

Nattens Bibliotek

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During the American invasion of Iraq, the archeological museums of Baghdad were looted, and their contents dispersed and destroyed¹. In particular this involved the wanton destruction of books and documents, and with it the preserved memories of an irretrievable past, the detailed elucidation of whose loss would be far too painful to expound on. Thus March 23 2003, or whatever date it happened to be on, is a crucial date in the history of mankind, albeit one who very few of its members would be aware of. It was a date of annihilation. Now an obvious moral question intrudes itself, the destruction of dusty documents was not the only disaster which has befallen Iraq, obviously one should not forget the hundred of thousands who were directly and indirectly the victims of the American invasion. Are not the lives of humans, even the life of a single individual, worth more than the merely material artifacts of mankind, be they of the most exalted artistic kind, let alone when just dusty documents, whose contents may not interest anyone, except the intermittent expert? When given the choice of saving a child and an art treasure, is it not obvious what to do? When contemplating the destruction of Dresden, should we not grieve the thousands who perished in the British un-opposedly induced Holocaust, rather than the destruction of its architectural splendors, because the former are gone for ever, while the latter can more or less be reconstructed?

The questions are important and tangled, and thus it is our duty to try and disentangle them before we can address them. First and foremost, to those to whom the answers seem so obvious, we must attribute a certain lack of imagination. Imagination does not work on the spectacle of anonymous masses of people, people are not individuals, but will die sooner or later anyway. Their only feeble claim to immortality lying in the preservation of the memories of them, the acknowledgment that they have existed. With the destruction of the records of their times, they are condemned along with those to an irrevocable extinction. A building of stone and mortar, as well as a state of affluence, can indeed be reconstructed, and in fact most of them were after the Second World War, both as to buildings and not to mention material affluence, because what was not destroyed were the means of reconstructions, the tangible objects of which are but material shadows of minds capable of casting them² It may very well be true that nothing of what was destroyed so

¹ An object only makes sense within a context. For everyday objects that context is obvious, and thus invisible. For unfamiliar objects, such as archeological, context is everything and fragile, and when divorced from it, even if physically intact, their meanings are literally destroyed.

² To a large extent the interesting buildings have been reconstructed, to the delight of latter-day tourists (in recent decades even the carnage of Dresden has been allowed to Phoenix like rise out of the ashes), but of course the reconstruction has not been complete, and the result somewhat lacking in soul. When it comes to material affluence on the other hand, its reconstruction has exceeded the original, because of all the bombs, the very ability to generate wealth was not affected. In fact cynics are tempted to claim that

haplessly and wantonly in Baghdad will ever be of interest to me personally, but the very fact that it existed, that such treasures were potentially available to be reaped by future generations, provided both a delight and a sense of security, and thus the intelligence of its loss, incidentally concomitant with my awareness of its prior existence, produced but the pain of being reminded of the ultimate extinction, and hence the utter meaninglessness of it all. Such losses are very similar to the ongoing destruction of biological diversity, the latter a phenomenon justified by itself, and thus needing no external justification. For those to whom this does not make sense, libraries do neither. I belong to the generation to which the Vietnam War became their defining feature. I personally stood aloof and the American atrocities in South East Asia never touched me as deeply as their intervention in Mesopotamia would do forty years later. Johnson and even Nixon (our favorite object of hatred at the time) stood at least for a liberal society (yes, even Nixon, at least in retrospect), and their global actions were not prompted by unopposed arrogance; my contempt and disgust for that Bush Jr. and his backers, is indeed unfathomable. But I am catapulted into a digression, and need to be brought back onto track again.

Have you read all your books is a question often asked when visitors encounter even a modest collection of books. The standard, somewhat weary reply by the Swedish writer Hjalmar Sderberg to that insolence, was simply that you do not read your furniture. This is a question that reveals not the curiosity of the puzzled interlocutor, but his or her illiteracy. If this was the case, why keep a collection of books? A collection of books, or a library if you prefer, is less a church-yard of books once consumed and discarded, but a promise of future delights. Any serious reader of books amasses more books than he or she will ever be able to read in her or his life-time. In fact if you compute the number of books you will realistically be able to read during the short span allotted to you, you will find it to be depressingly low. To live longer is obviously not a solution to this inadequacy of our measured life-spans, but to simply prolong those would only exacerbate the discrepancy between our appetites and our abilities to accommodate them. There are very obvious questions to be addressed to the collector. Why not borrow books? Why physically collect as so much furniture? My first mother-in-law had this attitude. It puzzled and infuriated me, and provided more than enough of an excuse to divorce her daughter, who was not immune to such influence from her mother. Now, such a question reduces the problem of private libraries to that of public libraries, to which we will return, and it highlights a very important feature of books, namely that of fetishism. The fetishism of books involves different levels of such fixations, the most obvious and direct one, being the physical feel of a book. A book as a physical artifact, as an object to be handled, smelled and dipped into. To be put on a shelf and to be retrieved from one. To be looked at, read, and have its pages turned, maybe even to be scribbled in, have coffee spilled upon, to have its spine cracked, to be left resting on your lap. Maybe even to hit somebody on the head with, or simply to be put in a pile and sat on³. Many people like fancy leather-bound volumes. Heavy tomes with gilded lettering, the kind which adorn libraries of the past. I myself care but

the very destruction of which WWII was characterized may very well have been a prerequisite for that very construction that followed upon it.

³ There is a story of the great mathematician Grothendieck, who once at a party found himself in want of a chair. The host of the party collected his collection of the guests oeuvres - the complete volumes of

little for such things, I grew up with paper-backs, with soft and visually attractive covers. Books should be of different sizes, within limits admittedly, at least for the majority of them, due to practical reasons. I do not generally like collected volumes, I prefer each book to be separately bound, to make up a self-contained unit. This does not mean that I am indifferent to a certain uniformity. For many years I collected Penguin editions, whose orange spines made up large swatches in my collections. The idea of reading on a monitor is repugnant to most people, at least as to sustained such efforts, and maybe not even good for you. Technology promises the ultimate emulation, the 'hand-able' book, into which all kinds of books can be electronically downloaded. From a purely rational perspective this suggestion appears unassailable. Why be so sentimental, when all the qualities of a book can be so cleverly simulated? Why hold on to something which is obviously moribund? Maybe we are, because this is a fate we are bound to share with our companions on the shelves, if they are so condemned. The very physical collection of a library is what gives to a home its security, its snugness, and above all its self-sufficiency. Books are, as Hjalmar Sderberg obviously understood, an essential part of the furniture. A home without books is not a home, and when I intermittently have had occasion to visit such homes without books, I have been struck by a sense of emptiness, not always having been able to pin-point its proper cause. It is to the books I am drawn when visiting the home of someone. It is to their spines my gaze is invariably attracted. One can learn a lot from what kind of books a person keeps on his shelves, and better still from what specimen have escaped their ranks and lounge, like other members of the family, on tables and sofas. But it is not primarily the curiosity as to the host, who propels my exploration, but my curiosity as to what kind of books exist and are still to be discovered. (Some people of course can carry their curiosities to such extremes as to surreptitiously help themselves, arguing that books belong to everyone and thus to no one in particular).

People collect all kinds of things. China ware, tin-cans, beer-bottle labels, match-boxes and what not. True, you can collect books in the same spirit, and some people do. But then you collect books as things, and books properly appreciated are not things at all. To the serious collector, the particular items of collection is irrelevant, it is the collecting spirit that matters, if not match-boxes, candlesticks would be as much fun, because it is but a projection of a deeper desire. But a library is not a collection of books. Books are not collected because of a collective urge, because it is not the case that they are interchangeable with something else, to the extent they are, they are just things. Books are being collected in spite of themselves, or as Manguel puts it, books proliferate at night, breed and multiply. The urge that propels an individual to surround himself with books is quite different. It has to do with reading, with a desire to appropriate not the books themselves, but the world into which they are windows, or sometimes the real thing itself. A man has only so much of a capacity to retain, and the world out there is so large. The library is the happy geometric mean between yourself and the world out there. The library becomes the world made manageable. And the library becomes your home, and that is why a public library cannot never be a substitute for a private one. A public library is public, and it is big. It should be catholic catering to a great variety of tastes. And

EGA and SGA, and presented them to his illustrious visitor, who sat on them and commented sarcastically that they turned out to be good for something in the end.

while a private library only lasts as long as its proprietor lives and reads; a public library should indeed outlast its readers, its purpose is archival, literally spanning generation after generation, providing the memory of mankind, potentially infinite in duration if not extent. Thus whether a given book is read or not is of minor importance, the crucial fact is its potentiality for being read sometime in the future. It is the same thing with getting a book. You usually do not buy a book in order to read it on the spot, this only happens when you are on your way to the train or plane, discovering to your horror that you have failed to bring any reading material with you, and such purchases are incidentally not always that felicitous. No, you buy a book because you feel that it would be nice to have it around, that you some day might want to read it. It is an investment for the future, nourishing your comfortable illusion that there will always be days ahead. It is a friend, with whom you would like to spend some time. Some time. Your days are limited, a hackneyed saying, whose truth most of us refuse to acknowledge save by our lips, and as a consequence, as noted above, most of our books will remain unread; but the point is that we can really never tell which ones.

There are books which are libraries by themselves. Books that try to do singlehandedly what normally is done collectively. I am of course thinking of encyclopedias. Someone may remark that they are indeed mini-libraries, because they often come in many volumes. This is a stupid remark, that is but an artifact of binding. An encyclopedia is one unit of course, sometimes this is emphasized by letting the pagination run continuously. But in their very organization, the formal but wonderfully consistent lexicographic, they jumble together the most disparate elements, bringing shoulder to shoulder things which have nothing to do with each other. This is a reflection of the world as a manifestation of senses, all a wonderful confusing mixture, which we just have to accept as given. In fact we do not always read in order to understand and be instructed, although that is of course a powerful attraction in all reading; but more importantly we read in order to be confused and overwhelmed, to challenge our understanding, to unsettle our smug convictions, to be reminded of how little we know, and hence how much there is to yet know, a desire of greed, which by definition not only cannot be satisfied but does not even desire so to be. Thus an encyclopedia can be consulted, but consultations of an encyclopedia are invariably disappointing, an encyclopedia should be read haphazardly, one should lose oneself into one, getting lost. Just as with a library. But there are other kinds of encyclopedias, although they are not usually thought of as such, because they are not ordered systematically, nor being obviously systematic as the standard types. I am of course thinking of such a book as the Bible, also known as the books of books. In fact the Bible is in many ways much more of a mini-library than a regular encyclopedia, and in fact it is divided into 'books'. The Bible cannot be used for straightforward consultation, it has to be browsed and dipped into. Its ultimate object, like other Holy books, is of course enlightenment, but few if any readers will find it there, instead they might find something else, just as in reading and browsing through a library you may be as unlikely to find the truth as becoming a better person. The pleasures of a library need no external justification, as little as life itself needs to have a clearly defined purpose to become meaningful.

How does an individual discover a library? It certainly helps to grow up in a home which has one, but on the other hand, being deprived of such an opportunity is no real

serious impediment, in spite of what is being claimed by educators. Anyway I was lucky that my parents had one. Not a very big one, but enough to both cover a wall of shelves and to impress the stray playmate who found his way into our home. The books of my parents library intrigued me before I could read. Books with pictures certainly helped, and to the child there is little difference between a book of pictures and one of text, and in fact high up into my childhood years I was truly fascinated by the illustrations found in books. My mothers parents had no library, my grandfather, who was a farmer, claimed that he had no interest in books,⁴ and apart from a long series of the yearbooks of an association of horse-breeders of which he was a member, there were almost no books at all. This did not mean that I despised him, on the contrary for many years he was a male model to me, only that I was a bit disappointed. However, in my father's home there were books my paternal grandfather being a village teacher, and of those books many admittedly were missionary tracts, but nevertheless in toto they made up a sufficient variety. Two things intrigued me a lot. First the big thick family bible with the illustrations by Gustave Doré. When I spent three weeks there along with my small brother at the age of seven, I used to study it intently. I was particularly fascinated by pictures of a big flood, and as my knowledge of the bible was limited, I thought that the illustrator simply had gotten tired of drawing religious scenes and deciding to branch out⁵. The other book, or rather collection of books, was the Life of Animals by Brehm. During my whole childhood I desired nothing more fervently. After my grandfather died, I used to ask my grandmother to give them to me, an act of audacity that still puzzles me, so uncharacteristic of my usual self, but my mother told me that this would leave such an ugly gap in my grandmothers collection that it was out of the question⁶. And here we go again with the idea of a library being a piece of furniture. The Bible and the Brehm's might appear quite distinct, but to the child they inspired similar urges, and the urge in my case was to write a very thick book myself. I called it the book about everything, and this pretty much summarizes what a library is all about. When I started writing it the ambition of the project was not clear to me, but this was something that became manifest later. I first made up some stories, involving imaginary names, like 'Vovav' and 'Isanack' clearly inspired by Biblical names. Then I started systematically to write down all I knew, along with things I just made up and fantasized about. I saw with satisfaction how the pages built up, and I was not adverse to padding them out by pages from teachers magazines. I designed chapters, who took on a life of their own, not unlike what happens in Tristan Shandy. One chapter went on and on, and I made some drawing about the chapter complaining about being tired. In the end I had over 2000 pages, and that was a year later, and the whole monstrosity was bound

⁴ although later in my childhood it transpired that he and his brothers had been fascinated by the books by Jules Verne, which they had read, but, I realized, not as books but as installments in the local newspaper.

⁵ Of course I knew the story of Noah from a children's version of the biblical stories, incidentally being one of the first books I read after having cracked the code of reading on my own; but somehow I failed to make the connection at the time.

⁶ I might add that we acquired a simplified version of the collection, and although I dutifully read those cheap books, I was deeply disappointed by them, not unlike the child who wants a real dog and gets a stuffed animal instead.

up, its thickness rivaling that of its other dimensions. Needless to say I have still this book in my possession, although residing up in the attic. Will it survive me? And if so, will it ever make sense to anyone else? It is being said (among others by William James) that all your interests in your adult life can be traced back to your childhood and youth (incidentally making education, in the sense less of instruction than in the instigation of curiosities, so extremely crucial), and it is not hard to see, in my present obsession with my accumulating collection of copies of my letters, the shadow of that old enterprise of mine projected into adulthood. While my youthful enthusiasm only lasted for a year, the present one has gone on for thirty, and gives no indications of abating, threatening to leave a legacy of far greater import (and embarrassment?) to my survivors, than the mere scribbling of a child.

But when did I think consciously of creating a library of books as opposed to a mere collection of ones? As a child and an adolescent I certainly bought books and filled shelves but I thought little of it. Likewise at the end of my teens, I hungrily browsed the mathematics sections of bookstores (in retrospect it is amazing the great variety of rather advanced math books which were to be had in quite ordinary bookstores in Stockholm in the late 60's and early 70's, those time are long since gone) and bought quite a few, but this was unintentional, not part of a project. My first conscious thoughts of expressing myself through a collection did not appear until my second year or so at Harvard. On my first trip West walking around San Francisco just after Christmas 1972, I bought a book, not to read it (it was a collection of essays on Wittgenstein, which I have not touched as of today) but just because I thought it would fit nicely in the collection of books I now realized that I was perfectly free to start. A few weeks later, back in Cambridge, I watched a movie, in which a young man had a room filled with books. It struck me that this was exactly what I would like to have, and my identity as some kind of intellectual was born, along with the realization that I would not devote my life entirely to mathematics, the illusion under which I had labored during the preceding years. What it meant really was the (belated) realization that I was now grown-up, but still young, entirely free to do whatever I wanted with my life, or at least to buy books at my complete discretion. After that I started to buy books quite eagerly regularly haunting the bookstores around Harvard Square, of which there were many, and the books (like the vinyl records of classical music I also were in the habit of collecting, having recently acquired my first gramophone (stereo) ever) were rather cheap. My girl-friend (and then wife) was not too enthused, as mentioned above, she thought it was a waste of money, as books could be had from libraries. (But if only libraries would buy books, who would support the authors?). I did watch with satisfaction my collection grow, and concomitantly with this my idea of myself as some kind of intellectual. When we in what would be our last months of married life moved into a ramshackle house along Massachusetts Avenue, I got a room just by myself, where I put my two bookcases framing a window. At that point my wife started to realize that something was going wrong. When I moved out, I moved with my books, and my home became where I kept them. Later on the Upper West-side in Manhattan, my library was allowed to grow unchecked, and I arranged for them to be regularly shipped back to Sweden, when I finally returned to my native shores. For quite some time I was without my books, the shipment being lost. Eventually it was retrieved and we were rejoined, but

not until more than six months later. Was I not worried? Many years later my new wife insisted that I get book-cases with glass-doors. I reluctantly complied, and now they grace our living-room housing most of my books. But there is always overflow. In the hallway and down in the basement there are regular bookcases, and in my office, the books pile up on top of bookcases, mostly unordered, unlike the case of the living room. I have made no count, and an attempt of cataloging them at the time I got a personal computer twenty years ago founded on too ambitious a scheme. So here they are still steadily growing. There are so many books you would like to read. Some day at least.

Libraries disperse, especially private ones. The one of my grandparents was divided among the children in 1966, and we secured the Doré bible along with some other books that had fascinated me and my brother, but I never knew what had happened to the Brehm collection. By that time I had grown out of my childhood obsession and did not care. Forty years after that, when my widowed mother was removed to a home for the demented, I saved a lot of the books in her library, although not as many as I ideally would have preferred. I made a clear distinction between the original books I remembered from my childhood explorations, and those that were acquired later, because with few exceptions, I had no compunctions about getting rid of the latter, while the first I treasured more than any other items remaining from my childhood home⁷.

But the ultimate library is of course the complete library of all books. None of the stories by Borges has fascinated me more than his library of Babel. He clearly understands that this library is not infinite, although it contains an incredible number of books, indicating how to actually calculate its number. However, like most good stories it is incomplete. Some things Borges says, like there being somewhere among those books a complete catalogue of them all is patently nonsense, and this very inability to realize this, also prevents him from drawing the full potential of his story, and all of its fascinating combinatorial aspects. It is about existence, real versus virtual and touches upon fundamental question of discovery versus invention, and has direct relevance to the notion of Platonism. Although it would be tempting to retell the story as it really should have been told, I will refrain from doing so, and only point out a few salient features.

How would you find something in such a library? How would the books be ordered? Alphabetically by title? For that one needs simply to realize that the title is identical with the text itself. Thus they are listed alphabetically by the letters themselves. This means that in order to find a particular book you need to write it! Just imagine that you enter the library and behind the front desk, by which the young pretty librarian sits, there are about a hundred doors, positioned like in a fan. One door for each of the initial letters⁸ of the books. You open a door, only to find another fan of doors, now corresponding to the second letter. In our Euclidean space, you would need to walk further and further at each stage to reach the next door, in fact the lengths of those walks will grow exponentially, so in fact even would you travel with the speed of light, it would take you an immensely long

⁷ My father had a collection of lithographs, with whom I grew up, but for some strange reason, maybe due to the practical ones of limited wall space, I was able to renounce them, saving only those pictures made by my father, who incidentally was a very skilled draughtsman himself

⁸ A hundred is just mentioned for the convenience of fixing ideas, one for each sign, upper or lower case, digits, periods, commas, spaces and all kinds of typographical things you expect.

time to reach your final door, behind which the sought out books resides. True, if space would be hyperbolic, the lengths would be constant, and the distance only proportional to the length of the book, and in fact quite manageable if the unit of length would be fairly small. But I guess Borges never knew about Hyperbolic space, he might have loved it had he known, mathematical ignorance severely limiting the scope of your imagination, something most people appear blissfully ignorant of. But why digress? Why take the trouble of walking through all those doors, in view of the fact that it will take so long, why not simply tell the pretty librarian which choices you intend to make, and she will dutifully enter them one by one on the keyboard (it does not matter whether it is that of a computer or that of an old-fashioned typewriter, Borges would clearly have preferred the latter.) In the end, maybe a week later, she has typed them all and here you are, the sought out book in your hand, beautifully bound as well, by her assistant. (If you have waited for a week, you could as well wait for a few more hours.) Thus in a very precise sense the library exists. But only in the sense that numbers exist, in fact the library consists exactly of all the numbers from zero (the blank book) up to a huge one, which would take two books to write down⁹ written consequently. How much fun would it be to read through this library? the overwhelming majority of which consists of complete gibberish.

Books are not written in this formal systematic ways. Books engender books, navigating, so to speak in this huge virtual configuration space of books, which is the Borgesian library of Babel. What makes books interesting are not only their relationship with the real world, but also, most importantly, with other books. Few books deal directly with the external world, most books are in fact in the nature of commentaries on other books. If you prefer, you can think of books as people defined by their social contexts. One may profitably compare the whole phenomenon with chemistry. Chemistry would not exist if one could construct chemical substances, atom by atom, as one does when one constructs models. Chemistry is about chemical reactions, and chemical reactions are about constructing new substances. To change extant matter one has to go about it circumspectively, and the very quality of a chemical substance lies in the way it affects and creates other substances. Something similar is the case with books. Books are not written letter by letter, but are extracted and synthesized from other books. The way a book reacts is the way it influences other books to be written. Now the magic of a collection of books, unlike the magic of the chemical world, is not self-contained. Ultimately we need human beings to make sense of books and to imbue them with meaning; while the chemical world exists independently of us.

So after this lengthy digression of an introduction it might be about time to at least briefly indicate the contents of a book which has inspired the paragraphs above. A book on libraries, or rather the idea of libraries, could that be interesting? After all nothing you can write about libraries can be as interesting as the treasures they contain themselves. Just as any reflection on mathematics can never compete with the real thing. On the other hand, if books and libraries, especially personal such, constitute such an important component of your personality, it would be hard not to resist at least a fleeting interest. And in fact the book, which I for rather perverse reasons decided to read in Swedish rather than its original

⁹ If we fix a hundred (ten times ten, i.e. ten squared) different characters

English¹⁰, provides a pleasant companion during a leisurely train-ride from Gothenburg to Stockholm¹¹. The book is divided into sections, each discussing a particular aspect of libraries, be it as historical myths, work-places or homes, shadows or forms. About how to order a library, and to what extent to have it ordered. Whether libraries are formed by intent or by chance, whether as a repository of forgetfulness or as a hedge against oblivion. In what sense they make up identities, and provide survival, aspects I have incidentally touched upon above. Let us concentrate on one simple aspect, the form of a library.

The author quotes Plato's oft cited injunction of not letting anyone enter who is ignorant of geometry. It is a strangely apposite remark, in view of the fact that it goes counter to what Plato really had in mind (if one can really speak of the mind of a philosopher of such ironic temperament). To Plato, knowledge of geometry is but a shadow of the knowledge of the transcendent, an attitude shared by mathematicians, to whom the beauty of geometry is less a matter of shape than of logical inevitability. What Manguel has in mind is geometry made palpable by architecture, which is nothing but the partitioning of space. As a human being, as opposed to a mathematician, I am of course not indifferent to such aspects, on the contrary. It is the very partition of space which makes it tangible, and we all marvel at finding between the cracks unexpected spaces, whether we are exploring an old city with winding streets, or an old house, with many floors and doors. How should a library be physically designed to enhance its collections and allow intriguing, as opposed to merely convenient, access? This is a problem posed both for the private library as well as the public with the important difference, that in most cases the former will have to do with what it finds, while the planned public library can start from scratch. Manguel discusses a few cases, notably the intriguing suggestion of Michelangelo as well as more modern conceptions, in which books tend to become an embarrassment threatening to clutter the cleanly conceived spaces created to contain them. But is not clutter the very essence of a library, or does clutter only belong to the private sphere, to be banished in the public? As I recall the author chooses not to delve into those matters, but it might to some extent explain the aversion many people, especially bookish people, view public collections. As to myself my hometown had a delightful public library. It was housed in a suitably modest house, whose architecture I can still recall vividly. You entered by a staircase to the ground floor facing the counter where books were returned and borrowed. To the left there was a reading room containing among other things the Encyclopedia Britannica, and straight ahead steps leading to the top floor where the children's books were kept. To me in my early years everything else but this top-floor was off-limits, for some reason as a child I always maintaining a strict division between books for children and those for adults, maybe because I had been told as a child that childhood was happy and all play and phantasy,

¹⁰ Two reasons can be adduced to an explanation. First that it provided the most convenient way of getting the book, prominently displayed at the book fair, at which I had just listened to the author. And secondly because I had once ordered from the same publisher, a book by the same author (On seeing), having been misled by his name, to think it was written in some Roman language. Why not have them both back to back similarly fashioned?

¹¹ I often chose the circuitous route, not just because it is cheaper, although that does not hurt, but to provide me with more undisturbed reading time, admittedly no longer such a luxury after the children have grown up.

while adulthood was boring and prosaic¹². Precocious children flaunt such divisions, and I guess I was not one after all. Only at the outset of puberty did I reluctantly cross over to the other side, and my reading of adult literature did in fact not start seriously until I discovered English, and the English books were placed in the basement of the library, to which you had access to the right, through the main section. A few years after I left my hometown the library was moved to another location, a newly built 'Folkets Hus' (literally Peoples House) erected by the Social Democratic majority of the town. Somehow in the new location, the magic was gone. The intimate semi-privateness of the former collection, so conducive to browsing and discovery, became dead and public, and I never went there. Almost twenty years later I rediscovered a similar library to that of my childhood in the town of Stillwater, Oklahoma, where I spent a year. The children were small and the visit there brought back memories of childhood reading sufficiently intense to compensate for the obvious drawbacks of such a mid-western residence¹³.

As already indicated, intimately related to the geometrical shape of a library is the way its collection is organized. This has two purposes, the obvious one is simply to provide efficient access, and this has an easy and standard solution, namely lexicographic ordering. This presupposes that one knows what to look for, i.e. the title of the book, and reduces the library to simply a resource for consultation, not unlike that of a telephone directory. More interestingly though is an organization that gives to the library an organic unity, in short makes it into a living thing. Thematic unity is an obvious choice, with like books being adjacent. However, a thematic unity cannot be maintained consistently, because association is not preordained but transcends occasionally narrow categories, just as associations of thoughts can take wild delightful leaps. This does indeed pose an almost insurmountable problem for our confined Euclidean 3-dimensional geometry, creating inconsistencies we simply have to live with.

Finally library as phantasy? Books are supposed to mirror the world and thus to reflect it focused and intensified within our physical reach. But this is but one aspect, the other is the flight of phantasy, of creating new worlds, although whatever those new worlds can offer they are ultimately fruits of the old and prosaic, and even when fictional, they do pertain to deeper realities of the one and only there is. The stories of Borges are fantasies especially in the sense of suggestions. Some may think that his stories are too much ideas and too little 'Gestalt', that he in fact makes it too easy for himself, by simply directing imagination and not elaborating on it, by being too abstract eschewing the concrete element so essential to any honest fictional enterprise. Manguel having in some sense been in the position of a disciple of the great Bard, returns to him repeatedly in his accounts. Borges who eventually became the head librarian of Buenos Aires, a prize that by the cruel ironies of Fate arrived only when he was blind and could no longer savour the

¹² Maybe this is true, and the consolation for lost innocence and playfulness is provided by sex.

¹³ In every child's life there is, or should be, a period of intense reading, when you literally gulp down books. I am able to pinpoint this period in my life rather precisely. It was in the summer of 1960 and we spent time at Lund, living in a small furnished apartment we rented. Every week, maybe even more often, we went to the library, and I borrowed a pile each time, systematically going through them. I have no recollection at all of the particular ambience of the library that provided them, so totally engrossed I was in my foraging that I was completely oblivious.

paradisiacal blessings such a position entailed. But was it really so bad? A library is not just a collection of books as we have repeatedly pointed out, there is to a library an element, an essence, that is not shared by any of its members, and that is the element of abstraction and potentiality, or if you want, phantasy. A true library, the reader should be reminded of, is not a collection of books read, but books having the potentiality of being read. The delights of a library lie in the future, projected into the imagination, just as fantasies are projected into the imaginary space. A true library is an imaginary place, where the titles and short summaries of books are enough to kindle the imagination, because after all a true library is too vast to be consumed page by page. A library is a promise, and a lost library is a promise lost, and because of being lost, it has not lost its innocence, because it will never be found out. This is why a library such as the Alexandrian library holds such a fascination to us, because it is for ever ensconced in phantasy and potential, a deaf witness to a world forever unattainable. And so the libraries of Baghdad have been turned into Alexandrian libraries, laden with treasures forever beyond our reach. They have become the ultimate thing, libraries of the imagination.

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