unable to discern the ideas we introduced from those inspired by others.

How can you avoid these risks? Before approaching the professor, you should assess the professor's honesty from the opinions of friends and the experiences of graduates whom the professor advised. You should read his books, and pay particular attention to citations of his collaborators. This investigation will take you so far, but you must also intuitively feel some sense of trust and respect toward the professor.

On the other hand, you should not become so paranoid that you believe you have been plagiarized every time a professor or another student addresses a topic related to your thesis. For example, if you did a thesis on the relationship of Darwinism and Lamarckism, your research would show that many scholars have treated the same topic, and have shared many common ideas. Therefore, you should not feel like a defrauded genius if the professor, one of his teaching assistants, or one of your classmates writes on the same topic. The actual theft of scientific work means something different altogether: using specific data from your experiments, appropriating your original transcriptions of rare manuscripts, using statistical data that you were the first to collect, or using your original translations of texts that were either never translated or translated differently by others. These constitute theft only if you have not been cited as a source, because once you publish your thesis, others have the right to cite it.

So, without slipping into paranoia, consider your willingness to join a collective project, and consider whether the risks are worth it.

3

CONDUCTING RESEARCH

3.1 The Availability of Primary and Secondary Sources

3.1.1 What Are the Sources of a Scientific Work?
A thesis studies an object by making use of specific instruments. Often the object is a book and the instruments are other books. For a thesis on "Adam Smith's Economic Thought," the object is Adam Smith's bibliography, and the instruments are other books on Adam Smith. In this case, we can say that Adam Smith's writings constitute the primary sources and the writings about Adam Smith are the secondary sources or the critical literature. Naturally, if the topic were "The Sources of Adam Smith's Economic Thought," the primary sources would then be the books or other writings that inspired Adam Smith. Certainly historical events (and particular discussions on certain concrete phenomena that Smith may have witnessed) may also have inspired Adam Smith's work, but these events are nevertheless accessible to us in the form of written material, that is, in the form of other texts.

But there are also cases in which the object is a real phenomenon. This would be true for a thesis on the internal migrations of Italians in the twentieth century, the behavior of a group of handicapped children, or an audience's opinion of a current TV program. In these cases, primary sources may not yet exist in an organized written form. Instead you must gather and create your primary documents, including statistical data, interview transcriptions, and sometimes photographs or even audiovisual documents. The critical
literature in these cases will not differ greatly from that of our thesis on Adam Smith, although it may consist of newspaper articles and other kinds of documents, instead of books and journal articles.

You must be able to clearly distinguish primary sources from critical literature. The critical literature often reproduces quotes from primary sources, but—as we will see in the next paragraph—these are indirect sources. Moreover, a student conducting hasty and disorderly research can easily mistake the arguments contained in primary sources with those of the critical literature. For example, if I am writing a thesis on "Adam Smith’s Economic Thought" and I notice that I am dwelling on a certain author’s interpretations more than my own direct reading of Smith, I must either return to the source or change my topic to "The Interpretations of Adam Smith in Contemporary English Liberal Thought." The latter topic will not exempt me from understanding Smith’s work, but my primary interest will be the interpretations of Smith’s work by others. Obviously, an in-depth study of Smith’s critics will require a comparison of their work to the original text.

However, there could be a case in which the original object matters little to me. Suppose I begin a thesis on traditional Japanese Zen philosophy. Clearly I must be able to read Japanese, and I cannot trust the few available Western translations. Now suppose that, in examining the critical literature, I become interested in how certain literary and artistic avant-garde movements in the United States made use of Zen in the fifties. At this point, I am no longer interested in understanding the meaning of Zen thought with absolute theological and philological accuracy. Instead, I am now interested in how original Oriental ideas have become elements of a Western artistic ideology. I will change my topic to "Zen Principles in the ‘San Francisco Renaissance’ of the 1950s," and my primary sources will become the texts of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and so on. As for my understanding of original Zen philosophy, some reliable critical works and good translations will now suffice. Naturally, this approach assumes that I do not wish to demonstrate that the Californians misinterpreted the original Zen thought, which would require me to make comparisons with the Japanese originals. But because the Californians loosely based their work on Western translations, I am more interested in their interpretations than in the original philosophy.

This example also illustrates that I should promptly define the true object of my thesis so that I can determine the availability of my sources from the outset. In section 3.2.4, I will demonstrate how to start a thesis from scratch with no preconceived bibliography, and how to obtain all the sources I need from a single, small library. Although this procedure is possible, the situation will rarely occur, because realistically I would not choose a topic unless I already knew: (a) where I could find the sources, (b) whether they were easily accessible, and (c) whether I was capable of fully understanding them. It would be imprudent of me to accept a thesis on a particular set of James Joyce’s manuscripts without knowing that they reside at the University of Buffalo, or (if I knew their location) knowing full well that I would never be able to travel to New York. It would be equally unwise to enthusiastically accept a topic on a private collection of documents belonging to a family that is overly protective of them, and that reveals them only to renowned scholars. And I should not accept a topic that deals with medieval manuscripts, no matter how accessible they are, if I lack the proper training needed to read them.

More realistically, I might agree to study an author only to learn that his original texts are very rare, and that I must travel like a maniac from library to library, or even from country to country. Or I may rely on the fact that microfilms of his complete oeuvre are readily available, forgetting that my department does not own the apparatus to read them, or that I suffer from conjunctivitis and cannot endure such exhausting work. And it would be quite useless for me, if I were studying film at an Italian university, to plan a thesis on a minor work of a director from the 1920s, if I then discover that the only copy of this work resides in the Library of Congress in Washington.

Once the problem of the primary sources is resolved, the same questions arise for the critical literature. I could choose a thesis on a minor eighteenth-century author because the first edition of his work coincidentally resides in my city’s
library, but I may then learn that the best critical works on
my author are not available at any library to which I have
access, and are very expensive to purchase. You cannot avoid
this problem by deciding to work only on the sources to which
you have access. You must read all of the critical literature, or
at least all of it that matters, and you must access the sources
directly (see the following paragraph). Otherwise, you should
choose another topic according to the criteria described in
chapter 2, rather than irresponsibly complete a thesis with
unforgivable omissions.

Let us look at some concrete examples from thesis defenses
that I have recently attended. In each of these, the authors
precisely identified sources that were unquestionably within
their range of expertise, verified the availability of these
sources, and used them effectively. The first thesis was on
“The Clerical-Moderate Experience in the City Hall Adminis-
tration of Modena (1889–1910).” As the title indicates, the
candidate (or the advisor) had precisely defined the scope
of the project. The candidate was from Modena, so he could
work locally. He discriminated between a general bibliogra-
phy and bibliography specifically on the subject of Modena.
He may have traveled to other cities for the former, and I
assume he was able to work in the city libraries of Modena on
the latter. He also divided the primary sources into archival
sources and journalistic sources, the latter including relevant
articles from contemporary newspapers.

The second thesis was on “The Scholastic Policy of the
Italian Communist Party (P.C.I.) from the Formation of
the Center-Left (1963) to the Student Protests (1968).”
Here too, the student specified the topic with precision and,
I would say, prudence, because conducting research on the
period after 1968 would have been difficult due to the sheer
quantity of sources. The student judiciously chose to focus
on the period before 1968, limiting his sources to the official
press of the Communist Party, the parliamentary acts,
the party’s archives, and the general press. I have to imagi-
ne that, no matter how precisely the student researched the
general press, some information must have slipped through
the cracks due to the amount of coverage involved. Neverthe-
less, the general press was unquestionably a valid secondary
source of opinions and criticisms. As for the other sources,
the official declarations were sufficient to define the Com-
munist Party’s scholastic policy. Had the thesis dealt with
the scholastic policy of the Christian Democracy, a party in
the government coalition, this would have been a very differ-
ent story, and the research would surely have assumed dra-
matic proportions. On one hand there would have been the
official statements, on the other the actual governmental
acts that may have contradicted these statements. Take also
into account that, if the period had extended beyond 1968,
the student would have had to include, among the sources
of unofficial opinions, all the publications of the extrapar-
liamentary movements that began to proliferate after that
period. Once again, the research would have been far more
difficult. Finally, I imagine that the candidate had the oppor-
tunity to work in Rome, or he was able to have the required
material photocopied and sent to him.

The third thesis dealt with medieval history, and was on
a seemingly difficult topic. It examined the vicissitudes of
the San Zeno Abbey’s estate in Verona during the High Mid-
dle Ages. The heart of the work consisted of a transcription,
previously never attempted, of certain folios from the San
Zeno Abbey’s registry in the thirteenth century. Naturally,
the project required some knowledge of paleography, but
once the candidate acquired this technique, he only needed
to diligently execute the transcription and comment on the
results. Nevertheless, the thesis included a bibliography of
30 titles, a sign that the student had historically contextual-
ized the specific problem on the basis of previous literature.
I assume that the candidate was from Verona and had cho-

The fourth thesis was titled “Contemporary Drama Perfor-
mances in Trentino.” The candidate, who lived in that region
of Italy, knew that there had been a limited number of per-
formances, and he reconstructed them by consulting news-
papers, city archives, and statistical surveys on the audience’s
frequency. The fifth thesis, “Aspects of Cultural Policy in
the City of Udine with Particular Reference to the City Library’s
Activity,” was similar. These are two examples of projects
whose sources are easily available, but that are nevertheless
useful because they require a compilation of statistical-sociological documentation that will serve future researchers.

A sixth thesis required more time and effort than the others. It illustrates how a student can treat with scientific rigor a topic that at first seems appropriate only for an honest literature survey. The title was "The Question of the Actor in Adolphe Appia's Oeuvre." Appia is a well-known Swiss author and the subject of abundant historical and theoretical theater studies that, it would seem, have exhausted all there is to say about him. But the candidate painstakingly researched the Swiss archives, along with countless libraries, and explored each and every place where Appia had worked. The student was able to compile an exhaustive bibliography of works on the author, along with the author's own writings, including minor articles that had been forgotten shortly after their original publication. This gave the thesis breadth and precision that, according to the advisor, qualified it as a definitive contribution. The student thus went beyond the literature survey by making these obscure sources accessible.

### 3.1.2 Direct and Indirect Sources

Regarding books, a direct source is an original edition or a critical edition of the work in question.

A translation is not a direct source: it is instead a prosthetic like dentures or a pair of glasses. It is a means by which I gain limited access to something that lies outside my range.

An anthology is not a direct source: it is a stew of sources, useful only for a first approach to the topic. If I write a thesis on a particular author, my goal is to see in him what others have not, and an anthology only provides someone else's view.

The critical works of other authors, no matter how rich with quotations, are not direct sources: at best, they are indirect sources.

Indirect sources can take many forms. If the subject of my thesis is the Italian communist politician Palmiro Togliatti, the parliamentary speeches published by the newspaper Unità constitute an indirect source, because there is no assurance that the newspaper has not made edits or mistakes. Instead, the parliamentary acts themselves constitute a direct source. If I could locate an actual text written by Togliatti himself, I would have the ultimate direct source. If I want to study the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, the only direct source is the original document. However, a good photocopy can also be considered a direct source. I can also use as a direct source the critical edition by a historiographer of undisputed rigor, if I define "undisputed" to mean that his edition has never been challenged by other critical works. Clearly the concepts of "direct" and "indirect" sources depend on my perspective and the approach that I take for my thesis. If I wish to discuss the political meaning of the Declaration of Independence in my thesis, a good critical edition will be more than adequate. If I want to write a thesis on "The Narrative Structures in The Betrothed," any edition of Alessandro Manzoni's novel will suffice. Instead, my thesis might be called "Manzoni's Linguistic Transformation from Milan to Florence." It would explore the novel's linguistic change from the blend of Lombard vernacular and traditional literary language of the 1827 edition to the contemporary Florentine of the 1840 edition. In this case, my thesis would require a good critical edition of each version of the novel.

Let us then say that my sources should always be direct, within the limits set by the object of my research. The only absolute rule is that I should not quote my author through another quote. In theory, a rigorous scientific work should never quote from any quote, even if the material that I wish to quote is from someone other than the object of my thesis. Nevertheless, there are reasonable exceptions, especially for a thesis. For example, if you choose "The Question of the Transcendental Nature of Beauty in Thomas Aquinas's Summa theologiae," your primary source will be Thomas Aquinas's Summa. Let us say that Marietti's currently available edition is sufficient, unless you suspect that it betrays the original, in which case you must return to other editions. (In this case your thesis will have a philological character, instead of an aesthetic/philosophical character.) You will soon discover that Aquinas also addresses the transcendental nature of beauty in his Commentary to Pseudo-Dionysius's De divinis nominitibus (The Divine Names), and you must address this
work as well, despite your thesis’s restrictive title. Finally you will discover that Aquinas’s work on this theme drew from an entire religious tradition, and that researching all of the original sources would take a scholar his entire career. You will also discover that such a work already exists, and that its author is Dom Henry Pouillon who, in this vast work of his, quotes large passages from all the authors who commented on Pseudo-Dionysius and illuminates the relationships, origins, and contradictions of these commentaries. Within the scope of your thesis, you can certainly use the material Pouillon gathered each time you refer to Alexander of Hales or Hildegard. If you come to realize that Alexander of Hales’ text becomes essential for the development of your argument, then you can consult the Quaracchi edition of the direct text, but if you only need to refer to a short quote, it will suffice to declare that you found the source through Pouillon. Nobody will fault you because Pouillon is a rigorous scholar, and because the text you quoted indirectly through him was not central to your thesis.

What you should never do is quote from an indirect source pretending that you have read the original. This is not just a matter of professional ethics. Imagine if someone asked how you were able to read a certain manuscript directly, when it is common knowledge that it was destroyed in 1944! This being said, you need not get caught up in “direct source neurosis.” The fact that Napoleon died on May 5, 1821 is common knowledge, usually acquired through indirect sources, such as history books written on the basis of other history books. If you wish to study the precise date of Napoleon’s death, you would need to locate original documentation. But if you wish to address the influence of Napoleon’s death on the psychology of European liberal youth, you can trust the date that appears in any history book. After you declare that you are citing an indirect source in your thesis, it may be prudent to check other indirect sources to determine the accuracy of a certain quote, or the reference to a certain fact or opinion. If you find inconsistencies that raise suspicion, you can either choose not to quote the data, or search for the direct source.

For example, since we have already mentioned St. Thomas’s aesthetic thought, let us note that a number of recent texts that discuss this topic assume that St. Thomas said the following: “pulchrum est id quod visum placet.” Since I wrote my own thesis on this topic, I consulted the original texts and noticed that St. Thomas had never said that. Instead, he said, “pulchra dicuntur quae visa placent,” and I will not go into the details of why the two formulations can lead to very different interpretations. What had happened? Many years ago the philosopher Jacques Maritain had proposed the first formulation, thinking he was faithfully summarizing St. Thomas’s thought. Since then, other scholars have referred to Maritain’s formulation (which Maritain had drawn from an indirect source), without bothering to check the original.1

The same issue arises in regard to bibliographical entries. In a rush, you may decide to include in your bibliography sources you have not read; you may discuss these works in footnotes, or what’s worse, in the body of the text, all along drawing from information that you gathered indirectly. For example, you may find yourself writing a thesis on the baroque; having read Luciano Anceschi’s article “Bacone tra Rinascimento e Barocco” (Bacon between the Renaissance and baroque), in Da Bacone a Kant (From Bacon to Kant) (Bologna: Il Mulino. 1972), you cite this article in a note and then, to make a good impression, you add the following comment: “For other acute and stimulating observations on the same topic see id., ‘L’estetica di Bacon’ (Bacon’s aesthetics), in L’estetica dell’empirismo inglese (The aesthetic of English empiricism) (Bologna: Alfa, 1959).” However, since you have not actually read “L’estetica di Bacon,” and you are simply mentioning a text that you saw referenced in a note, you will make a terrible impression when a professor points out that the two articles are one and the same, “L’estetica di Bacon” having been published 13 years before “Bacone tra Rinascimento e Barocco” in a more limited edition.

These observations are also valid if the object of your thesis is a current event rather than a series of texts. If I want to address the reactions of farmers from Romagna to a particular set of TV news programs, a primary source will be the survey I conduct in the field, interviewing a reliable and adequate sample of farmers according to defined rules. If not this, I should at least use as my primary source a recent analogous survey
published by a reliable source. Clearly I would be at fault if I relied on ten-year-old research, if nothing else because both the farmers and the TV news programs have changed significantly over the past decade. However, this research might be appropriate for a thesis titled “Studies on the Relationship between the Audience and Television in the Sixties.”

3.2 Bibliographical Research

3.2.1 How to Use the Library

How should a student conduct preliminary research in the library? If he already has a reliable bibliography, he can obviously search the author catalog to discover what a particular library has to offer. If the library lacks some of the titles in his bibliography, he can search another library, and so on. But this method assumes that he already has a bibliography, and that he is able to access a series of libraries, maybe one in Rome and another in London. But as we have previously discussed, readers of this book may not have such opportunities. Nor do many professional scholars. Furthermore, although we sometimes go to the library to find a book that we already know exists, we often go to the library to find out if a book exists, or to discover books about which we have no previous knowledge. In other words, we often go to the library to compile a bibliography, and this means searching for sources that we do not yet know exist. A good researcher can enter a library without having the faintest idea about scholarship on a particular topic, and exit knowing more about it, if only a little more.

The catalog The library offers some resources that allow us to find relevant sources about which we have no previous knowledge. Naturally, the first is called the subject catalog. Of course there is also an alphabetically arranged author catalog that is useful to those who already know what they want, but the subject catalog is for those who do not yet know. Here, a good library tells me everything that I can find in its stacks, for example, on the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

But querying the subject catalog requires some skill. Clearly we cannot find the entry “Fall of the Roman Empire” under the letter “F,” unless we are dealing with a library with a very sophisticated indexing system. We will have to look under “Roman Empire,” and then under “Rome,” and then under “(Roman) History.” And if we have retained some preliminary knowledge from primary school, we will have the foresight to consult “Romulus Augustulus” or “Augustus (Romulus),” “Orestes,” “Odoacer,” “Barbarians,” and “Roman-barbarian (regna).”

Our problems do not end there. In many libraries there are two author catalogs and two subject catalogs: old ones that stop at a certain date, and the new ones that are works in progress and that will absorb the old ones only at some future date. And we will not necessarily find information on the fall of the Roman Empire in the old catalog simply because that event took place centuries ago. In fact there could be recent books on the subject that are only indexed in the new catalog. Also, in certain libraries there are separate catalogs for different collections. In other libraries, subjects and authors are indexed together. There also may be separate catalogs for books and journals, divided by subject and author; and we may even encounter a library that stores books on the first floor and journals on the second. Consequently, we must study the system used by the library in which we are working, and make our decisions accordingly. Also, some intuition is usually necessary. For example, if the older of the two catalogs is very old, and I am researching the Greek region of Laconia, I should also search for the obsolete spelling “Lacedaemonia,” because an overly diligent librarian may have indexed this entry separately.

Also note that the author catalog is always more reliable than the subject catalog because the act of compiling it does not depend on the librarian’s interpretation, as is the case with the subject catalog. In fact, if the library has a book by John Smith, you will invariably find “Smith, John” under “S” in the author catalog. But if John Smith has written an article on “The Role of Odoacer in the Fall of the Western Roman Empire and the Advent of the Roman-Barbarian Regna,” the librarian may have recorded it under the subject “(Roman) History” or “Odoacer,” but not necessarily under the entry “Western Roman Empire” where you are currently looking.
Finally, the author and subject catalogs simply may not provide the information you require, and in this case you must settle for a more elementary approach. In every library there is a reference section (or an entire room) that contains a collection of encyclopedias, general histories, and bibliographical indexes. If you are looking for works on the Western Roman Empire, you can search the subject of Roman history, compile a basic bibliography starting from the reference works you find, and then search for the authors in the author catalog.

Bibliographical indexes  These are the safest resources for a student who already has clearly defined ideas about a topic. For some disciplines there are famous manuals where the student can find all the necessary bibliographical information. For other disciplines there are periodical indexes that contain updates in each issue, and even journals dedicated solely to a subject’s bibliography. For others still, there are journals that include an appendix in every issue that documents the most recent publications in the field. Bibliographical indexes are essential supplements to catalog research, as long as they are updated. In fact, some libraries may have an extensive collection of the oldest publications, but little or no updated work. Or they may offer histories or manuals of the discipline in question that were published in 1960, and that provide useful bibliographical information, but will not tell you if an interesting work was published in 1975. (The library may actually contain these recent works, but may have indexed them under a subject that you have not thought of.) An updated bibliographical index gives you exactly this kind of information on the latest contributions to a particular field.

The most convenient way to learn about bibliographical indexes is to ask your advisor. You can also ask the librarian (or a staff person at the reference desk) who can direct you to the room or the section of the stacks that contains the bibliographical indexes. Again here, the issue changes from discipline to discipline, so I cannot offer further advice.

The librarian  You must overcome any shyness and have a conversation with the librarian, because he can offer you reliable advice that will save you much time. You must consider that the librarian (if not overworked or neurotic) is happy when he can demonstrate two things: the quality of his memory and erudition and the richness of his library, especially if it is small. The more isolated and disregarded the library, the more the librarian is consumed with sorrow for its underestimation. A person who asks for help makes the librarian happy.

Although you must rely on the librarian’s assistance, you should not trust him blindly. Listen to his advice, but then search deeply and independently. The librarian is not an expert on every subject, and he is also unaware of the particular perspective you wish to adopt for your research. He may deem fundamental a particular book that you end up barely consulting, and may disregard another that you find very useful. Additionally, there is no such thing as a pre-determined hierarchy of useful and important works. An idea contained almost by mistake on a page of an otherwise useless (and widely ignored) book may prove decisive for your research. You must discover this page on your own, with your own intuition and a little luck, and without anybody serving it to you on a silver platter.

Union catalogs, electronic catalogs, and interlibrary loan  Many libraries publish updated inventories of their holdings. Therefore, in some libraries it is possible to consult catalogs that list the holdings of other national and foreign libraries, at least for some particular disciplines. Asking for information from the librarian is also useful in this case. There are certain specialized libraries linked via computer to a central memory that can quickly inform you whether and where you can find a certain book. For example, the Venice Biennale instituted the Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts that are linked via computer to the National Central Library’s archive in Rome. You can search the catalog by author, title, subject, series, publisher, year of publication, etc.

If you have located a book in a national or foreign library, keep in mind that a library usually has an interlibrary loan service that may be national or international. It may take some time to get what you need, but it is worth trying if you
need sources that are difficult to find. Even if there is such a service, the library that has the book may not lend it, as some libraries will only lend duplicate copies. Here again you should consult your advisor about all the possibilities of locating needed sources. In any case, remember that the services we need often do exist, but they only work if they are patronized often.

Also remember that many libraries keep a list of their new arrivals, their most recent acquisitions that have not yet been indexed. Finally do not forget that, if you are working rigorously on a project that interests your advisor, you may be able to convince your institution to purchase some important texts that you cannot obtain otherwise.

3.2.2 Managing Your Sources with the Bibliographical Index Card File

Naturally, to compile a basic bibliography you must consult many books. Many librarians will only lend one or two books at a time, are slow to find each book for you, and will grumble if you quickly return for new books. This is why you should not try to immediately read every book you find, but rather compile a basic bibliography of sources pertaining to your topic. A preliminary inspection of the catalogs allows you to prepare a list of books that you can then begin borrowing. However, the list you derive from the catalogs does not say much about each book’s contents, and it is sometimes difficult to determine which books you should borrow first. For this reason, in addition to consulting the catalogs in the reference room, you should preliminarily inspect each book. When you find a chapter and its accompanying bibliography that pertain to your topic, you can skim the chapter (you will return to it later), but be sure to copy all of that chapter’s bibliography. Together with the chapter that you have skimmed, its bibliography (and if it is annotated, the bibliography’s comments) will show which books the author considers fundamental among those he cites, and you can begin by borrowing those. Additionally, if you cross-check the bibliographies with some reference works, you will determine which books are cited most often, and you can begin to establish a first hierarchy of sources for your topic.

This hierarchy may change as you proceed in your work, but for now it constitutes a starting point.

Now, you may object to the idea of copying the entire bibliography from ten different sources. In fact, your research may lead you to as many as a few hundred books, even though your cross-check will eliminate doubles. (Organizing your bibliography in alphabetical order will also help you eliminate doubles.) Fortunately, these days every legitimate library has a copy machine, and each copy costs about a dime. A specific bibliography contained in a reference work, except in very rare cases, occupies only a few pages. With a few dollars you can photocopy a series of bibliographies that you can easily organize once you return home. Once you have finished the bibliography, you can return to the library to determine which sources are actually available.

At this point it will be useful to begin to document your bibliography. You might at first be tempted to record the titles in a notebook as you encounter them. Later, after determining if the titles are available in the library, you might finish each notebook entry by writing the call number near the title. The problem with this approach is that it becomes more difficult to locate the titles in your notebook as your bibliography grows. Also consider that your preliminary research might generate a bibliography of hundreds of titles, even if only some of them will ultimately be useful to your thesis.

A better system is to create a bibliographical index card for each book. On each card you can record an abbreviation that signifies the library where the book is available, as well as the call number of the book. A single card might contain many library abbreviations and call numbers, indicating that the book is widely available in different locations. (There will also be index cards with no abbreviations—this is trouble!) You can then file your cards in a small index card box. You can purchase a small box of this kind inexpensively from the stationer, or you can make one yourself. You can fit one or two hundred index cards into one small box, and you can take the box with you to the library. This is your bibliography file, and if your documentation is well organized, it will give you a clear picture of the sources you have found, and those you still need to locate. Additionally, everything will
years to the study of the baroque; or I could take out a loan
or look for a grant to study at a more relaxed pace. Do not
expect this book to tell you what to put in your thesis, or
what to do with your life. What I set out to demonstrate (and
I think I did demonstrate) with this experiment is that a stu-
dent can arrive at a small library with little knowledge on
a topic and, after three afternoons, can acquire sufficiently
clear and complete ideas. In other words, it is no excuse to
say, “I live in a small city, I do not have the books, I do not
know where to start, and nobody is helping me.”

Naturally the student must choose topics that lend them-
selves to this game. For example, a thesis on Kripke and
Hintikka’s logic of possible worlds may not have been a
wise choice for our hypothetical student. In fact I did some
research on this topic in Alessandria, and it cost me little
time. A first look for “logic” in the subject catalog revealed
that the library has at least 15 notable books on formal logic,
including works by Tarski, Lukasiewicz, Quine, some hand-
books, and some studies of Ettore Casari, Wittgenstein,
Strawson, etc. But predictably, it has nothing on the most
recent theories of modal logic, material that is found mostly
in specialized journals and is even absent from some uni-
versity libraries. However, on purpose I chose a topic that
nobody would have taken on during their final year without
some kind of previous knowledge, or without already owning
some fundamental books on the topic.

I’m not saying that such a topic is only for students who
have the resources to purchase books and for frequent travel
to larger libraries. I know a student who was not rich, but
who wrote a thesis on a similar topic by staying in a religious
hostel and purchasing very few books. Admittedly, despite
his small sacrifices, his family supported him and he was
able to devote himself full time to this project because he
didn’t have to work. There is no thesis that is intrinsically for
rich students, because even the student who chooses “The
Variations of Beach Fashion in Acapulco over a Five-Year
Period” can always search for a foundation willing to sponsor
such a research project. This said, a student should obviously
avoid certain topics if he is in a particularly challenging sit-
uation. For this reason, I am trying to demonstrate here how
to cook a meal with meat and potatoes, if not with gourmet
ingredients.

3.2.5 Must You Read Books? If So, What Should
You Read First?
The examples in this chapter suggest that writing a thesis
involves putting together a great number of books. But does
a student always write a thesis on books and with books?
We have already seen that there are experimental theses
that document research in the field, perhaps conducted
while observing mice in a maze for many months. Now, I do
not feel confident giving precise suggestions on this type of
research. Here the method depends on the discipline, and
people who embark on this kind of research already live in the
laboratory. They work with and learn from other research-
ers, and they probably do not need this book. However, as I
have already said, even in this kind of thesis it is necessary to
contextualize the experiment with a discussion of previous
scientific literature, and so even here the student must deal
with books. The same would be true of a thesis in sociology
that required the candidate to spend a long period of time
in a real social environment. This student will need books,
if nothing else, to understand how others have already car-
ried out similar research projects. There are even thesis proj-
ects that require the student to page through newspapers
or parliamentary acts, but even these require background
literature.

And finally there are the theses that discuss only books,
and in general these are in the subjects of literature, philos-
ophy, the history of science, canon law, and formal logic.
In Italian universities these are the majority, especially
for degrees in the humanities. Consider that an American
student who studies cultural anthropology has the Native
Americans right around the corner, or finds money to do
research in the Congo, while the Italian student usually
resigns himself to writing a thesis on Franz Boas’s thought.
Naturally, more and more students are writing ethnographic
theses that involve researching Italian society, but even in
these cases the library work is relevant, if only to search pre-
vious folklore collections.
Let us say that, for reasons that by now should be easy to understand, this book addresses the vast majority of theses written on books, and using only books. Here we should reiterate that a thesis on books usually employs two kinds: the books it talks about, and the books that help it talk. In other words, the texts that are the object of the study are the primary sources, and the critical literature on those texts constitutes the secondary sources. Regarding our experiment in Alessandria, the original texts of the baroque treatise writers are the primary sources, and all those who wrote about the baroque treatise writers are secondary sources.

The following question therefore arises: should a student deal immediately with the primary sources, or first cover the critical literature? The question may be meaningless for two reasons: (a) because the decision depends on the situation of the student, who may already know his author well and decide to study him in depth, or may be approaching for the first time a very difficult and perhaps seemingly unintelligible author; (b) this is a vicious circle, because the primary source can be incomprehensible without the preliminary critical literature, but it is difficult to evaluate the critical literature without knowing the primary source. However, the question is reasonable when posed by a disoriented student, perhaps our hypothetical student who is dealing with the baroque treatise writers for the first time. He might ask us whether he should begin immediately reading Tesoro, or should first cut his teeth on Getto, Anceschi, Raimondi, and other critics.

It seems to me the most sensible answer is this: approach two or three of the most general critical texts immediately, just to get an idea of the background against which your author moves. Then approach the original author directly, and always try to understand exactly what he says. Afterward, explore the rest of the critical literature. Finally, return to examine the author in the light of the newly acquired ideas. But this advice is quite abstract. In reality, students tend to follow the rhythm of their desire, and often there is nothing wrong with consuming texts in a disorderly way. The student can meander, alternating his objectives, provided that a thick web of personal notes, possibly in the form of index cards, keeps track of these "adventurous" wanderings.

Naturally, the approach depends on the researcher's psychological structure. There are monochronic people and polychronic people. The monochronic succeed only if they work on one endeavor at a time. They cannot read while listening to music; they cannot interrupt a novel to begin another without losing the thread; at their worst, they are unable to have a conversation while they shave or put on their makeup. The polychronic are the exact opposite. They succeed only if they cultivate many interests simultaneously; if they dedicate themselves to only one venture, they fall prey to boredom. The monochronic are more methodical but often have little imagination. The polychronic seem more creative, but they are often messy and fickle. In the end, if you explore the biographies of great thinkers and writers, you will find that there were both polychronic and monochronic among them.