

## 2 Documentarity in the Works of Paul Otlet and Georges Bataille: Two Competing Notions of “Document” and Evidence

If one wants to see civilization, one would be better off visiting a slaughterhouse than a museum.

The ubiquity of strong documentarity in Western cultural traditions leads to the question of whether there has been a countertradition to such, less based on particulars evidencing essential and universal type-classes and more based on self-evidence. It also leads to the question of the relationship of documentation or library science theory to philosophical modes of documentarity.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century documentarity took two extreme epistemic forms: that of positivist representation (stressing reference) and that of a counter “materialism” (stressing sense) of entities. Nietzschean and similar projects of a “reevaluation of all [Western or European] values” (i.e., the critical unmasking of the Western cultural tradition as a “will to power”) had far-reaching implications in philosophy, art, and the human sciences during the early part of the twentieth century. Such critiques, together with the cultural ruptures that the First World War wrought to the ideals of “European” elite culture, starkly brought forth two poles for documentarity tied to two forms of knowledge: knowledge as collections of facts about the world, and knowledge as experience, where terms such as “sense,” “sensuality,” and “the body” played important roles.

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century library and museum documentation theory, as an epistemology of knowledge that held that the world was represented in collections, was challenged in the early twentieth century by field anthropological research and ethnology. Science, understood as a distantly held documentary collection of knowledge, was challenged

by science as a practice of investigation and inscription, while at the same time, the latter often making the same type of representational claims of realism in documentary field research products (such as notes, still photographs, and film recordings). Generally speaking, evidence was relocated from what was literally or figuratively seen as storehouses of facts (books, libraries) to factual experience (empirical research, “the body”). Again, however, experiential inscriptions often took on the same metaphysical claims for representing the real. Here we have a case of metaphysics and representation coloring not only strong, but also weak, “empirically” based, documentarity. As we will see throughout this book, the same (though with less brash a tone) dialectics, perhaps most pronounced when explicitly involving documentation (or more generally, information) technologies, occur throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.

We can see this by contrasting the works of two contemporary librarians/documentalists writing in French in the early twentieth century: Paul Otlet, who is seen as the father of European documentation, and the writer and philosopher Georges Bataille, whose work was heavily influenced by early and developing French field anthropology, ethnography, and ethnology. By contrasting Otlet’s utopian positivist understanding of library documentation with Bataille’s dystopian “base materialism,” we can see two seemingly opposed epistemologies—one grounded in ideal reference and the other in materialist sense—each engaging in documentary (and, in Otlet’s case, at least, institutional) practices of representation. In examining Bataille’s practice and reading of documents as valorizations of “the body,” we may recall Heidegger’s critique of Nietzsche’s reevaluation of all values: that by replacing mind with body, reference with sense, and being with becoming, Nietzsche (and we may add, Bataille after him) had merely inverted Platonism, rather than having destroyed it (Heidegger, 1979).

We have case of this, too, in early and mid-twentieth-century French ethnology, the earlier of which had a strong influence on Bataille’s works. As Vincent Debaene has shown in his book *Far Afield: French Anthropology between Science and Literature* (Debaene, 2014), the collections orientation for anthropology developed in the nineteenth century with the practices of museum collections.<sup>1</sup> Museums were seen as collections of cultural knowledge, much like libraries were and largely still are: distant from their points of construction and arranged more from the perspective of their collectors

than by the expressive powers of their objects or subjects of study. They were, in a strong documentary and colonial sense, European “centers of calculation” for collecting and measuring others in distant lands. Like their offspring, ethnological exhibitions or “human zoos” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (live exhibits of other cultures by representatives of those cultures), museums had mixed epistemic, education, and entertainment value in a fascination with the “other.”

As Debaene (2014) recounts, by the 1920s, however, field anthropology and early ethnology developed in France as a critique against this documentation orientation in museums. Like their earlier British and American brethren, anthropologists took to the field, and by the 1950s, according to Debaene, French anthropologists were writing two books, one of a scientific representation of the studied culture and the other of their experiences during that research. The first book depicted the studied culture in a structural method similar to museum classifications: as the “objective” cultural differences of one cultural group as compared to another, within systems of identity and difference. The second book, however, was more of an experiential narrative of being “in the field and in the flesh” as it were. Nevertheless, as Debaene notes, both of these works—a type of strong documentarity and a type of weak documentarity—were representational.<sup>2</sup> They both represented the “other”: the first in a mode of scientific objectivity, and the second in a more phenomenological and less “methodological” frame.

Debaene writes:

We have seen that, in the 1930s and beyond, the anthropologist’s “second book” in most cases constituted an attempt to restore the “atmosphere” of the society under study. This brings two elements to the fore: first, naturally, the inadequacy of the documentary and museological paradigm as it was applied to social realities; second, the fundamental unity of the project underpinning both of the ethnographer’s two books, for whether we consider the first or second of these texts, at stake is always the description and restoration of a “real” cultural object. Put another way, the project of anthropology as it was formulated in the interwar period remained fundamentally empiricist: it held that the ethnographer’s objects are entire societies and that these had to be fully described. Regardless of whether this object was material or mental or whether one hesitated between different methodologies (collection or immersion) and different modes of writing up the results (a scientific study or a “literary” work), it hardly mattered in the end since the same epistemology governed both the scholarly presentation of scientific data and the “evocative” ethnographic narrative. (2014, p. 276)

In this book, I argue that the metaphysics of documentarity not only possess an idealist paradigm, but also historically evolve toward an attempt to represent the particular as particular, however paradoxical this might be, in terms of experiential or “empirical” methods of sense. In this, the aesthetic or experiential index of documentary (broadly speaking) representation shifts, from a mimetic to a metonymic relationship between the universal and the particular (as we will examine in the next chapter), and finally evolves to a synthesis of tracking the particular in terms of expected inductive paradigms, as well as innate powers and habits. In Otlet’s works, we see classic “strong” documentarity in a positivist paradigm led by library-held “facts.” In Bataille’s works, we see a series of tropic and literary inversions of the Otletian paradigm for documents, while the “other” remains an object of erotic fascination, inclusive, if not to say dominant, within the author’s own self and culture.

### **Paul Otlet’s Bibliographic Positivism**

Paul Otlet was a rather forgotten figure after his death in 1944 until his work was recovered by his biographer, W. Boyd Rayward, some forty years later. Today, Otlet is widely celebrated as an information science predecessor and a visionary of something like today’s World Wide Web. His vision of science as documentary knowledge representation continues today, however, not only in libraries, but also in information technology firms claiming to be “keepers of knowledge” and in representationalist claims for information visualization (performed in Börner, 2015, and critically discussed in Drucker, 2014).

Paul Otlet is sometimes referred to as the father of the European documentation movement, a predecessor to American documentation and its successor of information science. He was coinventor with Henri La Fontaine of the Universal Decimal Classification scheme in 1905. He was a prolific and voluminous author who wrote on the social need for international institutions—foremost documentary intuitions, but also governmental, monetary, and educational institutions—and he was the founder of a large world library and museum in Brussels between the First and Second World Wars, the Mundaneum.

As Balnaves and Willson (2011) argue, what they call the “Otlet” tradition of information differs from what they call the “Cutter” tradition,

because in the latter, it is the material item (e.g., the paper document or the virtual document) that is seen as being “information,” whereas in the Otlet tradition, it is the *content* of such that is seen as being “information” (a very important emphasis when it comes to digital content). This tradition of seeing the “content” of a document, regardless of its material form, as being what constitutes its “information” continues up through contemporary information science.

For Otlet, documents, in the sense of the above notion of information content, are representations of the world. What documents contain is information, and the information of documents is “authoritative” in a strong sense—documents contain or represent (depending on one’s grammar) “the facts” of the world.

Otlet’s theory of documentation follows a picture theory of language, similar to then near-contemporary works in positivist philosophy such as Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, with documents and knowledge-organization systems (such as classification systems) playing the role of atomic statements. (Though it should be noted that, according to Otlet’s “monographic principle,” larger documents may be amendable to being broken up [or in paper form, cut up] into smaller informational documents, where each essential, or “micro,” document is a representation of a single “monographic” fact.) Since for Otlet, science is an epistemological domain of true statements of facts about the world (i.e., “information”), documents and library collections hold such “information” in their documents and in their bibliographic organization and the metadata codes for texts (classification codes, cataloging codes, etc.). For Otlet, true knowledge resides in the informational content of documents, and the further “purification” and organization of such occurs in the abstracts and other metadata or “knowledge organization” systems of libraries.

What we could call Otlet’s bibliographic atomic positivism can be conveniently seen in the following two illustrations from Otlet’s book *Traité de documentation: Le livre sur le livre: Théorie et pratique* (1934). It should be remembered that far from exemplifying a forgotten historical-epistemological moment, Otlet’s epistemological commitments continue today in the notion that what information tells us is what is true—or at least is potentially true. (As I will suggest throughout this book, literate societies tend to exhibit a slippery, and sometimes dangerous, slope between literary or graphic taste and epistemic belief.) In Otlet’s theoretical works,

the materiality of documents and the material, cultural, and social processes that mediate their appearance as information are largely viewed as being inconsequential to the information or knowledge said to be within them, other than when they strengthen the representational claims of such (e.g., in metadata that states the “aboutness” of documents).

In the first illustration, we see knowledge depicted as representations of the world in individual minds and then in various documentary materials, such as books, and most iconically, in photographs. In the second illustration, we see how knowledge (at its “highest” and most “scientific” levels for Otlet) is understood as representations of the world in recorded documents at higher and higher levels of representational abstraction, which for Otlet meant greater essential truths. For Otlet, documentation—meaning

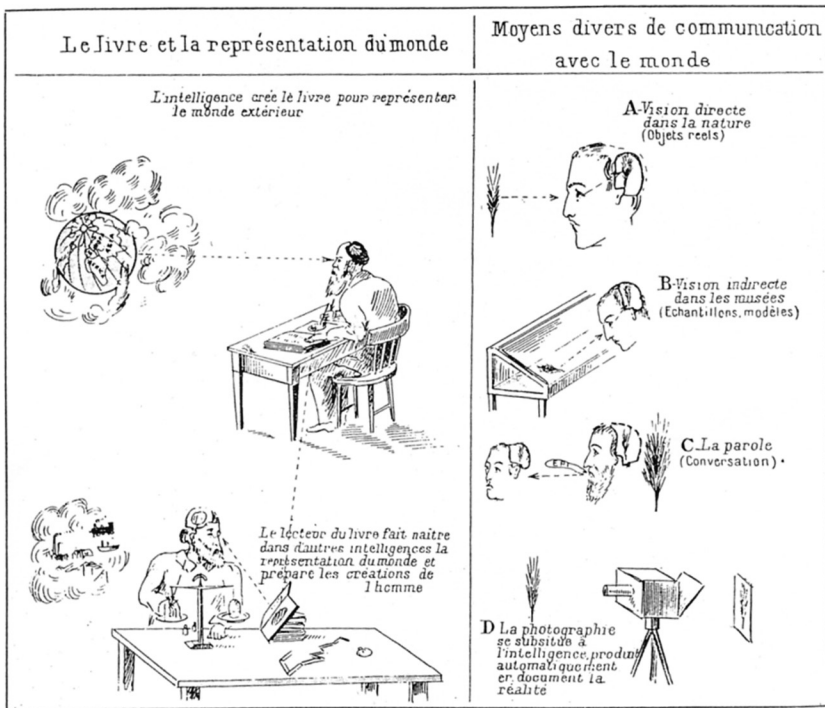


Figure 2.1

On the left, “The book and the representation of the world,” and on the right, “Diverse means of communication with the world.” From Otlet (1934).

documents and their documentary institutions—represents the true nature of the world. “The book” is Otlet’s metonymical trope for all documentation, in part and in totality. And his *Traité de documentation: Le livre sur le livre: théorie et pratique*, as the title tells us, is the book on “the book,” and so represents—as theory should, for Otlet—still a higher level of representation, a higher level of synthesis for knowledge, namely, the knowledge of bringing knowledge into being. The highest truths are contained in the most atomic and abstract representations or “metadata” held by libraries: abstracts, ontologies, and taxonomies, and ultimately bibliographic codes (such as classification numbers). Theoretical work on this is something like God’s view of all of knowledge (understood as the facts of the world): it includes the “manual” of how it all came and comes about.

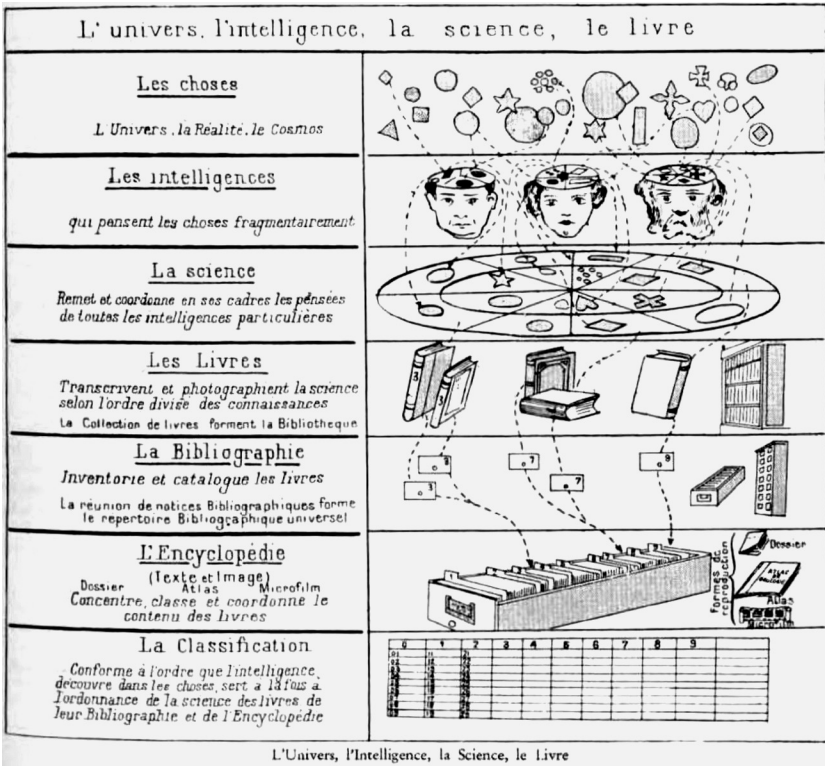


Figure 2.2  
 “Universe, Intelligence, Science, Book.” From Otlet (1934).

Finally, as graphic evidence of what I claimed earlier, namely that Otlet's bibliographic positivism resembles Ludwig Wittgenstein's logical positivism in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein, 1921), let us try substituting "document" and cognate terms for "fact" in the second and third propositions that begin Wittgenstein's book, as I do in the brackets below, to see how well these two philosophies fit together:

1. The world is all that is the case.
  - 1.1. The world [of knowledge, i.e., collections of statements—books, the documentary collection/library/catalog; "*Le Livre*"] is the totality of facts [statements/documents], not of things.
    - 1.11 The world [of knowledge, i.e., collections of statements—books, the documentary collection/library/catalog; "*Le Livre*"] is determined by the facts [statements/documents], and by their being all the facts [statements/documents].  
(adaptation of Wittgenstein, 1921)

Otlet's *Traité* not only repeats the epistemological assumptions of logical positivism expressed in works such as Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, but it also uses some of the same formal, rhetorical devices Wittgenstein used in his *Tractatus*, namely "atomic" rhetorical units (such as sentence-level statements), which are then built up into more complex rhetorical units (such as paragraphs, book sections, chapters). In this way, and through the use of simple sentences and other rhetorical "monographic" units, both Otlet and Wittgenstein's textual sections build into larger wholes; their texts rhetorically *perform* the analytic-synthetic science that they assert as the true form for knowledge.

In this vein, we can also compare, for example, the similar numeric textual designs that Wittgenstein used in his *Tractatus* (as quoted and amended for content, above) and those used by Otlet in his *Traité*, as shown by the table of contents of the latter (figure 2.3).

In the design of both works, the positivistic claims are not simply made, but rhetorically *shown*. We may recall here Wittgenstein's belief that ethics is most truly shown, not simply said. If this is the case, then both writers demonstrate not only in their epistemic statements, but also in their graphic textual designs, their ethical stances. Similarly, the practice of material culture in library institutions and their theoretical claims are not simply contingent for Otlet, but rather, theory is read out of practices and then comes to reinvest practice with theory in terms of pedagogy, methods, and material and human organization. At least for the notion of professionalism to



.43 Publications de textes .....	168	.36 Cartes postales illustrées; Cartes à jouer; Ex-libris .....	198
.431 Notion .....	168	.361 Cartes postales illustrées .....	198
.432 Règles pour la publication des textes.	168	.362 Cartes à jouer .....	198
.433 Types de publication de recueils ...	169	.363 Ex-libris .....	199
.44 Commentaires des textes .....	170	.37 Photographie .....	199
<b>241.5 Catalogues .....</b>	<b>170</b>	.38 La projection .....	204
<b>241.6 Tables et tableaux .....</b>	<b>171</b>	.52 Histoire .....	210
<b>241.7 Autres espèces de documents .....</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>242.4 Archives, (pièces, collections, dépôts).</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>241.8 Modalités d'une même œuvre. Edition. Traduction. Extraits. Arrangements.</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>242.5 Musique .....</b>	<b>208</b>
.81 Edition .....	177	.51 Notion .....	208
.82 Exemplaires .....	178	.53 Questions fondamentales .....	210
.83 Traductions .....	178	.54 Instruments de musique .....	211
.84 Extraits, Anthologie .....	181	.55 Notation musicale .....	212
.85 Arrangement. Transcription .....	181	.56 Partitions musicales. Bibliographie ...	214
.86 Le Neuf et le Plagiat. Emprunt. Copie. Citation .....	182	.57 Diffusion de la musique .....	214
.87 Œuvres complètes .....	183	.58 Organisation commerciale de l'édition de la musique .....	215
.88 Continuité des œuvres .....	183	.59 Bibliothèque et collection de musique.	215
<b>242 Documents graphiques autres que les ouvrages imprimés. ....</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>242.6 Monuments dits figurés : inscriptions, monnaies, médailles .....</b>	<b>215</b>
<b>242.1 Les manuscrits .....</b>	<b>183</b>	.61 Inscriptions .....	215
.11 Notion .....	183	.62 Monnaies et médailles .....	215
.12 Historique .....	183	.63 Sceaux. Cachets .....	216
.13 Enluminure. Miniature. Décoration ...	184	<b>243 Documents dits « Substituts du livre »</b>	<b>216</b>
.14 Erreurs dans la copie .....	184	<b>243.1 Objets, Matériel de démonstration .....</b>	<b>217</b>
.15 Collections. Bibliothèques .....	184	<b>243.2 Disque : phonogramme .....</b>	<b>220</b>
.16 Catalogue de manuscrits .....	184	<b>243.3 Films : cinéma .....</b>	<b>223</b>
.17 Travaux sur les manuscrits .....	185	.31 Notion .....	223
.18 Les papyrus .....	185	.32 Historique .....	223
.19 Manuscrits modernes, Incunables .....	187	.33 Caractéristiques .....	223
<b>242.2 Cartes et plans. Atlas .....</b>	<b>187</b>	.331 En général .....	223
.21 Notions .....	187	.332 Caractéristiques particulières .....	224

Figure 2.3

Numerical organization of Otlet's *Traité de documentation: Le livre sur le livre: Théorie et pratique*, from its table of contents. From Otlet (1934).

succeed in modernity, it needs a practical philosophy, for practice without theory is blind, and theory without practice is empty. Both Otlet and Briet were dedicated to this principle in regard to documentary institutions and their relation to knowledge, just as much as the early Wittgenstein sought a role for philosophers to “clean up” the practices of language so that they become as “meaningful” as possible.<sup>3</sup>

### Georges Bataille and the Philosophy of Base Materialism

In seeming contrast to Otlet's positivist understanding of documents, we now turn to the work of the French novelist and nonprofessional philosopher Georges Bataille, who worked at the French Bibliothèque Nationale,

first as the head of the Department of Medallions and later moved to the Printed Books Department. Bataille was at the Bibliothèque Nationale for nearly twenty years and later worked as a librarian in Orléans and elsewhere.

Though Bataille's literary works are sometimes seen as belonging to the work of the modern avant-garde in literature, it is not because of their formal innovation (there isn't much), but rather because of their pornographic and "extreme" contents. They are representational fiction whose surrealism is in large part due to their extreme sexual content—the surreal lengths that an "empirical" or realist narrative is drawn out into sexual extravagance and how this philosophy of excess constitutes the transcendental or sublime grounds for the real. Indeed, it is only because Otlet's and Bataille's works share claims to representing transcendental essences in documents (one in the form of substances, the other in the form of psychobiological drives) that one couldn't imagine a greater moral and aesthetic contrast than that between Otlet's theoretical works and Bataille's novels and theoretical works as documents of the human world. In Otlet's works, all the writing and all the content it refers to are meant to have clear and distinct boundaries in facts that are rationally organized. In Bataille's novels, excess, disgust, and confusion ooze from every being and their bodily orifices, and all social relations in his theoretical works are somewhat rhetorically meandering. In Nietzschean terms, in their works, Otlet tries to be Apollonian and Bataille tries to be Dionysian, with both, to some degree, becoming the opposite. (Otlet can't stop writing about how simple things are, and Bataille's novels, at least, of course, are filled with sexual fixation to the point of absurdity.)

In Bataille's works, sexual acts, slaughterhouses, war, and other such situations display civilization as based on excess, irrationality, and violence. Whereas documents give evidence of atomic facts and rationality in Otlet's works, in Bataille's works they give evidence of the unreasonable and violent tendencies that led—through subjugation and violence upon those within and outside—to the dominant states of Western Europe and the idea of European civilization. In short, whereas for Otlet documents give evidence of *logos*, documents for Bataille give evidence of the violence that culminates in *logos*.

Further, it is important to note once again not only the rhetorical but also the visual forms that perform the nature of documentary evidence for each writer. For Otlet, the forms of the ideal world were illustrations,

perhaps in part because no physical evidence could exist of the epistemic order he saw behind all things and knowledge. In Bataille's works, however, as in field anthropology, photographs offered examples of excess via their contents. So, for example, Bataille used a photograph by Eli Lotar of severed cow hooves neatly lined up outside of a Parisian slaughterhouse for his "Critical Dictionary" section entitled "Abattoir" (Ades, 2006) in the journal *Documents*. For Bataille, if one wants to see the taste of European civilization, one would be better off visiting a slaughterhouse than a museum.

### *Documents* (1929–1930)

Bataille was editor of the Parisian journal *Documents*, which ran from 1929 to 1930. Other than Debaene's (2014) broader work, I am unaware of any critical consideration of the importance of the title of this journal in debates about the social sciences and literature in the early twentieth century. But in the context of Bataille's profession and his friendships in the ethnographic community (such as with Michel Leiris), as well as the subtitle of the journal (*Documents: Doctrines, archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie*), it would be hard to think that "document" wasn't a contested term during this time, since what is offered as documents in this journal is certainly not like Otlet's illustrations of rational harmony for the world. Increasingly, under Bataille's editorial control, including his own essays, the journal took on a critical position of "base materialism."

Bataille's base materialism in *Documents* could be quite literally "base," in terms of social and aesthetic tastes and literal vertical positionality in the world. Bataille's works alone in *Documents* are commentaries accompanied by photographs of severed cow hooves, spiders, and a human big toe. In his article "Le gros orteil"—"The Big Toe"—from the first issue of *Documents* in 1929, Bataille argues for the importance of the literally supporting role of the big toe in differentiating human beings from other animals, affording the "higher" standing of humans in the world, a verticality that, for Bataille, contributes to human cognitive development. Further, the photograph provided in the article as evidence of the importance of the big toe and its role in civilization is not of any famous big toe, but rather of an ordinary and ungroomed, big toe. Indeed, for Bataille, the more aesthetically and often more physically base the object, the more likely it is the material basis for civilization.

Bataille describes the (ig)nobility of the big toe:

The big toe is the most *human part* of the human body, in the sense that no other element of this body is as differentiated from the corresponding element of the anthropoid ape (chimpanzee, gorilla, orangutan, or gibbon). This is due to the fact that the ape is tree dwelling, whereas man moves on the earth without clinging to branches, having himself become a tree, in other words raising himself straight up in the air like a tree, and all the more beautiful for the correctness of his erection. In addition, the function of the human foot consists in giving a firm foundation to the erection of which man is so proud (the big toe, ceasing to grasp branches is applied to the ground in the same plane as the other toes).

But whatever the role played in the erection by the foot, man, who has a light head, in other words, a head raised to the heavens and heavenly things, sees it as spit, on the pretext that he has his foot in the mud. (Bataille, 1985, p. 20)

Characteristically, as with all infrastructure, the most essential part of the body is often ignored by its users until breakdown:

Man willingly imagines himself to be like the god Neptune, stilling his own waves, with majesty; nevertheless, the bellowing waves of the viscera, in more or less incessant inflation and upheaval, brusquely put an end to his dignity. Blind, but tranquil and strangely despising his obscure baseness, a given person, ready to call to mind the grandeurs of human history, as when his glance ascends a monument testifying to the grandeur of his nation, is topped in mid-flight by an atrocious pain in his big toe because, though the most noble of animals, he nevertheless has corns on his feet; in other words, he has feet, and these feet independently lead an ignoble life. (Bataille, 1985, p. 22)

Bataille ends “The Big Toe” by challenging the poetic methods of Bretonian surrealism, suggesting that rather than inducing unconscious states in order to see reality, the surrealist poets need only look down at their feet:

The meaning of this article lies in its insistence on a direct and explicit questioning of *seductiveness*, without taking into account poetic concoctions that are, ultimately, nothing but a diversion (most human beings are naturally feeble and can only abandon themselves to their instincts when in a poetic haze). A return to reality does not imply any new acceptances, but means that one is seduced in a base manner, without transpositions and to the point of screaming, opening his eyes wide: opening them wide, then, before a big toe. (Bataille, 1985, p. 23)

To summarize this chapter, what we see by contrasting the works of Paul Otlet and Georges Bataille is an early twentieth-century drift from an idealistic understanding of documents to a phenomenological one, in both what documents are understood to be and how they appear in the world.

This corresponds to, and in Bataille's case, intersects with, a similar drift in the notion of document in French anthropology (Debaene, 2014). But, what we also see here is how the metaphysics of strong documentarity is inverted, but in such a way as to appear in the empirical world still in the mode of class-type representations. Bataille's base materialism is a philosophy of documentarity grounded in sense, itself taken as a metaphysical category.

In the next chapter I first historically return to a medieval theological context of textual revelation to see the emergence of "literary" styles where the particular illuminates and makes actual the theological universal. Then, I look at another example from earlier twentieth-century documentation theory, where the particular is proposed as absorbed within a strong "scientific" documentarity in documentation practice and through a narrative of scientific revelation. Religious and "literary" texts, here, draw in universal types and themes and give them concrete personages and events in everyday sense and language, while "science" is said to make particulars what they are in documentation practices of ontology, which are understood to be both leading, and in character, a model for, scientific knowledge.

What we see with Otlet and Bataille's works are metaphysical systems of reference and of sense, where particulars are absorbed within transcendental classes and surreal experiences, respectively. Inscriptions are themselves inscribed as reason or experience. What we will encounter in the next chapter are temporal, experiential, movements between universals and particulars within forms of inscription. The universal becomes readable in events and events become readable by documentary science. As different as they are, in both cases, truth is not transcendental, but rather is revealed by performative practices. Truth becomes evident at indexical points of revelation made possible through technologies of informational inscription.

