Alberto Manguel

The Traveler, the Tower, and the Worm

The Reader as Metaphor

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CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

There are no such things as facts, only interpretation.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Posthumous Papers*

As far as we can tell, we are the only species for whom the world seems to be made of stories. Biologically developed to be conscious of our existence, we treat our perceived identities and the identity of the world around us as if they required a literate decipherment, as if everything in the universe were represented in a code that we are supposed to learn and understand. Human societies are based on this assumption: that we are, up to a point, capable of understanding the world in which we live.

To understand the world, or to try and understand it, translation of experience into language is not enough. Language barely glances the surface of our experience, and transmits from one person to another, in a supposedly shared conventional code, imperfect and ambiguous notations that rely both on the careful intelligence of the one who speaks or writes and

Hildegard von Bingen, "Cosmic Man."
From *Liber divinorum operum* (c. 1170–1174).

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on the creative intelligence of the one who listens or reads. To enhance the possibilities of mutual understanding and to create a larger space of meaning, language resorts to metaphors that are, ultimately, a confession of language's failure to communicate directly. Through metaphors, experiences in one field become illuminated by experiences in another.

Aristotle suggested that the power of a metaphor resides in the recognition conjured up in the audience;[1] that is to say, the audience must invest the subject of the metaphor with a particular shared meaning. Literate societies, societies based on the written word, have developed a central metaphor to name the perceived relationship between human beings and their universe: the world as a book that we are meant to read. The ways in which this reading is conducted are many—through fiction, mathematics, cartography, biology, geology, poetry, theology, and myriad other forms—but their basic assumption is the same: that the universe is a coherent system of signs governed by specific laws, and that those signs have a meaning, even if that meaning lies beyond our grasp. And that in order to glimpse that meaning, we try to read the book of the world.

Not every literate society assumes this central image in the same way, and the different vocabularies that we have developed to name the act of reading reflect, at specific times and in specific places, the ways in which a certain society defines its own identity. Cicero, contesting Aristotle's assumptions, warned against the idle use of metaphors merely for adorn-

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ment's sake. In *On Oratory*, he wrote that "just as clothes were in the beginning invented to protect us against the cold and later began to be worn as adornment and dignity, the use of metaphors started because of poverty but became of common use for the sake of entertainment."[2] For Cicero, metaphors are born from the poverty of language, that is to say, from the inability of words to name our experience exactly and concretely. To use metaphors in a merely decorative function is to debase their essential enriching power.

Out of a basic identifying metaphor society develops a chain of metaphors. The world as book links to life as a voyage, and so the reader is seen as a traveler, advancing through the pages of that book. Sometimes, however, on that journey the traveler does not engage with the landscape and its inhabitants but proceeds, as it were, from sanctuary to sanctuary; the activity of reading is then confined to a space in which the traveler withdraws from the world instead of living in the world. The biblical metaphor of the tower denoting purity and virginity, applied to the Bride in the *Song of Songs* and to the Virgin Mary in medieval iconography, becomes transformed centuries later into the ivory tower of the reader, with its negative connotations of inaction and disinterest in social matters, the opposite of the reader-traveler. The traveler metaphor evolves and the textual pilgrim becomes in the end, like all mortal beings, prey of the Worm of Death, a grandiose image of that other, more modest pest that gnaws through the pages of books, devouring paper and ink. The metaphor folds back upon itself, and just as the

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Worm devours the reader-traveler, the reader-traveler (sometimes) devours books, not to benefit from the learning they contain (and life displays) but merely to become bloated with words, reflecting back the work of Death. Thus the reader is derided for being a worm, a mouse, a rat, a creature for whom books (and life) are not nourishment but fodder.

These metaphors are not always explicitly set out. Sometimes the idea presents itself, implicit in its context, but the metaphor that will illuminate it has itself not yet been named. In fact, in some cases, as in that of the ivory tower, the metaphor is created long after the idea has been present in society. It is difficult, except in a few cases, to track the appearance of the metaphors themselves; perhaps more useful, more revealing, is to discuss certain instances of the presence and development of the notion behind the metaphor. In one of my early books, *A History of Reading*, I dedicated several pages to explore the metaphors related to our craft. I attempted to trace some of the most common ones but felt that the subject merited a more in-depth exploration; the result of that insatisfaction is the present book.

Readers of the printed word are constantly being told that their tools are old-fashioned, their methods outmoded, that they must learn the new technologies or be left behind by the galloping herd. Perhaps. But if we are gregarious animals who must follow the dictates of society, we are nevertheless individuals who learn about the world by reimagining it, by putting words to it, by reenacting through those words our experience.

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In the end, it may be more interesting, more illuminating to concentrate on that which does not change in our craft, on that which radically defines the act of reading, on the vocabulary we use to try to understand, as self-conscious beings, this unique ability born from the need to survive through imagination and through hope.

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CHAPTER 1

THE READER AS TRAVELER

Reading as Recognition of the World

You will not discover the limits of the soul
by traveling, even if you wander over every
conceivable path, so deep is its story.

—Heraclitus, fragment 35

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The Book of the World

To lay before you the marvellous book of the entire universe, and have you read the excellence of its Author in the living letters of its creatures.

—Luis de Granada, *The Symbol of Faith*

In the left margin of a fifteenth-century French manuscript,[1] a small illumination serves as incipit for the text. It shows, against a dark blue sky studded with golden stars, a woman looking

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upon a baby child strapped to its cradle. The scene depicted is Moses in the bulrushes. The woman is Miriam, Moses's sister, who convinces the Pharaoh's daughter to have the child Moses nursed by a Jewish nurse; unbeknownst to the princess, the nurse is Jochebed, Moses's mother. The child in the illumination is Moses himself; the basket in which he is sent downriver is a thick, red, bound book. In an effort to ally the teachings of the New Testament with those of the Old, medieval commentators traced parallels between the two, providing artists and sermonists with a rich iconography. The Virgin Mary mirrored Moses's mother, who regained her youth after her hundred and fifty-sixth year and married her husband Amram a second time: Mary's virginity was read as equivalent to Jochebed's new virginal state. Like the angel who announced to Mary the birth of Christ, God told Amram that his wife would bear a child whose memory "would be celebrated while the world lasts, and not only among the Hebrews, but among strangers also." To escape the Pharaoh's edict that decreed the slaughter of all Hebrew male children (as Herod would later, in Mary's time), Jochebed made a cradle out of bulrushes, daubed it with pitch on the outside, and abandoned it on the shores of the Red Sea.[2] The image is taken up in the exquisite illumination, combining in one depiction the reenactment of the scene in Exodus, Miriam watching over the child Moses as Mary will later watch

Moses in a book, *Grandes Heures de Rohan* (c. 1430–1435).
Courtesy the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

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over the infant Jesus, and the promise that the Book will carry Moses into the world, implicitly announcing the coming of the Savior. The Book is the vessel that allows the word of God to travel through the world, and those readers who follow it become pilgrims in the deepest, truest sense.

The book is many things. As a repository of memory, a means of overcoming the constraints of time and space, a site for reflection and creativity, an archive of the experience of ourselves and others, a source of illumination, happiness, and sometimes consolation, a chronicle of events past, present, and future, a mirror, a companion, a teacher, a conjuring-up of the dead, an amusement, the book in its many incarnations, from clay tablet to electronic page, has long served as a metaphor for many of our essential concepts and undertakings. Almost since the invention of writing, more than five thousand years ago, the signs that stood for words that expressed (or attempted to express) our thinking appeared to its users as models or images for things as intricate and aimless, as concrete or as abstract as the world in which we live and even life itself. Very quickly, the first scribes must have realized the magical properties of their new craft. For those who had mastered its code, the art of writing allowed the faithful transmission of lengthy texts so that the messenger had no longer to rely solely on his or her memory; it lent authority to the text set down, perhaps for no other reason than that its material existence now offered the spoken word a tangible reality—and, at the same time, by manipulating that assumption, allowed for this authority to be distorted or undermined; it helped organize

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and render coherent intricacies of reasoning that often became lost in speech, whether in convolutions of monologues or in the ramifications of dialogue. Perhaps we cannot imagine today what it must have felt like for people accustomed to requiring the bodily presence of a live speaker to suddenly receive, in a clump of clay, the voice of a distant friend or a long dead king. It is not surprising that such a miraculous instrument should appear in the mind of these early readers as the metaphorical manifestation of other miracles, of the inconceivable universe, and of their unintelligible lives.

The remnants of Mesopotamian literature bear witness to both the sense of marvel of the scribes and the extraordinary uses to which the new craft was put. For example, in *The Epic of Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, composed sometime in the twenty-first century B.C.E., the poet explains that writing was invented as a means of properly conveying a text of many words. "Because the mouth of the messenger was too full, and he was therefore unable to deliver the message, Enmerkar molded a piece of clay and fixed the words upon it. Before that day, it had not been possible for words to cleave to clay." This capacious quality was complemented by that of trustworthiness, as affirmed by the author of a hymn in the twentieth century B.C.E.: "I am a meticulous scribe who leaves nothing out," he assures his readers, heralding the future promises of journalists and historians. At the same time, the possibility of manipulating this same trustworthiness is attested by another scribe, serving under the Akkadian king Ashurbanipal, in the seventh century

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B.C.E.: "Everything that will not please the king, I shall delete," the loyal subject declares with disarming frankness.[3]

All these complex characteristics that allowed a written text to reproduce, in the reader's eye, the experience of the world, led to the container of the text (the tablet, later the scroll and the codex) being seen as the world itself. The natural human propensity to find in our physical surroundings a sense, a coherence, a narrative, whether through a system of natural laws or through imagined stories, helped translate the vocabulary of the book into a material one, granting God the art that the gods had bestowed upon humankind: the art of writing. Mountains and valleys became part of a divine language that we were meant to unravel, seas and rivers carried a message from the Creator and, as Plotinus taught in the third century, "if we look at the stars as if they were letters, we can, if we know how to decipher this kind of writing, read the future in their configurations."[4] The creation of a text on a blank page was assimilated to the creation of the universe in the void, and when Saint John stated in his Gospel that "in the beginning was the Word" he was defining as much his own scribal task as that of the Author Himself. By the seventeenth century, the tropes of God as author and the world as book had become so engrained in the Western imagination that they could be once more taken up and rephrased. In *Religio Medici*, Sir Thomas Browne made the now commonplace images his own: "Thus there are two books from whence I collect my Divinity. Besides that written one of God, another of his servant Nature, that universal and publik Manuscript, that lies

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expans'd unto the eyes of all; those that never saw him in the one, have discovered him in the other."[5]

Though its sources are Mesopotamian, the precise metaphor relating word to world was fixed, in the Jewish tradition, around the sixth century B.C.E. The ancient Jews, lacking for the most part a vocabulary to express abstract ideas, often preferred to use concrete nouns as metaphors for those ideas rather than inventing new words for new concepts, thereby lending these nouns a moral and spiritual meaning.[6] Thus, for the complex idea of living consciously in the world and attempting to draw from the world its God-given meaning, they borrowed the image of the volume that held God's word, the Bible or "the Books." And for the bewildering realization of being alive, of life itself, they chose an image used for describing the act of reading these books: the image of the traveled road.[7] Both metaphors—book and road—have the advantage of great simplicity and popular awareness, and the passage from the image to the idea (or, as my old schoolbook would say, from the *vehicle* to the *tenor*)[8] can be smoothly and naturally effected. To live, then, is to travel through the book of the world, and to read, to make one's way through a book, is to live, to travel through the world itself. An oral communication exists almost exclusively in the present of the listener; a written text occupies the full extension of the reader's time. It extends *visibly* into the past of pages already read and into the future of those to come, much as we can see the road already traveled and intuit the one waiting before us, much as we know that a number of years lie behind us and

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(though there is no assurance of this) that a number of years lie ahead. Listening is largely a passive endeavor; reading is an active one, like traveling. Contrary to later perceptions of the act of reading that opposed it to that of acting in the world, in the Judeo-Christian tradition words read elicited action: "Write

St. John devouring a book. Jean Duvet, *The Apocalypse* (1561).
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the vision," says God to the prophet Habakkuk, "and make it plain upon tables, that he may run who readeth it."[9]

Composed probably a century after the prophecies of Habakkuk, the Book of Ezekiel offers an even clearer metaphor of the readable world. In a vision, Ezekiel sees the heavens open and a hand appear, holding a scroll of parchment that is then spread before him, "written within and without; and there was written therein lamentations, and mourning, and woe."[10] This scroll the prophet must eat so that he may speak the ingested words to the children of Israel. Much the same image is later taken up by Saint John on Patmos. In his Book of Revelation, an angel descends from Heaven with an open volume. "Take it and eat it up," says the angel, "and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey."[11]

Both Ezekiel and John's images gave rise to an extensive library of biblical commentaries that, throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see in this double book an image of God's double creation, the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature, both of which we are meant to read and in which we are written. Talmudic commentators associated the double book with the double tablets of the Torah. According to Midrash, the Torah that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai was both a written text and an oral commentary. During the day, when it was light, Moses read the text God had written on the tablets; in the darkness of the night he studied the commentary God had spoken when he created the world.[12] For the Talmudists, the Book of Nature is understood as God's oral gloss on his

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