

A Don Juan of libraries

George Steiner reviews *Into the Looking-Glass Wood* by
Alberto Manguel

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The area which Alberto Manguel has mapped for himself is that of the eros of reading. He celebrates the diversities of desire - tempestuous, hidden, intermittent, lapsed - which relate us to a literary text. Manguel glories in the duality of the French word, *jouissance*, signifying orgasm and savouring joy: 'Reading or making love, we should be able to lose ourselves in the other, into whom - to borrow St John's image - we are transformed: reader into writer into reader, lover into lover into lover.' The sexual analogy is crucial. Manguel's tryst with the beloved text is intimate, possessive and 'very private'. As in the erotic, every consummation has its perils and specific register of excitement. He is a Don Juan of libraries.

The tutelary spirits of Manguel's ardours and philandering are Lewis Carroll and Borges. It is the word-play, the density of dreamt mirrors and allusions in *Alice* together with the ultra-bookish texture of Borges's fictions - most notably *The Library of Babel* which happens to be the universe - that inspire Alberto Manguel's enchanted lecheries. Chesterton and Roland Barthes are attendant messengers out of the boundless world of textuality. In the distant glow, we make out the grammarians and bibliographers of Hellenistic and Alexandrine high culture, whose developments of textual conservation and commentaries, whose passion for the hermetic and the encoded continue to make of Western culture so bibliomaniacal an inheritance. As for Borges, the lucid trance of the cabbalist, threading the maze of letter, syllable and syntax, provides Manguel with secret companionship.

Almost all of the articles collected here have appeared previously in book-review form, as prefaces or as talks. Very often, they

cover ground already considered in its historical context in Manguel's *A History of Reading*. Love welcomes repetition.

Travelling in Patagonia, the young Manguel, then at the University of Buenos Aires, carried in his knapsack Mao's poems, the novels of Robert Louis Stevenson and Alejo Carpentier, the stores of Saki and Juan Rulfo, the poems of Neruda. What underwrites this happy eclecticism is the playful, intimately engaged yet subversive stance of the peregrine reader. Political, social realities in the grim guise which they take on in Latin America do intrude persistently. But they too come to be seen through the 'looking-glass' of the transforming and narrative imagination of writers.

Alberto Manguel's is so tolerant a sensibility that polemic comes as something of a surprise, a crash of thunder in the midst of elegant summer. But his anger at Vargas Llosa is fierce. Llosa 'hates the Andean Indian'. He equates the 'hatred of the victimiser for the victim with the hatred of the victim for the victimiser'. The 'murky ethics' of Mario Vargas Llosa tint his political ambitions no less than his novels. *The Time of the Hero* 'supports an amnesty granted to torturers and argues for the annihilation of Indian cultures'.

But such a diatribe is the exception in a gathering essentially admiring and benign. Manguel delights in Chesterton's 'verbal capers', in the 'counterpointing and shadow-readings' which license Cynthia Ozick's indirect approach to the Holocaust, in Yeats's descent towards the impure sources of vision. Rightly, Manguel pays tribute to the indispensable but sometimes traitorous role of editors, publishers and translators in the enterprise of literature. Without editors, 'hardly a book can get published', but their care may make us miss 'something fabulously new, something as incandescent as a phoenix and as unique, something impossible to describe because it has not yet been born but which, if it were, would admit no secret sharers in its creation'. The drawbacks to this bouquet of causeries are evident. Substance simply evaporates in lightness and brevity. There is something truly off-putting in the reissue of five ephemeral pages 'On being Jewish'. A skim over the increasingly difficult problem of the production and diffusion of pornography trivialises the issue. A passing reference to Celine among writers

who prove that 'great literature cannot be at the same time hate literature' (Juvenal, Swift?) merely fudges an immensely vexing question. Celine and Proust divide twentieth-century French prose between them. Dates are not always right. Mandarin learning alternates with the journalistic requirements of the elementary.

Dare one, playing Alberto Manguel's own game, hint at what is known as 'vanity publishing'? But, then, Manguel himself might be the last to mind.