

Library

AN UNQUIET
HISTORY

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CHAPTER ONE

Reading the Library

The impious maintain that nonsense is normal in the Library and that the reasonable (or even humble and pure coherence) is a miraculous exception.

—JORGE LUIS BORGES, "The Library of Babel"

When I first went to work in Harvard's Widener Library, I immediately made my first mistake: I tried to read the books. I quickly came to know the compulsive vertigo that Thomas Wolfe's Eugene Gant, prowling the fictionalized Widener stacks, felt in the novel *Of Time and the River*:

Now he would prowl the stacks of the library at night, pulling books out of a thousand shelves and reading them like a madman. The thought of these vast stacks of books would drive him mad: the more he read, the less he seemed to know—the greater the number of the books he read, the greater the immense uncountable number of those which he could never read would seem to be. . . . He read insanely, by the hundreds, the thousands, the ten thousands. . . . [T]he thought that other books were waiting for

him tore at his heart forever. He pictured himself as tearing the entrails from a book as from a fowl.

Gant's histrionics are a response to the contradictions anyone faces in the library. As the reader gropes the stacks—lifting books and testing their heft, appraising the fall of letterforms on the title page, scrutinizing marks left by other readers—the more elusive knowledge itself becomes. All that remains unknown seems to beckon from among the covers, between the lines. In the library, the reader is wakened from the dream of communion with a single book, startled into a recognition of the word's materiality by the sheer number of bound volumes; by the sound of pages turning, covers rubbing; by the rank smell of books gathered together in vast numbers. Of course, the experience of the physicality of the book is strongest in the large libraries, where the accumulated weight of written words seems to exert a gravity all its own. And fewer libraries are larger than Widener, which beguiled not only Thomas Wolfe but myself and countless others as well.

Endowed by the grieving mother of Harry Elkins Widener, a Harvard graduate and bibliophile who went down with the *Titanic*, Widener is the Great Unsinkable Library. Its ten levels contain fifty-seven miles of shelves, enough to hold some 4.6 million bound volumes, give or take a few. The shelves are great armatures of forged iron that carry the weight of the building; the library quite literally is supported by its books. Peopled not only with librarians, patrons, and professors but also with carpenters, couriers, cooks, accountants, student and part-time book shelvees, webmasters, network administrators, and human resource consultants, it is the city-state at the center of a confederacy of Harvard's ninety-odd school and departmental collections, totaling some 14 million volumes; taken together, they make up the largest academic library the world has ever known.

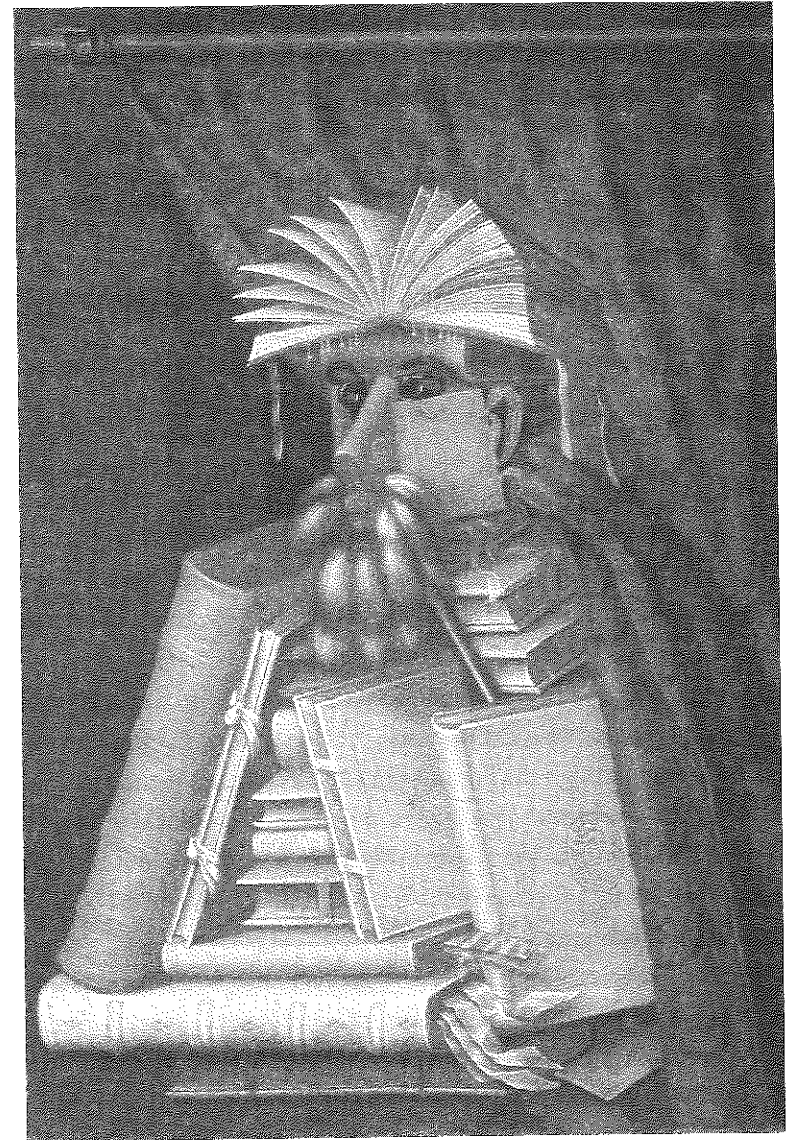
Among Widener's dusty stacks are tunnels: one leads to the government document depository, in which I have read Indian censuses recording how many houses are made of mud and grass, or how many basket weavers and hide tanners reside in each village in Uttar Pradesh or Kashmir. Another tunnel leads to the stacks that hold the theater collection and the "X-cage," which hides items in odd sizes and formats, on paper deemed too fragile for the open stacks, or of a nature too salacious for the eyes of the undergraduates of various eras. Here, piles of slim boxes contain philological notes written in a flowing, nineteenth-century hand; binders are stuffed thick with typescripts in Georgian and photostats of Averroës manuscripts. There are crumbling volumes of anti-immigrant tracts and pro-Nazi American magazines—sequestered not for the ideas they contain, but because the acid in their depression-era paper is causing the pages slowly to digest themselves. In this locked-away, seldom visited corner of the library, I come across the title *Military German: A "Lingo" Language Game*. It consists of a box of cards the size of a pack of unfiltered cigarettes with a booklet of instructions. "Questioning prisoners of war on the European front demands a specialized vocabulary," it says. "You learn it by playing cards and having fun at it!" The cards contain such useful phrases as "This is no time for arguments. Get out" (*Das ist keine Zeit zum Streiten! Raus!*) and "In spite of your lies I intend to give you another chance" (*Trotz Ihrer Lügen, beabsichtige ich, Ihnen noch eine Gelegenheit zu geben*). A companion title treating Japanese states, "Most language manuals are for tourists. Not this one. This one is for American soldiers and sailors engaged in licking hell out of the Japs."

But the library—especially one so vast—is no mere cabinet of curiosities; it's a world, complete and uncompletable, and it is filled with secrets. Like a world, it has its changes and its seasons, which belie the permanence that ordered ranks of books imply. Tugged by

the gravity of readers' desires, books flow in and out of the library like the tides. The people who shelve the books in Widener talk about the library's *breathing*—at the start of the term, the stacks exhale books in great swirling clouds; at end of term, the library inhales, and the books fly back. So the library is a body, too, the pages of books pressed together like organs in the darkness.

In the Widener stacks more than anywhere else, I can fool myself that the universe is composed of infinite variations of a single element—the book—that I, too, am made of books, like the person in Giuseppe Arcimboldo's painting *The Librarian*. The Prague court of Arcimboldo's patron, Rudolf II, freely mixed the rational and the irrational, the mythological and the empirical; Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler mingled with alchemists and astrologers. Arcimboldo reveled in the contradictions that surrounded him. This revel—and revelation—is embodied in his *Librarian*, a person made of books; he is not a single book but a whole library. His cheeks and lips are miniature books, the sort that in Arcimboldo's time would have contained prayers and devotions. His right arm, by contrast, is a weighty folio volume. Pages fan out from his head, marked not with type but with handwriting, legible only from above.

In the stacks of the library (this or any other), I have the distinct impression that its millions of volumes may indeed contain the entirety of human experience: that they make not a model *for* but a model *of* the universe. Fluttering down the foot-worn marble stairs that drop into the building's bowels, descending through layer after layer of pungent books, I am often struck by the sense that everything happening outside must have its printed counterpart somewhere in the stacks. It's easy to plunge into cabalistic reveries, dreaming rearrangements of the books that would reveal the mysteries of the universe, a sacred Logos tantamount to the secret name of God. Where among the 43 books published in Bhutan in



Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *The Librarian*, ca. 1566. By permission of Skokloster Castle, Sweden, © LSH photo Goran Schmidt.

1983, or the 31,602 published in China, or the 30,000 tablets at Ashurbanipal's long-lost library at Nineveh, or the 300,000 scrolls burned when Caesar flamed his ships at Alexandria, might we have sought the formula for the philosophers' stone? To which of the eight daily newspapers of Western Samoa should we look? Was the name of God carted off to the bookbinders in a ripped manuscript stolen from Salisbury Cathedral during the troubled reign of Henry VIII? Or encoded among some number of the 2,635 children's books published in Iran in 1996 alone? There's a reductive danger in this fantasy: for if the world can be compressed into a library, then why not into a single book—why not into a single word?

From the 1870s to the 1990s, the collections of research libraries at Harvard and elsewhere have increased a hundredfold—in some cases, a thousandfold. This vast torrent of books inspires in many people an awful shock and anxiety. All these books—who has time to read them? The apocryphal eighteenth-century *Old Librarian's Almanack* (actually a literary hoax perpetrated by a Boston librarian in the early twentieth century) extols the virtues of the librarian who diligently dusts his way through the books in his charge, taking the time to read each volume; when he reaches the last book, he begins the process again. The librarian in the research library of today could not accomplish this task in a lifetime—not in three hundred lifetimes. And of course, the collections aren't frozen. This library, like all research libraries of any size, acquires more books each year than any one of us could read in a lifetime. The Library of Congress, the world's largest universal library, each day adds some 7,000 books to the more than 100 million items already standing on its 530 miles of shelves. Add to this the printed ephemera we daily produce at our word processors, fax machines, and photocopiers, plus the more than 800 million pages on the World Wide Web, and it becomes clear: we are inundated.

This flood of print forces us to ask, How do we sort it all out? Until fairly recently—that is to say in the last couple of hundred years, which is a short interval for the library—librarians could have counted themselves among the Stoic followers of Seneca, who, in his *Epistulae morales*, wrote that “it does not matter how many books you have, but how good they are.” Seneca's library is a place of canons. I like to call this type of library the “Parnassan,” for like Delphi it is a temple built upon the flanks of Mount Parnassus, that hill-top holy to Apollo and the Muses. The works within it are a distillation, the essence of all that is Good and Beautiful (in the classical formulation) or Holy (in the medieval). It is meant as a model for the universe, a closely orchestrated collection of ideals. In the universal library, by contrast, books are not treated as precious and crystalline essences, at least not in the first instance. Instead, they are texts, fabrics to be shredded and woven together in new combinations and patterns. Like the stars in the sky or the flowers of Linnaeus, they are not to be praised for particular influences or qualities; they must be counted and classified before they may be desired.

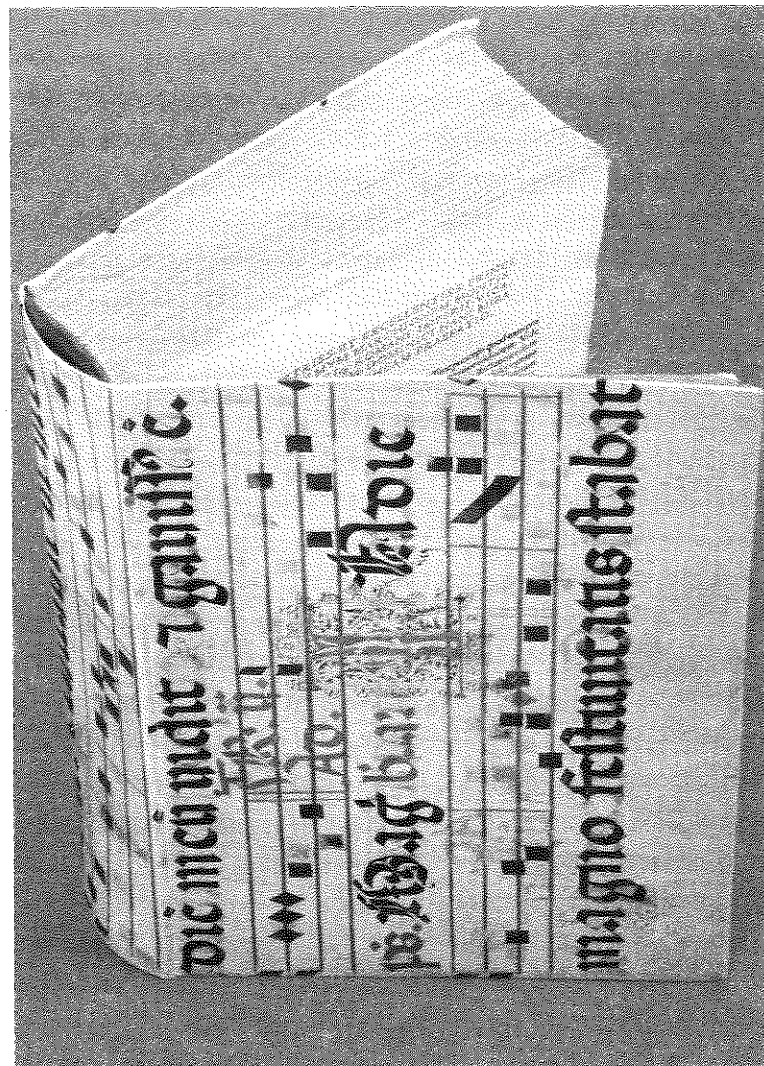
Grumpy Seneca gave the selective Parnassan library a motto fit to inscribe in Roman capitals above the doors. Thomas Jefferson (whose own books were the kernel of the collections of the University of Virginia and the Library of Congress) offers the relentlessly accumulative universal library a contrasting creed: “a library book . . . is not, then, an article of mere consumption but fairly of capital.” Each sort of library is also an argument about the nature of books, distilling their social, cultural, and mystical functions. And what the Word means to society—whether it is the breath of God or the Muses, the domicile of beauty and the good, the howling winds of commerce, or some ambiguous amalgam of all these things—this is what the library enshrines. Ultimately, there may be a common creed under which the Parnassan and the universal libraries—with

their attendant conceptions of the book and the Word—can be united. If so, perhaps it is the one offered by Stéphane Mallarmé, who expressed best my own experience in the library when he wrote that “everything in the world exists to end up in a book.”

In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida sets out to show that writing is no mere secondary system of symbols for the spoken word, a “trace of a trace,” but is, in short, its own thing. He needn’t have looked farther than the universal library for support. For here the written word takes on a life of its own in the jumble of incipits, explicits, and colophons; of pages recto and verso; of manuscript in hands uncial and Beneventan and Merovingian Compressed; in palimpsests and lacunae; in sewn signatures from folio to octavo to sexagesimo-quarto; in chain lines and watermarks, in incunabula and CD-ROMs; in the *Pandectarum* and the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*; in subject, author, and title cards; and in the subfields and literals of the MARC record format.

Like other natural philosophers of the Latin Middle Ages, Roger Bacon held that three classes of substance were capable of magic: the herbal, the mineral, and the verbal. With their leaves of fiber, their inks of copperas and soot, and their words, books are an amalgam of the three. The notion that words, like plants and stones, have existences independent of our uttering them—that they have power and do things in the world—is a commonplace in many traditions. Brought together in multitudes, heaped up and pared down, read and forgotten, library books take on lives and histories of their own, not as texts but as physical objects in the world.

Let me give an example, one from the library in which I work. In 1503 in Savona, Italy, the printer Francesco de Silva produced the first edition of Domenico Nani Mirabelli’s *Polyanthea opus suavissimis floribus exornatum*, a popular compendium and dictionary of classical authors. Like all books of the time, the *Polyanthea* would have been



The Polyanthea of Nani Mirabelli (1503), a printed book bound in a leaf from a manuscript antiphonary. Houghton Library, Typ 525 03.596 F. By permission of the Department of Printing & Graphic Arts, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Photograph by Stephen Sylvester and Bob Zinck, HCL imaging services.

sold unbound, in loose signatures; individual buyers would bring the freshly printed pages to a binder, who would encase them in a covering as simple or ornate as the customer's taste—and pocketbook—permitted. Students might have left the sheaves unbound, sharing pages from a single volume with fellow students to cut down on expenses. A wealthy collector, by contrast, would have had the book clad in richly gilded leather, dyed to match the colors of his already extensive library. The copy in Houghton Library, however, was rebound sometime in the last five hundred years. The material for its binding was taken from another work altogether: a manuscript antiphonary of uncertain pre-Gutenberg provenance, in vellum, its three-line musical staves lined up precisely along the edges of the book, forcing manuscript and print, soaring music and marching text, into uneasy intimacy.

This practice was common among the early printers and binders. When King Henry VIII broke with the Roman Catholic Church, the abbey's new, secular owners often swiftly emptied them of books, which they sold as pulp for use in preparing the papers and bindings of new volumes. A few Tudor luminaries saw this for the destruction it was: Richard Cotton, one of the king's own ministers, secretly saved many works from the bindery, including the earliest still-surviving copy of *Beowulf*. The same thing happened throughout Europe in the early decades of the print era: the only extant written example of the Old Saxon dialect, for example, was found stiffening the binding of a volume in the Vatican Library. Abandoned texts and ephemera—the lifeblood of the universal library—continued to be recycled in this fashion for centuries. Peer behind the flaky leather covering the spine of nearly any French book published up to the turn of the century, and you will find the bold capitals of advertising pages, torn into strips and pressed into service.

Even before the advent of movable type, when books were a

costly, specialized technology, manuscripts were recycled. Vellum could be scraped down to remove any writing it may have carried—a list of some obscure laird's serfs, or perhaps the earliest rendering of Cicero's denunciation of Catiline to the Senate—producing a clean page ready to receive fresh copy. Examples of such reused manuscripts are called palimpsests; the ghost of manuscript past remains, sometimes legible only in ultraviolet light, beneath the new generation of handwriting.

Many indices of the passage of time are inscribed into the physical matter of books. One finds dates of acquisition stamped or penciled onto the verso of title pages; charge slips record whether, when, and how often books have been taken out. In the condition of bindings and papers, time loses its linear nature, revealing its fluid, clotty relation to our experience. Recently published books often are worried to a state of utter decay—their boards battered, their spines loose, their pages ripped and scribbled upon. Some older books, by contrast, have never been peered into by even the most persistent patron: pages remain uncut, unsmudged. When they are finally plucked from the shelves, their bindings crack when opened, as tight as when they left the bindery. Charge slips have browned and crumbled away without seeing a single stamp. Card catalogs once displayed patterns of use of the collection over time, oft-consulted cards becoming more dog-eared and smudged as they were thumbed and held, while unconsulted cards remained fresh and white in their interiors, pressed and protected by their neighbors. The card catalogs are largely gone, of course; now online catalogs register visitors in the occult fashion of great digital networks. Not only do these systems record the borrowing of books; the computers track the number of times each record is viewed as well, chronicling the searches taking place on workstations throughout the network.

Some have pointed out the monstrosity of the online catalog, that grotesque tentacular database which has the capacity to turn even the coolest of scholar-patrons into a gibbering fool. They mourn the loss of the virtues of the card catalog, that elegant labor of generations of librarians. If we heed the warnings of librarians present at the invention of the card catalog itself, however, we might not so hastily make our retreat. Edmund Lester Pearson, writing in 1909, observed,

As these cabinets of drawers increase in number until it seems as if the old joke about the catalogues of the Boston Public Library and Harvard University meeting on Harvard Bridge might become literally true, the mental distress and physical exhaustion suffered by those consulting one of them becomes too important to be disregarded.

Almost any day in any large library their fearful influence may be observed. Dozens of harrowed individuals are seen trying to think whether the name of Thomas De Quincy will be found in the drawer marked De or that labelled Qu. Then they make the choice—always wrong—and are seen, with pain only too apparent on their brows, dashing off to the other drawer. . . .

Nor . . . are the consulters of the catalogues the only persons whose reasons are in danger. The cataloguers themselves, the very ones who sit all day spinning this codified brainstorm, are in peril. Not long ago a body of them got together and bound themselves by a fearful oath not to part until they had settled once and forever the question whether it is better to write "Department of Agriculture" or "Agriculture, Department of." They well knew that many a strong mind has come to ruin on this reef, but they were a reckless lot, and they plunged in. Midnight came, and found them still bickering. The struggle continued during the

early hours of the morning, and at last the cold gray light of dawn looked in at the shutters, but whatever it saw, no solution of the problem was there, and the mental condition of the disputants has ever since been one upon which it is not pleasant to dwell.

And this was the case in that universal library circa 1900, with its collections a hundred times smaller than those of the research library of today. The anxieties of Pearson's patron and catalogers may have less to do with the size of libraries or the nature of their catalogs than with the metaphysical implications of the idea of the universal library itself.

Systems of classification record history at another, coarser level of detail. American academic libraries have adopted the now standard Library of Congress call number system—an opaque cabalism of numbers and letters defiant of intuition, replete with the formulaic rigor of "scientific" bibliography. There are other systems, too, of which Dewey's is probably the most (in)famous. Most libraries once had their own proprietary systems of call numbers as well. Widener's old system persists in the stacks to this day, preserving traces of the division of knowledge in its turn-of-the-century formulation. The "Aus" class contains books on the history of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; the "Ott" class serves the purpose for the Ottoman Empire. Dante, Molière, and Montaigne each gets a class of his own.

In the universal library, esoterica and exoterica mingle in disregard for the patterns and preferences of their respective times. One finds shelved side by side numerous editions of the Variorum Shakespeare; intershelved among them are such legitimately obscure works as *Shakespeare in Limerick*, by Brainerd McKee, a 1910 doggerel adaptation of the collected works of the Bard of Avon. Here is McKee's abridgment of *The Tempest*, with that obsessive librarian Prospero nowhere to be found:

There once was a girl named Miranda
 Who flirted with one Ferdinand, a
 Shipwrecked young prince
 Who, after a rinse,
 Played chess with her on the veranda.

Henry David Thoreau could have been reading such doggerel in the dim alcoves of Harvard's Gore Hall when he wrote, "[I]n a library [t]here is all the recorded wit of the world, but none of the recording, a mere accumulated, and not truly cumulative treasure; . . . Shakespeare and Milton did not foresee into what company they were to fall." Even for Thoreau—who browsed nature as if it were the most copious library of all, who found genius and grandeur expressed fully in its least significant details—bad books in the library fall like hail on literature's eternal spring morn. But the same sort of secret wonders Thoreau discovered among furtive squirrels and browsed-over apple trees is alive in the library, too. Must one choose from among the collection of numerological treatises which prove that it was Francis Bacon who wrote the Bard's plays, or the close chronological studies that restore the authorship of Edward de Vere, earl of Oxford, or the (many volumes fewer) biographical literature supporting the Stratfordian himself? No; these books must stand together on the shelves of any truly universal library. Together they tell us stories that they could not tell alone.

Reading the library, we quickly come to an obvious conclusion: most books are bad, very bad in fact. Worst of all, they're *normal*: they fail to rise above the contradictions and confusions of their times (in this respect, I'm sure this book will be no exception). It's understandable, then, that we spend so much energy ferreting out

the exceptional books, the ones that shatter paradigms. But we shouldn't forget that the unremarkable books have much to teach us about cultural history—ultimately more, perhaps, than our cherished Great Books. In his *Atlas of the European Novel*, Franco Moretti argues that the "series"—the chronological context from which the exceptional works always spring—is "the true protagonist of cultural life." Moretti admits that "[a] history of literature as history of norms" may seem a "less innovative, much 'flatter' configuration than the one we are used to. . . . But this is exactly what life is like, and instead of redeeming literature from its prosaic features we should learn to recognize them and understand what they mean."

AS THE FULLNESS OF A CULTURE is expressed in its literature taken as a whole, so have the authors of books intuited the significance of the library. Libraries figure in the work of writers ranging from Shakespeare to Jonathan Swift to Umberto Eco. Indeed, the library is such an evocative setting that it has become a cliché; what would a gothic mystery be without a gloomy library? (Noticing the great lateral strength of books—just smack your palm with the spine of even the flimsiest paperback, and you'll see what I mean—I've had a notion of writing a murder mystery in which a book was the weapon. It always seemed to me the greatest loss of the game Clue that one could never do it to Colonel Mustard, in the library, with the *book*.) Libraries are so enticing to authors that they can't help making them up for themselves. Perhaps the first instance of this subgenre is found in the second book of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, in which Pantagruel visits the library of Saint Victor's in Paris, browsing such choice titles as *The Codpiece of the Law* and *De modo cacendi* (On methods of shitting). For all his imaginative abundance, however, Rabelais did not exhaust the form:

John Donne penned a fictional bibliography in 1610; Edgar Allan Poe peppered his stories with citations from a library that existed only in his head; and Charles Dickens had the doors to the study in his house at Gad's Hill tricked out with false bookshelves containing such titles as *Hansard's Guide to Refreshing Sheep* (in nineteen volumes).

Perhaps the most famous literary library was imagined by an author who was also a librarian. In his short story "The Library of Babel," Jorge Luis Borges imagines the universe as a library (or perhaps it's the library he imagines as a universe). It's a curiously uniform library, however, a Platonic ideal, which according to the narrator is "composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries." Four walls contain five bookshelves each; the two remaining walls open on adjacent, identical rooms. "Also through here," the narrator explains, "passes a spiral stairway, which sinks abysmally and soars upward to remote distances." In the halls are mirrors, which the narrator presumes "represent and promise the infinite" extent of the library. The experience of Babel's traveling librarians confirms that this pattern repeats itself indefinitely in all directions. The books that fill this library must be finite in extent—410 pages each, their variation is limited by the fixed number of letters in the alphabet. Yet the librarians who populate this universe cannot conceive of a limit or border; the universe, they reason, must somehow be infinite.

For any question, the library offers no hope of a definitive answer: though it necessarily contains prophecies of the lives of everyone who has lived or will live, as well as theories explaining the origins and workings of the universe itself, it must also contain unimaginable numbers of spurious accounts, with no means of sorting the true and immanent from the fallacious and misleading. Librarians wander in tribes or as lonely mendicants; some search out the one book that catalogs all the rest; others seek "clarification of

humanity's basic mysteries; still others believe that the books are meaningless," the work of vain primordial beings imitating the perfect architecture of the deity. But Borges's narrator believes he has discovered the cosmological key to the library, its final theory of everything: "*the library*," he writes, "*is unlimited and cyclical*. If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order)."

Borges the librarian suffered from hereditary blindness, the fog of which ultimately stole from him visual delight in the physicality of books. His blindness became total about the same time that he was elevated to the directorship of Argentina's National Library after the fall of the Peronist regime.

No one should read self-pity or reproach
 Into this statement of the majesty
 Of God, who with such splendid irony
 Granted me books and blindness in one touch.

Borges's loss of sight reminds me of Lavinia in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, whose own injuries also prevented her from reading. The sons of Tamora had raped her and, chopping off her hands and cutting out her tongue, had stolen her senses of touch and taste as well. Lavinia's agony is moving despite Shakespeare's reliance on a violence that is lurid in its irreality (further weakening a play so shaky that apologists long tried, without success, to attribute it to another author). She misses the taste of words; she cannot tell the story that would bring vengeance to her tormentors, and her agony reveals itself in her silence. When she enters Titus's library, he sees the grief in her eyes and bids a boy to turn the pages of whatever books she chooses. "Take choice of all my library," he tells her, "and so

beguile thy sorrow." We are meant here to identify deeply with Lavinia's estrangement from intimacy with books, and our empathy should enliven our pity. But to Lavinia, it's not the beguiling solace of books that she craves but their ability to tell stories. And so she chooses Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and with the stumps of her arms she tosses the pages to the story of Philomel. Remembering Philomel's rape at the hands of Tereus, Titus sees her point, and the wheels of justice begin to turn.

Borges, like Lavinia, was cut off from the sensuous experience of books. And yet the books were in him still; he was as much a library as that composite librarian in Arcimboldo's painting. In "Poem of the Gifts," Borges later states that to his occluded eyes the books of the library are now "as distant as the inaccessible volumes / that perished once in Alexandria."

Like one of Borges's lost librarians, I explore the library's intertwined relations of fancy and authenticity, of folly and epiphany, of the Parnassan and the universal. My method in the pages that follow mirrors that of Eugene Gant: I pick up a volume—perhaps it's Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*—and something I read there leads to the lyrics of Callimachus or the letters of Seneca. Keeping a finger stuck among those pages, I follow a trail that leads from Cassiodorus to Francis Bacon, from Caliph Omar to Jonathan Swift and John Stuart Mill. I drop one passage to follow another, threading my way among ranges of books, lost among the shelves. In many places, the volumes are thick with dust, pocked with the holes left by insects, which are almost as hungry for books as I.

For all this free association, however, my searching has a plan. I am looking for the library where it lives. Of course, a complete history of the library—a documentary account of libraries wherever they have existed, in whatever forms they take—would run to many

volumes. What I'm looking for are points of transformation, those moments where readers, authors, and librarians question the meaning of the library itself. As I follow Borges, the blind librarian, out of the stacks and into the whirling data streams of the Internet, I experience less shock than I might have expected. Out there the searching is as casual, as associative, and as serendipitous as ever it was.