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The Encyclopedia, the Dictionary, and Ordering and Compiling in the Enlightenment: A Brief Literature Review

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Abstract: This paper is a compact literature review of the history of the evolution of encyclopedias and dictionaries through the Enlightenment period. An attempt has been made to create an engaging narrative that will help students to internalize the trajectory of the encyclopedia and the dictionary, beginning from the print revolution and leading up to the adoption of the encyclopedia and its quirks by the institution of the university.

Keywords: Literature Review, Encyclopedism, Dictionary, Encyclopedia, Literary Historiography.

Introduction: Any attempt at literary historiography aims to gather a sense of the continuities and discontinuities among histories. These continuities, discontinuities, similarities, and differences help classify works of literature into periods and movements in chronological time. Processes of evaluation, inclusion, and exclusion then result in a literary canon that claims authority and legitimacy for itself — the literary canon functions as a plane of visibility for texts that overcome the hurdles of selective traditions. The same logic applies to the literatures of the *epistemic canon*, albeit with several additional hurdles. The print revolution "made books cheap and plentiful, such that "it was no longer so essential to be a wandering scholar" to consult different books (Eisenstein 47). The standardized and uniform nature of print led to the standardization of texts, and as a result, different people in different locales could now turn to the same page of the same book in the very same font. This ready accessibility of books meant that "the era of the glossator and commentator came to an end", and that of intense cross-referencing of texts began (Eisenstein 47). The web of books wove a web of knowledge, which now seemed concretized in its material residue. With the proliferation of print in the Age of Reason (late 17th to early 19th century) and the rising desire to achieve full human potentiality as the Enlightenment erudite *homo universalis*, various knowledge aids emerged — journals, lexica, and periodicals, all of which started to be seen as inseparable from their respective sciences, almost as stand in for the knowledge they reproduced. This was a clear case of knowledge being conflated with the "technologies of knowledge" (Wellmon 77).

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Fig. 1. Stacked Britannicas in a library, the quintessential picture of knowledge. "Books on brown wooden shelf" by Clay Banks.

The Enlightenment period's scholarly "empire of erudition" envisioned a virtual world of *unified*, *homogenous*, and *authoritative* knowledge accessible equally to all literate persons. True knowledge became conflated with material knowledge "in and of print" and its deft usage (Wellmon 77). Scholars set to work on creating compendia to nourish future polymaths. Of these, the *encyclopedia* was the foremost. The encyclopedia was a novel way of producing, organizing, and sharing knowledge, showcasing that capacity especially in its alphabetically arranged references to other printed books. In referencing thus the encyclopedic text became a network of printed texts that drew attention to the collation of knowledge pathways in print.

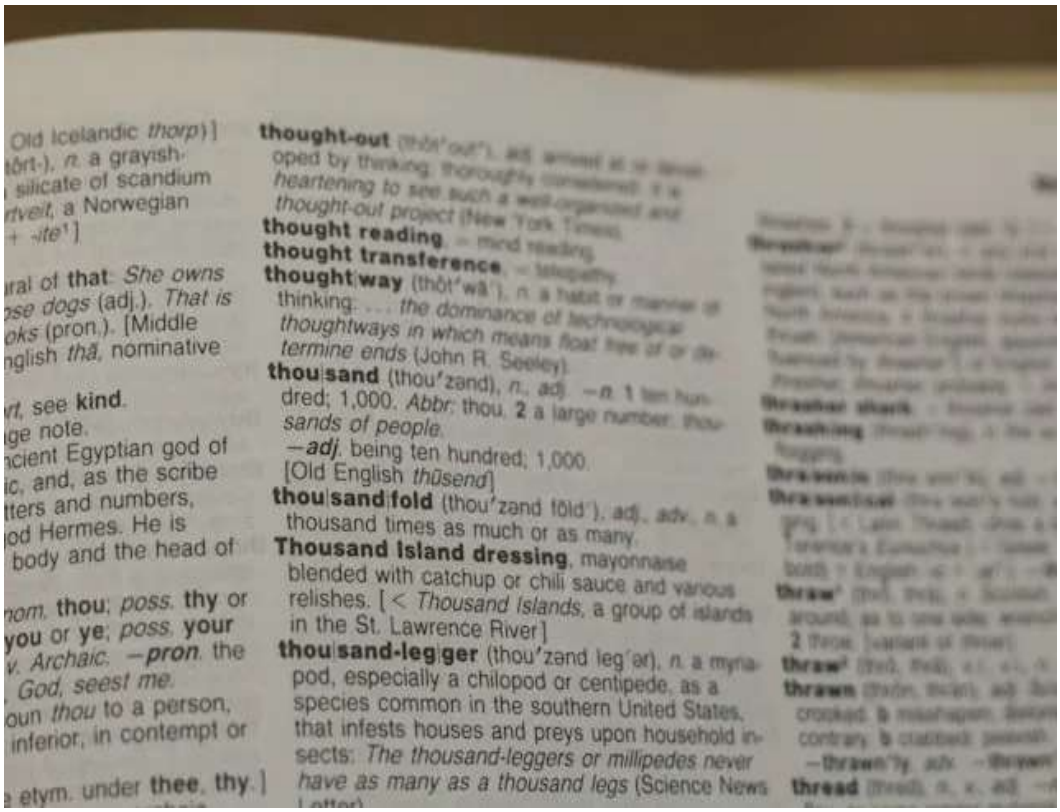
It simultaneously "sought to present an accessible and immediately visible display of knowledge to its erudite citizens" (Wellmon 46). For a significant period, this "display of knowledge" took the route of a superficial (in hindsight) compilation of unrelated information, arranged according to alphabetical order. While this method of ordering information works well even today in the case of the *concise* genre of the *dictionary*, which extricated itself from its enmeshment with the encyclopedic, for the encyclopedia, it meant a naïve compilation of facts or data such that knowledge disintegrated into information. This is because the

encyclopedia promised the reader the "entirety of erudition" in a *comprehensive* manner. It promised the reader, an aspiring erudite, *complete* knowledge. Knowledge is always distinct from information, because "[k]nowledge refers to ideas and facts that a human mind has internalized and understood… Acquiring knowledge means absorbing a lot of information" (Headrick 4). The composition of any encyclopedic work necessarily involves the compilation and ordering of *data* into a nourishing compilation, i.e. knowledge. The compiling process is a double operation; as information/texts undergo *selection*, there occurs a concurrent *deletion* of the unselected information/texts from the plane of visibility. The manner of compiling could be innocuous and based on the type of readership experienced by the specific text.

For instance, the aforementioned example, the dictionary, might carry out many fundamental exclusions in its terseness, but this is not the function of villainous intent; simply that the intended readership — the educated public — desires "access to *current* information organized for [quick and] efficient retrieval" (Headrick 143). Encyclopedic compiling processes also carry out selections of *what counts* as knowledge; legitimizing certain knowledge systems and rejecting others from epistemic traditions. "Secret or hermetic knowledge, such as alchemy, Latin texts, and craft secrets, was challenged by open and accessible knowledge provided by newspapers, encyclopedias, and public lectures in vernacular languages" (Headrick 11). Concurrently, encyclopedic works such as Johann H. Zedler's *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste* (1732-54) carried out a "Baconian expansion of knowledge", foregrounding the mechanical arts above the established scientific disciplines of law, medicine, theology, metaphysics, etc. (Wellmon 80). Zedler's encyclopedic work was erected out of the cooperative effort of various masters of varied fields and sought to comprehensively — and in a complete fashion — collect already established knowledge rather than produce newer epistemic or scientific discourses.

As a result, the *Universal-Lexicon* along with its famed French successor *Encyclopédie* (1751-72) and other such works fixated on completeness turned quickly obsolete under the rapid epistemic and scientific discoveries of the voracious Age of Reason. "Culture persists for ages, but most information is ephemeral" (Headrick 143). *Britannica* and *Brockhaus*, who were lazy in their commitment to the comprehensive, thus endure. This is despite the encyclopedia's sixteenth-century roots as "the circle or course of learning" i.e., "a curriculum" and "collective knowledge of a community" (Wellmon 79). The encyclopedia's (and the dictionary's) value as an "information retrieval device" was in the "arrangement of the entries, whether thematic or alphabetical, and such tools as indexes and cross-references" (Headrick 143). It follows that such a work would refuse to include or reference texts *not considered* knowledgeable, especially those that may not partake in the cross-referencing tradition. Another negative point of the encyclopedic compilation system is that *anonymous tracts* face erasure. This applies extensively to women's works, with some variation caused by those writing under pseudonyms. For example, Harry Blamires' "A Short History of English Literature" (1974), a literary history encyclopedic excludes the works of many female writers and altogether ignores entries for others, the foremost of the exclusion being Mary Wollstonecraft, whose husband's memoir of her has an entry for arbitrary reasons. This

arbitrariness was also present in earlier encyclopedics. Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert addressed the many different organizations of knowledge possible based on the author's point-of-view and stressed that no knowledge system was free of the arbitrariness caused by the author's individual choice (Wellmon 84).


Old Icelandic *thorp*)]
tôrt-), *n.* a grayish-
silicate of scandium
rtveit, a Norwegian
+ *-ite*¹]

ural of **that**. *She owns*
ose dogs (adj.). *That is*
oks (pron.). [Middle
nglish *thā*, nominative

rt, see **kind**.
ge note.
ncient Egyptian god of
ic, and, as the scribe
tters and numbers,
od Hermes. He is
body and the head of

nom. **thou**; *poss.* **thy** or
you or **ye**; *poss.* **your**
v. Archaic. —***pron.*** the
God, seest me.
oun *thou* to a person,
inferior, in contempt or

etym. under **thee**, **thy**.]

thought-out (thôt′out′), adj. arrived at or devel-
oped by thinking thoroughly considered: *It is*
heartening to see such a well-organized and
thought-out project (New York Times).
thought reading, — mind reading.
thought transference, — telepathy.
thought|way (thôt′wā′), *n.* a habit or manner of
thinking: *. . . the dominance of technological*
thoughtways in which means float free of or de-
termine ends (John R. Seeley).
thou|sand (thou′zənd), *n., adj.* —*n.* 1 ten hun-
dred; 1,000. *Abbr:* thou. 2 a large number: *thou-*
sands of people.
—*adj.* being ten hundred; 1,000.
[Old English *thūsend*]
thou|sand|fold (thou′zənd fōld′), adj., adv., *n.* a
thousand times as much or as many.
Thousand Island dressing, mayonnaise
blended with catchup or chili sauce and various
relishes. [< *Thousand Islands*, a group of islands
in the St. Lawrence River]
thou|sand-leg|ger (thou′zənd leg′ər), *n.* a myria-
pod, especially a chilopod or centipede, as a
species common in the southern United States,
that infests houses and preys upon household in-
sects: *The thousand-leggers or millipedes never*
have as many as a thousand legs (Science News

Fig. 2. The arbitrariness of selections leads to a simultaneity of arbitrary deletions. "Text" by Joshua Hoehne.

The hyperproliferation of books in the Age of Reason caused "book plagues" and "book floods" which catalyzed an Enlightenment exhaustion. As writers came to terms with the fact that an authoritative "unity of knowledge" was impossible to achieve in an encyclopedic because of the immediately subsequent threats to their organization, encyclopedias diverged into two distinct categories, with two concepts of encyclopedic knowledge: one that dealt with *detailed particulars*, and the other that dealt with the *general whole*. The *material encyclopedia* and the *formal encyclopedia* came to be and were geared toward different consumers. The material encyclopedia with its excess of information appealed to the polymath and the curious, and the formal encyclopedia, focused on the systematic

genealogy of a discourse/science, was directed towards the student/scholar, especially those contiguous with the university.

The formal encyclopedia, such as Johann Joachim Eschenburg's *Textbook for a Wissenschaftskunde: A Compendium of Encyclopedic Lectures* (1792), aimed to formalize disciplines of study. Eschenburg's *Textbook* was an isagogic attempt at a systematic description of the sciences and desired to produce in the student a unity of cognition of science as a whole. It was adopted for study in encyclopedia lecture courses at the University of Jena (Wellmon 91-2, 97). Formal encyclopedias had as mnemotechnic devices their divisions of categories and topics. The "networked canon of print authority" was a technology for forming "particular types of people" who embodied the "scientific spirit" of the Enlightenment (Wellmon 89). As formal encyclopedias attached themselves to university courses, the print norms of the encyclopedia became the scholarly norms of the university. The distinction between the common person and the scholar became the ability to base judgment on "basic principles that are rationally communicable. The scientific character [*Wissenschaftlichkeit*] of a particular science is a function of the extent to which it pursues its particular "material" from objective principles that are theoretically available to all and can be disseminated and replicated" (Wellmon 99). That is to say that the unity of print paved the way for the unity of method.

Such was the *encyclopedic revolution*.

While the encyclopedia gestured at things, the dictionary defined words. There existed the literary dictionary that "explained words common to works of literature", and was characteristic of countries of Romance languages (Headrick 144). There was also the French Academy, which ordered words by their etymological roots, fit for scholars. However, the Enlightenment increase in information necessitated "the development of scientific taxonomy, cartography, lexicography, statistics", etc. (Headrick 11). The increased access to education during the Industrial Revolution meant that knowledge must be codified systematically. "The time it takes to obtain and use the relevant information puts a premium on the efficiency with which it is organized" (Headrick 6). This meant that the dictionary increased in size and sales. Ordering processes classified and organized the overabundance of information into alphabetically accessible, easily retrievable miniatures (Rudy 3). The French academicians' abstract concept of a certain language as "perfection" and "excellence", "and what Dumarsais called "good usage" were clearly the linguistic representations of the social structure of the Old Regime" (Headrick 146). This lofty ideal had to make way for the language *useful* to the people. At this stage, the tension between cohesiveness and comprehensiveness becomes unsolvable.

This is due to the incorrect and infertile assumption that "complete" is a monolith. The manner of compiling and ordering makes each "complete" or encyclopedic work suited to a particular type of reader. "Complete is always already ironic and typically indicative of a mass-market rather than scholarly appeal" (Rudy 5). Ordering an encyclopedia alphabetically would leave the reader with a text more incomplete than an alphabetically arranged dictionary; a

thematically arranged encyclopedia appears to be more comprehensive. "In purely quantitative terms, Cooper's universal pocket-book [1740] necessarily contained altogether less content than Harris's universal dictionary [1708-44], but with respect to mobility, affordability, and comprehensibility, it may well have been more useful to some readers and therefore more complete" (Rudy 7). The material encyclopedia, such as Zedler's *Universal-Lexicon,* with its eclectic offering that includes "arcana as necromancy, chiromancy, witchcraft, etc.", may be best suited to the curious and the philonoist; the formal encyclopedia to the student and the teacher; the etymological and literary dictionary to the linguists and littérateurs, and so on (Headrick 155). Today's dictionaries and encyclopedias combine thematic and alphabetical arrangements, *link* every category, and serve each everyperson. In this, it is aided by the World Wide Web.

Seth Rudy formulates the proposition that it was the enduring pursuit of "complete" knowledge across genres of the ancient and early modern epics alongside the "discursive works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries [that] advanced the separation of encyclopedism from epic poetry, epic poems from novels, literature from "Literature," and the sciences from the humanities", establishing the now commonplace "distinctions between "high" and "low," ephemeral and eternal, useful and useless" (1). Epics and other literary works alongside encyclopedias and dictionaries work as a *database* (Rudy's term) of our pasts. The juxtaposition of "subjective" literary works with "objective" information systems draws attention to the narrativized nature of (literary) history. "[A] host of writers and titles made similar attempts to identify, collect, and preserve what *they deemed* the true and worthwhile parts of human knowledge and literary history even as they changed, added to, and became part of the past they captured" (Rudy 3, italics mine). Literary historiography grapples with different positions on historical literary cultures: the *ideal*, the *documentary*, and the *social* (Williams 32). While ideal views of literary cultures are conjured by stringent selections, the texts themselves provide the documentary and even the social screenshots of culture, if only one looks intently enough.

Just as the text is located and pinned to a chronological period and historicized, the materiality, mediality, or digitality of the text concomitantly carries a residual narrative of the time of its composition. The data that escapes our naked eyes can be caught by "the [information] systems used to transform information from one form into another and to display it in a new way… [such as] turning narrative descriptions into lists, lists into statistical tables, statistics into graphs, or graphs into three-dimensional objects" (Headrick 5). This digital, distant reading is undertaken by Rudy when he tabulates and graphs the exponential increase of "complete" works, as well as Franco Moretti in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005) where he analyzes the 18th-century British novel similarly. After all, no technological supplement is negligible enough to be casually dismissed in the pursuit of complete knowledge. Then, we might see the missing intertexts in the epistemic and literary canons becoming visible.

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