Paul Otlet’s ideas on documentation have attracted considerable scholarly attention since Boyd Rayward’s pioneering work of over 30 years ago (see his 1973; 1975). Rayward’s subsequent translation of selections from Otlet’s writings (Otlet 1990) precipitated publications that deal in whole or in part with Otlet’s documentation, including further studies by Rayward (1991; 1994a; 1994b; 1997), Michael Buckland (1991; 1997), Ron Day (1997; 2001), Isabelle Rieusset-Lemarié (1997), Bernd Frohmann (2001; 2004), and the several papers on Otlet in Transnational Associations/Associations Transnationales, issues 1–2 (June 2003).

Otlet (1868–1944) was a Belgian lawyer and bibliographer. He was also a visionary utopian internationalist who participated in movements leading to the founding of the League of Nations and UNESCO. Otlet saw documents everywhere, not just in the holdings of libraries and the products of publishing houses, but in photography, microforms, film, radio, television and even x-rays. He was convinced that documentation – the name he gave to a new professional, bibliographical practice and its associated institutions – was a profoundly social force. As Rayward puts it, ‘for Otlet the document is at the centre of a complex process of communication, of the cumulation and transmission of knowledge, of the creation and evolution of institutions’ (1991, 137). He suggests that Otlet’s Traité de documentation (1934) ‘is perhaps one of the first comprehensive introductions to the study of information as an important social phenomenon’ (138). Day makes a similar point, but in terms of information rather than documentation: ‘Perhaps there has never been an information theorist who took so seriously the mapping of information upon the social’ (1997, 43). In Rayward’s collection of selected papers, Otlet also emerges as a thinker who eschewed systematic theorizing in favour of multiplying concepts and generating ideas about how rigorously disciplined documentary practices could provide powerful resources for international efforts to build a just and peaceful global polity. Since

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1 Throughout, authors of parenthetical in-text references are specified only when not named in the immediately preceding text, or when a sequence of references to the same source is interrupted by a reference to another source. When the same page source is used for consecutive references, the page number is specified only in the last reference in the sequence.
much of Otlet’s published work is not readily available, the arguments presented here rely on Rayward’s selection and translation, and are presented to invite further work.

Among the many strands of thought about science, documents, classification and bibliography one finds in these papers, the notion of the fact works as a strong attractor, organizing and linking many other concepts. Otlet’s writing is marked by its extraordinary energy. His muscular and tireless prose powers a huge machine, a vast assemblage of interconnected parts operating on multiple strata according to precisely articulated scales. From the standardized production of small cards of carefully annotated items of information, their rigorous organization by the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) (a highly complex version of Melvil Dewey’s Decimal Classification), the elaborate and disciplined work routines of a dedicated cadre of an early manifestation of knowledge workers called ‘documentalists’, to the production of a ‘universal book’ for global use, the energy of Otlet’s documentation generates – at least in his prose – cascading arrays of interconnected social organizations constituting laboratories of documentation, from regional to national centres and beyond, to international institutions dedicated to an exhaustive inventory not only of all publications but all facts, culminating in a supra-national institution Otlet calls ‘the Universal Organization’ (Otlet 1990, 198). In his visionary zeal, the intensities that power widely diverse flows of intellectual energies are gathered up and co-ordinated: document production, registration, cataloguing and subject organization; collaborative scientific and pedagogical labour; founding and convening conferences and associations of governments, private sectors and scholarly institutions; instituting rules, classifications, standardized methods, criteria for the consistency and replication of formats and notations, and even uniform document ‘containers’ in the form of furniture and storage equipment; installing authority and control systems for regimes of publication and the work of associations and institutions; rationalizing plans of libraries, archives, and museums; drawing diagrams of ‘agencies of cooperation’ from local to global scales (173–203). This enumeration sounds a reprise of familiar modernist themes and variations, but their mere aggregation here fails to convey what without exaggeration emerges in Otlet’s text as a frenzy of modernism. It is precisely its abundance and excessive, hyper-modernist energy that provokes the question of this chapter: how are we to understand the co-ordination and organization of the vectors assembled and animated in Otlet’s project of documentation? To use a mathematical trope, what is the singularity that organizes this vector field? I argue that the answer lies in Otlet’s concept of a fact, but with a postmodernist twist, for it seems to me that Otlet’s modernist frenzy is driven by an anxiety occasioned by his glimpse of the iterability of the signs of facts. The massive modernist apparatus that Otlet assembles is, I suggest, a reaction to the destabilization threatened by what Jacques Derrida later analyzed as the trace-structure of the sign.

Facts

To understand Otlet on facts, it is useful to start with his distinction between natural and social science. The former builds a ‘great monument’ through disciplined,
collective work. For natural scientists, ‘speculation and interpretation are secondary’, whereas ‘the social sciences are seen … not as one discipline … but as a gathering of personal opinions’ (11). The difference has to do with methods for discovering and documenting facts. The admirable positivism of the natural scientists – ‘[n]atural scientists are not content simply to declare themselves positivist as a turn of phrase, as most of our popularisers do, and then to act as if positivistic methods did not exist and ought not to be applied everywhere and always’ – disciplines the temptation to embellish the plain facts with ‘speculation’ and ‘interpretation’. Social scientists, on the other hand, need to exercise ‘more precision and rigour in the observation of facts’ (12). Nothing less than the possibility of scientific knowledge is at stake, because, as the natural sciences have shown, science is built upon facts: ‘The results of the natural sciences are grounded in millions of carefully observed, analysed, and catalogued facts. These facts have subsequently been integrated into sequences and the combination of these sequences has naturally led to the enunciation of laws, partial at first, general later, from which the most powerful and indestructible synthesis that has ever been made now seems possible’ (11).

A second difference, related to the first, between the two kinds of science lies in the different relations between their facts. In each kind of science, facts are concatenated into ‘sequences’, but their relations differ in complexity. Not only are social facts ‘infinitely numerous’ and widely dispersed (they are not contained in laboratories and many are geographically specific), but they have a greater number of connections to each other than do natural-scientific facts. Social facts, writes Otlet, ‘constitute groupings of which both the whole and its parts escape the wisest observer’, and he asks: ‘Where else can one find more connections between phenomena, and more reciprocal influences and effects?’ (13). Moreover, social facts are connected to facts no longer observable: understanding them requires ‘knowledge of anterior facts from the domain of history that are not amenable to direct examination’ (12).

Otlet’s documentation can be a universal method for processing facts in the service of knowledge production because the differences between social and natural-scientific facts do not generate two distinct genera. The differences are epistemological rather than ontological; there are not different criteria for what, in general, constitutes a fact. Differences lie in problems of revealing facts, but, once revealed, their connections to other facts are laid bare. Greater effort is required to reveal facts with many connections to others, and in general, social facts are more complex in this regard than natural-scientific facts. But even though the multiple connections of the former give them the epistemological property of being more obscure than natural facts, their complexity does not mark an essential difference. A lack of precision and rigour in the observation and recording of facts (which can and at an earlier historical period did befall the natural sciences) is addressed by exercising greater discipline in the practice of already existing methods, not by methodological differences arising from irreducible distinctions between two sorts of facts. Otlet’s remarks on the prospects for progress in the social sciences show that he considered sociology as already enjoying positivistic methods. (Writing in the early 1890s, Otlet may have been influenced by Auguste Comte’s ‘positive sociology’.) He admires especially the statistical sciences, by means of which the ‘reduction of all [social] phenomena to rigorous numerical laws will give them
the precision we have pointed out as a first requirement’ (12). The burden of much of what Otlet says about the numerical methods of the social sciences is to argue that although their facts may be more obscure, they are in all essentials the same as natural-scientific facts. For example, he wants to see whether ‘by a special classification it is possible eventually and naturally to group them [the facts of social science] into scientific laws’ (12) – just as natural facts are grouped. For both kinds of facts, the ‘sequences’ and ‘combinations of sequences’ that lead to ‘laws’ are ‘naturally’ produced once the relevant facts are properly revealed to consciousness in their full, unique presence. Even though more effort must be expended to reveal social facts, the goal is the same. And it can be the same only if there are not two radically different kinds of fact. Documentation is therefore not bifurcated into two regional practices split by essential differences between social- and natural-scientific facts, notwithstanding the significance of their accidental and historically contingent differences. A homogeneous field of facts, differing only in obstacles standing in the way of their revelation to consciousness in their full, unobscured presence, presents a uniform surface of application for the rationalizing, standardizing, and regulating operations of Otlet’s universal, modernist documentation.

Signs

W. Boyd Rayward opens the introduction of his anthology of Otlet’s selected essays with a passage from the Traité de documentation that envisions documentary operations performed by a ‘collection of machines’. Among those operations is one that captures two ideas central to Otlet’s concept of documentation: ‘The creation of documents in such a way that each item of information has its own identity’ (Rayward 1990, 1). The first idea, that Otlet’s documentation requires the creation of new documents rather than simply the cataloguing and classification of existing ones, expresses his fundamental concept of the ‘monographic principle’. The second idea is that when documentation is practiced according to the monographic principle, it reveals an ‘item of information’ in its ‘own identity’. But behind each idea lies Otlet’s concept of a fact. Documentation, as conceived by Otlet, serves science, and science is based on facts. He conceives a new scientific discipline, operating on the level of documents, which serves the existing scientific disciplines, which operate on the level of observation of natural and social phenomena. Science is built upon writing, but its writing must be made more scientific. The clear and accurate revelation of results requires that scientific writing be disciplined, controlled, standardized, regularized, catalogued and classified according to a uniform, universal set of techniques whose rigour and objectivity find their ultimate expression when documentary operations function like assemblages of machines. Just as natural and social scientists need to discipline the techniques of scientific method through which facts are clearly and distinctly revealed through rigorously practiced observation and experiment, so documentalists need to discipline the techniques of documentation through which those same facts are clearly and distinctly revealed through a rigorously constructed and organized system of signs. Otlet’s reference to mechanized techniques for creating and organizing items of information in their ‘own identity’ situates documentation
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on the plane of writing, signs and sequences of signs, but always in the service of the full revelation of facts. A fact can be fully revealed to the consciousness of a reader only when the ‘item of information’ that refers to that fact is constructed and organized in such a way, as Rayward put it, ‘that each item of information has its own identity.’ If the identity of the item of information is somehow compromised, so is the revelation of the fact.

The signs constituting ‘items of information’ are multiply complex. In the first instance, they are embedded in chains of signs originating from specific authors. The distinction between the obscurities of social science and the clarity of natural science is properly located here, on the level of signs. Natural-scientific authors already, thanks to the long history of natural-scientific documentation, create documents in a manner sufficiently disciplined to render an ‘item of information’ in its ‘own identity’, thereby presenting to the consciousness of readers its referent – the fact – in its own identity as specific and unique. But social-scientific authors, whose writing is insufficiently disciplined (in spite of their admirable statistical methods), contaminate the items of social-scientific information by surrounding them with ‘fine language or repetition or padding’ (17). It is as if signs of social facts bristle with a multitude of hooks, attaching them to signifying chains that obscure their ‘own identity’, thus preventing their referents – the facts – from being revealed to consciousness in their full, unique presence. Signs of social facts would appear to ‘stick’ to their authorial chains, thus obscuring the facts. Moreover, they would appear to attract an obfuscating detritus – ‘opinion’, ‘interpretation’, ‘speculation’, and ‘dross’ – that imposes between the signs and their referents a semiological fog, emanating from the undisciplined excesses of authorial subjectivity. In the social sciences, the original sign is original sin.

A second level of complexity of signs of facts is generated by writing practices disciplined by the monographic principle. Items of information, or signs of facts, undergo a rewriting or reinscription to a greater or lesser degree depending on whether they are social or natural-scientific facts. Ideally, they are reduced to a single, concise document, usually a card or single page. The most ambitious application of the monographic principle is to the writing of the Universal Book – the book of all hitherto revealed facts. Its pages document facts recorded in a standardized, ‘analytical’ form of inscription. Otlet writes: ‘Information, from which has been removed all dross and foreign elements, will be set out in a quite analytical way. It will be recorded on separate leaves or cards rather than being confined in volumes’ (84). When the monographic principle is ‘pushed to its ultimate conclusion’, the result ‘is to detach what the book amalgamates, to reduce all that is complex to its elements and to devote a page to each’ (149). As the techniques for writing the Universal Book disseminate across space and time, the old form of the book will give way to this new documentation of facts, in what amounts to ‘a complete transformation of modern publishing’ (83). Otlet discerns a historical movement toward works produced according to the monographic principle, because the modern proliferation of publications has produced a new kind of reading: ‘once one read; today one refers to, checks through, skims. Vita brevis ars longa!’ (79).

Otlet approvingly cites many documentary forms animated by the spirit of the monographic principle, which ‘demonstrate the existence of the need to condense
what has been written and to retrieve scientific information in an analytical form from which any personal interpretation has been removed’. Extended to books, this spirit will ‘make the book easier to consult and easier to handle so that it is more effectively and more quickly informative – in a word, more documentary’ (85). The degree to which publications become ‘more documentary’ takes the measure of their essential power: to reveal facts to consciousness in their full, unique presence. Otlet approvingly notes that book reviews and abstracts are now driven by the need to reinscribe facts more analytically. He asks us to ‘imagine a book review which has been developed ‘scientifically’ according to standardized procedures’. It should be in the form of a short résumé consisting of extracts of the book’s objectives and conclusions, becoming in that regard like a legal digest, from which all expression of opinion has long been expunged. In a discussion of bibliographic cards, Otlet contrasts a ‘good extract’ with the pernicious practice – ‘It soon became necessary to put a stop to this’ – of writing ‘what were really critical articles’, instead of a short summary. A ‘good abstract’ records just the facts of the abstracted item (16).

As items of information are severed by the application of the monographic principle from their original and too often obscuring authorial context, and are thus reduced to a card or page, they stand revealed in their ‘own identity’, through which the facts to which they refer are disclosed in their ‘own identity’. Whether in the writing of book reviews, legal digests, abstracts or the Universal Book, the proper documentation of facts functions as a normative principle: writing is placed under the rule of the clear revelation of the fact through the rigorous application of uniform, standardized writing techniques disciplined by the monographic principle.

The application of the monographic principle does not complete the documentation of facts. ‘By gathering these leaves together’, Otlet writes, ‘and classifying and organising them according to the headings of a reliable, precise, and detailed classification, we will create the “Universal Book” of knowledge, a book which will never be completed but will grow unceasingly’ (84). His reference to classification and organization indicates the third element of the complexity of the signs of facts. After the ‘dross’ of authorial subjectivity has been removed by a cleansing, analytical rewriting, the fact is marked by an additional sign: its classification code. The code has a double structure, pointing first to the verbal elements corresponding to the notation – for example, ‘535.7’ points to ‘Optical Physiology’ (151) – and second to a set of (properly reinscribed) documents bearing the same mark, all pertaining to their shared and often highly specific, complex ‘subject’. (The notation in the UDC can become quite complex; for example, ‘33.331.2 (44) <<17>>‘ refers to ‘the statistics of salaries in France in the 17th century’ (152).) But the classification code does not simply denote a unique set; it refers to a place in a complex network of such sets. The notation is constructed to make this ‘place’ clearly visible. Its structure is apparent when read from right to left, eliminating notational chains one by one, thus moving up one step at a time in the classification’s hierarchy. At each step, the notation refers to a wider set, thus situating the fact in relation to multiple sets of facts. Otlet compares the classification’s notation to geography’s navigational schemes: ‘bibliography … has its own extremely simple notations. Immediately and without confusion, it allows us to find a place for each idea, for each thing and consequently, for each book, article, or document and even for each part of a book
or document. Thus it allows us to take our bearings in the midst of the sources of knowledge, just as the system of geographic coordinates allows us to take our bearings on land or sea’ (153).

By virtue of its classification code, which reveals the fact’s place in an organized network of facts, its triply complex sign makes it available to collaborative scientific labour in the form most useful for knowledge production. When Otlet says that one wants to know whether ‘by a special classification it is possible eventually and naturally to group [facts] into scientific laws’ (12), the adjectives ‘eventually’ and ‘naturally’ are important. They signal the distinction between bibliographic classification and knowledge classification, and the relationship between documentalism and science. The use of ‘eventually’ implies the work of classification precedes that of science. When the work of bibliographic classification is performed rigorously, according to properly disciplined, standardized techniques of analytical fact inscription and classification, the scientific work of grouping facts by scientific laws is facilitated to the point where it proceeds ‘naturally’. The term ‘naturally’ has already appeared in a passage cited earlier in this chapter, in which Otlet distinguishes between the two kinds of work and indicates their temporal order. The passage, once again, is: ‘The results of the natural sciences are grounded in millions of carefully observed, analysed, and catalogued facts. These facts have subsequently been integrated into sequences and the combination of these sequences has naturally led to the enunciation of laws’ (11). The first sentence refers to the work of documentation in its use of ‘analysed, catalogued facts’. The writing practices of the natural sciences are so well disciplined that scientists themselves already perform much of the first stage of this documentary work. As we have seen, more energy is required, and specialists in documentation must be enlisted, to wrest social-scientific facts from their authorial chains in order to reveal them to consciousness in their full clarity. The second sentence refers to the work of scientists, because it is they, not the documentalists, who organize ‘verified facts … in a structure of systems, hypotheses, theories, laws’ (150). Scientific organization of facts is distinct from their bibliographic organization. But if the latter is properly done, the former comes ‘naturally’.

‘It is necessary, of course’, Otlet writes, ‘to distinguish carefully scientific classification from bibliographic classification’. The temporal order is clear, because the latter proceeds without waiting for the former. Scientific classification depends upon a consensus regarding the nature of scientific phenomena, but a final consensus has yet to be achieved. The aim of bibliographic classification is ‘quite practical’; it ‘can depart from an exact scientific order without the principles of the classification being compromised’. A ‘theoretical classification’ can generate places for subjects about which nothing has been written, whereas such places are ‘pointless’ in bibliographic classification, which always depends upon literary warrant. Otlet therefore notes that ‘a bibliographic classification is not a pure classification of knowledge, but such classification in relation to bibliographic entries’ (63–4).

The distinction between the two kinds of classification is further reinforced by Otlet’s metaphor of collective scientific work as quarrying stones for the construction of a ‘common edifice’. He says: ‘Each brings to the common edifice the stone he has quarried. It is important, however, that this stone be trimmed to the dimensions of the place in which it must fit beside the others, and consequently that the state of
development of the whole of the work should always be exactly and easily known’ (27). The image of trimming stones according to the dimensions of places prepared for them captures the concept of collaboration between specialists mentioned earlier in the passage. Any particular scientist’s work must accommodate the work of others; if it fails to fit the dimensions of its place, it is useless to the construction of a common edifice. It is tempting to interpret this work as that of positioning the precise fact discovered by observation and experiment in its proper place in the structure of facts – the organization of knowledge – as it has been collectively constructed to that point. The metaphor is deliberately material: the material properties of the trimmed stones suggest finite possibilities of combinations of facts. The positioning of facts in the structure of knowledge is the work of scientists, but the work of revealing the fact in its full presence by disciplined scientific writing is the work of documentalists. Bibliographic classification is a means to the end of scientific classification.

For Otlet, facts are unambiguous, whereas the original signs of facts, at least social-scientific facts, are not. But when the ‘items of information’ are disciplined first by severing their original signs from their authorial, signifying chains, and then by a condensed and ‘analytical’ rewriting, their inscription on a single page or card lends material support to the concept of an unambiguous, unitary fact revealed in the full presence of its own identity. Moreover, facts are simple, but the signs of facts are not. Wrested from the chains of signs that obscure them and rewritten in their new, ‘documentary’ form, they are ‘signed’ once more by their highly specific classification code. The labour of revealing the order of facts according to scientific laws can then proceed ‘naturally’, unobstructed by the inefficiencies of wasteful duplication and lost, undocumented and unorganized facts. Much work has to be done, many techniques and practices need to be developed, many workers need to be trained, and many interlocking institutions must be created in order to stabilize the chains of signs that constitute the proper, analytical documentation of facts.

Iterability and Its Discontents

Otlet wants to eliminate authorial subjectivity as an ordering principle for the signs of facts. Because the sign of a fact includes its classification code, its ‘own identity’ as a properly constructed ‘item of information’ includes the ‘sequences’ of the bibliographic classification, and thus its ‘proper’ documentary relations to other signs of facts. The ego that apprehends the sign’s ‘own identity’ has been disciplined to transcend the subjectivity of its situated, empirical individuality, either by the admirably disciplined and disciplinary documentary practices of natural scientists, or by training in Otlet’s documentation. This rational and universal apprehension of facts belongs, one could say, not to an empirical but to a transcendental, documentalist ego.

In several places Otlet opposes subjectivity to rationality, uniformity, standardization, classification and rational order. He does so with wit and deliberate irony. In discussing the new form of reading imposed by the ‘tremendous masses of materials’ flowing from publishers, he remarks, in a voice of complaint: ‘There is too much to read, the times are wrong’. But the protesting voice is immediately juxtaposed with a voice of approval: ‘the trend is no longer slavishly to follow the author
through the maze of a personal plan which he has outlined for himself and which, in
vain, he attempts to impose on those who read him’. The following sentences mix
seriousness and irony. First, Otlet remarks: ‘Works are referred to, that is to say, one
turns to them to ask for a reply to very precise, specialized questions’. But then: ‘The
reply found, one parts company, ungratefully no doubt but certainly for a thousand
good reasons, from the obliging friend who has just given such good service’ (79).
The ‘thousand good reasons’, of course, is an ironic reference to the fine words
and padding, the speculation and opinion, or the ‘dross’ of authorial subjectivity
imposed by the ‘maze of a personal plan’ on readers who, in proper positivistic
spirit, crave just the facts. At another place, Otlet complains: ‘Books, brochures, and
journal articles appear nowadays apparently as the products of chance’. He leaves
no doubt about his opinion of this turn of events: ‘Everyone has freedom to publish
on any subject, in any manner, in any form, in any style, consequently to clutter up
the field of documentation with vague and useless productions which have nothing
seriously new to say as to substance and which represent no improvement as to
form’ (83). The reference to individual freedom as the source of the problem again
expresses the opposition between subjectivity and order. Otlet continues: ‘Should
we not impose a doctrine of “moral restraint” in the sphere of the book where an
overwhelming and truly harmful proliferation is rampant?’ The irony of the reference
to morality is amplified in the immediately following sentence, written in the voice
of moralists who would accuse the documentalist of suppressing individual freedom
and creativity: ‘In fact, no one would dream of suppressing or even limiting this
precious freedom of writing, a necessary corollary of freedom of thought, which
is, in itself, nothing more than the fundamental right of intellectual life, action and
procreation’. But Otlet’s response to this ironic defense is spoken in the voice of
the sober, mature, rational subject, whose superior knowledge of what is at stake
neutralizes moral claims about the ‘freedom’ and ‘right’ to ‘clutter up’ the field of
documentation with ‘vague and useless productions’; thus, ‘the task of organizing
this freedom by means of appropriate institutions, just as political institutions and
codes of law have organised other freedoms, falls to those who are aware of the
problem’ (83). Writing 10 years earlier, Otlet was more direct: ‘The debasement of
all kinds of publication resulting from the modern cultivation of the so-called moral,
social and political sciences is alarming to those who are concerned about quality
rather than quantity. What is original in all of these books, brochures, and journal
articles, the publication of which is announced each week in publisher’s catalogues
and in reviews in specialist periodicals? What allowances must be made for style and
repetition and what is really new?’ (11).

Otlet did not espouse a theory of meaning in the texts considered here. But his many
comments about the obscurities of meaning arising from authorial subjectivity imply
that meaning is a function of relations between signs. If subjectivity contaminates
meaning, as it does in the case of social-scientific writing, the meaning of signs
that constitute an ‘item of information’ is not a function of authorial intention. It
is, instead, a function of the relations between signs, because the sign of the fact is
obscured – its meaning is contaminated – by its insertion in an obscuring chain of
signs. The sign can be purified by extraction from such chains and by reinscription
through an ‘analytical’ documentation that includes a classification code that embeds
it in a ‘sequence’ of signs of like facts. But the unfolding of the full and final meaning of the sign of the fact is not yet complete. The final step is taken when the scientist repositions the item of information in the classification of knowledge. Attaining its proper place in the structure of scientific hypotheses, theories and laws completes the unfolding of its meaning, and stabilizes its true and final relations to other signs also positioned in this knowledge classification. Even though Otlet allows that such a classification is constantly in flux, he nonetheless recognizes that the end to which it tends depends upon mutual reinforcements of the fixity of meaning and the stability of knowledge classification: ‘If one could say that a science was a well-made language, one could equally assert that it is a completed classification’ (150). The telos of a ‘well-made’ sign of a fact is realized in a ‘completed classification’, that is, in a final, stable and highly articulated ‘sequence of signs’. The sign of the fact, at first unstable in its original authorial chain of signs, tends toward a final, universal resting place stabilized by the organization of facts in a classification of scientific knowledge. As an ‘item of information’, the sign has been brought to its ‘own identity’, both by its revelation of the fact in its ‘own identity’, and by its proper relations to other signs, which in their turn reveal the proper relations between facts.

The force and power of the massive apparatus of Otlet’s modernist project of documentation – the techniques and disciplines of uniformity, standardization, rationalization, classification and organization, and all their supporting institutions – may be interpreted as a reaction to the inherent instability of signs that for him is manifested in the contaminations of authorial subjectivity. He sees the problem arising most acutely in the social sciences but, since social and natural-scientific facts are not essentially different, any sign is vulnerable to the contingencies of writing practices that obscure an item of information’s ‘own identity’. The problem may thus be posed more generally: What intensity, what force, powers the construction of standardized and universal procedures for all this extracting, rewriting and arranging under categories? What is the source of the energy that feeds this obsessive documentation, or the drive to reveal facts through disciplined techniques of writing aimed at revealing items of information in their ‘own identity’? What danger lurks in the documentation of facts that generates warnings like this: ‘Any error in the statement of any one of them has immediate consequences for everything that has been deduced from it, thus multiplying the error almost to infinity’ (13)? What is it about subjectivity that transforms it from a mere nuisance to a danger threatening the production of scientific knowledge?

In Derridean terms, we can say that for Otlet the signs of social facts seem to have an enhanced iterability. Given all the interpretation, speculation and opinion that ‘clutters up’ the publications spawned by ‘the modern cultivation of the so-called moral, social and political sciences’, the same fact may not only be expressed by different signs, but its signs appear in a greater number of signifying chains than do the signs of natural-scientific facts. Compared to the discipline enjoyed by the latter, signs of social facts suffer the ill effects of a disturbing promiscuity. They appear almost everywhere, anytime, in almost any company (‘Everyone has freedom to publish … in any manner, in any form, in any style’) (83). But Derrida argues that the arbitrariness of all signs means that their possibility of being repeated at another time, in another place, and in other signifying chains is not an accidental but
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a necessary feature qua sign. The meanings of signs are not grounded in essential relations to their signifieds, but rather in the differences between signs themselves. The implications of Otlet’s worries about authorial subjectivity – that meaning is a function of the relations between signs – point in the same direction. If any sign is always infected with the possibility of using it in other chains of signs, or if, as Derrida puts it, it is infected by the traces of all those signs, its meaning is not exhausted by its relations to its signified. Derrida refers to what for Otlet is an infectious semiological possibility as ‘différance’, a fundamental structure of the sign, which has the dual sense of ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’. The meaning of a sign is never given in its ‘own identity’: meaning cannot elude the field of signs from which it differs, and meaning is always deferred due to the traces of possible iterations that belong to the structure of signs in general. Derrida analyzes all writing, indeed all experience, as having the ‘trace-structure’ of the sign (Derrida 1976; Derrida 1982).

A Derridean problem therefore arises for Otlet’s idea of bringing facts into the clarity of their full presence to consciousness by means of a documentary discipline for writing facts and for stabilizing relations between their signs. His anxieties about the contaminations of subjectivity appear to allow that for him, meaning consists in relations between signs, yet he argues for the possibility, indeed the necessity, of a privileged set of such relations. But establishing such a privileged order depends upon suppressing or negating the iterability of signs, of denying the possibilities inherent in the arbitrariness of the sign, or of denying what Derrida analyzes as the trace-structure of the sign. Otlet’s documentation, I suggest, may be understood in terms of such suppression, negation and denial. For him, the sign of the fact, once understood or ‘meant’, establishes the ‘item of information’ in its ‘own identity’. It is as if the sign is fully used up by bringing to consciousness the full presence of its meaning, or its ‘signified’. Yet as Otlet’s anxieties about authorial subjectivity show, this presence can be contaminated by traces of other meanings, other signifieds, arising from the sign’s iterability, or from the possibility of its repetition in other chains of signs. If signs did not exhibit a trace-structure, there would be no reason to exercise the purifying discipline of Otlet’s documentation. But when signs of facts are ‘well-made’, the privileged order in which they are embedded reveals an order of facts. Such an order bestows the privilege of a universality manifested in the classification of scientific knowledge because it is grounded in the nature of the world: ‘If there is a certain order in things, it is necessary to have it also in science which reflects and explains nature’ (150). Otlet’s grafting of an ‘order of things’ onto his documentation to stabilize a privileged order of signs of facts, or ‘items of information’, is a kind of metaphysical hedge against iterability, ‘différance’, and the trace, on which Derrida spent much time and energy in deconstructing. But iterability poses a fatal problem for this privileged order. If a sign is iterable, if it can be divorced from one chain of signs and inserted in another, it bears the mark of the trace and is structured by ‘différance’. Its meaning is not exhausted in reaching out and embracing its referent. There will always be, as an essential part of the sign, traces of the possibilities of other signs, hence traces of other orders. The sign’s ultimate space is not a position in a stable structure yet to come, but the whole space of possibility of relations between signs. The trace-structure of the sign thus contaminates any privileged order of signs. Otlet’s dream of severing signs of facts
from other signs – such that they reveal, without remainder, the facts themselves and just the facts in their full presence – is plagued by the nightmare of the freedom of authorial subjectivity, which Otlet sees as a ‘debasement’: an endless play of signs of facts slipping from one order to another, ad infinitum – a play of signs without any transcendent, stabilizing foundation.

I suggest that a useful way to think about Otlet’s documentation is in terms of how the phenomenon of ‘writing the facts’ exhibits the power of the trace-structure, or iterability, of signs of facts. It is useful because such a view does not appeal to a mysterious ‘modernity’ transcendent to and animating Otlet’s work, an interpretation which often reads as a single-minded obsession with the ‘influence’ of familiar characteristics of European modernism: standardization, routinization, rationalization, uniformity, classification and institutionalized techniques. The interpretation proposed here also appeals to Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the sense of a phenomenon: ‘We will never find the sense of something (of a human, a biological or even a physical phenomenon) if we do not know the force which appropriates the thing, which exploits it, and which takes possession of it or is expressed in it’ (Deleuze 1983, 3). Deleuze explains that not only is the object or phenomenon itself a force but it is always related to another force (6). The sense of the phenomenon of ‘writing the facts’ may thus be interpreted as the differential expression of the forces immanent to writing in general and to its trace-structure, or its iterability: on the one hand, an active force expressing the ‘freedom’ of signs to be iterated or ‘cited’ in any other chain of signs, and on the other, a reactive force suppressing this freedom by the stabilizing power of the fixity afforded by documentation. This relation of forces plays out in different ways at different historical moments; thus the sense of the phenomenon of writing is plural (‘There is no event, no phenomenon, word or thought which does not have a multiple sense’ (4)). In the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts of Otlet, the sense of ‘writing the facts’ is dramatized by a collision between allegiances to the clarity, presence and ‘own identities’ of ‘items of information’ conceived as the ‘trimmed stones’ of a vast collective edifice of human knowledge, and a peculiarly post-structuralist and postmodern distress arising from the unsettling repercussions of the iterability of the signs of these facts, which appears in Otlet’s work as the excesses of authorial subjectivity. Otlet’s massive, modernist project of documentation may be read as a specific historical instance of the play of these active and reactive forces. The latter work to stabilize particular kinds of signifying chains through a special kind of writing – Otlet’s documentation – which denies iterability under the banner of techniques for transparent revelation of facts in the service of scientific knowledge. This is a long and hard battle. Little wonder that Otlet enlisted the whole world.

The reading suggested here gains support from its internal tensions. Even though Otlet clearly envisioned the ultimate aim of his efforts as the documentation and bibliographic classification of each and every fact as a means to a stable knowledge classification that would mirror the stable structure of reality itself, it turns out that even by his lights, iterability infects even the natural sciences. In several places in Rayward’s anthology, Otlet contrasts the stability of his universal bibliographic classification to the instabilities of knowledge classification. The latter is always in flux; to complete it would bring scientific investigation to an end. This constant flux
undermines, of course, the metaphor of scientists fitting their ‘trimmed stones’ to places already prepared for them. Those ‘places’ are not stable; thus the edifice has to be reassembled, time and again – an image of Sisyphean futility, strikingly at odds with the idea of steady, collective progress toward the construction of a temple of scientific knowledge. In some places Otlet even describes factions among scientists in terms evoking the excesses of authorial subjectivity. In his discussion of scientific knowledge classification, Otlet remarks: ‘The classifications of which we have just spoken are constantly changing, at least in their detail if not in their broad outline. In practice, such instability, such variability which is dependent on the moment, on schools of thought and individuals, is not acceptable’ (151).

Who, then, are the true stabilizers? They are the documentalists. The bibliographic classification of properly documented facts is the only truly stable order of signs of facts. They often begin as unstable, especially in ‘the so-called moral, social and political sciences’; once documented, they achieve stability in their bibliographic classification, only to become destabilized in scientists’ futile attempts to construct a stable common edifice of knowledge classification. It is as if the infection of authorial subjectivity generates a mutant strain that situates the massive apparatus for the production of bibliographic stability precariously between two regions of instability. A tragic note can be heard sounding through the enthusiastic idealism of Otlet’s modernist dream of a collection of machines that permit the ‘mechanical manipulation at will of all the listed items of information in order to obtain new combinations of facts, new relationships of ideas, and new operations carried out with the help of numbers’. What befalls the privileged order of facts when their signs are mechanically manipulated at will? Anyone’s will? And if the information technology envisioned by Otlet operates as imagined, do the infinite possibilities of mechanical rearrangements of facts not produce a far more fitting metaphor of the endless play of signifiers than the mere authorial subjectivity whose excesses Otlet tried so hard to control through his documentation? We are left with an image of documentalists who mechanically manipulate facts at will, turning kaleidoscopes of signifiers of facts, only to contemplate the infinite varieties of their patterns. It is a peculiarly postmodern image, comfortably lodged in contemporary ‘information society’, where the play of active and reactive forces of writing have shifted toward the free play of electronic signifiers.

References


*Transnational Associations/Associations Transnationales*, issues 1–2, June 2003.