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14 February 2015

Library Research Prize Essay

I never set out to be the bane of the Bethel Library's existence, although after having requested some thousand items through interlibrary loan and who knows how many checkouts from the on-campus shelves, I sometimes fear that is what I have become. In my defense, I come by this obsession honestly from my parents and libraries have been a part of my life for practically as long as I can remember. I often joke that taking library books home with me is almost an addiction, and I am really only half joking. Each book seems to promise the chance of an encounter that could send me in a new, better direction, or else help me appreciate more where I currently find myself. I resonate with Francis Spufford's manifesto in his wonderfully titled memoir, *The Child that Books Built*: "In a world washed to and fro by glassy floods of representations, I choose to gaze at experience through the mesh of paragraphs" (Spufford 6). Although that is not to say that I have anything in particular against the glassy floods of film or the sonic waves of CDs. After all, as Donald Weinberger points out, "in a library, we have the sense that the past is present, waiting to speak to us, even if we're there to check out the latest Jennifer Aniston romcom DVD" (Weinberger 101). In a library, Sven Birkerts notes, we come to appreciate the way various thoughts and lives touch each other—often across centuries—through the "obvious physical adjacency of certain texts" (Birkerts). This awe-inspiring, if perhaps intimidating, sense of the cumulative past is perhaps what most excites me every time I walk through the stacks. I cannot help but agree with novelist Cornelia Funke in her suspicion that, for any number of reasons, "a library book is a happy book."

In fact, this preoccupation with the abundance of reading a library provides is in many respects parallel to the phenomenon of life's extravagance that I explore in this paper on Virginia Woolf and her masterpiece, *Mrs. Dalloway*. I have wanted for several years now to pin down exactly what it was I loved in the writing of Virginia Woolf, and via the final paper assignment for Dr. Horstman's 20th Century Literature course, I finally found the motivation. Woolf is, I attempt to demonstrate, wonderfully preoccupied with the fullness of life. She finds herself consumed with exploring and representing it to the best of her ability throughout her writing. In many ways, this exuberance is similar to that which I associate with libraries and writing this paper has been a similar exercise in expressing such joy. It is a comparison I do not think Woolf would mind. She once wrote: "I ransack public libraries & find them full of sunken treasure" (qtd. Lee 408).

Researching this paper required that I make use of several resources off the shelves of our on campus library, as well as other books procured by the indefatigable interlibrary loan staff and articles available through online databases Bethel subscribes to, such as JSTOR. While this particular paper did not result in an exorbitant amount of library resources (especially by my personal standards), I wrote it as a preliminary study for my English senior seminar paper on artistic extravagance, which *has* demanded extensive use of the library's assets and which is not yet completed. I am endlessly thankful, as I continue to work on that project, for the efficient and comprehensive means of searching for and obtaining all sorts of resources.

Like Woolf (or so I flatter myself in thinking), I greatly enjoy the process of accumulating and synthesizing—Woolf would say "enclosing" and "saturating"—the various thoughts and writings I come across while researching. I am often frustrated at the end of writing a paper by how little of these sources I have actually been able to incorporate. For this reason,

Emerson's fear of recognizing his "own rejected thoughts" in someone else's work has always mystified me a bit (Emerson 19). If I come across someone saying "with masterly good sense precisely what [I] have thought and felt all the time," I almost always come away invigorated and take from it affirmation, not despair at being "forced to take with shame [my] own opinion from another." I cannot help but think that if he truly believed this, Emerson must naturally have found the library to be a rather terrifying place, full of whispering shelves and printed thoughts that could have been his, book spines that could have had his name printed on them...

While I agree with Robert Louis Stevenson that books on the whole are "a mighty bloodless substitute for life," I do not think I will ever doubt their importance as a *supplement* to life (Stevenson 34). It never ceases to amaze me how many words, how many thoughts, how many lives are just waiting to be taken off the shelves of even the smallest of libraries. In this sense, what greater extravagance can there be, what finer accumulation?

Works Cited

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