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CHAPTER ONE

Libraries of the Mind

WHAT DO WE NEED LIBRARIES FOR? One of the greatest and most beautiful studies on literature was written during the tragic destitution of a Jewish intellectual who fled to Istanbul in order to escape the Nazis, having left his entire library behind.

Erich Auerbach thus wrote *Mimesis*, a history of the representation of reality through narrative, spanning from Homer and the Bible to Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf. All of Western literature is reflected in this unparalleled compendium of literary knowledge, based primarily on the memory of past readings. Indeed, a scholar's memory is robust enough to produce from its own fund a work that serves as a reliquary, a vestige for all eternity—"a possession for all time," *ktēma es aei*, as Thucydides described his own work.¹

In Istanbul, Auerbach claimed that "the libraries are not well equipped for European studies." Yet he observed a paradoxical benefit in this deficiency:

On the other hand it is quite possible that the book [*Mimesis*] owes its existence to just this lack of a

rich and specialized library. If it had been possible for me to acquaint myself with all the work that has been done on so many subjects, I might never have reached the point of writing.²

Whether or not Auerbach was really unaware of the existence of rich academic libraries in Istanbul is a matter of debate, though ultimately of little importance here.³ In a way, he had to mentally set aside the existence of physical libraries in order to focus more acutely on the library inscribed within his own mind. He had to melancholically embrace the idea of the disappearance of libraries in order to find within himself the power to write a book that would be able to outlast all libraries.

If the world were to disappear, or if, in a less grandiloquent yet equally effective scenario, the contents of all libraries were wiped out in an instant—a peril increasingly plausible with the shift from paper to electronic media—reading Auerbach's work would give survivors, or extraterrestrials curious about our civilization, a fairly accurate idea of what European literature was like over the last thirty centuries. *Mimesis* is an irreplaceable book, therefore, in that it could replace all other books. God forbid that the opportunity to test this scenario should ever arise!

The history of texts and books since classical antiquity has been shaped by works, summaries, compilations, and encyclopedias that gradually replaced the

original works they encapsulated, rendering the originals' reading and preservation superfluous. We end up discarding what we no longer read.

Why do books get lost? Either because of disinterest or because one book says better, more succinctly, or more memorably what a previous one had developed with painstaking detail. Over time, everything ends up in compendiums and textbooks.

Such was the fate of Greek tragedy—a fate that, despite its exemplary nature and its very banality, was marked by a certain tragedy of its own. Of the hundreds of tragedies performed in Greece during the classical period, only those preserved by obscure Roman-period grammarians for the needs of their students remain, with a few exceptions. Should I add that these grammarians neither were motivated by our scientific rigor nor had our pleasure in mind?

Most of the tragedies we are fortunate enough to read in their entirety today reflect a conception of tragedy from eighteen hundred years ago, which is neither ours nor that of the tragic authors who were writing six centuries earlier.⁴

So it is with libraries in general: they impress us with their materiality, the infinite shelves of books that unroll before our eyes, creating a vertigo that can either lift or overwhelm us. However, their destiny and history ultimately unfold on a plane far removed from the mere physical accumulation of books. Libraries are fundamentally intellectual objects, they

exist in the mind, and it is this psychic existence of libraries that we should explore.

The double example of Auerbach and Greek tragedy illustrates that every library eventually resolves itself into a mental image, formed at either the individual or the community level. This mental image tends to replace the physical library itself.

Of course, no one knows a library by heart. Yet this does not prevent readers from having a representation of it, shaped by their partial knowledge of its contents. This *a priori* representation directly influences the experience the library offers. It seems difficult to escape this hermeneutic circle. The mind is the destiny of any library. This will be my first proposition.

To this first proposition, we should add a second, which is its corollary: every library proceeds from one or more mental images that preside over its constitution and development.

No library comes into being on its own. It responds to an idea, a project, a sometimes complex history whose distinct moments form fragmented, if not contradictory, visions of what its collection of books should be. Each library embodies the multiple and diverse intentions of its founders and the long line of its librarians, intentions that are sometimes left undefined. Each library has its origin in somebody's mind.

Between the idea from which a library originated and the idea in which it eventually resolves itself, the

library appears as a moment of irreducible stasis, a transition without end or beginning, a material that is both a product and an almost inexhaustible producer of imagination and thought. Every library is both the result and the material source of thought, whether individual or collective.

The Concept of the Invisible Library

This brings us to the concept of invisible libraries, which are symmetrical to visible libraries. The latter, in the classical sense, refer to the material, tangible libraries we commonly envision when we hear the word *library*: books kept at home on a shelf; local libraries in neighborhoods, schools, universities, hospitals, and prisons; and even national institutions, such as the Bibliothèque nationale de France or the British Library. In these libraries, one can enter, pick up a book, caress its edge, open it, and inhale the fragrance of its paper.

Now let us imagine all the material libraries, all the visible libraries that exist in the world. We could call this collection the world library, encompassing the contents of all other libraries. However, in the phrase *world library*, the word *library* does not carry quite the same meaning as it does when referring to the library in my country house or the Library of Congress.

Certainly, the world library can be defined as the library of libraries. But the world library is both more

and less than that. *More*, because its contents exceed in a phantasmic way those of the individual libraries, taking on a powerful imaginative charge—suddenly filling up with works that have never existed and probably never will, created by our own imagination. Yet the world library is also *less* than the library of libraries because it is a library you cannot touch, cannot physically enter, and of which the majority of books are inaccessible to you, except for those you can open and read in your usual libraries.

In fact, the world library exists only as a virtual reality—a reality that has yet to come into being, a reality we should be aware of, but one that is purely mental. The world library is thus an invisible library, not directly visible or tangible, existing instead at the level of the mind, as a potentiality to be explored.

However, the world library is just one invisible library among an infinite number of others. If we consider any mental representation of a collection of works as an invisible library, or a library of the mind, then libraries can indeed be invisible in various ways: because they are mental, hidden, censored, or lost or even because they do not yet exist. Libraries of the mind are “such stuff as dreams are made on.”⁵ Yet they are no less effective than dreams.

It is important to avoid a potential misunderstanding: here, *invisible* does not mean *virtual*. Nowadays the word *virtual* has taken on a new meaning, which

introduces ambiguity. It is often used as the equivalent of *electronic* or *computerized*.

Virtual meetings, visits, or courses are events that actually take place, though not in physical contact or proximity, nor in the same physical space. Thus, a virtual encounter, in the contemporary sense, is still a real, material interaction facilitated by technology.

When we converse via a screen, we exchange information, and I am more knowledgeable at the end than at the beginning. The encounter has indeed occurred, albeit in a different order of reality—that of electronic representation. Virtual encounters enable us to act on reality and make decisions; they are not merely mental events.

Therefore, an invisible library is not the same as a virtual library in the sense of an electronic library. For example, Project Gutenberg or the Gallica database, drawn from the collections of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, are as material and effective as the physical libraries they replicate. Their materiality is different, carried by flows of electrons rather than ink on paper.

When I read a book on Gallica or Google Books, the content is assimilated in the same way as if I were reading a hardback copy in the vast halls of the French national library. The only loss of information comes from not being able to physically touch the book.

Therefore, electronic libraries are not invisible libraries. They are visible, real, concrete libraries, albeit belonging to another order of reality, with its own constraints.

A Scholar's Brain

Let us return to the concept of libraries of the mind. Here is an example illustrating the link between a visible library and a mental, or invisible, library.

While working on my doctoral thesis on the invention of formalist criticism in the interwar period in France and English-speaking countries, I was a lecturer at Kyoto University in Japan. At first glance, Japan did not seem the ideal place to investigate pre-World War II English and French literature, but this assumption proved to be a serious mistake. In the 1930s, the Kyoto University Library received the collection of a former English professor at the university, Edward Bramwell Clarke (1874–1934), who is also known for introducing rugby to the Land of the Rising Sun.

Instead of dispersing his books among the shelves and allowing the original collection to fade away by capillary action, the library made the judicious choice—perhaps imposed by the conditions of Bramwell Clarke's will—to create a specific space for this personal library and keep the books on separate shelves.

When I visited these shelves, I could immediately see the study library of an English literary critic from the period I was researching. This collection gave me a fairly accurate idea of his literary and mental landscape and the works he used as reference material. This insight would have been very difficult to achieve if the works had been scattered among the ordinary shelves of English literature. The information conveyed by the order and composition of this personal library had not been lost; it had been preserved to that day. This information allowed me to enter, so to speak, the invisible library of this scholar. Though the collection bequeathed to Kyoto University was an imperfect reflection of this library of the mind, it was infinitely precious for someone such as me, who wished to reconstruct the literary and critical panorama of the time.

The invisible, mental library of this early twentieth-century English academic effectively disappeared with his death: mental libraries die with the minds that house them. However, this invisible library left a trace in the material library that I could explore. The professor's brain remained watermarked, as it were, in the preserved order of his library.

A brain in a test tube, connected to electrodes—that is the image I remember seeing as a child, taken from a science-fiction film. Fascinating and terrifying at the same time, it symbolized the possibility of the survival of thought after the death of the individual.

In a way, this happened with Bramwell Clarke's library: the preservation of his books as a separate and ordered entity allowed for the faint survival of his spirit after the disappearance of the body that had sheltered it.

This survival highlights an advantage of material libraries over invisible ones: durability, linked to the material persistence of objects. Objects last. A book is like a stone. Stored under particular conditions of temperature and humidity; preserved from insects, mold, and rodents; and provided it is not printed on acidic paper, which self-destructs over time, a book is destined to outlive its owner for a long time. Not forever but long enough to allow several generations of readers to enjoy it.

The Immateriality of Works

Though essential, the distinction between visible or concrete libraries and invisible or mental libraries does not imply a disconnection between the two. On the contrary, the link between visible and invisible libraries—between the texts stored in stacks and those that haunt a reader's mind or are referenced in collective memory—is fundamental, albeit complex.

Etymologically, a library is first and foremost a repository for books, taking the form of a piece of furniture or a space with a specific structure. Our modern bookcases are made up of shelves. This anal-

ogy extends to invisible libraries, whose shelves are also invisible and intangible, yet still real: shelves without boards to assemble, without screws or nails. After all, bookcases are merely the material form of a structure that houses books, and such structures exist in any library, whether visible or invisible, with their organization determined by various constraints.

When we think of a library, we visualize a collection of books. However, an invisible library cannot consist of physical books, because of their materiality, given their weight and volume. *Texts* would be a more appropriate term, as a book is merely the object that supports a text. “What is a book if we do not open it?” asked Jorge Luis Borges. “It is simply a cube of paper and leather, with leaves.”⁶

Could we then call any collection of texts a library of the mind? The notion of *text* still retains too much materiality. Texts refer to a set of signs or words arranged on a page, spoken, or represented mentally.

“Read the text,” the teacher says to the pupil, and it is in the act of reading—whether audibly or silently—that the text actually becomes a mental form. The text itself is not this mental form; it is merely the condition for it, preexisting it. Strictly speaking, it is only a series of commands whose realization through reading will enable the constitution of an object of thought.

Mental forms emerge indifferently from written or spoken language. When I hear a text read aloud, what

do I have in my ear other than a series of semantic commands that are more or less easy to carry out? If someone recites to me, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," I make less effort to understand than I do with, "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past."⁷ Yet it is through the work of the intellect, in the tension toward a meaning to come, that the work is born. It appears in the mind, not on the page.

Text and work thus form two different levels of reality. In literature, the work takes on the appearance of a text or a set of texts, but we should always remember that texts are just the outer envelope: the text leads the reader toward the work, though it is not the work itself. What makes a work is not the pure text on the page or its deciphering but the act of conceiving it as an artistic or technical unit, as the expression of an intention. The book contains pages, which serve as a support for a text, and the text itself is the support for a mental reality, which is called the *work*.

F. R. Leavis described the essentially psychic nature of the literary work as follows:

[It] is in the study of literature, the literature of one's own language in the first place, that one comes to recognize the nature and priority of the third realm (as, unphilosophically, no doubt, I call

it, talking with my pupils), the realm of that which is neither merely private and personal nor public in the sense that it can be brought into the laboratory or pointed to. You cannot point to the poem; it is “there” only in the re-creative response of individual minds to the black marks on the page. But—a necessary faith—it is something in which minds can meet.⁸

A poem, any poem, or any literary “work” belongs not to the realm of material objects but to what the German philosopher Gottlob Frege called the “third realm,” that of abstract objects.⁹ While these objects may be abstract, they are nonetheless real, albeit of a different kind of reality than the table I am writing on at the moment. The poem or the work exists as an invisible reality: invisible because we cannot touch it with our fingertips, yet real because we can all agree on the meaning and effects of this or that work or poem. Hans-Georg Gadamer made it very clear: “The understanding of something written is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning.”¹⁰ The existence of literary works cannot be separated from the minds in which they take their substance.

“The work of the mind exists only in act,” said Valéry, meaning that the texts deposited in books are merely dead objects: they come to life only through the act of reading, which brings out their mental

dimension.¹¹ Literature is composed of mental objects conveyed by a text.

The Evolution of Libraries from Oral Tradition to Written Text

In our modern cultures, the written text is indispensable for the existence of the literary work: just as we need books to read and discover works, the immaterial library (the library of works) has become inseparable from the material libraries (libraries of texts).

This was not always the case. The poems attributed to Homer first lived as an oral tradition before being fixed in written texts. In traditional Brahmanic culture, it was forbidden to put the sacred texts, the Vedic poems, into writing: they would have been profaned. These texts were transmitted for centuries through an oral tradition of extreme precision because the ritual was deemed invalid if a single letter of the poem was altered during its recitation by the priest. Brahmanical teaching aimed to transmit the entire Vedic library down to the letter through meticulous recitation.

Neuroscientists tell us today that the areas of the brain that process reading are the same as those that deal with oral language: they are the areas of linguistic comprehension. Written text or oral text? With regard to the existence of works, this difference does not matter because, beyond the text, it is the understanding of the meaning that makes the work appear.

It is thus possible to conceive of oral libraries that would be exhaustive, although totally immaterial, deprived of any concrete medium, paper, or electronic, except for the brains of those who have memorized the texts. However, such oral libraries can only exist within the framework of an ad hoc social organization, with the support of a community dedicated precisely to the maintenance and safeguarding of this immaterial library: in archaic Greece, the singers or *aoidoi*; in India, the Brahmins.

Such intangible libraries cannot survive the suppression or transformation of the social organization on which they depend unless they are first duplicated onto a written medium. This happened with the Homeric poems and the Vedas.

But how many other purely immaterial libraries, without any written medium, have been lost over the centuries? This question opens up a dizzying abyss in our history.

Sometimes it was enough for an investigator to appear—Charles Perrault in seventeenth-century France or the Grimm brothers in nineteenth-century Germany—to bring to light works that would otherwise have perished, with all trace lost: folktales. Ethnological or pre-ethnological research somehow crystallizes and precipitates to the bottom of the glass—that is, to the bottom of books—what previously only existed in fluid and invisible form, as mental realities surviving only in memories.

The Universality of Invisible Libraries

It should not be believed, however, that invisible and immaterial libraries were reserved only for supposedly primitive, archaic civilizations deprived of writing. In truth, far from being the privilege of oral civilizations, invisible libraries are the general and even universal case. Material libraries do not suppress immaterial or mental libraries; they merely prolong and extend them without replacing them.

The notion that “the work of the mind exists only in act” applies to all civilizations, whether oral or written. Historically, the mind was the original support for works, albeit an immaterial one. Most cultures first existed on an oral basis before the written word came into play: immaterial libraries were therefore the only ones possible, as memory alone could serve as a medium for works. But what was true in the past remains true today on a psychological level: works are first produced in the mind of their creator before eventually, but not necessarily, being put down on paper. Valéry describes these literary drafts as “the seismograph of the movements of the mind.”¹²

Let me digress for a moment: here I am quoting Valéry from memory, which is fitting when discussing invisible libraries. It is also my own immaterial library that I am exploring and revealing in these pages, making it visible. To speak or write is to make

visible a mental library, a personal or social memory, which we may also call *culture*. Of course, I checked this quotation afterward, and the curious reader can find the reference in the endnotes, but it must be clear that initially, as with most quotes, I drew this one from the invisible library of my mind. Books do not suppress or replace invisible libraries; they are merely their companions. QED.

Thus, there have always been and always will be invisible libraries everywhere. That is why it is important to give them more attention than has generally been the case. For all that, material libraries also have the merit of providing a concrete, visible model for the functioning of mental libraries—a model that undoubtedly has its limits and should not be pushed too far but that can help to lay some foundations for reflection and questioning.

The Mental Genesis of Libraries

Let us not allow what we see to obscure what we do not see: there are infinitely more invisible or mental libraries than visible or material ones, primarily because every concrete library is almost systematically preceded by an invisible one. Every concrete library is the product of a project whose existence is first and foremost confined to the realm of pure intellect. An invisible library is thus capable of physically giving rise to a material library.

In 1995 the François-Mitterrand building of the Bibliothèque nationale de France came into being as an outgrowth of the old national library, which had become too cramped for space. Initially, the new building was supposed to house only the books published after 1945. It would be interesting to question this weird idea that a radical divide could be made between books published before 1945 and those published after that date. This notion carries obvious political overtones: a new world supposedly emerged after World War II, and a cut in 1945 allowed the darkest hours of French history to be distanced. President François Mitterrand, who launched the project, was himself an ambiguous product of this history: first a supporter of Marshal Pétain, head of the Vichy regime, then fully engaged in the Resistance.

The new building was designed with this divide in mind, before it was realized that a post-1945 library was not viable for users. Knowledge does not expire according to impassable thresholds: even research on recent times requires older works, and research on older times needs recent studies on the subject. In the end, it was wisely decided to bring all the printed material together in one place. However, a significant proportion of the ergonomic difficulties associated with the new building are nonetheless linked to this original design flaw—that is, the invisible post-1945 library, which has left its indelible mark on the walls and structure of the visible library.

In many respects, invisible libraries encompass visible libraries, for which they constitute both the foundation and the necessary outlet: every visible, material library proceeds from mental representations and leads to other mental representations.

A material library exists and holds value as a support for mental libraries—those of its readers. A book is valuable only because it is read and transmuted into a thing of the mind. So many readers, so many invisible libraries, which everyone carries within them. Let us now make this invisible visible.

Definitions

The time has come for a few definitions.

Visible libraries are localized collections of physical, material books containing texts.

Symmetrically, *invisible libraries* are collections of works in the minds of individuals or groups, who are aware of these works. Such awareness need not be very precise; even a vague knowledge of a work is enough to include it in an invisible library. While visible libraries are composed of books and texts, invisible libraries consist of works.

Mental libraries should not be seen solely as an individual characteristic. Every individual carries the memory of works they have read or heard about, organized into different shelves where works maintain relationships with one another. However, the

memory of books is not entirely unique to each individual. Invisible libraries also exist at the level of groups, communities, or sociocultural classes. There are references common to an entire society or given class, built up through education, institutions, the press, and conversation. These social and cultural mental libraries form *canons*—sets of works referenced in a given social group for specific uses.¹³

Canons materialize in physical libraries in a particular way. The number of book collections in any given city or country or the world is immense. Even with many duplicate books, no two collections are exactly alike. Some books are rare, found in only a few libraries or even just one. The most duplicated works are the *canonical* ones.

Implicit or explicit canons are special cases of invisible libraries: not individual ones but collective ones. The concept of an invisible library bridges the individual and community levels. However, an individual's library is not an exact replica of a surrounding community's invisible library, because individuals are influenced by multiple groups or communities.

Texts are sets of signs serving as supports for works, which are artistic or intellectual projects with a unity of intent, coming into existence when a text is actualized in the mind through reading.

Works are images or mental representations of language objects. These representations can include precise linguistic elements, such as quotations or memories of

extracts, but not necessarily. Works are primarily objects of meaning, knowledge, and emotion.

We could transpose these concepts to museums and speak of *invisible museums*, similar to André Malraux's "imaginary museums" or "museums without walls" (*musées imaginaires*), which are made up of images of art objects.¹⁴ However, not every mental image—a notion borrowed from philosophy and cognitive psychology—necessarily includes a visual dimension, especially with texts. For libraries, language is the starting point, where the mental image originates.

How Literature Becomes Present in the Mind

A literary work, as a mental representation of a text, is a cognitive creation involving various elements: propositions, quotations, extracts, narrative structures, emotions or memories of emotions, aesthetic pleasure, and occasionally visual representations from films and illustrations, or auditory representations, especially in poetry and theater. This complex array of elements forms a mental representation, distinct from recalling the text in its entirety—except in the case of short texts, such as sonnets.

When I think of *Madame Bovary*, for example, it is not the complete text of the novel that comes to mind but a blend of various impressions: the theme (a woman who "*bovaryizes*" or "*quixotizes*," imagining

reality as if it were a novel), a general outline of the narrative, specific scenes (Charles's arrival in the classroom, the agricultural fairs, the carriage scene, Emma's death), characters (Monsieur Homais), aesthetic impressions, descriptions, and possibly a few quotations, such as the incipit. This mental aggregation of elementary conceptions and affects, unified under a title, constitutes a work of art.

You may wonder whether this is all there is to it. Did the "gueuloir" where Gustave Flaubert tested his work aloud; Proust's sleepless nights; and hundreds, even thousands, of pages written and rewritten only culminate in a simple mental aggregate of impressions and memories, more or less vague? For such perfectionist writers, this perspective may seem profoundly disheartening.

However, this is the fate of everything in our life: all the reality we experience—places, events, people—eventually resolves into mental aggregates of this kind.¹⁵ The books we read end up the same way, no more, no less. These mental representations of books integrate with all our other mental representations, carrying an equivalent value to reality.

It is well known that books can be life-changing events, sometimes even more impactful than the events we experience personally or witness in the lives of those close to us. Art objects, and literary works in particular, possess a unique power, capable of endowing them with a significance equal to, or even greater

than, real-life events. These objects have a capacity to imprint themselves on the psyche in a stable, recurrent, and lasting way.

This is the essence of art: the creation of objects with such powerful and enduring impact. Valéry compared the poet to an engineer building a locomotive, and indeed, there are poems with the mental-projection power of a locomotive.¹⁶

Literature and the Blurring of Fact and Fiction

Literature blurs the line between fact and fiction.¹⁷ While this latter distinction carries significant philosophical, metaphysical, legal, ethical, and political implications, it is only marginally relevant to the literary effect in general. The central question posed by literature is not metaphysical, because, in most cases, the boundary between fact and fiction is clear. As Coleridge noted, when reading a work of fiction, there is a “willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.”¹⁸

The real problem is this: how is it that facts we unequivocally recognize as entirely fictitious can sometimes affect us more deeply than actual events? This does not always happen, only sometimes, but this *sometimes* is enough to make the problem crucial.

This has been the almost eternal question of literary criticism since its very beginnings, one that Plato and then Aristotle asked and tried to answer, albeit

in very different and even antagonistic ways (poetry was all about deceit for the former, and about catharsis and greater truth for the latter).¹⁹

To ask this question is to ask the question of literature itself, that is, to define it as a distinct kind of discourse: from the moment Plato attacked poetry as deceit, in order to oppose it to philosophy, he gave rise to a regime of discourse that we can call, in retrospect, *literary*, or at least, because the conditions under which this discourse was practiced in classical antiquity were very different from our own, *preliterary*.²⁰

Now the question of the confusion between fact and fiction, between reality and the work of language, suddenly becomes much easier to resolve, or at least to conceive, when we consider that as mental representations, works, once assimilated, are not of a fundamentally different nature from experienced reality.

In the end, everything is resolved in mental images, reality no less than fiction. And if fiction is given in the mind a coefficient that undoubtedly puts it at a disadvantage compared to reality, then the strength of art consists precisely in compensating for this handicap through a whole range of verbal, thematic, emotional, empathetic, narrative, or rhetorical means. These means, in some cases, end up raising the power of the mental image of literary works to the level of real facts, or even raising the psychic impact of literary works above reality, because in all cases we are dealing with mental images.

The Books We Have Not Read

As a paradoxical consequence of the fact that works are only mental images, invisible libraries do not necessarily include works that we have read ourselves and know about directly. It is enough to have heard about them. The very act of transmitting a commentary on works is sufficient to form a mental image, no less impactful than reading the text itself. The invisible library, therefore, is also made up of unread books.

French critic Pierre Bayard divides these into four categories: those we do not know, those we have read, those we have heard about, and finally those we have forgotten.²¹ Forgetting erases the hard disk and resets the counter to zero, so to speak, forcing us to start reading all over again. Hence, the boundary between the books we have not read and the books we have read is not as clear-cut as we may think.

But forgetting is only the most extreme case of a flaw intrinsic to all reading. In reality, no reading is adequate or sufficient. This is the lesson to be drawn from all of Bayard's essays: all reading is in some way false or distorted.²² In other words, when it comes to the theory of reading, Kantianism is relevant: the thing-in-itself is inaccessible, and only phenomena are accessible, mediated as they are by sensory and cognitive experience, with all the physiological and psychological constraints that impose themselves upon it.

If texts are only actualized as mental images, then the difference between those formed through our own reading and those gathered from a teacher, a critic, a review, or an encyclopedic entry is not so great, because mental images have their own life and autonomy. They are easily transmitted from one individual to another, or within a community.

A mental image of *Madame Bovary* might have been induced just as much by reading the novel as by a course on Flaubert or the study of extracts. The book's theme, general plot, and emblematic scenes would all be there. The only difference may be that without direct reading, the impression would be weaker, less lasting. There would not be the same grip, the same stability of the psychological structure, linked to the intensity of the emotion and the duration of the experience. But the elements of the mental image would be fundamentally the same, just less firmly linked together, in a less organic way, the work of assimilation having been in some way premixed by the teacher or the handbook.

Direct and indirect knowledge of a work should not be too radically opposed. My reading of *Madame Bovary* is influenced by what I know about it, by what I have been told, by a class I have taken, by another book I have read. No reading is pure. Unbeknownst to me, it feeds on elements outside the text I am reading, whether it is the temperature of the air or my personal state.²³

It is true that in many cases, direct contact with works overturns preconceptions and preestablished models. This is particularly true when dealing with masterpieces, which could be precisely defined as works irreducible to any secondary or critical discourse. Reading a masterpiece (e.g., *Don Quixote*, *Moby Dick*, *In Search of Lost Time*) is like being disempowered by a thunderbolt; words come only with difficulty. The masterpiece goes beyond words; it goes beyond me.

Besides, what do we mean by direct knowledge of the work? There are so many ways of reading, depending on circumstances, age, and habits. Is a single reading enough? Do we know a country because we have been there once? A single reading is certainly enough to form an image of the work, but it gives only one image, and one image only, which is necessarily reductive. Subsequent readings can refine and modify it.²⁴

Mental Shelves

As we have seen, the mental image of works is not independent of the material text. It derives either directly or indirectly from it. What can be said of those works that make up invisible libraries also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to invisible libraries themselves, albeit on a purely analogical level. The relationship of works to their text is etiological—the text is a cause

of the work, the mental image. The relationship of the invisible library to the material library is analogical.

Initially, then, we can try to think of invisible libraries using the model of visible libraries, trying to identify common structures. We can attempt to question invisible libraries on the basis of what we know about visible libraries.

As material entities, libraries are constituted of bookcases, each supported by uprights and resting against a wall. What does an immaterial library rely on? What social structures guarantee its existence and durability, when durability there is? What culture does it lean on?

Let us start with the basic unit: the shelf.

The Imaginary of Scrolls

In our modern libraries, designed for codices, a bookcase is made up of superimposed shelves. Libraries in classical antiquity were, for their part, composed of cabinets with compartments where papyrus scrolls were stored one on top of the other, to prevent them from rolling away. Codices and scrolls, therefore, evoke different imaginaries. Books, with their stable, rectangular shape, form orderly stacks and remain in place. Scrolls (*volumina*), on the other hand, do not stay in place; rolls roll and cannot be stacked unless in a tightly enclosed space.

Scrolls represent an incompressible time-space: you have to unroll them entirely to reach the end, experiencing all intermediate stages, whereas codices allow almost instantaneous navigation from one part of the book to another. Scrolls perfectly embody oral discourse with its inherent temporality: you must wait until the end of the speech to know the conclusion. You cannot short-circuit the time of a speech or the length of a scroll. Only memory and rote knowledge enable instantaneous navigation through the text; in the world of scrolls, memory played a crucial role. Conversely, codices materialize the regime of reading for reference, where the written word holds the full authority of the master: there is no longer a need to memorize, as any passage in the book is immediately accessible.

There are intermediaries between the scroll and the codex. In Japan, the scroll is unrolled and then accordion-folded to produce an *orihon* (a folded book), traditionally used for Buddhist texts. Again, the aim is to facilitate navigation through a reference text.

Papyrus scrolls were stored in piles, one on top of the other, in a two-dimensional space. Ancient libraries in Greece, Alexandria, and Rome had different compartments for specific authors or themes, but within each compartment, the rolls were in disorder: chaos reigned. Codices, on the other hand, are arranged on shelves in a linear pattern, creating adjacency and

serial continuity. The linear series of codices imposes a precise order unknown to readers of rolls. Farewell to the mobile world of circles, and welcome to the empire of rectangles and squares!

The Dewey Decimal Classification

In a well-organized modern library, spatial proximity also implies mental proximity, an ideal proximity. It is the art of the librarian—or librarianship—to reflect a mental geography of works through the classification of books and their physical arrangement. Physical order thus corresponds to an ideal order, linked to the content of the books, their origin, or their authors.

This need for an ideal order is precisely what led Melvil Dewey to develop his classification system in the United States in 1876. Later, Belgians Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine perfected it, creating the Universal Decimal Classification, which has since been adopted by numerous libraries worldwide, superseding many locally developed classifications.

The current Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) divides books into ten main classes, as follows:

- 000 - Computers, information, and general works
- 100 - Philosophy and psychology
- 200 - Religion
- 300 - Social sciences
- 400 - Language

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