrida 1996, 30). According to Derrida, an unrelenting drive to derive artifacts and new meanings from the repository of signs taps into an invisible archive behind or underlying the archives perceptible to the collective. This demonstrates that the

inexorable inscriptions of the sign collector do not serve the purpose of launching a “concept,” but rather an “impression through the unstable feeling of a shifting figure, of a schema, or of an in-finite or indefinite process” (Derrida 1996, 29). The promise with regard to what will come, then, is the point at which Derrida’s understanding of the textual artifact takes on messianic qualities. Counter to Hutchins’ canon, Derrida’s archive targets a constitutive plurality, mnemonically capable of sustaining a centrifugal movement of styles, expressions, and instruments with which the memory process distances itself from exclusive monocultures: ontologically bridging pasts with a surplus of meanings and presents lacking a vocabulary for recollection, and aesthetically attuned to an endless variety of semantic and syntactic options. The archive reveals itself as a liminal space that is not a diagonal between two points, but a zone of unlimited dissemination, which impresses its public as a theater of ideas. The zone is imbued with a theatrical, performative and iconic quality, because it invites the audience to cross the threshold into a memory space integrating pasts and presents, what has been told and what the future might hold in store. Based upon an iconicity that exploits mankind’s desire to play with the ingredients of memory, Derrida’s plurality of archival meanings stands in opposition to the remoteness of the Great Books project. Intentionally opaque, the canonic trajectory safeguards the texts from clashing with unsolicited signifiers and confronting the erosion of memory in the global perspective. Braced to withstand transatlantic challenges, Hutchins’ books become monuments that abrogate any responsibility to acknowledge how volatile cultures of memory can be. From a Derridean standpoint the aporia is that canonic traditions, which, in their archival form, should be the most supple, self-referential, and unrepressed medium of cultural recollection, are subject to authoritarian treatment. Attempting to counteract the loss of cultural memory by stipulating which meanings are valid and which are not, this rigid practice only succeeds in jeopardizing the mnemonic vitality of the archive.

Conclusion

The dialectics underlying Hutchins’ closed canon and Derrida’s open archive are also central to Pierre Nora’s cultural theories. They are based on a criticism of the acceleration of historical thought in modern societies, in which the narrative of the individual has become indistinct and living memory has been usurped by history. Acceleration “confronts us with the brutal realization of the difference between real memory—social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called

primitive or archaic societies—and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past” (Nora 1994). Brought about by an increase in temporal velocity, the provocations find themselves subsumed in the formation of a social order that the doctrine of progress has subjected to a loss of tradition. Nora’s sites of memory, the central figure around which his theory is constructed, form an exception to this trend, since they entail a material, a functional, and a symbolic dimension. In their polyvalent materialization as texts, buildings, rituals, and museums, they compensate for the mnemonic deficiencies besetting global societies today and for the demise of memory in modernity. Moreover, *lieux de mémoire* acquiesce to this loss in a dual sense of the word by commemorating the temporality of a particular object and by memorializing the collapse of collective memory itself. Nora himself likens the spatiotemporal overdetermination of sites of memory to a kaleidoscope of objects that have been given the task of forging political identities. Hence, the interaction between history and memory in Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* takes on significance only when the mnemonic factors—object and meaning on a phenomenological level, forgetting and remembering on an epistemological level—begin to resonate with one another.

Consistent with Nora, canonic archives are stimulated by an eschatologic drive that envisions death and forgetting as something that can be eradicated and laid to rest. However, since the death drive evokes aggression and destruction, “it not only incites forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory, as *mnēme* or *anamnēsis*, but also commands the radical effacement, in truth the eradication, of that which can never be reduced to *mnēme* or to *anamnēsis*, that is, the archive, consignment, the documentary or monumental *hypomnēma*, mnemotechnical supplement or representative, auxiliary or memorandum” (Derrida 1996, 11). Although archives motivate a loss of memory through eradication, effacement, and censure, they also control the memory process, and every act of control which reinforces canonic autonomy is an act of suppression. If importance is placed on a liberal arts program as a mnemonic practice that both reifies a storage area for collective memory and regulates latent subcultures resisting mnemonic governance, then the real question is: what happens to the excess or clandestine signs that arise in the process of reading and writing? Reconfiguring the mnemonic repository insinuates that the signs circulate in new constellations, and their signifying potential either necessitates adaptation to the pride and prejudice inherent in prevailing traditions or triggers open resistance to the instruments of memory, be they canons, archives, *lieux de mémoire*, or iconic books.

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