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Quality Storage. Collecting as a Technique of Reading (will be published 2022)

The invention of the "Great Books" curriculum nearly one hundred years ago in the United States has been almost forgotten. According to this curriculum, all of Western culture is condensed into a collection of specially selected literature that ranges, for example, from Homer to Hemingway. Nowadays, this nostalgic book utopia looks like a dated Sunday School where allegedly Western values, norms, and traditions replace religion. Nonetheless, without reassurance of a meaningful past, there is only an overrated form of presentism. But how is this past accessible in a way that not only the significant is separated from the less significant, but above all retains its quality for the here-and-now. Simply glorifying the past by recommending the works of "great" authors as a timeless treasure will not be sufficient. The following argument is not focused on the treasure itself, understood as the norms, values, and esthetic preferences of a past era. Rather, light is shed on the "Great Book" as a specific media format as a cultural technology which is widely practiced but little understood in its operational logic. In plain language, as a historian of media practices I am interested in advanced forms of book-reading as a way to collect and store cultural heritage.

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    We do not know exactly what quality storage could mean. Something that would provide our society with a type of storage that collects ideas and objects that have been important, even irreplaceable in the past and should still be accessible today. What would be required to create an all-inclusive storage of such extent? In a Western society that is characterized by accelerating

technologies, there is an easy solution for everything. Just believe in the militant technological optimism of Silicon Valley and push a button: *To save everything, click here![1]* Storage is always within reach, just click and it is done. Anywhere and anytime. Neither expertise, nor practice is needed. Effortlessly and instantly. Even the problem of selection is solved thanks to the low cost of storage. Do not bother to select, just save it all. No special skills required.

To go beyond such oversimplified approaches, one must first understand "quality storage" as a challenging problem. Because wherever specific demands are made regarding the quality of storage, things proceed differently. Just think of the so-called Barbarastollen in a forest near Freiburg in Germany, a suspended section of a former ore mine deep under the earth. This 700-meter long tunnel is the central depository for the Federal Republic of Germany's archived photographic documents of great cultural significance. Everything is copied on 35 millimeter polyester film, totaling more than 28,000 km.[2]The perishability of the films means they will last approximately 500 years. Only then would they have to be recopied. The construction of this storage bunker goes back to the 1960s, when Germany was a front state during the Cold War. But it became public only in the 1989 with the fall of the Iron Curtain.

What is preserved, what is collected at the Barbarastollen? Photographs of "irreplaceable cultural heritage"[3] as the legal definition attests—with over a billion collected documents. [4] Microfilms are stored in 1,500 stainless-steel air- and water-tight containers. But all numbers are out-of-date because the filming of this material is still underway. Is this the solution to the problem of all-inclusive storage? The project certainly has few imitators. Only the Netherlands and the Vatican have comparable projects. After all, there are objections against such enterprises beyond financial considerations.

Firstly, this form of long-term storage is ultimately *inaccessible*. The only access intended by its creators is reserved for the survivors of catastrophic wars or natural disasters. Only if the originals are destroyed do the back-ups become significant. It is an open question as to how this post-catastrophic access is supposed to function. This much is certain, access is guided by a strong belief in the power of an antiquated device, a rather unimpressive apparatus: a magnifying glass. A magnifying glass assures access to the stored past as the instrument typically used in microfilm reading devices because the film requires no other decoding. Secondly, because storage space is not an issue, there is only *weak selectivity*. Storage is to include (to quote from the official mission statement) "everything of specific significance to German history and culture."[5] But if "everything" is to be included, any access to such a *monstrous quantity* must become problematic. Finally, to store the entirety of German cultural heritage in one location is to subject it to great risk as a single precise attack could result in total loss. The legendary fire of the Library of Alexandria could be repeated.[6] But the past is not just a legend. Just think of the Bosnian War of 1992, when the Serbians intentionally targeted Sarajevo's National Library in order to extinguish the collected cultural heritage of the Bosnians and the Croats.

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The next case study has its roots in the Cold War as well. And here, too, the problem of quality storage is viewed from the perspective of catastrophes. But the solution this time is not a feat of engineers. Instead it has to do with readers, precisely the authority that the Barbarastollen has locked out. What kind of readers are we talking about?

By "readers" I refer to an extremely committed group of bibliophiles or "book-lovers" because they are active in a socio-political context in which the possession and reading of books—as it was the case East of the Iron Curtain—are prohibited and disobedience is harshly punished. In this and similar contexts, books are haunted because according to state propaganda, they promote antisocial behavior—criticism, diverse opinions, and conflict. They are toxic to a community in which the powerful keep everyone and everything under control. The counteragent is a kind of fire department in reverse, which does not put out fires, but puts every individual book all the way up to entire libraries to the torch. Only the bibliophiles resist; the vast majority of people has replaced reading with enormous, wall-sized televisions, showing whatever supports the regime.

As concretely-visible paper objects, books cannot be hidden from the "firemen" by these dissidents, typically intellectuals, professors, librarians, collectors, and similarly book-oriented "species." In addition, books can be memorized to a certain degree and thus kept from their destruction. *Fixed in memory*, significant books survive. The manual for this personalized or human storage technology is a fictional story, a dystopia as presented by Ray Bradbury in 1953. The title reveals a catastrophe that is already present everywhere: *Fahrenheit 451. The temperature at which book paper catches fire and burns*.[7]

There cannot be many such bibliophile readers. Reading—whether under real or fictional totalitarian regimes—requires an enormous willingness to accept personal risks. Furthermore, memorizing a *very long* text is not an easy task. Prose cannot be compared to epics whose rhymes made it possible for ancient cultures to pass them on from generation to generation. Moreover, any text once memorized is at risk of being forgotten. For how long can a biological

memory be securely stored? And how can one check the memory for correctness if the original paper format no longer exists?

Fahrenheit 451 provides no answers. Technology does not become a topic of its own. The main line of this book is a parable of book burning as a proof of an authoritarian and anti-human society. What it provides is a brief statement that shows how books, when memorized by many individuals, exist *in multitudes.* In fact, any reader can only learn one entire book by heart. They can escape isolation only through the occasional gathering of "book-lovers." Such gatherings would be contest-like disputes or exchanges in which memorized books are cited back and forth, without fixed rules or an explicit goal. However, there seem to be no commentaries for these books based on a memorizer's own interpretation. The danger would be too great that an interpretative or hermeneutic approach would imperil the exact wording of the text. The precious text from the past would dissolve into random variations, without any possibility to control the deviations and return to the original wording or text. At the end of *Fahrenheit 451*, the city from which the dissidents have fled is destroyed by a nuclear attack. The regime comes to an end— and the survivors will return to start anew on the basis of a book culture that had been nearly erased were it not for the memorizing efforts of some individuals. If this would work even in a fictional setting remains unclear. There is no sequel to *Fahrenheit 451*.

Let us revisit the case for "quality storage." We have discussed two examples thus far, one that exists in the real world and one that presents itself in the literary imagination. They serve as a heuristic aid to figure out how a convincing form of cultural storage may keep the past alive. The bunker solution relies on technological devices to preserve an "irreplaceable cultural heritage" that is carefully closed and remains inaccessible until doomsday has passed. Once it is discovered by the survivors of a catastrophe, the content would be the same. Gold remains gold.

But what if after a thousand years the 1,500 treasure chests in the Barbarastollen have become a tomb of a forgotten culture doomed to remain unknown and indecipherable? When the grave robbers are not interested in the obscure plastic inside the barrels but in the sparkling stainless steel of the containers themselves? Even *Fahrenheit 451* shows a crucial flaw when it comes to storing culture a book learned by heart but only mechanically recited without meaning or understanding will not keep the past alive: its words are dead on arrival.

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I would like to offer another case study. What you see in the picture below is well known to those who are familiar with the tradition of canonical literature and often on display in libraries.illustration]
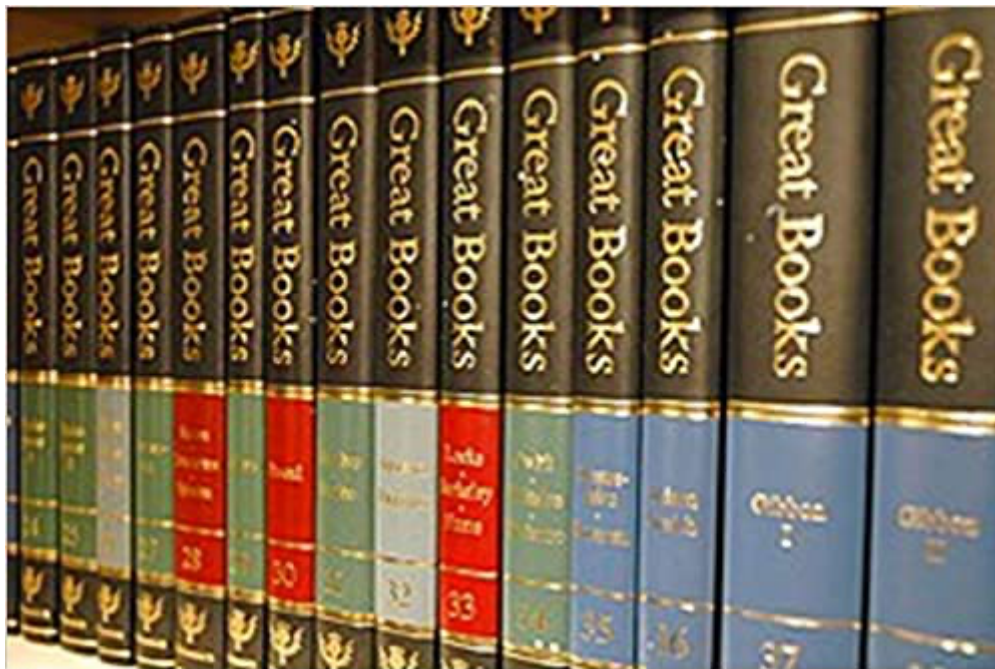
The very first of such a books series was published 1901 in 51 volumes under the title *Harvard Classics*. What is shown in the photograph above is an example of the *Great Books of the*

Western World, a series originally published in the United States in 1952 by *Encyclopædia Britannica* to present the *Great Books* in a visually impressive 54-volume set. The original editors had several criteria for adding a book to this collection: The book must be relevant to contemporary culture and not only be "important" in its historical context; and it must be a part of "the great conversation about the great ideas,"[8] i.e. a book has to match at least 25 of the 102 great ideas as identified by the editors.[9] The books were not chosen on the basis of ethnic and cultural inclusiveness, historical influence, or the editors' agreement with the views that were expressed by the authors.

Contrary to the many, and very understandable, objections to the selection criteria, I would like to make a case for this method. What we see is a visual representation of an almost timeless, and thanks to large editions, *affordable and large-scale storage technology*. In the German-speaking world it is called: "Das Gute Buch," in English, as indicated above, "the Great Book." More than, as held for centuries in European history, the "one and only" Bible, a series of "Great Books" is of amorphous body of texts. Sets like the *Encyclopædia Britannica*'s *Great Books of the Western World* are an attractive offer for the its readers, at least in a time when such a set is cherished as an investment in personal education or *Bildung*—and as a very visible proof of the owner's cultivation of the mind.

Today, "quality storage" bound in fine leather has become unfashionable. Remove the bindings and the golden letters: Would the "Great Book" as in the *Harvard Classics* series still be considered a "great book"? Sociologists have quick answers. "Great books" represent the norms, values, and cultural preferences of the white middle class. That is all very true. I am more interested in the form itself, however, which leads to the question as to why all these valuables can only be accessed through an exhausting operation such as reading, especially the reading of

voluminous books which have already been read over and over again by other individuals (or oneself)? Questions of value are in truth unspecific in the case of the "Great Book," in spite of a rhetoric of significance. Only the book, the medium, is great. And yet these books are certainly not without significance. According to common belief they simply *have to be read.*

Let us turn to "common sense" for help and look into a widely accepted source like the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Not only is there an entire sub-section, five volumes, that covers "Great Books," but there is also a "Gateway to the Great Books." In this section we find references to the valuable *contents* of "Great Books". Arriving at the selection of "Great Books" as well as a glimpse of their content allegedly requires deep thinking, eternal wisdom, and universal values, categories that endure over time seemingly through the sheer power of their inherent qualities. In this case, a storage technology of its own seems to be unnecessary. A well-bound book of acid-free paper is all that is needed.

But the *Encyclopedia Britannica* goes into greater detail about something else, namely the correct way to deal with books. And this neither refers to devotion nor to philosophical hermeneutics, but focuses directly on an easily overlooked technical process involved. At the center stands a fundamental teaching of how to approach a canonical text, namely through "the art of reading the book."[10] This "art" can be reduced to one basic rule, a rule which does not refer to values and norms at all: "*'Great books' are readable again and again, with renewed pleasure and added profit.*"[11] "*It might almost be said, that a book which is not worth rereading one or more times is not really worth reading carefully in the first place.*"[12] Clearly, the difference between a book and a "Great Book" is decided by the criterion of re-reading. Only a "Great Book" deserves to be reread, because it gets better over time and thus gains that authority we attribute to a significant cultural achievement.

Can we also analyze this temporal anomaly that is included in the act of rereading? Are we forced to simply admire and praise the "Great Book" because it was labeled as such by higher authorities? Metaphysics does not help to explain how we arrived at the "Great Book" as a form of "quality storage." We have to go back to the process of rereading as the singular operation through which the "Great Book" emerges. Despite the *Encyclopedia Britannica*'s case for the "Great Book" as an inventory of values, or a catechism of fixed questions and answers, rereading is the only operation that generates cultural "treasures" that withstand the grind of time. Rather, the "Great Book" is born out of an operation that each and every book requires: *reading.*

How exactly does rereading generate/create the "Great Book"? What actually happens during this operation? Let us follow the general truth the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is passing on: As a *temporal* operation, rereading is the decisive source for the extended life span of a "Great Book." But then, time cannot be tamed or stopped. Instead, the opposite—to follow Niklas Luhmann—is the case.[13] Time can bind, perhaps two (or more) events; in this case, two or more readings. Without the intervention of rereading, events like single readings would all but guarantee the disappearance of the "Great Books." It is precisely this act of joining through repetition that forms the core of rereading. In each case it transforms individual readings into a fixed form of iteration, and it is precisely through the emerging succession of connected readings that duration emerges.

Once set in motion, rereading produces additional effects that have objective and social implications. One of these effects is the enhanced credibility that a reader connects with the "Great Book." This, again, requires a close look at the mechanics of rereading. Every new reading says something not only entirely different from a previous reading—otherwise there would be no reason for the repetition of the process. At the same time, it does not simply

reproduce what was said before, because the process would be futile if there were not an element of variation. What is designated in this way is never totally different from what has been said before nor is it a dogmatic—and boring—repetition. Rather, both variety and redundancy are in place at the same time, thus strengthening certainty and credibility. That which is meaningful today was also meaningful in the past and will presumably continue to be meaningful in the future. Why should the chain of rereadings that has already held for so long stop at some point?

Through rereading the "Great Book" we acquire a surplus because a subsequent reading does not simply generate the same results over and over again. Ultimately, the operation always occurs in a situation that is *different* from the first. A second reading includes the first reading. And when the first reading is included, the second reading also captures what and how the first reading was executed and, thus, necessarily deviates. Nonetheless, this deviation retains much of the identity of the text that was read the first time. The text to be repeated reveals itself through the repetition as the same and, hence, illuminates the new context of the second reading and produces new meaningful references and understandings.

If rereading creates permanence, the "Great Book" necessarily produces a surplus of meaning. And this is a quality that not only includes the past and the present, but also the future. From an uninterrupted succession of rereadings we can expect the disclosure of hitherto undetected meanings *ad infinitum*.

Once the "Great Book" is explicated as a technical medium, it appears as a phenomenon autonomous of external causalities. This very special book operates as a self-creating circuit, as a recursive loop, in which that what is created becomes itself the creator. It is an autopoietic technology, a system capable of reproducing and maintaining itself.

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Granted, this technical explication of rereading is elaborate—especially since the *practice of rereading* does not need detailed knowledge at all. As the crucial infrastructure for a collection, or: canon of "Great Books," it remains largely invisible, that is, as long as this infrastructure does what it is supposed to do, namely, to *generate* "greatness" of a Western Canon of books. The infamous "canon wars," battles over what is supposed to be part of a canon and if canons should not be abandoned altogether, missed this functional aspect. Instead, the controversy is all about the *list*, the right selection of books and authors, one side arguing in favor for the timeless embodiments of Western experiences or values, the other demanding a revision based on priorities shared by a generation of scholars pursuing race-, gender-, and cultural-studies pertaining to high schools and colleges.

In the 1980s and 1990s, higher education was consumed by the canon wars. Participants could not agree on authors that ought to be taught and researched. Lost in these battles over *what* should be read or taught, was the question of *how* books from the past have been read and thus stored and formed the cultural memory of our society. But this is exactly the course one must take, however, to see what is currently being taught and practiced in schools.

Timeless existence is a beautiful illusion, and that holds true not only for cultural products. Precisely therein lies the actual point of weakness, according to my technological assessment presented here. What happens when the elaborate skill of rereading is no longer taught and practiced as the load-bearing infrastructure of the Western canon? When it is replaced by other forms of reading? Currently, developments hint at the direction of how future techniques of generating a canon may look like.

The state of reading is changing. Reading in schools is no longer practiced mainly as a "Gateway to Great Books." There is now a new, so-called *smart* alternative. The growing success of this new approach is based on an old promise: Once we are able to observe how the actual reading process unfolds, we can actively intervene and thus improve reading skills dramatically. Precisely this level of surveillance is now offered in the form of software bundles, used in the classroom as "learning apps" that claim to *monitor the actual reading* of the student. No more guessing of who read what and certainly no more problems with grading.

The two dominant apps in the field are distributed and sold under telling brand-names: *Accelerated Reading* and *Scholastic Reading Counts!*[14] "Accelerated" courses are the ones that really or only count, like in accelerated math, the early version of an Advanced Placement class, a college-level course taken in high school. Advanced Placement courses save time and money in the process of finding and being admitted to college. *Scholastic reading counts!*—with exclamation mark—directly address the anxieties of skeptical parents who focus on college admission and costs and have yet to be convinced of the usefulness of technology to achieve the best outcomes for their children and their wallets. Scholarly reading sounds like quality reading—and this app supports only that what truly counts.

What can these apps do? What do readers gain from their use? Such apps transform the process of reading books into big data. Computer-based technology assembles data from thousands of readings, corroborated by asking additional questions which are designed to show how much readers can remember. On the basis of this collected data, quizzes are designed to "help" teachers in the classroom. Focused on questions that are based on students' memories of facts instead of thought processes and, as a result, only allow one correct answer. Through this protocol, teachers will see at a glance whether a student has read a book or not. Comprehension,

critical thinking or more individualized procedures are less of interest. Everything that would undermine the *quantifiable effectiveness* that companies promise in their advertisement has to be ruled out.

None of the corporations' mission statements mentions the books themselves and certainly not their quality. Not only are specific titles missing, the conceptual terms "Great Book" or "canon" are also omitted. Instead, students are explicitly encouraged to pick whatever book they "want." More or less anything can be chosen, thanks to databases that cover over 100,000 books that have already been processed into the aforementioned literary quizzes option for each of the apps. No need for teachers to organize his or her own assessment. Canon or "Great Book" is replaced by an operational concept called *extended range*: "Over 35,000 reading practice quizzes are available on books from over 300 publishers and imprints. Independent of any publishing interests: Accelerated Reading ensures that there are plenty of books to interest every reader available on the programme." The website sums up: allegedly perfect reading "made painless."[15]

Quality storage without "pain," that is one of modern technology's selling points. This painless, quantifiable approach is set *against the old operational ontology of rereading*. Rereading as the most significant way to access the cultural past, requires a serious commitment, without any guarantee for instant success. Difficulty, problems of understanding and so forth are vital elements of the process—without ever reaching a point of completeness. To the contrary: rereading, once set in motion, will always question and rephrase what has been read before.

Rereading as a recursive operation is a skill that must be applied to keep the past alive, and thus continuously alter the canon—understood as an objective version of quality storage. Rereading is a demanding concept, even more so, because we cannot outsource it to engineers,

memory artists, preceptors or app designers. After all, the texts themselves have to be read to

keep the collection that is stored in our cultural memory alive.

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[1] Evgeny Morozov, To Save Everything, Click Here. The Folly of Technological Solutionism, New York 2013.

[2] By 2009, 28,000 km of documented material was stored on microfilm. Today's total is not yet made public, see Bundesamt für Katastrophenschutz und Bevölkerungshilfe, "Neue Ordnung im Barbarastollen," Meldungen (July 20, 2009), https://web.archive.org/web/20150118143018/http://www.bbk.bund.de/SharedDocs/Kurzmeldungen/BBK/DE/2009/20071530_Bergungsort_Ordnungssystem.html

[3] Entry Barbarastollen: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbarastollen. Elaborate research on this large scale national storage project is a desideratum for cultural studies.

[4] In the year 2016, on the national holiday Day of German Unity, a filmed copy of the original basic law including all related files was brought down into the storage facility, marking the new addition in a promotionally effective act as the billionth document. Online: https://www.fluter.de/historische-dokumente-deutschlands-im-barbarastollen

[5] Entry Barbarastollen: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbarastollen

[6] The fall of the Great Library is a storied event adding mythical depth to its history. The one time destructive fire might be the more dramatic story compared to a slow decline over time.

[7] Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451, first edition 1953; the book's tagline explains the title: "Fahrenheit 451 – the temperature at which book paper catches fire, and burns..."

[8] Great Books of the Western World, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Books_of_the_Western_World

[9] These 102 ideas, ranging from Angel to World are the final result of an extensive distilling process based on writings who have 'passed the test of time'. Mortimer Adler, the driving force behind this large scale enterprise, elaborated his findings in 102 individual essays. Mortimer Adler, The Great Ideas. A Lexicon of Western Thought, Scribener Classics 1999.

[10] Robert Hutchings, Mortimer Adler, editors in chief, Gateway to the Great Books, Encyclopedia Britannica, Chicago 1963, p 19.

[11] Ibid. p.16.

[12] Ibid. p.18.

[13] More on this simple and – therefore? – powerful concept of historical semantics: Niklas Luhmann, Die neuzeitlichen Wissenschaften und die Phänomenologie, Wien 1996, p. 56 and58f.

[14] One of the telling websites making advertisement for the company: http://mediaroom.scholastic.com/node/126

[15] All you ever wanted to know about this version of computer aided reading: https://www.renaissance.com/products/practice/accelerated-reader-360/.