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“Appearance of the world, disappearance of coherence”
—Lyn Hejinian, The Unfollowing

Librarians and poets are fatuous experts on everything. Both have had frequent recourse to information theories ranging from cybernetics to semiotics and from corporate parsimonies to hermetic correspondences. I wanted to start a movement, LIBRARIANS AGAINST INFORMATION, in solidarity with POETS AGAINST LITERATURE. Instead, I wrote this essay, borrowing a dilapidated conceit: Russell Ackoff’s so-called Wisdom Pyramid. Picture a triangle, laterally stratified, hierarchic and vaguely hieratic: from bottom to top, the steps are Data, Information, Knowledge, and Wisdom.¹ Imagine this as poetry. I tried, playing sorts with whatever came to hand, heaping questions, tweaking answers and scattering rubble.

DATA/POLLEN/NOISE

Look ‘em up: Contingent, material, sensible (if unsensed), countable (if countless), transfers of earthly earth never worldly, data are for example before example, overample, peaks and valleys of a first fricative in its groundless granularity. Data are both irreducible particles and indigestible enormities: like, information’s atoms, or information before differentiation, dissolute but reactive: bumps but not phrenology, illegible bumps, maybe words before we read them, maybe our infinite to-read lists, maybe lemuers, wergild, and pleroma. Up-to-date librarians have fallen into data with characteristic obsequiousness, dragging along traditions of metadata classification which were always already knowledge obverted into facile authoritarian wisdom.

Poets, with characteristic stubbornness and lazy stride, have always inhabited a world of data — but I must mean two incompatible kinds of data. Data resist the intelligence almost successfully. Poets should resist success almost intelligently. Librarians should use data to hold knowledge at bay. At bay is in clover, we love data, and data anyway are inevitable and not the problem. Data—singular, a sort of swarm, sometimes big, sometimes raw, prey to lots of misleading cognitive and neural analogies — is the problem for librarians. And for poets — everything can compose, but nobody can keep up with the grand composition.

Data seems to answer our voraciousness, becoming singular the more plural we try to get. We can’t help scanning it for messages or a message: Don’t think, look; or Don’t look now.

And by the time you’re doing anything with data it’s already something else. Data is an abstraction of abstractions, metametaphor posing as ultimate concreteness. Before data, the reigning metaphor was pollen\textsuperscript{2}, favored by Novalis who gathered stray Pollen and Fragments, and by Aimé Césaire who invented the most astonishing metadata field:

\begin{quote}
Desert, desert, I endure your challenge
blank to be filled out on the passport of pollen.\textsuperscript{3}
\end{quote}

If not pollen on the desert winds, it’s noise we talk about. Not noises — winds, sands — since this metaphor works to push aside, for now, all questions of differentiation or message, as in Gregory Bateson’s truism: “All that is not information, not redundancy, not form and not restraints — is noise, the only possible source of new patterns.”\textsuperscript{4} Aggregate noise rushed in when we needed it (hegemonic we), mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century when telecommunications metastasized into computing. But to a different we, we who love noise, the figure — the ground — is still vivid. What’s unanticipated and unpatterned gives place and impulse to patterning.


\textbf{INFORMATION, OR BERRYPICKING}

“Mops” is a poem in that it invites play. Helplessly, of course, you start playing or informing as soon as two words appear. Attempts to reverse-engineer language into raw noise backfire yielding imaginary verbs, germinating pollen. The Wisdom Pyramid’s nonsense, but the jump from nonsense into redundancy, bewilderment into composition, matters if poetry and libraries are sites for living, rather than naively instrumental conduits of information (or expression). Don’t understand but experience, use information. From

\begin{itemize}
\item Pollen is another singular noun that should really be plural — unless it’s the Greek pollen aporian, which I need to look up. (I did. As I vaguely recalled, it means a problem without a solution. Google Books informs me that Aristotle used this phrase in reference to both the reproduction of honeybees and the location of phantasmal images within the soul.)
\item Gregory Bateson, “Cybernetic Explanation,” in \textit{Steps to an Ecology of Mind} (New York: Ballantine, 1972): 410. Redundancy is cybernetics jargon for whatever is part of some recognizable pattern and therefore “restrains” or limits the possibilities elsewhere in the same system.
\item James Yeary, “Mops,” in \textit{Rolling in the Easy Circumstances} by James Yeary and Sam Lohmann (n.p.: Great Fainting Spells, 2012), [6].
\end{itemize}
library discourse I’m tempted to borrow the term “sense-making,” emphasizing (I wish librarians would) an active making in all senses (all 27, beloved Anna Blume!)

My favorite sense-making right now is this Art Ensemble of Chicago record, Full Force, a hand-me-down from my mother-in-law. I listen over and over. The whole thing’s a complex, heterogeneous concord, full of gradual or sudden moments of sense, making separate lines gather and correspond into a given shape from diverging tunes. Ending Side 1, the lumpy sprawl of the first track, “Magg Zelma,” full of ghostly cackles and counterspiraling noisy layers, suddenly clenches into the 45-second fanfare “Care Free,” which seems to transpose and compress the whole foregoing meander into a single (however duplicitous, wayward and gappy) declarative melody.

The 1980 album seems to study the transition two decades earlier from late bebop to free jazz — as if an evolution could be replayed synchronically. By 1980 the polemical experiment of free collective improvisation no longer had to push against entrenched traditions — it was tradition — and could be understood as cognitive, aesthetic experience, conversation emerging as an ensemble of noisers gathers up its possible musics, ear against ear and moment to moment: like Bach’s “reasonable men in an orderly discussion,” with parameters of order and ratio thrown far afield: the best evidence I’ve found lately of human intelligences acting collectively.

Another sense-making: Whit Griffin’s poetry of information, which quilts together shreds of lapsed wisdom from countless sources, conjuring a choral arcane out of dusty, lively libraries. Each shred’s a marvel in itself, but it’s the stitches that fascinate:

| The starling’s bill turns from black to yellow. The Athenians wore golden grasshoppers in their hair. Hearn tells us the Dorians wrote on toadstools. The shaggy-cap melts drop by drop. The grouse grows appendages on its toes to aid walking in winter. As the halcyon nests about the time of the winter solstice. The Sphinx was the daughter of Echidna and Typhon.6

The reader, entering anywhere, gets pulled both forwards and back by a relational prosody. Maybe this is what library literature calls a “visceral information need” or, in Marcia Bates’s metaphor, information-seeking as berrypicking.7 Berry to berry or starling to Typhon we’ve drifted far from the simplistic signal/noise model, foundational for information and library discourses since it was proposed — in military and corporate telecommunications contexts — by Claude Shannon in the 1940s. But the action of “redundancy” still matters — filtering, sorting, transforming. I still like the pragmatic openness of Bateson’s non-

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6 Whit Griffin, We Who Saw Everything (Brooklyn: The Cultural Society, 2015), 93.
definition: any "difference which makes a difference," within a given system, *informs.*

BEWILDERMENT, OR USEFUL KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge is data’s delirium, where the pyramid begins to mushroom. Just as data and information, on the signal/noise model, became paradigmatic in the postwar military-industrial information rush, the next tier was canonized in the 1980s: knowledge conceived as mechanical economy, as in knowledge creation, knowledge management, knowledge banking. The Wisdom Pyramid, popularized at this point, essentially adds a layer or two of neoliberal management-mysticism to the information discourse. At our most pompous and self-regarding, librarians have seen ourselves as guardians of knowledge. Poets characteristically claim to guard something even more totalizing: language itself — whether as termites, clownfish, or unlegislated acknowledgers.

But there’s Césaire’s magnificent essay “Poetry and Knowledge.” And Robin Blaser’s vocation to uncover knowledge loosed from predatory positivisms. For Césaire, poetry’s knowledge embodies the “individual whole”—a situated microcosm, participating among others in what must be a magic ecology, imaginal, like Blaser’s Image-Nations or José Lezama Lima’s imaginary eras. Césaire writes: “What presides over the poem is not the most lucid intelligence, or the most acute sensibility, but an entire experience… the most extraordinary contacts: all the pasts, all the futures (the anticyclone builds its plateau, the amoeba loses its pseudopods, vanished vegetations meet). All the flux, all the rays.”

I don't have these poets’ polymath brilliance and prefer to claim not knowledge through poetry but bewilderment in poetry, following Fanny Howe. If knowledge is information put to work by understanding, bewilderment is where understanding struggles, among irreconcilable informations and wild data, to dwell and participate in the out-of-phase goosegabble village, the real. If bewilderment is a form of wisdom, wisdom isn’t the facility Ackoff proposed. Bewilderment’s wisdom is hazardous and forlorn like trying to write poems in a library — but why be grandiose? It’s only the commotion of composition — Gertrude Stein’s “human mind” activity, distinct from “human nature.”

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8 Bateson, “Form, substance and difference,” in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 453.
12 Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge,” xlvii-xlvi.
Words convey meanings, but only within a constrained universe of differences that make differences — whether cosmic or particulate. Stein foresees “Mops”:

I found that any kind of a book if you read with glasses on and somebody is cutting your hair and so you cannot keep your glasses on and you use your glasses as a magnifying glass and so read word by word reading word by word makes the writing that is not anything be something.

Very regrettable but very true.14

In composition — as opposed to communication — each word bewilders by bringing many kinds of information to a focus.

Not only the semantic and symbolic meanings, but all the sonic and graphic qualities of words start to nudge and taste each other. Prosody is present to them all. Among poets this is vapid shop talk, but could it usefully divert or block the library information-to-knowledge conduit? What would happen if, instead of Ackoff’s abstracted and at best “actionable” currency, library workers had Césaire’s cosmological, processual knowledge in mind? Flare-ups of bewilderment? Or an ecology of attention? I like to imagine a personism of librarianship after Frank O’Hara, with bewilderment, knowledge or words Lucky-Pierre-style between two people not two pages.15

LIBRARY AS DRAGON

But I may have broken the context. Stein’s next sentence rejects any nostalgia for wholes: “So that shows to you that the whole thing is not interesting because as a whole well as a whole there has to be remembering and forgetting, but one at a time, oh one at a time is something oh yes definitely something.” Stein’s human mind never remembers: “it knows and it writes what it knows.”16 Spontaneous knowledge! What about meaning without redundancy, that is without pattern and without memory — is that just noise, an excessive openness or even attachment to what isn’t a signal?

Bateson, adapting Shannon, reduced information to redundancies: mutually delimiting possibilities within a given “universe.” Donald Case, distorting Bateson’s context, stipulates that information’s differences should make differences to “a conscious, human mind.”17 Does that help? Alluringly, cybernetics renders everything schematic, but everything, without precluding the information present in tone, texture and tune (you just gotta ask the right universe). Again there’s a jump or pop between levels, figured by H.D.’s painter “who

concentrated on one tuft of pine branch with its brown cone until every needle bore to every other one, a clear relationship like a drawing of a later mechanical twentieth century bridge builder.”

Or by Lezama: “The fascinations of those archetypal groupings, of the magnetizing that convokes in order to flee from the whirl that must be reduced to the law of its structure.” Lezama, with his enigmas of image, is moving to the center. His essay “Confluences” investigates what he calls *supernature*, quoting Pascal: “Since true nature has been lost, everything can be nature.” Lezama contrasts the “determinism of nature” with “the total freedom of the image” figured in a childhood memory of “that room, library, storeroom, resting place for wayward things,” where he perceived “all the sparks of an unseen forge.”

Which develops into *the library as dragon*, the “defensive labyrinth” of poetry’s resistance:

> There, in solitude, one seeks company, and more specifically in public libraries, where company seeks solitude. The struggle against the dragon had to take place in the ceaseless relationships between solitude and company.... And just as it is claimed in some medieval legend that the devil likes to sleep in the shadow of a bell tower, so the uncreated that creates likes to spend the day in the library, because the library has begun by being something unheard, unseen, and thus nature will be found in *supernature*.

I find this eerily comforting if not quite comprehensible. I’d place it beside opening to Lisa Robertson’s essay on noise: “I wanted the present to be an ideal library. Infinity, plenum, chaos, dust. I wanted it to be an agora — total availability of the entire thick history of linguistic conviviality and the ability to be completely lost in the strangeness of civic description.” Robertson suggests the library is a city and defines *city* as “a peopled-through sensing.” So in place of “wisdom” comes the image of the library — peopled-through, disquiet, indiscriminate, bedragoned — that abdicates its authority to let polyphony in.

**UNFOLLOWING UNUNDERSTANDING, OR SCRATCHES ON THE RECORD**

Poetry might teach librarians to see information as not only social, but sociable. In associating, it also resists, doubling, disobeying—*unfollowing*, to use Lyn Hejinian’s recent coinage, the title of a work built painstakingly of non-sequiturs. Some reject the noisy excess of non-sequitur as a loss of focus, as in Mary Butts’ characterization: “Voluble and mobile, Ambrose had a trick of statement, one to each sentence, followed by a denial, a reversal of it in the next. So that which seemed, sentence by sentence, to be a vivid reaction

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to life, cancelled out to nothing. To no belief at all.”

But Hejinian pursues the unfollowing precisely as a vivid reaction to death. Hilarity and uncertainty, she makes clear, are indices of loss.

Laughter is encrypted grief, but grief is encrypted laughter, too

... The sun burns every story to a crisp and leaves only a lisp, or lapse, palsy, panic or a princess pointing at something across another now

... The sociable book is ample and uninhibited, unashamed of its jolly idiosyncracies, unembarrassed by its infuriated sentimentality — o lucky sociable book off the shelf

... Survival can’t wait

In place of a monument or wisdom as such: Noise, resistance, mourning, static, pollen, dust.

Noise as record. Reference as resistance. Robertson: “Noise exceeds its own identity. It is the extreme of difference. Noise is the non-knowledge of meaning, the by-product of economies.”

Nathaniel Mackey: “...I accept it all, even the scratches and the nicks, the points on the record where the needle skips. Noisy reminders of the wear of time they may well be, but I hear them as rickety, quixotic rungs on a discontinuous ladder...”

The omnivorous poet, amateur de toutes les choses (Lezama, quoting La Fontaine) or “scientist of the whole” (Robert Kelly), basketweaving or berrypicking, eats noise, churns dust like butter.

Can we love archives while rejecting institutional triumphalism? I deliriate about librarianship as a deliberation with ghosts, guarding not knowledge but tangles of gaps, animadversions, unbeliefs, forked tongues and invisible sparks. Can we imagine information unpatterned, or ask, with Morton Feldman, Why Patterns? Listening to Feldman’s trio I can only find it demandingly patterned; irregular, but no more so than Stanley Whitney’s grids or the hand-woven kilim Feldman loved to stare at. Robertson again: “The rhythmic opacity of noise or the body or the city fails or exceeds its measure. Listening leans expectantly towards a pattern that is effacing itself...”

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“Understanding” is sometimes wedged between knowledge and wisdom, so now I want blasphemously to bring in Jack Spicer’s word *ununderstanding* from “A Textbook of Poetry”: another one-word sentence, another imaginary verb: “A private language. Carried about us, them. Ununderstanding.” But surely ununderstanding, like language, takes two, and is no more private than the *sense-making* (Brenda Dervin) or *formulation* (Carroll C. Kuhlthau) that teaching librarians make a holy grail of. Much less has been made of Bateson’s astonishing definition of wisdom: “a sense or recognition of the fact of circuitry” needed, in an ecology of “circuit structures,” for love to survive.  

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30 “Style, grace and information in primitive art,” in Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 146.
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