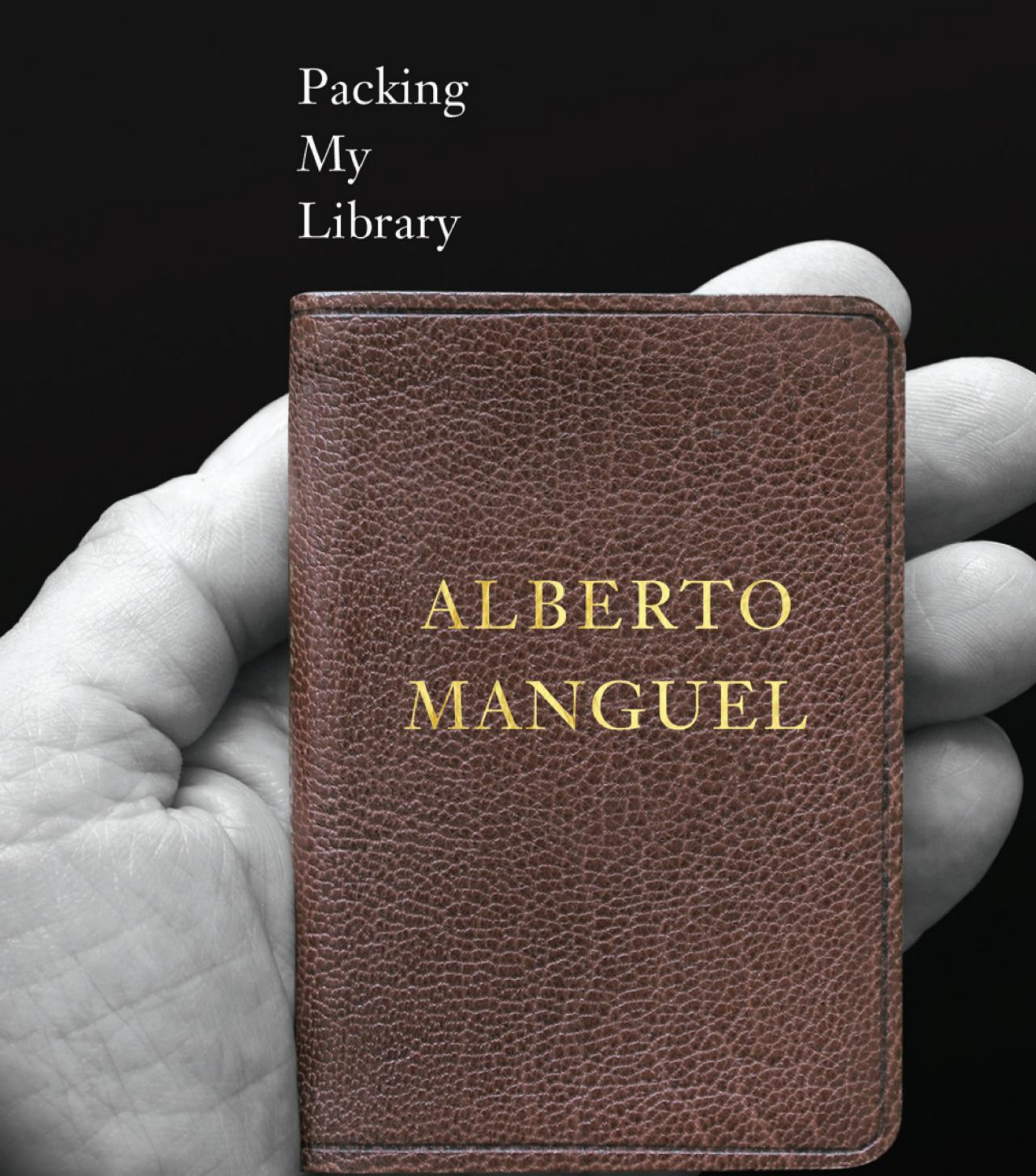
Packing My Library



An Elegy
and
Ten Digressions

Alberto Manguel

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Designed by Nancy Ovedovitz and set in Palatino and Weiss Bold types by Integrated Publishing Solutions.
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017950992
ISBN 978-0-300-21933-3 (hardcover : alk. paper)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

My last library was in France, housed in an old stone presbytery south of the Loire Valley, in a quiet village of fewer than ten houses. My partner and I chose the place because next to the house itself was a barn, partly torn down centuries ago, large enough to accommodate my library, which by then had grown to thirty-five thousand books. I thought that once the books found their place, I would find mine. I was to be proved wrong.

I knew I wanted to live in this house the first time I opened the heavy oak carriage doors that led across the entrance into the garden. The view, framed by the arched stone portal, was of two ancient *Sophora* trees casting shadows over a soft lawn that stretched all the way to a distant gray wall; we were told that underground, vaulted corri-

dors had been dug out during the peasant wars to connect the house with a now crumbling tower in the distance. Over the years, my partner cared for the garden, planted rosebushes and a vegetable plot, and tended to the trees, which had been savagely treated by the previous owners, who had filled one of the hollow trunks with garbage and allowed the top branches to become dangerously fragile. Every time we walked through the garden we spoke of being its guardians, never its owners, because (as with all gardens) the place felt possessed by an independent spirit which the ancients called numinous. Pliny, explaining the numinosity of gardens, says that this is because at one time trees were the temples of the gods, and the gods had not forgotten. The fruit trees in the back corner of the garden had grown over an abandoned cemetery dating back to the ninth century; perhaps here too the ancient gods felt at home.

The walled garden was an extraordinarily quiet place. Every morning at about six, I would come downstairs, still half-asleep, make myself a pot of tea in the dark rafted kitchen, and sit with our dog on the stone bench outside to watch the morning light creep along the back wall. Then I would go with her into my tower, which was attached to the barn, and read. Only the song of birds (and in summer, the drone of honeybees) broke the silence. In the evening twilight, tiny bats flew around in circles, and at dawn the owls in the church steeple (we never under-

stood why they chose to build their nest under the tolling bells) swooped down to catch their supper. They were barn owls, but on New Year's Eve a huge white owl, like the angel that Dante describes steering the ship of souls to the shores of Purgatory, would glide noiselessly across the dark.

The ancient barn, whose stones carried the signature of their fifteenth-century masons, housed my books for almost fifteen years. Under a ceiling of weathered beams, I gathered the survivors of many previous libraries from my childhood on. I had only a few books that a serious bibliophile would have found worthy: an illuminated Bible from a thirteenth-century German scriptorium (a gift from the novelist Yehuda Elberg), an Inquisitor's manual from the sixteenth century, a number of contemporary artist's books, quite a few rare first editions, and many signed copies. But I lacked (still lack today) the funds or the knowledge to become a professional collector. In my library, shiny young Penguins sat happily side by side with severe-looking leather-bound patriarchs. The books most valuable to me were private association copies, such as one of the earliest books I read, a 1930s edition of Grimms' *Fairy Tales* printed in somber Gothic type. Many years later, memories of my childhood drifted back whenever I turned the yellowed pages.

I set up my library according to my own requirements and prejudices. Unlike a public library, mine demanded

no common codes that other readers could understand and share. A certain zany logic governed its geography. Its major sections were determined by the language in which the books were written: that is to say, without distinction of genre, all books written originally in Spanish or French, English or Arabic (the latter a language which I can't speak or read) sat together on a shelf. I allowed myself, however, many exceptions. Certain subjects—the history of the book, biblical commentaries, the legend of Faust, Renaissance literature and philosophy, gay studies, medieval bestiaries—had separate sections. Certain authors and certain genres were privileged: I collected thousands of detective novels but very few spy stories, more Plato than Aristotle, the complete works of Zola and hardly any Maupassant, all of John Hawkes and Cynthia Ozick but barely any of the authors on the *New York Times* best-seller list. I had on the shelves dozens of very bad books which I didn't throw away in case I ever needed an example of a book I thought was bad. Balzac, in *Cousin Pons,* offered a justification for this obsessive behavior: "An obsession is a pleasure that has attained the status of an idea."

Though I knew that we were only the keepers of the garden and the house, the books themselves, I felt, belonged to me, were part of who I was. We speak of certain people who are reluctant to lend an ear or a hand; I seldom lent a book. If I wanted someone to read a certain

volume, I'd buy a copy and offer it as a gift. I believe that to lend a book is an incitement to theft. The public library of one of my schools carried a warning both exclusionary and generous: "THESE ARE NOT YOUR BOOKS: THEY BELONG TO EVERYONE." No such sign could be put up in my library. My library was to me an utterly private space that both enclosed and mirrored me.

When I was a child in Israel, where my father was the Argentine ambassador, I was often taken to play in a park that started off as a well-kept garden and faded into sandy dunes. Huge tortoises plodded their way across it, leaving dainty tracks in the sand. Once I found a tortoise whose shell had been half torn off. It seemed to stare at me with its ancient eyes, as it dragged itself over the dunes towards the sea beyond, bereft of something that had protected and defined it.

I've often felt that my library explained who I was, gave me a shifting self that transformed itself constantly throughout the years. And yet, in spite of this, my relationship to libraries has always been an odd one. I love the space of a library. I love the public buildings that stand like emblems of the identity a society chooses for itself, imposing or unobtrusive, intimidating or familiar. I love the endless rows of books whose titles I try to make out in their vertical script that has to be read (I've never discovered why) from top to bottom in English and Italian, and from bottom to top in German and Spanish. I love

the muffled sounds, the pensive silence, the hushed glow of the lamps (especially if they are made of green glass), the desks polished by the elbows of generations of readers, the smell of dust and paper and leather, or the newer ones of plasticized desktops and caramel-scented cleaning products. I love the all-seeing eye of the information desk and the sibylline solicitude of the librarians. I love the catalogues, especially the old card drawers (wherever they survive) with their typed or scribbled offerings. When I'm in a library, any library, I have the sense of being translated into a purely verbal dimension by a conjuring trick I've never quite understood. I know that my full, true story is there, somewhere on the shelves, and all I need is time and the chance to find it. I never do. My story remains elusive because it is never the definitive story.

Partly this is because I can't think in a straight line. I digress. I feel incapable of going from factual starting points across a neat grid of logical stepping-stones to a satisfying resolution. However strong my initial intention, I get lost on the way. I stop to admire a quotation or listen to an anecdote; I become distracted by questions that are alien to my purpose, and I'm carried away by a flow of associated ideas. I begin by talking about one thing and end up talking about another. I tell myself that I'll consider, for instance, the subject of libraries, and the image of the ordered library conjures up in my disordered mind un-

expected and haphazard holdings. I think "library," and I'm immediately struck by the paradox that a library undermines whatever order it might possess, with random pairings and casual fraternities, and that if I, instead of sticking to the conventional alphabetical, numerical, or thematic path that a library puts forward for my guidance, allowed myself to be tempted by non-elective affinities, my subject would become no longer the library but the joyful chaos of the world the library intends to put in order. Ariadne transformed for Theseus the labyrinth into a clear-cut and simple path; my mind transforms the simple path into a labyrinth.

Borges observed in an early essay that a translation can be understood as equivalent to a draft, and that the only difference between a translation and an early version of a text is merely chronological, not hierarchical: where the draft precedes the original, the translation follows it. "To suppose that any recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original," wrote Borges, "is to suppose that draft 9 is necessarily inferior to draft H, since there can be nothing but drafts. The concept of a *definitive text* belongs only to religion or to fatigue." Like Borges's text, I have no definitive biography. My story changes from library to library, or from the draft of one library to the next, never one precisely, never the last.

One of my earliest memories (I must have been two or three at the time) is of a shelf full of books on the wall

above my cot from which my nurse would choose a bedtime story. This was my first personal library; when I learned to read by myself a year or so later, the shelf, transferred now to safe ground level, became my private domain. I remember arranging and rearranging my books according to secret rules that I invented for myself: all the Golden Books series had to be grouped together, the fat collections of fairy tales were not allowed to touch the minuscule Beatrix Potters, stuffed animals could not sit on the same shelf as the books. I told myself that if these rules were upset, terrible things would happen. Superstition and the art of libraries are tightly entwined.

That first library stood in a house in Tel Aviv; my next library grew in Buenos Aires, during the decade of my adolescence. Before returning to Argentina, my father had asked his secretary to buy enough books to fill the shelves of his library in our new house; obligingly, she ordered cartloads of volumes from a secondhand dealer in Buenos Aires but found, when trying to place them on the shelves, that many of them wouldn't fit. Undaunted, she had them trimmed down to size and then re-bound in deep-green leather, a color which, combined with the dark oak, lent the place the atmosphere of a glade. I pilfered books from that library to stock my own, which covered three of the walls in my bedroom. Reading these circumcised books required the extra effort of supplanting the missing bit of every page, an exercise that no doubt

trained me to read later the "cut-up" novels of William Burroughs.

After this came the library of my adolescence, which, built throughout my high school years, contained almost every book that still matters to me today. Generous teachers, passionate booksellers, friends for whom giving a book was a supreme act of intimacy and trust helped me build it. Their ghosts kindly haunted my shelves, and the books they gave me still carry their voices, so that now, when I open Isak Dinesen's *Gothic Tales* or Blas de Otero's early poems, I have the impression not of reading the book myself but of being read to out loud. This is one of the reasons I've never felt alone in my library.

I left most of these early books behind when I set off for Europe in 1969, sometime before the military dictatorship in Argentina. I suppose that had I stayed, like so many of my friends, I would have had to destroy my library for fear of the police, since in those terrible days one could be accused of subversion merely for being seen with a book that looked suspicious (someone I knew was arrested as a Communist for carrying Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*). Argentinian plumbers found that there was an unprecedented call for their services, since many readers tried to burn their books in their toilet bowls, causing the porcelain to crack.

In every place I settled, a library began to grow as if by spontaneous generation. In Paris and in London and

in Milan, in the humid heat of Tahiti, where I worked as a publisher for five long years (my Melville novels still show traces of Polynesian mold), in Toronto and in Calgary, I collected books, and then, when the time came to leave, I packed them up in boxes and forced them to wait as patiently as possible inside tomblike storage spaces in the uncertain hope of resurrection. Every time I would ask myself how it had come to pass: how this exuberant jungle of paper and ink had entered yet another period of hibernation, and if, once again, it would cover my walls like ivy.

My library, either settled on shelves or packed away in boxes, has never been a single beast but is a composite of many others, a fantastic creature made up of the several libraries built up and then abandoned, over and over again, throughout my life. I can't remember a time in which I did not have a library of some sort. My libraries are each a sort of multi-layered autobiography, every book holding the moment in which I read it for the first time. The scribbles in the margins, the occasional date on the flyleaf, the faded bus ticket marking a page for a reason today mysterious—all attempt to remind me of who I was then. For the most part, they fail. My memory is less interested in me than in my books, and I find it easier to remember the story read once, long ago, than the young man who was its reader.

My earliest public library was that of Saint Andrews Scots School, one of the several elementary schools I at-

tended in Buenos Aires before the age of twelve. It had been founded as a bilingual school in 1838 and was the oldest school of British origin in South America. The library, though small, was for me a rich, adventurous place. I felt like a Rider Haggard explorer in the dark forest of stacks that had a earthy smell in summer and reeked of damp wood in winter. I would go to the library mainly to put my name on the list for the new Hardy Boys installment or a collection of Sherlock Holmes stories. That school library, as far as I was aware, didn't have a rigorous order: I would find books on dinosaurs next to several copies of *Black Beauty*, and war adventures coupled with biographies of English poets. This flock of books, gathered with no other purpose (it seemed) than to offer the students a generous variety, suited my temperament: I didn't want a strict guided tour, I wanted the freedom of the city, like that honor (we learned in history class) that mayors bestowed in the Middle Ages on foreign visitors.

I've always loved public libraries but I must confess to a paradox: I don't feel at ease working in one. I'm too impatient. I don't like to wait for the books I want, something that is unavoidable unless the library is blessed with the generosity of open stacks. I don't like being forbidden to write in the margins of the books I borrow. I don't like having to give back the books if I discover in them something astonishing or precious. Like a greedy looter, I want the books I read to be mine.

Perhaps that is why I'm not comfortable in a virtual library: you cannot truly possess a ghost (though the ghost can possess you). I want the materiality of verbal things, the solid presence of the book, the shape, the size, the texture. I understand the convenience of immaterial books and the importance they have in a twenty-first-century society, but to me they have the quality of platonic relationships. Perhaps that is why I feel so deeply the loss of the books that my hands knew so well. I'm like Thomas, wanting to touch in order to believe.

First Digression

All our plurals are ultimately singular. What is it then that drives us from the fortress of our self to seek the company and conversation of other beings who mirror us endlessly in the strange world in which we live? The Platonic myth about the original humans having a double nature that was later divided in two by the gods explains up to a point our search: we are wistfully looking for our lost half. And yet, handshakes and embraces, academic debates and contact sports are never enough to break through our conviction of individuality. Our bodies are burkas shielding us from the rest of humankind, and there is no need for Simeon Stylites to climb to the top of a column in the desert to feel

himself isolated from his fellows. We are condemned to singularity.

Every new technology, however, offers another hope of reunion. Cave murals gathered our ancestors around them to discuss collective memories of mammoth hunts; clay tablets and papyrus rolls allowed them to converse with the distant and the dead. Johannes Gutenberg created the illusion that we are not unique and that every copy of the *Quixote* is the same as every other (a trick which has never quite convinced most of its readers). Huddled together in front of our television sets, we witnessed Neil Armstrong's first step onto the moon, and, not content with being part of that countless contemplative crowd, we dreamt up new devices that collect imaginary friends to whom we confide our most dangerous secrets and for whom we post our most intimate portraits. At no moment of day or night are we inaccessible: we have made ourselves available to others in our sleep, at mealtimes, during travel, on the toilet, while making love. We have reinvented the all-seeing eye of God. The silent friendship of the moon is no longer ours, as it was Virgil's, and we have dismissed the sessions of sweet silent thought which Shakespeare enjoyed. Only through old acquaintances popping up on Facebook do we summon up remembrance of things past. Lovers can no longer be absent, or acquaintances long gone: at the flick of a finger we can reach them, and they can reach us. We suffer from

the contrary of agoraphobia: we have become haunted by a constant presence. Everyone is always here.

This anxiety of being surrounded by the words and faces of others permeates all our histories. In Petronius's Rome, Encolpius wanders through a museum looking at the images of the gods in their amorous entanglements and realizes that he is not the only one to feel the pangs of love. In China, in the eighth century, Du Fu wrote that an old scholar sees in his books the populous universe that whirls around him like an autumn wind. Al-Mutanabbi, in the tenth century, likened his paper and pen to the entire world: to the desert and its traps, to war and its harsh blows. Petrarch doesn't possess his library as much as his library possesses him. "I'm haunted by an inexhaustible passion that up to now I have not managed or wanted to quench. I feel that I have never enough books," he says. "Books delight one in depth, run through our veins, advise us and bind with us in a kind of active and keen familiarity; and an individual book does not insinuate itself alone into our spirit, but leads the way for many more, and thus provokes in us a longing for others." Goethe's Werther, on the contrary, wants only one book: his Homer, which is, he says, a *Wiegengesang*, a lullaby to soothe him. For Pushkin's Tatyana, Eugene Onegin's books are what she requires to reflect back her erotic passion. For Jules Verne's Captain Nemo, his library holds the only human voices that deserve

to be spared from destruction. In every one of these cases, the individual is obsessed with finding others who will tell him or her who they are. As if we were Heisenberg's electrons, we feel as though we don't always exist: we exist only when we interact with someone else, when someone else deigns to see us. Perhaps, as quantum physics teaches us, what we call reality—what we think we are and what we think the world is—is nothing but interaction.

But even interaction must have its limits. The fifth edition of the DSM (the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), published in 2013 by the American Psychiatric Association, lists "Internet Gaming Disorder" as a pathology that leads to "clinical significant impairment or distress." What Mariana in the Moated Grange might have called melancholy, and what Doctor Faust calls "a burning of the heart" the DSM calls "depression associated to withdrawal" (when the technology breaks down) and "a sense of unfulfillment" (when it fails to deliver). The end result is the same.

The search for others—to text, to email, to Skype, or to play with—establishes our own identities. We are, or we become, because someone acknowledges our presence. The motto of the electronic age is Bishop Berkeley's "esse est percipi," "to be is to be perceived." And yet, all the crowds of friends promised by Facebook, all the multitudes of correspondents wanting to link across cyberspace, all the merchants of promise who offer fortunes in foreign lands,

partners in virtual orgies, penis and breast enlargements, sweeter dreams and better lives cannot remedy the essential spleen for which Plato imagined his story.

"After intercourse all animals are sad," Aristotle (or perhaps Galen) is supposed to have said, and to have added: "except the rooster, who then sings." Aristotle was referring to sexual intercourse. Perhaps all intercourse—with pictures, with books, with people, with the virtual inhabitants of cyberspace—breeds sadness because it reminds us that, in the end, we are alone.

I WOULD ARGUE THAT PUBLIC LIBRARIES, HOLDING both virtual and material texts, are an essential instrument to counter loneliness. I would defend their place as society's memory and experience. I would say that without public libraries, and without a conscious understanding of their role, a society of the written word is doomed to oblivion. I realize how petty, how egotistical it seems, this longing to own the books I borrow. I believe that theft is reprehensible, and yet countless times I've had to dredge up all the moral stamina I could find not to pocket a desired volume. Polonius echoed my thoughts precisely when he told his son, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." My own library carried this reminder clearly posted.

I love public libraries, and they are the first places I

visit whenever I'm in a city I don't know. But I can work happily only in my own private library, with my own books—or, rather, with the books I know to be mine. Maybe there's a certain ancient fidelity in this, a sort of curmudgeonly domesticity, a more conservative trait in my nature than my anarchic youth would have ever admitted. My library was my tortoise shell.

Sometime in 1931, Walter Benjamin wrote a short and now famous essay about readers' relationship to their books. He called it "Unpacking My Library: A Speech on Collecting," and he used the occasion of pulling his almost two thousand books out of their boxes to muse on the privileges and responsibilities of a reader. Benjamin was moving from the house he had shared with his wife until their acrimonious divorce the previous year to a small furnished apartment in which he would live alone, he said, for the first time in his life, "like an adult." Benjamin was then "at the threshold of forty and without property, position, home or assets." It might not be entirely mistaken to see his meditation on books as a counterpoise to the breakup of his marriage.

Packing and unpacking are two sides of the same impulse, and both lend meaning to moments of chaos. "Thus is the existence of the collector," wrote Benjamin, "dialectically pulled between the poles of disorder and order." He might have added: or packing and unpacking.

Unpacking, as Benjamin realized, is essentially an ex-

pansive and untidy activity. Freed from their bounds, the books spill onto the floor or pile up in unsteady columns, waiting for the places that will later be assigned to them. In this waiting period, before the new order has been established, they exist in a tangle of synchronicities and remembrances, forming sudden and unexpected alliances or parting from each other incongruously. Lifelong enemies Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa for instance, will sit amicably on the same expectant shelf while the many members of the Bloomsbury group will find themselves each exiled to a different "negatively charged region" (as the physicists call it) waiting for the wishful reunion of their particles.

The unpacking of books, perhaps because it is essentially chaotic, is a creative act, and as in every creative act the materials employed lose in the process their individual nature: they become part of something different, something that encompasses and at the same time transforms them. In the act of setting up a library, the books lifted out of their boxes and about to be placed on a shelf shed their original identities and acquire new ones through random associations, preconceived allotments, or authoritarian labels. Many times I've found that a book I once held in my hands becomes another when assigned its position in my library. This is anarchy under the appearance of order. My copy of *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*, read for the first time many decades ago, became in its alphabetically

ordered section a stern companion of Vercors and Verlaine, ranking higher than Marguerite Yourcenar and Zola, but lower than Stendhal and Nathalie Sarraute, all members of the conventional fraternity of French-Language Literature. No doubt Verne's adventurous novel retained in its pages traces of my anxiety-ridden adolescence and of one long-vanished summer in which I promised myself a visit to the Sneffels volcano, but these became, once the book was placed on the shelf, secondary features overruled by the category to which the language of its author and the initial of the surname have consigned it. My memory retains the order and classification of my remembered library and performs the rituals as if the physical place still existed. I still keep the key to a door that I will never open again.

Places that seem essential to us resist even material destruction. When in 587 B.C.E. Nebuchadnezzar set fire to the First Temple in Jerusalem, the priests gathered with the keys to the sanctuary, climbed to the burning roof, and cried out, "Master of the World, since we have not merited to be trustworthy custodians, let the keys be given back to you!" They then threw the keys toward heaven. It is told that a hand came out and caught them, after which the priests threw themselves into the all-consuming flames. After the destruction of the Second Temple by Titus in 70 C.E., the Jews continued to perform the holy rites as if the ancient walls still rose around them, and they kept on

Writers are just as astonished as their readers at the existence of successful literary creations. A few of these moments of conception have come down to us. The story of the would-be knight in search of justice occurred to Cervantes, he tells us, while he was languishing unjustly in prison; the story of the tragic consequences of dreaming up a life for Madame Bovary occurred to Flaubert after he read a snippet in a newspaper. Bradbury explains that the first stirrings of the dreadful world of *Fahrenheit 451* came to him in the early 1950s after seeing a couple walking hand in hand down a Los Angeles sidewalk, each with one ear plugged into a portable radio.

And yet, in most cases, the moment of literary creation is as unknown to us as that of the universe itself. We can study every fraction of a second after the Big Bang as we can read (in the days when writers kept their early scribbles) every draft of *À la recherche du temps perdu* or the various versions of Auden's poems. But the moment of birth of most of our best-beloved books is more mysterious. What sparked the first idea for the *Odyssey* in the mind of the poet or poets we call Homer? How did a storyteller who didn't care to sign his or her name dream up the atrocious story of Oedipus that was later to inspire Sophocles and Cocteau? What sad lover of flesh and hot blood lent his character to the irresistible figure of Don Juan, damned for all eternity?

Authorial confessions seldom sound truthful. Edgar Allan Poe explained in a lengthy essay that "The Raven" was born

from his intention to write a poem on what he judged "unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world," the death of a beautiful woman, and to use for its refrain the most resonant syllables in the English language, "er" and "ore." The words *never more* immediately suggested themselves for the refrain, and in order to allow them to be repeated he chose not a person but a bird that could speak them. He didn't choose a parrot, which in his opinion was not poetic enough (he was right), but a raven, appropriate to his gloomy soul. Poe's explanation is logical, cleverly presented, and entirely unbelievable.

Perhaps we should content ourselves with admitting that miracles are possible, without asking how. Everything that can be imagined proves in the end to come into being somehow: everything, from perfect creations like *Orlando Furioso* or *King Lear* to perfect abominations, such as land mines or electric prods. And because we still believe in cause and effect, we demand an explanation for everything: we want to know how each thing came to be, what made it happen, what was the first heartbeat that set the beast in motion, where did this thing that now stands before us come from.

Fortunately for us, fortunately for the survival of the human intelligence, abominations can be explained, though perhaps too late for remedy, by historical and psychological analyses. Fortunately as well, literary creations cannot. We can find out what authors say about the circumstances

surrounding the act of creation, what books they read, what were the everyday minutiae of their life, the state of their health, the color of their dreams. Everything, except the instant in which the words appeared, luminous and distinct, in the poet's mind, and the hand began to write.

I remember that on the first day I began setting up my library in France, I took out of its box a first edition of Kingsley's *Hypatia*, a novel about the fourth-century philosopher and mathematician who was murdered by Christian fanatics. I remember opening the book and coming upon the description of the Library of Alexandria, a passage I had completely forgotten except for the words "rainless blue," without recalling where they came from. This was the passage: "On the left of the garden stretched the lofty eastern front of the Museum itself, with its picture galleries, halls of statuary, dining-halls, and lecture-rooms; one huge wing containing that famous library, founded by the father of Philadelphus, which held in the time of Seneca, even after the destruction of a great

part of it in Caesar's siege, four hundred thousand manuscripts. There it towered up, the wonder of the world, its white roof bright against the rainless blue; and beyond it, among the ridges and pediments of noble buildings, a broad glimpse of the bright blue sea."

How could Kingsley's description have slipped my mind as I was trying to depict Alexandria and its library in a book I wrote a few years later? Why was my memory not more helpful when I was painfully trying to piece together an image, factual or imaginary, of what the ancient library might have been? My mind is capricious. Sometimes it can be charitable: in moments when I need a consoling or happy thought it throws at me, like coins to a beggar, the alms of an event that I had long forgotten, a face, a word from the past, a story read one sultry night between the sheets, a poem discovered in an anthology that my adolescent self believed no one had discovered before. But the generosity of my books is always there, as part of their makeup, and as I took them out of their boxes, having condemned them to silence for so long, they still were kind to me.

As I unpacked my books on the remote afternoon that restored Kingsley's passage to me, the empty library started to fill with disembodied words and the ghosts of people I knew once, who had guided me through libraries vaster than that of Alexandria. The unpacking also conjured up images of my own younger self at different times:

transformed into a roomful of building blocks gathered in the midst of empty stacks. When the *Mona Lisa* was stolen from the Louvre in 1911, crowds came to stare at the bare space with the four pegs that had held the painting, as if the absence carried meaning. Standing in my empty library I felt the weight of that absence to an almost unbearable degree.

After the library was packed and the movers came and the boxes were shipped off to their storage place in Montreal, I would hear the books calling out to me in my sleep. "I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground," wrote Edna St. Vincent Millay. "Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind; / Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave. / I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned."

There can be no resignation for me in the act of packing a library. Climbing up and down the ladder to reach the books to be boxed, removing knick-knacks and pictures that stand like votive figures before them, taking each volume off the shelf, tucking it away in its paper shroud are melancholy, reflective gestures that have something of a long good-bye. The dismantled rows about to disappear, condemned to exist (if they still exist) in the untrustworthy domain of my memory, become phantom clues to a private conundrum. Unpacking the books, I was not much concerned with making sense of the memories or putting them into a coherent order. But packing them, I

felt that I had to figure out, as in one of my detective stories, who was responsible for this dismembered corpse, what exactly brought on its death. In Kafka's *The Trial*, after Josef K. is placed under arrest for a never-specified crime, his landlady tells him that his ordeal seems to her "like something scholarly which I don't understand, but which one doesn't have to understand either." "Etwas Gelehrtes," Kafka writes: something scholarly. This was what the inscrutable mechanics behind the loss of my library seemed to me.

But I needn't dwell on how it came to pass. For reasons I don't wish to recall because they belong to the realm of sordid bureaucracy, in the summer of 2015 we decided to leave France and the library we had built there. It was the absurd conclusion to a long and happy chapter and the start of another that, I hardly dared hope, would be equally happy and at least as long. After the inane circumstances that forced us to go, taking down the library felt like a counterbalancing act similar to that of Benjamin after his divorce. Packing the books was, as I said, a premature burial, and I now had to endure the consequent period of anger and mourning.

Here I should explain that I'm not a seeker of novelty and excitement. I take comfort not in adventures but in routine. I enjoy, especially now as I'm approaching seventy, the moments when I don't have to reflect on everyday actions. I like to walk through a room with my eyes

shut, knowing through habit where everything is. In my reading as in my life, I don't care much for surprises. Even as a boy, I remember dreading the moment in a story when the hero's happy days would be interrupted by an unexpected and terrible event. Though I knew from my other books that there would be a resolution, most often satisfying, I wanted to dwell on the brief first pages in which Dorothy lives peacefully with her aunt and uncle, and Alice has not yet started her fall down the rabbit hole. Because my childhood was largely nomadic, I liked to read about settled lives running their ordinary course. And yet, I was aware that without disruption there would be no adventure. Perhaps this idea was colored by the presumption that disruptions—misfortunes, injustices, calamities, suffering—are the necessary conditions for literary invention. "The gods weave misfortunes for men," King Alcinous says in the *Odyssey*, "so that the generations to come will have something to sing about." I wanted the song but not the tapestry.

Third Digression

The notion that misery is at the root of the creative process has its origins in a fragment ascribed to Aristotle, or, rather, to Aristotle's school. Throughout the centuries, this melancholic notion acquired both positive and negative connotations and was explored by relating it to somatic causes, psychic inclinations, and spiritual choices, or as a reaction to certain natural or cultural environments. The variety of such ascriptions is indicative of melancholia's lasting attraction. From Aristotle on (and probably long before), philosophers, artists, psychologists, and theologians have attempted to find in the almost indefinable state of melancholia the source of the creative impulse, and even perhaps

that of thought itself. Being melancholic, sad, depressed, unhappy (as popular belief has it) is good for an artist. Misery, they say, produces good art.

This belief implies two corollaries, more dangerous still. The first is that there is an existential state in which we are not miserable. Not satisfied with the story that once, in Eden, we were happy and now we have to earn our bread with the sweat of our brow, we are surrounded by ads that tell us that we can reach Eden again with the help of a platinum credit card and look as beautiful as the first Eve with the assistance of a fashion designer. The second implied belief is that art is somehow to blame for making us unhappy. The Controller in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* succinctly justifies the decision to eliminate art from human society: "That's the price we have to pay for stability. You've got to choose between happiness and what people used to call high art. We've sacrificed the high art."

Of course, leaving aside the fact that our emotions are wonderfully kaleidoscopic, it would be truer to say that it is in a happy state that artists work best. Schopenhauer's existential despair and physical agony were only alleviated in the moment of writing, and whether he felt suddenly happy and wrote, or started to write and felt suddenly happy, no one will ever know. We can tell that Dante, in his gloomy exile, had moments of happiness when in the course of the poem he meets Casella on the beach of Purgatory or Brunetto Latini on the burning sands of Hell, and we can sup-