George Sand

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Introduction
An Exercise in Bad Faith

For, brother myn, of me taak this motyf:
I have now been a court-man al my lyf,
And God it woot, though I unworthy be,
I have stonden in ful greet degree
Abouten lordes of ful heigh estaat;
Yet hadde I neve with noon of hem debaat.
I neve hem contraried, trewely;
I woot well that my lord kan moore than I.
What that he seith, I holde it ferme and stable;
I seye the same, or elles thyng semblable.

— Chaucer, Merchant’s Tale, ll. 1491–1500

The proven best way in evolutionary biology, as in most of science, is to define a problem arising during empirical research, then select or devise the theory that is needed to solve it. Almost all research in inclusive-fitness theory has been the opposite: hypothesize the key roles of kinship and kin selection, then look for evidence to test that hypothesis.

— Edward O. Wilson, The Social Conquest of Earth

The best introduction can keep you from reading the book: it summarizes what it cannot present, and even indicates to other scholars what they can expect to cite in the chapters that follow. It presents a thesis, which the rest of the book will support (see Section 3.5 later in this volume). To write one here, as I am attempting to do, is to conclude or imagine that a project is complete, that there is unity in the project, whether abstract
and intellectual or merely material. But that unity has always eluded me. Instead, I keep focussing on the important things: the necessary conditions for a book, the big number. In the days of typewriters, that meant the number of pages; now, it means the number of words. When I reach it, I can start revising, and in some senses, I am done.

This project began in a discussion with a particle physicist about differences, real and imagined, between the fields of science and humanities. This is a now standard argument, popularized in several books by Stephen A Gould, E.O. Wilson, and even Steven Pinker, that bête noir, I see, of many humanist acquaintances. We argued about politics, a book on bundling from the nineteenth century, diet, the proper way to share expenses, automobiles, public transportation, dress codes, the correct way to conduct oneself in department meetings. The ashes of those discussions are scattered here (particularly in the final section) and remain active in conversations not recorded here: the chivalric deference I show to those who can work out difficult abstruse math problems I don’t understand, the tolerance by both of us for the less convincing rants of the other. We both know that the attempt to find some common ground is futile, or, for fields as diverse as ours, despairingly describable (with some despair) as a search for the “least common denominator” (if I have this metaphor right); we cannot communicate in any way except on the most general or obvious of principles; and we realize that finding what those principles are, and attempting to build on them (that is, to find our way back to the areas that really interest us — the way books are constructed, editions are defined, or the way subatomic particles behave or if they behave and exist at all) — all this is an instance of petitio principii: we find a standing point that is so banal and obvious it is almost embarrassing to mention it. (Did you ever notice, for example, that Physics and English are housed in different buildings on a college campus?)

The thesis or purpose of this book is a bit more abstract, but no less straight-forward: I am concerned here with the tenuous connection between what we define as evidence and what we construct as the narrative, scholarly or historical, that makes
sense of that evidence, the gap between the impressive but often cryptic footnotes (which graduate students were once instructed to arrange first before writing) and the narrative they seem to be supporting. Chaucer vs. Chaucerians; book history as an event (the life of book copies) vs. book history as a field commonly known as bibliography. The principal le problem here is not difficult or abstruse; doubtless we all claim to know it, but most of us (“us” meaning those I read and listen to) act, write, and edit as if we did not. I would like to think that our methods and ways of thinking are determined by the object that seizes our attention: literature, history, humanistic vs. scientific inquiry. But I can’t find any convincing foundation on which to make that claim or to refute it. Scholarly method quickly merges into scholarly myth — thus the portmanteau word in my title.

Such considerations run throughout these studies. At minimum, my hope is that readers (at least some of them) come away knowing more about Chaucerian metrics than they did going into it, more about the annoying rifts in the logic and conventions of, say, basic cataloguing conventions in bibliography, and realize also that these apparently diverse subjects are related and that they are variants of similar problems in scholarly methods in all fields. I also hope they consider how we think about these and other things, how we find or invent problems and imagine we have solved them. I would like us to be more comfortable with the imperfect knowledge we have of any of the subjects we deal with or claim expertise in.

Myths of Evidence

On considering the matter of evidence in the humanities, I looked first to a recent and self-declared premier source on this topic: MLA Literary Research Guide.1 The Library Journal blurb, quoted on the MLA website, in a classic case of transferred epi-

the, describes this as follows: “Animatedly, energetically, enthusiastically, and vigorously recommended.” Moved as I was, I was skeptical: this work has over 800 pages (the fifth edition, of 2008, had 826); these consist of annotated entries for reference books and articles, and there are only three pages devoted to research methods, as if these were self-evident. The Research Guide thus seems less a guide to doing research, than a storage base for the construction of book-lists, footnotes, and Works Cited; 823 of its pages exemplify what it promotes, manifesting that amorphous and undefined excellence of kind that is the basis for success in other venues established by this institution, for example, the Submission Guidelines for its journal, included in every issue (“The ideal PMLA essay exemplifies the best of its kind, whatever the kind”).

Alas, even the above sentences are speculative: this magisterial MLA Guide remained inaccessible to me. To take advantage of the advertised “Free Trial” proved beyond my computational competence and I would not part with the $700 to make this work “available to a university library.” I turned instead to some of the works I assume were referenced in this more important one, these readily available at no cost on-line: I was interested in what it would take to define the evidence I have invoked repeatedly here. I began with the most basic of distinctions: primary versus secondary.

From BMCC Library in the Borough of Manhattan:

Humanities:

Primary sources: original first-hand account of an event or time period. Usually written or made during or close to the event or time period. Original, creative writing or works of art; factual, not interpretive.

Secondary sources: analyzes and interprets primary sources; second-hand account of an historical event; interprets creative work.
Sciences:
Primary: report of scientific discoveries; results of experiments; results of clinical trials; social and political science research results; factual not interpretive.

Secondary: analyzes and interprets research results; analyzes and interprets scientific discoveries.²

From the Library Guides at Princeton:
A primary source is a document or physical object which was written or created during the time under study. These sources were present during an experience or time period and offer an inside view of a particular event. Some types of primary sources include: original documents…letters, interviews news, film footage, autobiographies, official records, creative works, relic or artifacts. A secondary source interprets and analyzes primary sources. These sources are one or more steps removed from the event.³

Other guides distinguish “tertiary sources”: almanacs, bibliographies, dictionaries and encyclopedias, indexes.⁴

The distinctions are time-honored, but the difficulties with them are obvious even in these brief and uncontroversial descriptions. The statement regarding scientific sources fosters the notion almost universally discredited that there exist indisputable facts; secondary sources and only secondary sources interpret those facts.⁵ But there are no facts in the scientific papers I have read: there are accounts or narration of observations, an experiment that may be reproducible, or a series of equations. These experiments are unlikely to be tested or ex-

actly reproduced: you cannot get grants or publications simply by confirming results already obtained by others. The narration of scientist A leads more often to a completely different narration by scientist B.⁵

The humanities, despite the growing distrust contemporary humanists have for historical documents and the once-standard distinction between document and monument, is similar:⁶ a primary source is an “original, first-hand description of an event.” Even here, the notion of ‘primary’ has been removed from the so-called “event,” which, at least in historical studies, might be considered the major focus — the thing that happened. “These sources or materials were present during an event or time period and offer an inside view.” The phrase “inside view” seems to imply that what we suspect to be the least reliable source (one directly involved and thus potentially interested in the event) would be a primary source: but this is the opposite of the attitude this distinction is intended to foster. Wouldn’t a disinterested account be more accurate? Or does “accuracy” mean something different here, where the notion of truth changes from an accurate description of facts to the ontological status of a scholarly or witness statement. And are not eye-witness accounts, as we are often told, at the same time the least reliable and the most persuasive of sources? “Closeness to the event” is not the same as “what happened” unless the subject matter is the account itself.

The difference between these types of sources is often one of focus more than material: I can study “Chaucer’s meter” or “cata-

⁵ There is an amusing Tumblr devoted to this topic, “Overly Honest Methods”: “there are two types of people in this world: those who can extrapolate from incomplete data.” “Curves were drawn, and the data was plotted.” “Samples 3, 15, and 23 through 41 were discarded due to suspected taco sauce contamination.” “We forgot to photocopy some of the surveys double-sided so we only had data from odd numbered surveys.” See https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/overly-honest-methods.

loguing conventions.” In some sense I could distinguish these as investigations into “primary sources” (Chaucer’s text) and studies of “secondary ones” (the catalogues describing older books). But anyone who thinks of these two topics knows that the distinction is specious. Chaucer’s meter does not exist apart from our discussion of it. And we cannot conceive of what a book is apart from the bibliographical language (sophisticated or banal) that allows them to be considered in the first place. There is no hierarchy or even fast distinction to be had in these cases.

When I decided to look into book history and bibliography, I had no opportunity for instruction, either in the material or in the methods to study them. I thus had no experience with “standard sources” or “basic studies” until I had already dealt with far more esoteric ones. By the time I looked at these (McKerrow’s Introduction to Bibliography for Literary Students, Gaskell’s continuation, and various “histories of printing”) I was in a position to read them with amusement rather than simply trying desperately to absorb whatever was there. I had been thrown into the company of those to whom bibliographical study seemed second nature: John Bidwell and the staff of the Clark Library, readers and staff at the Huntington. At first, it took a monumental effort on my part simply to nod at the appropriate places in a conversation. And the whole experience embodied fears shared by many of my academic friends: some day, one day, “they” (whoever they might be) will “find out.”

I was lucky enough to be accustomed to that feeling. I have taught languages I couldn’t speak and can barely read; I have, since my undergraduate days, breezed through examinations on books I haven’t read. And as examiners became more sophisticated and their questions more pointed, I simply gerrymandered areas of interest in which none of my advisors could possibly know more than I did. I survived; bibliography was not in those days recognized in America as an important field or area

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in literary studies or even in some cases a legitimate one; consequently there seemed less at stake. If you were an incompetent collator, or didn’t know variants from virgules, no one outside of a very small coterie really cared. It was also rather easy to blur one area (Chaucer, in which my employers had pigeon-holed me) into this new one — two areas or interests that are reflected in the structure of this present study. Chaucer/Bibliography: I cannot determine whether the centers of those Venn circles have become more or less distant. Perhaps there is a larger area — humanistic studies — into which they comfortably fit.

These areas of interest are accidents. One is due to what I found in graduate school — no one available to help me through early Germanic philology, but excellent readers of Chaucer. The second is another accident of history — finding myself in Los Angeles, where libraries outlining critical history (say, nineteenth-century French literary histories) were few, but examples of early printing were plentiful. Because of these accidental interests (or because of my awareness of their nature), certain types of study and scholarship have completely eluded me. There is nothing quite so admirable in scholarship as a well-researched and beautifully argued book that proves an articulable point and provides an avenue for future scholarship. And nothing quite so precious as a beautifully cut gemstone, seen under a microscope. But the world we live in, whether it is one of books, bibliographers, artists, or Chaucerians, is not at all like that. And the books that argue otherwise seem to me (as a professed hater of all things Victorian) like a Byrne-Jones painting set in some contrasting and utterly cartoonish version of Victoriana — rickety houses, turrets, roofs that have been shingled three times, steel-cut engravings. My logic then turns out to be like just as the logic I criticise: given that I cannot write such beautifully constructed books; therefore, I won’t.

My own methods, considered most generously, grow out of this thinking and experience. And the essays below result from two opposing methods that form or imply a methodology. One is what I have called the “heaps of books” approach, or what earlier I might have called the “heaps of texts.” When
I first began to study material books, I thought a good place to begin was with Caxton (that seems naive to me now, but most things in our past do). I would just call up all his books that were available and look at them. Something would turn up, the way things had always turned up by shelf-reading in the bookstacks. I would be the Micawber of book-historians. Or so I thought. Until some librarians, less kindly than I had imagined they might be, intervened. Civilian library patrons cannot just “call up” these precious Caxtons. Before asking to see one, you must know in advance exactly what you are looking for. So I modified this purported method: I invented a fraudulent or make-believe project, complete with a thesis, that would enable me to call outsee, not only those Caxtons, but thousands of early books. They would be requested in what appeared to be a logical order, but in fact as close to random as the suspicious librarian, now a friend, would permit.\(^8\) I finally got my heap of books. My notes on them, thousands of hand-written descriptions and questions, are of course unsystematic and scattered. I thus finally threw them away, enabling me to begin this project (whatever it was) again. Although library policies have changed and are far less congenial than they were in those fine days, something will still, I think, turn up.

The second method, if we can call it that, is to rely entirely on what would be known as called secondary evidence. I may well have no idea what to say about the heaps of things on my desk, about the heaps of books and texts I have read, but fortunately, other scholars are not so reticent. I can simply take what they say and place those statements against other statements or perhaps against the very evidence they themselves cite (or in some cases should have cited).\(^9\) The approach is largely negative. And true, if everyone acted this way, the world might grind

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to a cynical and nihilistic halt. Fortunately, there is no chance of that happening. There will always be grand claims from humanists. And there will always be young scholars instructed in the construction and organization of book-lists. Perhaps if you could just get your sources in order and arranged correctly, or, as Henry Bradshaw claimed more than a century ago, your facts rigorously arranged, the actual work of researching and writing up that research (two completely different things, we desperately imagine) would simply do itself.

Concluding Statement

One of my favorite encounters when I began to work seriously in academia was with a young classicist. The first day I met him, we were exchanging discussing areas of interest; at the time, I was thinking about parody as a topic, and he responded, as if responding: “In the opening sentence of the fifth oration of Demosthenes, did you know that there is an apparently parodic reference to…?” I can’t remember the particulars and I won’t try to invent them. But I do remember thinking that this was why I went to graduate school, just so I could have conversations just like this one. No matter how abstruse a topic or interest (mine was not; his was), it is always possible to use that as a basis of thinking or communication. Three years later, I ran into this slightly older man again. I had not seen him since my first week on campus. It was graduation. I made some reference to the cruel irony (another area of interest) that there were not enough fold-up metal chairs in the quad for us newly minted PhDs to sit. He nodded: “In the opening sentence of the fifth oration of Demosthenes, did you know…?”

You, my friend, will never read this. You have long forgotten my name and have no interest whatsoever in the fields I pursue. You have no idea who I am. But you perhaps have had time to learn who you are.

I choose this anecdote to introduce my concluding paragraphs here but I could have chosen, and at certain points did
choose others. The “Flewelling” collection at USC (see Section 3.1 in this volume), the notion of “readability” (see Section 3.3 in this volume), Hoccleve (alluded to here, and completed in Mythologies II in an act of near plagiarism of a once brilliant student, or rather brilliant once-student). I could also have chosen a remark by one of my friends, who does not realize he has used it on many occasions. Reading and critiquing something I have written, he concludes: “What this book/article is really about is not X [(my own interest and subject)], but Y [(the subject of one of his recent studies)].” I of course do the same thing to him. I learned to call this “The Elephant Conversation,” but to understand that, you need to know what “An Elephant Paper” is, and for that, you need to read Section 3.4 below.

There are, therefore, three parts: the first two are on fields I have worked in in the past and ones that still interest me to some extent: Chaucer, and bibliography. I could have chosen other areas, areas in which I once claimed competence, to complete this quasi-autobiographical sketch, but for various reasons, I am done with them, and there remain only vague allusions to them here: medieval drama, allegory, and Old English. These two parts are followed by a series of inquiries, or what I call “Cacophonies” in the form of a rondo. In my mind, each of these could be expanded, and that likely will be what I will be asked by a reader at some point to do. To this, I have already formed my answer: “Thank you for your valuable input and notes, which I have read with great interest. Now, concerning that project I am engaged in here…” Some of the problems I deal with here are old and familiar, others are new, and some are of my own creation. I have not been able to solve any of them in a traditional sense.

I have finally come up with a thesis, one that is neither too confining nor constricting. I am critiquing the methods I encounter often in the humanities — our construction of a foundation long after the rickety superstructure has gained the aura and veneration of tradition. I am aware that my own thinking tends to fit the same grooved pattern of the past, and why not? It worked well once, why should it not work again? I have stated on more than one occasion that before I take on a subject, define
it, or pick up a book in a library, I know much of what I will say before so much as glancing at the evidence. I am neither proud nor ashamed of that. It is just the way things are.

None of these essays has a listed collaborator, although that was hardly the original plan. Sometimes, you just don’t have the time left to let younger colleagues catch up with you; they will have to do it on their own. Or perhaps, more accurately, the banalities that always convince me have never quite convinced them.