

pruning

Libraries fill me with a deep, existential dread. Finding a book that piques my interest is more than a happy accident, its a welcome salvation from nihilism. Finding that book isn't a random walk, its a feedback loop. It's curation, no? The brain receives signals from the books it sees, performs motor functions, reinforces its synaptic topology by choosing the book. How important is your personal curation? How much of your thought is this curation?

My dad has the greenest of thumbs; growing up, I used to prune bonsai with him. There are certain shears for different tasks, and we would strip the plastic coating off old copper wire to pull branches closer together or further apart. Some of his oldest trees--older than me, he'd say--have swallowed their wires as if to show ownership of them. The wires that had given them shape were now part of the their selves forever. From our perspective, pruning and regrowth shapes the overall aesthetic of the tree. But bonsai practice isn't forcing a tree into a certain shape, but *finding* the shape of the particular tree. The bonsai needs years to grow in the pot before its shape can present itself. The tree is never a *tabula rasa*, but holds its shape within it. The pruner's job is to accentuate, to polish that form not unlike a jeweler or a lens grinder...



In his [essais](#), Montaigne describes standing in his library, gazing at his books. He tells his reader how he feels the weight of his existence, a personal happiness, when he is alone in his library.

Tis there that I am in my kingdom, and there I endeavour to make myself an absolute monarch, and to sequester this one corner from all society, conjugal, filial, and civil...

He doesn't mention using his books. Neither reading them nor reflecting upon them, though he does mention flipping their pages when he is in thought. This is collection, not a curation. Curation involves use, involves activity, involves agency. Collection involves storage. Collection involves selection criteria; it conjures a checklist. There is no feedback in collection, for it's a type of sorting. A robot could collect, could catalog, could alphabetize. A person curates.

In his essay [Unpacking My Library](#) Geoff Dyer quotes Walter Benjamin's essay of the same name to describe recollections of his literary choices.

I keep hauling them out of boxes, and 'what memories crowd upon me' as I do so.

'Memories of the cities in which I found so many things.'

He makes a typical Dyerian jab at the heart of the matter soon after his Benjamin sentimentality:

I don't even need an intellect, now that I've got all my books around me.

It's his next reflection that brings it home, to mix sports metaphors.

Finding myself, at last, in the position for work I don't want to do any work. I can't go for more than a few moments without sliding back in my chair and gazing with massive self-love at my library. Needless to say, I have no impulse to *read*. Books are to be arranged and classified, shuffled around. At the very most I want to take a volume from the shelves, consult it, perhaps smell it, and replace it, carefully. Sometime in the future I want to add a few incremental volumes but, for the moment, I just want to sit here, gazing at my life. For that's what it is, this library; it's not just the story of my life, it is my life.

Dyer highlights the connection between collections and curations as one of assembly versus sculpture. Collections imply addition, adding a few incremental volumes. Curations imply subtraction along with addition, an incremental pruning process until the work is formed of precise pieces.

David Foster Wallace (bear with me) said something once that isn't in my curation but that I read in passing. He said that he is uncomfortable with speaking in public because he's a *writer*, not a speaker. He requires sources, research, supporting evidence, quotation marks. I'm nothing without my books, he seems to say. This is curation. This isn't a collection to admire from a lamp-lit armchair, it's to be used, hunched over behind spectacles. The library is a life because it's an extension of the mind, it's a tool. The curation of books is the process of the mind, of selection and pruning, of evolutionary learning used particulate constituents-- books, their words.

Isn't this the horror of Borges's famous infinite library? The infinite, labyrinthine, hexagonal library exists in spite of curation, it renders curation impossible. The library becomes a collection of everything, not unlike Borges's [1:1 scale map](#). Overwhelmed with input destroys the process of learning. On the other end of the spectrum, Jonathan Franzen advises that one destroy the internet connection capabilities of their laptops if they want to be "serious novelists". We will take his work as evidence of this practice.

I'm starting to wonder if dichotomies are natural objects, perhaps the only natural objects. Rather, are there anything other small prime numbers? Can we not find anything in 1s, 2s, and 3s? Numerological interpretations aside, the plain arithmetical fact is that there are two ways to build things: additively and subtractively. We typically think of these as separate endeavors:

milling, lathing, drilling as subtractive while new-fangled 3D printing and old-fangled joinery might qualify as additive construction.

I'd to push forward how we can superposition addition and subtraction to think in cycles of each, the same way that we learn. We take in inputs constantly, but our memories are sparse-- to remember is to forget. We can understand reduction as a form of introduction, of production-- addition of inverses, of negations, perhaps; we say things "add up" but we could just as well say they "subtract down".

Montaigne, *Of Three Commerces*

When at home, I a little more frequent my library, whence I overlook at once all the concerns of my family. 'Tis situated at the entrance into my house, and I thence see under me my garden, court, and base-court, and almost all parts of the building. There I turn over now one book, and then another, on various subjects, without method or design. One while I meditate, another I record and dictate, as I walk to and fro, such whimsies as these I present to you here. 'Tis in the third storey of a tower, of which the ground-room is my chapel, the second storey a chamber with a withdrawing-room and closet, where I often lie, to be more retired; and above is a great wardrobe. This formerly was the most useless part of the house. I there pass away both most of the days of my life and most of the hours of those days. In the night I am never there. There is by the side of it a cabinet handsome enough, with a fireplace very commodiously contrived, and plenty of light; and were I not more afraid of the trouble than the expense—the trouble that frights me from all business—I could very easily adjoin on either side, and on the same floor, a gallery of an hundred paces long and twelve broad, having found walls already raised for some other design to the requisite height. Every place of retirement requires a walk: my thoughts sleep if I sit still: my fancy does not go by itself, as when my legs move it: and all those who study without a book are in the same condition. The figure of my study is round, and there is no more open wall than what is taken up by my table and my chair, so that the remaining parts of the circle present me a view of all my books at once, ranged upon five rows of shelves round about me. It has three noble and free prospects, and is sixteen paces in diameter. I am not so continually there in winter; for my house is built upon an eminence, as its name imports, and no part of it is so much exposed to the wind and weather as this, which pleases me the better, as being of more difficult access and a little remote, as well upon the account of exercise, as also being there more retired from the crowd. 'Tis there that I am in my kingdom, and there I endeavour to make myself an absolute monarch, and to sequester this one corner from all society, conjugal, filial, and civil; elsewhere I have but verbal authority only, and of a confused essence. That man, in my opinion, is very

miserable, who has not at home where to be by himself, where to entertain himself alone, or to conceal himself from others. Ambition sufficiently plagues her proselytes, by keeping them always in show, like the statue of a public square. They cannot so much as be private in the watercloset.