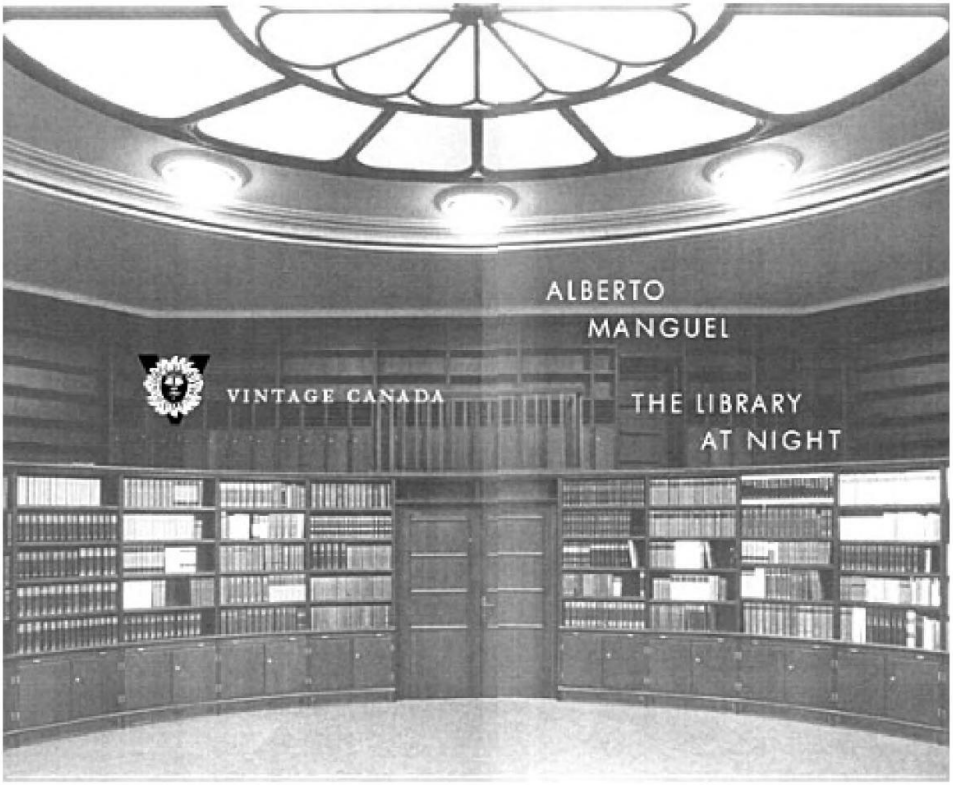
The Library at Night

ALBERTO MANGUEL

VINTAGE CANADA



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All that remains of an Athenian library: an inscription stating that opening times are "from the first to the sixth hour" and that "it is forbidden to take works out of the library."

FOREWORD

This roving humor (though not with like success) I have ever had, & like a ranging spaniel, that barks at every bird it sees, leaving his game, I have followed all, saving that which I should, and may justly complain, and truly (for who is everywhere is nowhere) …, that I have read many books, but to little purpose, for want of good method; I have confusedly tumbled over divers authors in our Libraries, with small profit, for want of art, order, memory, judgement.

Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

The starting point is a question.

Outside theology and fantastic literature, few can doubt that the main features of our universe are its dearth of meaning and lack of discernible purpose. And yet, with bewildering optimism, we continue to assemble whatever scraps of information we can gather in scrolls and books and computer chips, on shelf after library shelf, whether material, virtual or otherwise, pathetically intent on lending the world a semblance of sense and order, while knowing perfectly well that, however much we'd like to believe the contrary, our pursuits are sadly doomed to failure.

Why then do we do it? Though I knew from the start that the question would most likely remain unanswered, the quest seemed worthwhile for its own sake. This book is the story of that quest.

Less keen on the tidy succession of dates and names than on our endless collecting efforts, I set off several years ago, not to compile another history of libraries nor to add another tome to the alarmingly extensive collection of bibliotechnology, but merely to give an account of my astonishment. "Surely we should find it both touching and inspiriting," wrote Robert Louis Stevenson over a

century ago, "that in a field from which success is banished, our race should not cease to labour."[1]

Libraries, whether my own or shared with a greater reading public, have always seemed to me pleasantly mad places, and for as long as I can remember I've been seduced by their labyrinthine logic, which suggests that reason (if not art) rules over a cacophonous arrangement of books. I feel an adventurous pleasure in losing myself among the crowded stacks, superstitiously confident that any established hierarchy of letters or numbers will lead me one day to a promised destination. Books have long been instruments of the divinatory arts. "A big library," mused Northrop Frye in one of his many notebooks, "really has the gift of tongues & vast potencies of telepathic communication."[2]

Under such agreeable delusions, I've spent half a century collecting books. Immensely generous, my books make no demands on me but offer all kinds of illuminations. "My library," wrote Petrarch to a friend, "is not an unlearned collection, even if it belongs to someone unlearned."[3] Like Petrarch's, my books know infinitely more than I do, and I'm grateful that they even tolerate my presence. At times I feel that I abuse this privilege.

The love of libraries, like most loves, must be learned. No one stepping for the first time into a room made of books can know instinctively how to behave, what is expected, what is promised, what is allowed. One may be overcome by horror—at the clutter or the vastness, the stillness, the mocking reminder of everything one doesn't know, the surveillance—and some of that overwhelming feeling may cling on, even after the rituals and conventions are learned, the geography mapped, the natives found friendly.

In my foolhardy youth, when my friends were dreaming of heroic deeds in the realms of engineering and law, finance and national politics, I dreamt of becoming a librarian. Sloth and an ill-restrained fondness for travel decided otherwise. Now, however, having reached the age of fifty-six (which, according to Dostoyevsky in *The Idiot*, is "the age at which *real* life can be rightly said to begin"), I've returned to that early ideal and, though I cannot properly call myself a librarian, I live among ever-increasing bookshelves whose limits begin to blur or coincide with the house itself. The title of this book should have been *Voyage around My Room*. Regrettably, over two centuries ago, the notorious Xavier de Maistre got there first.

ALBERTO MANGUEL, 30 January 2005

THE LIBRARY

AS MYTH

Night which Pagan Theology could make the daughter of Chaos, affords no advantage to the description of order.

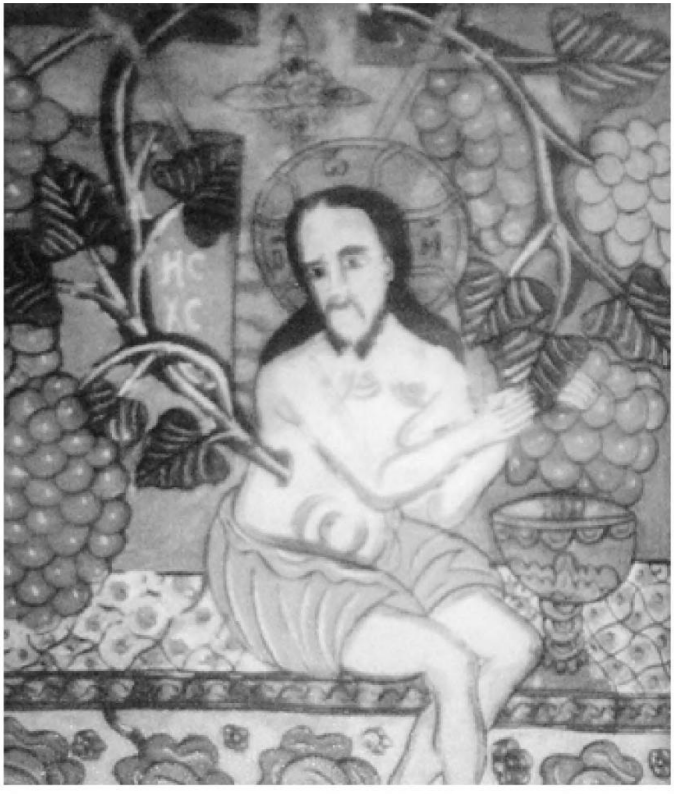
Sir Thomas Browne, *The Garden of Cyrus*

The library in which I have at long last collected my books began life as a barn sometime in the fifteenth century, perched on a small hill south of the Loire. Here, in the last years before the Christian era, the Romans erected a temple to Dionysus to honour the god of this wine-producing area; twelve centuries later, a Christian church replaced the god of drunken ecstasy with the god who turned his blood into wine. (I have a picture of a stained-glass window showing a Dionysian grapevine growing out of the wound in Christ's right side.) Still later, the villagers attached to the church a house to lodge their priest, and eventually added to this presbytery a couple of pigeon towers, a small orchard and a barn. In the fall of 2000, when I first saw these buildings which are now my home, all that was left of the barn was a single stone wall that separated my property from a chicken run and the neighbour's field. According to village legend, before belonging to the barn, the wall was part of one of the two castles that Tristan L'Hermite, minister of Louis XI of France and notorious for his cruelty, built for his sons around 1433. The first of these castles still stands, much altered during the eighteenth century. The second burnt down three or four centuries ago, and the only wall left standing, with a pigeon tower attached to its far end, became the property of the church, bordering one side of the presbytery garden. In 1693, after a new cemetery was opened to house the increasing number of dead, the inhabitants of the village ("gathered outside

the church doors," says the deed) granted the incumbent priest permission to incorporate the old cemetery and to plant fruit trees over the emptied tombs. At the same time, the castle wall was used to enclose a new barn. After the French Revolution, war, storms and neglect caused the barn to crumble, and even after services resumed in the church in 1837 and a new priest came to live in the presbytery, the barn was not rebuilt. The ancient wall continued to serve as a property divider, looking onto a farmer's field on one side and shading the presbytery's magnolia tree and bushes of hydrangea on the other.[4]

TOP: *The library of the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires.*

BOTTOM: *The library at Le Presbytère.*



ABOVE: *The stained-glass window in Chinon depicting Christ as the life-giving vine.*

As soon as I saw the wall and the scattered stones around it, I knew that here was where I would build the room to house my books. I had in mind a distinct picture of a library, something of a cross between the long hall at Sissinghurst (Vita Sackville-

West's house in Kent, which I had recently visited) and the library of my old high school, the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires. I wanted a room panelled in dark wood, with soft pools of light and comfortable chairs, and an adjacent, smaller space in which I'd set up my writing desk and reference books. I imagined shelves that began at my waist and went up only as high as the fingertips of my stretched-out arm, since, in my experience, the books condemned to heights that require ladders, or to depths that force the reader to crawl on his stomach on the floor, receive far less attention than their middle-ground fellows, no matter their subject or merit. But these ideal arrangements would have required a library three or four times the size of the vanished barn and, as Stevenson so mournfully put it, "that is the bitterness of art: you see a good effect, and some nonsense about sense continually intervenes."[5] Out of necessity, my library has shelves that begin just above the baseboards and end an octavo away from the beams of the watershed ceiling.

The Long Hall library at Sissinghurst.

While the library was being built, the masons discovered two windows in the old wall that had been bricked up long ago. One is a slim embrasure from which archers perhaps defended Tristan l'Hermite's son when his angry peasants revolted; the other is a low square window protected by medieval iron bars cut roughly into stems with drooping leaves. From these windows, during the day, I can see my neighbour's chickens hurry from one corner of the compound to another, pecking at this spot and at that, driven frantic by too many offerings, like demented scholars in a library; from the windows on the new wall opposite, I look out onto the presbytery itself and the two ancient sophora trees in my garden. But at night, when the library lamps are lit, the outside world disappears and nothing but this space of books remains in existence. To someone standing outside, in the garden, the library at night appears like a vast vessel of some sort, like that strange Chinese villa that, in 1888, the capricious Empress Cixi caused to be built in the shape of a ship marooned in the garden lake of her Summer Palace. In the dark, with the windows lit and the rows of books glittering, the library is a closed space, a universe of self-serving rules that pretend to replace or translate those of the shapeless universe beyond.

During the day, the library is a realm of order. Down and across the lettered passages I move with visible purpose, in search of a name or a voice, summoning books to my attention according to their allotted rank and file. The structure of the place is visible: a maze of straight lines, not to become lost in but for finding; a divided room that follows an apparently logical sequence of classification; a geography obedient to a predetermined table of contents and a memorable hierarchy of alphabets and numbers.

The marble boat palace of Empress Cixi

But at night the atmosphere changes. Sounds become muffled, thoughts grow louder. "Only when it is dark does the owl of Minerva take flight," noted Walter Benjamin, quoting Hegel.[6] Time seems closer to that moment halfway between wakefulness and sleep in which the world can be comfortably reimagined. My movements feel unwittingly furtive, my activity secret. I turn into something of a ghost. The books are now the real presence and it is I, their reader, who, through cabbalistic rituals of half-glimpsed letters, am summoned up and lured to a certain volume and a certain page. The order decreed by library catalogues is, at night, merely conventional; it holds no prestige in the shadows. Though my own library has no authoritarian catalogue, even such milder orders as alphabetical arrangement by author or division into sections by language find their power diminished. Free from quotidian constraints, unobserved in the late hours, my eyes and

hands roam recklessly across the tidy rows, restoring chaos. One book calls to another unexpectedly, creating alliances across different cultures and centuries. A half-remembered line is echoed by another for reasons which, in the light of day, remain unclear. If the library in the morning suggests an echo of the severe and reasonably wishful order of the world, the library at night seems to rejoice in the world's essential, joyful muddle.

In the first century A.D., in his book on the Roman civil war that had taken place a hundred years earlier, Lucan described Julius Caesar wandering through the ruins of Troy and remarked how every cave and every barren wood reminded his hero of the ancient Homeric stories. "A legend clings to every stone,"[7] Lucan explained, describing both Caesar's narrative-filled journey and, far in the future, the library in which I am now sitting. My books hold between their covers every story I've ever known and still remember, or have now forgotten, or may one day read; they fill the space around me with ancient and new voices. No doubt these stories exist on the page equally during the day but, perhaps because of nighttime's acquaintance with phantom appearances and telltale dreams, they become more vividly present after the sun has set. I walk down the aisles glimpsing the works of Voltaire and hear in the dark the oriental fable of Zadig; somewhere in the distance William Beckford's *Vathek* picks up the thread of the story and hands it over to Salman Rushdie's clowns behind the blue covers of *The Satanic Verses;* another Orient is echoed in the magical twelfth-century village of Zahiri of Samarkand, which in turn relinquishes the telling to Naguib Mahfouz's sorrowful survivors in present-day Egypt. Lucan's Caesar is told to walk carefully in the Trojan landscape lest he tread on ghosts. At night, here in the library, the ghosts have voices.

And yet, the library at night is not for every reader. Michel de Montaigne, for instance, disagreed with my gloomy preference. His library (he spoke of *librairie*, not *bibliothèque*, since the use of these words was just beginning to change in the vertiginous sixteenth century) was housed on the third floor of his tower, in an ancient storage space. "I spend there most of the days of my life and most of the hours of the day; I am never there at night,"[8] he confessed. At night Montaigne slept, since he believed that the body suffered enough during the day for the sake of the reading mind. "Books have many pleasant qualities for those who know how to choose them, but there is no good without effort; it is not a plain and pure pleasure, not more so than others; it has its discomforts, and they are onerous; the soul disports itself, but the body, whose care I have not forgotten, remains inactive, and grows weary and sad."[9]

Not mine. The various qualities of my readings seem to permeate my every muscle, so that, when I finally decide to turn off the library light, I carry into my sleep the voices and the movements of the book I've just closed. I've learned from long experience that if I want to write on a certain subject in the morning, my reading on that subject at night will feed my dreams not only with the arguments but with the actual events of the story. Reading about Mrs. Ramsay's *boeuf en daube* makes me hungry, Petrarch's ascension of Mount Ventoux leaves me breathless, Keats's account of his swimming invigorates me, the last pages of *Kim* fill me with loving friendship, the first description of the Baskervilles' hound makes me look uneasily over my shoulder. For Coleridge, such recollections elicit in a reader the loftiest of all possible sensations, the sense of the sublime, which, he says, "arises, not from the sight of an outward object, but from the beholder's reflection upon it; not from the sensuous impression,

but from the imaginative reflex."[10] Coleridge dismisses the "sensuous impression" too readily; in order for these nightly imaginations to flourish, I must allow my other senses to awaken—to see and touch the pages, to hear the crinkle and the rustle of the paper and the fearful crack of the spine, to smell the wood of the shelves, the musky perfume of the leather bindings, the acrid scent of my yellowing pocket books. Then I can sleep.

Montaigne's Tower.

During the day, I write, browse, rearrange books, put away my new acquisitions, reshuffle sections for the sake of space. Newcomers are made welcome after a period of inspection. If the book is second-hand, I leave all its markings intact, the spoor of previous readers, fellow-travellers who have recorded their

passage by means of scribbled comments, a name on the fly-leaf, a bus ticket to mark a certain page. Old or new, the only sign I always try to rid my books of (usually with little success) is the price-sticker that malignant booksellers attach to the backs. These evil white scabs rip off with difficulty, leaving leprous wounds and traces of slime to which adhere the dust and fluff of ages, making me wish for a special gummy hell to which the inventor of these stickers would be condemned.

During the night, I sit and read, and watch the rows of books tempting me again to establish connections between neighbours, to invent common histories for them, to associate one recalled snippet with another. Virginia Woolf once tried to distinguish between the man who loves learning and the man who loves reading and concluded that "there is no connection whatever between the two." "A learned man," she wrote,

> is a sedentary, concentrated solitary enthusiast, who searches through books to discover some particular grain of truth upon which he has set his heart. If the passion for reading conquers him, his gains dwindle and vanish between his fingers. A reader, on the other hand, must check the desire for learning at the outset; if knowledge sticks to him well and good, but to go in pursuit of it, to read on a system, to become a specialist or an authority, is very apt to kill what it suits us to consider the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading.[11]

During the day, the concentration and system tempt me; at night I can read with a lightheartedness verging on insouciance.

Day or night, however, my library is a private realm, very unlike public libraries large and small, and also unlike the phantom electronic library of whose universality I remain a moderate sceptic. The geography and customs of the three are different in different ways, even though all have in common the explicit

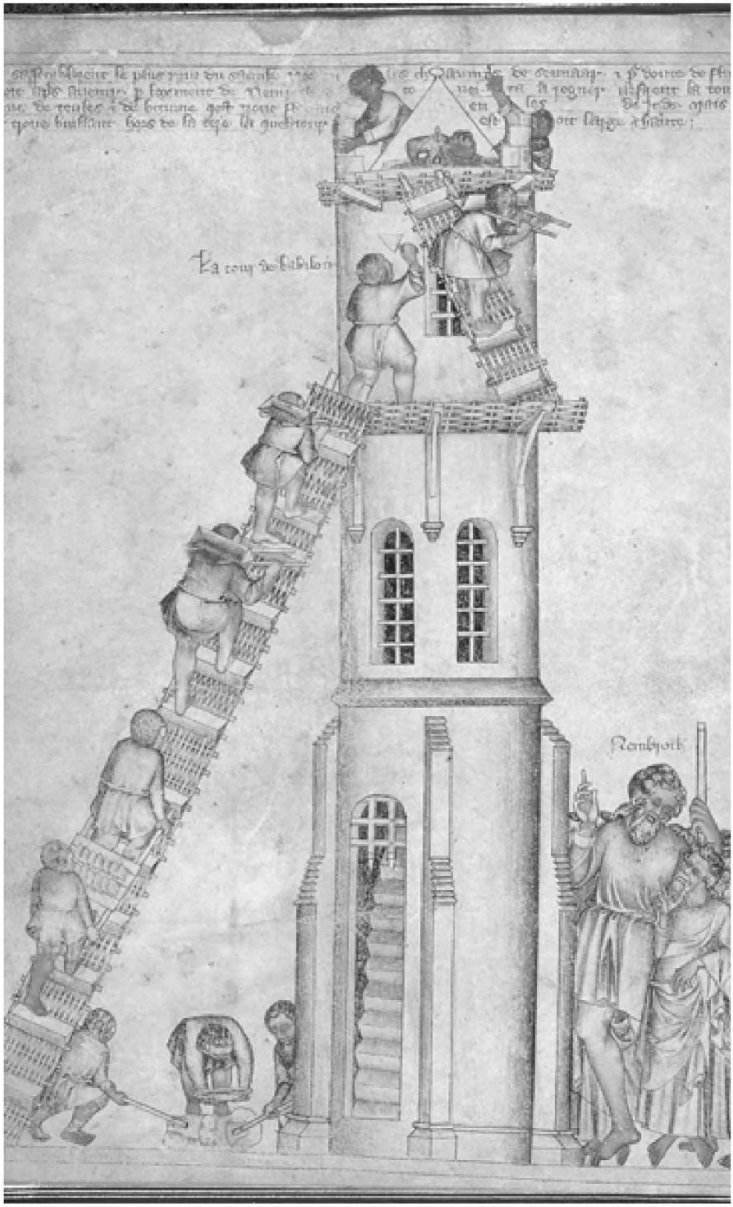
will to lend concord to our knowledge and imagination, to group and to parcel information, to assemble in one place our vicarious experience of the world, and to exclude many other readers' experiences through parsimony, ignorance, incapability or fear.

So constant and far-reaching are these seemingly contradictory attempts at inclusion and exclusion that (at least in the West) they have their distinct literary emblems, two monuments that, it could be said, stand for everything we are. The first, erected to reach the unreachable heavens, rose from our desire to conquer space, a desire punished by the plurality of tongues that even today lays daily obstacles against our attempts at making ourselves known to one another. The second, built to assemble, from all over the world, what those tongues had tried to record, sprang from our hope to vanquish time, and ended in a legendary fire that consumed even the present. The Tower of Babel in space and the Library of Alexandria in time are the twin symbols of these ambitions. In their shadow, my small library is a reminder of both impossible yearnings—the desire to contain all the tongues of Babel and the longing to possess all the volumes of Alexandria.

The story of Babel is told in the eleventh chapter of Genesis. After the Flood, the people of the earth journeyed east to the land of Shi'nar, and there decided to build a city and a tower that would reach into the heavens. "And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."[12] God, the legend tells us, invented the multiplicity of languages in order to prevent us from working together, so we would not overreach our powers. According to the

Sanhedrin (a council of Jewish elders set up in Jerusalem in the first century), the place where the tower once rose never lost its peculiar quality and, even today, whoever passes it forgets all he knows.[13]Years ago, I was shown a small hill of rubble outside the walls of Babylon and told that this was all that remained of what had once been Babel.

The Library of Alexandria was a learning centre set up by the Ptolemaic kings at the end of the third century B.C. better to follow the teachings of Aristotle. According to the Greek geographer Strabo,[14] writing in the first century B.C., the library may have contained the philosopher's own books, left to one of his disciples, Theophrastus, who in turn bequeathed them to another, Neleus of Scepsis, who eventually became involved in the establishment of the library. Up until the founding of the Library of Alexandria, the libraries of the ancient world were either private collections of one man's readings, or government storehouses where legal and literary documents were kept for official reference. The impulse for setting up these earlier libraries was one less of curiosity than of safekeeping, and stemmed from the need for specific consultation rather than from the desire to be all-embracing. The Library of Alexandria revealed a new imagination that outdid all existing libraries in ambition and scope. The Attalid kings of Pergamum, in northwestern Asia Minor, attempted to compete with Alexandria and built a library of their own, but it never achieved the grandeur of that of Alexandria. To prevent their rivals from creating manuscripts for their library, the Ptolemies banned the exportation of papyrus, to which the Pergamum librarians responded by inventing a new writing material which was given the city's name: *pergamenon*, or parchment.[15]

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Alexandria rose when stories took on the shape of books, and strove to find a syntax that would lend each word, each tablet, each scroll its illuminating and necessary place. Indistinct, majestic, ever-present, the tacit architecture of that infinite Library continues to haunt our dreams of universal order. Nothing like it has ever again been achieved, though other libraries (the Web included) have tried to copy its astonishing ambition. It stands unique in the history of the world as the only place which, having set itself up to record everything, past and future, might also have foreseen and stored the chronicle of its own destruction and resurrection.

Divided into thematic areas by categories devised by its librarians, the Library of Alexandria became a multitude of libraries, each insistent on one aspect of the world's variety. Here (the Alexandrians boasted) was a place where memory was kept alive, where every written thought had its niche, where each reader could find his own itinerary traced line after line in books perhaps yet unopened, where the universe itself found its worded reflection. As a further measure to accomplish his ambition, King Ptolemy decreed that any book arriving in the port of Alexandria was to be seized and copied, with the solemn promise that the original would be returned (like so many solemn kingly promises, this one was not always kept, and often it was the copy that was handed back). Because of this despotic measure, the books assembled in the Library became known as "the ships' collection."[19]

The first reference to the Library is by Herodas, a poet from Cos or Miletus who lived in the second half of the third century B.C., in a text that mentions a building known as the Museion, or House of the Muses, that almost certainly lodged the famous Library. Curiously, in a dizzying game of Chinese boxes, Herodas lends the kingdom of Egypt an all-englobing universal-library nature, so that

Egypt includes the Museum, which in turn includes the Library, which in turn includes everything:

> And [Egypt] resembles the house of Aphrodite:
> Everything that exists and everything that is possible
> Is found in Egypt: money, games, power, the blue sky above,
> Fame, spectacles, philosophers, gold, young men and maidens,
> The temple of the sibling gods, the benevolent king,
> The Museum, wine and whatever else one might imagine.[20]

Unfortunately, in spite of passing references like this one, the truth is that we don't know what the Library of Alexandria looked like. We have an image of the Tower of Babel, probably inspired by the ninth-century spiral minaret of the Abu Dulaf mosque in Samarra and rendered in dozens of paintings, mainly by sixteenth-century Dutch artists such as Breughel: a snail-like, unfinished building crawling with industrious workers. We have no familiar image, however fantastical, of the Library of Alexandria.

The Italian scholar Luciano Canfora, after surveying all the sources available to us, concludes that the Library itself must have consisted of a very long, high hall or passageway in the Museion. Along its walls were endless *bibliothekai*, a term which originally designated not the room but the shelves or niches for the scrolls. Above the shelves there was an inscription: "The place of the cure of the soul." On the other side of the *bibliothekai* walls were a number of rooms, used perhaps by the scholars as residences or meeting places. There was also a room for communal meals.

The Museion stood in the royal neighbourhood, by the seafront, and provided bed and board to scholars invited to the Ptolemaic court. According to the Sicilian historian Diodorus Siculus, writing in the first century B.C., Alexandria boasted a second library, the

so-called daughter library, intended for the use of scholars not affiliated with the Museion. It was situated in the southwestern neighbourhood of Alexandria, close to the temple of Serapis, and was stocked with duplicate copies of the Museion library's holdings.

It is infuriating not to be able to tell what the Library of Alexandria looked like. With understandable hubris, every one of its chroniclers (all those whose testimony has reached us) seems to have thought its description superfluous. The Greek geographer Strabo, a contemporary of Diodorus, described the city of Alexandria in detail but, mysteriously, failed to mention the Library. "The Museion too forms part of the royal buildings and comprises a *peripatos* [deambulatory], an exedra with seats, and a large building housing the common room where scholars who are members of the Museion take their meals,"[21] is all he tells us. "Why need I even speak of it, since it is imperishably held in the memory of all men?" wrote Athenaeus of Naucratis, barely a century and a half after its destruction. The Library that wanted to be the storehouse for the memory of the world was not able to secure for us the memory of itself. All we know of it, all that remains of its vastness, its marbles and its scrolls, are its various raisons d'être.

One forceful reason was the Egyptian pursuit of immortality. If an image of the cosmos can be assembled and preserved under a single roof (as King Ptolemy must have thought), then every detail of that image—a grain of sand, a drop of water, the king himself—will have a place there, recorded in words by a poet, a storyteller, a historian, forever, or at least as long as there are readers who may one day open the appointed page. There is a line of poetry, a sentence in a fable, a word in an essay, by which my existence is justified; find that line, and immortality is assured.

The heroes of Virgil, of Herman Melville, of Joseph Conrad, of most epic literature, embrace this Alexandrian belief. For them, the world (like the Library) is made up of myriad stories that, through tangled mazes, lead to a revelatory moment set up for them alone—even if in that last moment the revelation itself is denied, as Kafka's pilgrim realizes, standing outside the Gates of Law (so oddly reminiscent of library gates) and finding in the instant of dying that "they are to be closed forever, because they were meant for you alone."[22] Readers, like epic heroes, are not guaranteed an epiphany.

In our time, bereft of epic dreams—which we've replaced with dreams of pillage—the illusion of immortality is created by technology. The Web, and its promise of a voice and a site for all, is our equivalent of the *mare incognitum*, the unknown sea that lured ancient travellers with the temptation of discovery. Immaterial as water, too vast for any mortal apprehension, the Web's outstanding qualities allow us to confuse the ungraspable with the eternal. Like the sea, the Web is volatile: 70 percent of its communications last less than four months. Its virtue (its virtuality) entails a constant present—which for medieval scholars was one of the definitions of hell.[23] Alexandria and its scholars, by contrast, never mistook the true nature of the past; they knew it to be the source of an ever-shifting present in which new readers engaged with old books which became new in the reading process. Every reader exists to ensure for a certain book a modest immortality. Reading is, in this sense, a ritual of rebirth.

But the Library of Alexandria was set up to do more than merely immortalize. It was to record everything that had been and could be recorded, and these records were to be digested into further records, an endless trail of readings and glosses that would engender in turn new glosses and new readings. It was

to be a readers' workshop, not just a place where books were endlessly preserved. To ensure its use, the Ptolemies invited the most celebrated scholars from many countries—such as Euclid and Archimedes—to take up residence in Alexandria, paying them a handsome retainer and not demanding anything in exchange except that they make use of the Library's treasures.[24] In this way, these specialized readers could each become acquainted with a large number of texts, reading and summing up what they had read, producing critical digests for future generations who would then reduce these readings to further digests. A satire from the third century B.C. by Timon of Phlius describes these scholars as *charakitai*, "scribblers," and says that "in the populous land of Egypt, many well-fed *charakitai* scribble on papyrus while squabbling incessantly in the Muses' cage."[25]

In the second century, and as a result of the Alexandrian summaries and collations, an epistemological rule for reading was firmly established, decreeing that "the most recent text replaces all previous ones, since it is supposed to contain them."[26] Following this exegesis and closer to our time, Stéphane Mallarmé suggested that "the world was made to conclude in a handsome book,"[27] that is to say, in a single book, any book, a distillation or summing-up of the world that must encompass all other books. This method proceeds by foreshadowing certain books, as the *Odyssey* foresees the adventures of Holden Caulfield, and the story of Dido foretells that of Madame Bovary, or by echoing them, as the sagas of Faulkner hold the destinies of the House of Atreus, and the peregrinations of Jan Morris pay homage to the voyages of Ibn Khaldun.

This intuition of associative readings allowed the librarians of Alexandria to establish complex literary genealogies, and later readers to recognize, in the most trivial accounts of a hero's life

and interpreting information, ordering and cataloguing all manner of books, seeking to associate different texts and to transform thought by association.

By housing as many books as possible under one single roof, the librarians of Alexandria also tried to protect them from the risk of destruction that might result if left in what were deemed to be less caring hands (an argument adopted by many Western museums and libraries today). Therefore, as well as being an emblem of man's power to act through thought, the Library became a monument intended to defeat death, which, as poets tell us, puts an end to memory.

And yet, in spite of all the concern of its rulers and librarians, the Library of Alexandria vanished. Just as we know almost nothing of the shape it had when it was erected, we know nothing certain about its disappearance, sudden or gradual. According to Plutarch, during Julius Caesar's stay in Alexandria in 47 B.C. a fire spread from the Arsenal and "put an end to the great Library," but his account is faulty. Other historians (Dio Cassius and Orosius, drawing their information from Livy and from Caesar's own *De bello alexandrino)* suggested that Caesar's fire destroyed not the Library itself but some forty thousand volumes stored near the Arsenal, where they were possibly awaiting shipment to Rome. Almost seven centuries later, another possible ending was offered. A Christian chronicle, drawn from the *Ta'rikh al-Hukuma* or *Chronicle of Wise Men* by Ibn al-Kifti and now discredited, blamed the destruction on the Muslim general Amr ibn al-As, who, upon entering Alexandria in A.D. 642, was supposed to have ordered Caliph Omar I to set fire to the contents of the Library. The books, always according to the Christian narrator, were used to feed the stoves of the public baths; only the works of Aristotle were spared.[32]

Historically, in the light of day, the end of the Library remains as nebulous as its true aspect; historically, the Tower, if it ever existed, was nothing but an unsuccessful if ambitious real estate enterprise. As myths, however, in the imagination at night, the solidity of both buildings is unimpeachable. We can admire the mythical Tower rising visibly to prove that the impossible is worth attempting, no matter how devastating the result; we can see it working its way upwards, the fruit of a unanimous, all-invading, antlike society; we can witness its end in the dispersion of its individuals, each in the isolation of his own linguistic circle. We can roam the bloated stacks of the Library of Alexandria, where all imagination and knowledge are assembled; we can recognize in its destruction the warning that all we gather will be lost, but also that much of it can be collected again; we can learn from its splendid ambition that what was one man's experience can become, through the alchemy of words, the experience of all, and how that experience, distilled once again into words, can serve each singular reader for some secret, singular purpose.

The Library of Alexandria, implicit in travellers' memoirs and historians' chronicles, re-invented in works of fiction and of fable, has come to stand for the riddle of human identity, posing shelf after shelf the question "Who am I?" In Elias Canetti's 1935 novel *Die Blendung (Auto da Fé)*, Peter Kien, the scholar who in the last pages sets fire to himself and to his books when he feels that the outside world has become too unbearably intrusive, incarnates every inheritor of the Library, as a reader whose very self is enmeshed in the books he possesses and who, like one of the ancient Alexandrian scholars, must himself become dust in the night when the library is no more. Dust indeed, the poet Francisco de Quevedo noted, early in the seventeenth century. And then added, with the same faith in the survival of the spirit that the

Library of Alexandria embodied, “Dust it shall be, but dust in love.”[33]

THE LIBRARY

AS ORDER

"But how do you arrange your documents?"
"In pigeon-holes, partly…."
"Ah, pigeon-holes will not do. I have tried pigeon-holes,
but everything gets mixed in pigeon-holes:
I never know whether a paper is in A or Z."

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Sitting in my library at night, I watch in the pools of light the implacable plankton of dust shed by both the pages and my skin, hourly casting off layer after dead layer in a feeble attempt at persistence. I like to imagine that, on the day after my last, my library and I will crumble together, so that even when I am no more I'll still be with my books.

The truth is, I can't remember a time when I did not live surrounded by my library. By the age of seven or eight, I had assembled in my room a minuscule Alexandria, about one hundred volumes of different formats on all sorts of subjects. For the sake of variety, I kept changing their groupings. I would decide, for instance, to place them by size so that each shelf contained only volumes of the same height. I discovered much later that I had an illustrious predecessor, Samuel Pepys, who in the seventeenth century built little high heels for his smaller volumes, so that the tops all followed a neat horizontal line.[34] I began by placing on my lowest shelf the large volumes of picture-books: a German edition of *Die Welt, in der wir leben*, with detailed illustrations of the world under the sea and life in an autumn undergrowth (even today I can perfectly recall the iridescent fish and the monstrous insects), a collection of stories about cats (from which I still remember the line "Cats' names and cats' faces/ Are often seen in public places"),

frustration, I'll stop this geometrical progression. But the possibility of continuing it is always there. There are no final categories in a library.

A private library, unlike a public one, presents the advantage of allowing a whimsical and highly personal classification. The invalid writer Valéry Larbaud would have his books bound in different colours according to the language in which they were written, English novels in blue, Spanish in red, etc. "His sickroom was a rainbow," said one of his admirers, "that allowed his eye and his memory surprises and expected pleasures."[36] The novelist Georges Perec once listed a dozen ways in which to classify one's library, "none satisfactory in itself."[37] He halfheartedly suggested the following orders:

~ alphabetically
~ by continent or country
~ by colour
~ by date of purchase
~ by date of publication
~ by format
~ by genre
~ by literary period
~ by language
~ according to our reading priorities
~ according to their binding
~ by series

Such classifications may serve a singular, private purpose. A public library, on the other hand, must follow an order whose code can be understood by every user and which is decided upon before the collection is set up on the shelves. Such a code is more easily

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