

MY LIBRARY

By Alberto Manguel

A library is an ideally-suited place for our gloomy times. Wandering through the stacks of one of the world's great libraries, the Biblioteca Nacional of Buenos Aires, Jorge Luis Borges once imagined that the millions of volumes around him constituted not a model of the universe but a the universe itself, its Doppelgänger as it were. The idea is thrilling: that everything we know, that everything we believe we can know of this chaotic world, might be reflected in an orderly way on the open shelves of a library. I can think of no other place that justifies such jubilant optimism.

If every library is a model of the universe, then mine is a reduced version of that model, a lesser individual of the colossal species. During the day, its resemblance to the real thing is deceiving. Down and across the lettered passages, I move with a visible purpose in search of a name or a voice, calling books to my attention according to their allotted rank and file. The structure of the place is visible: a maze not to become lost in but to find, a divided room that follows an apparently logical sequence of classification, obedient to a predetermined table of contents and a memorable hierarchy of alphabets and numbers. But at night, the atmosphere changes. Sounds become muffled, thoughts grow louder. Time seems closer to that moment halfway between wakefulness and sleep in which the world can be deliberately reimaged. My movements

feel unwittingly furtive, my activity secret. I turn into something of a ghost. The books are now the real presence and it is I, their reader, who, through cabbalistic rituals of half-glimpsed letters, is conjured up and lured to a certain volume and a certain page. The order decreed by the catalogues is, at night, merely conventional, it holds no prestige in the shadows. Free from quotidian constraints, unobserved, my eyes and hands roam across the tidy rows restoring chaos. One book calls to another unexpectedly, creating alliances across different cultures and centuries. A half-remembered line is echoed by another of which sober concordances tell me, in the light of day, nothing. If the library in the morning suggests a mirror of the severe and reasonable order of the world, the library at night seems to rejoice in the world's essential, joyful muddle.

The library at night is not for every reader. Michel de Montaigne, for instance, disagreed with my preference. His library (he spoke of *librairie*, not *bibliothèque*, since the use of these words was just beginning to change in the vertiginous sixteenth century) stood on the third floor of his tower, lodged in a disaffected closet. "I spend there most of the days of my life and most of the hours of the day: I am never there at night." At night, Montaigne slept, since he believed that the body suffered enough for the sake of the reading mind. "Books have many pleasant qualities for those who know how to choose them; but there is no good without effort: it is not a plain and pure pleasure, not more so than others; it has its disagreements, and they are onerous; the soul disports

itself, but the body, whose care I have not forgotten, remains inactive, it grows weary and sad.”

The library in which I have at long last collected my books began life as barn, here in la Vienne, sometime in the fifteenth century. When I first saw it, forming one of the branches of a U-shaped string of buildings, all that was left was a single stone wall, separating the property from a chicken run and the neighbour’s field. According to village legend, before it held the barn, the wall belonged to one of the two castles that Tristan l’Hermite, minister of Louis XI of France and notorious for his cruelty, built for his sons around 1433. The first of the castles still stands, much altered during the eighteenth century. The second burnt down and the only wall left standing, with a pigeon tower attached to its far end, became the property of the church, cutting off one side of the presbytery garden. In 1693, the inhabitants of the village (“gathered outside the church doors” says the deed) granted the incumbent priest permission to wall in the old cemetery and plant a small orchard over the emptied tombs. At the same time, the castle wall was used to erect a new barn. After the French Revolution, storms, war and neglect caused the barn to crumble, and even after services resumed in the church in 1837, and a new priest came to live in the presbytery, the barn was not rebuilt. The ancient wall continued to serve merely as a property divider, looking onto a farmer’s field on one side and shading a magnolia tree and bushes of hydrangea on the other.

As soon as I saw the wall, I knew that here was where I would build the room to house my books. I wanted a room panelled in dark wood, with soft pools of light and comfortable chairs. Ideally, I imagined shelves that began at my waist and went only as high as the fingertips of my stretched-out arm, since the books relinquished to heights that require ladders or to depths that force the reader to crawl on the floor, receive far less attention than its middle-ground fellows. But these ideal arrangements would have required a library three or four times the size of the vanished barn and, as Robert Louis Stevenson so mournfully put it, “that is the bitterness of art: you see a good effect, and some nonsense about sense continually intervenes.” So my library has shelves that begin just above the running-boards and that end an octavo away from the beams of the slanted ceiling. At night, if the moon is out, the intimate lighting of the place is perfect. Paradise sometimes must adapt itself to suit circumstantial requirements.

Setting up a library after many years of change is akin to writing an autobiography. The order, the atmosphere, the titles that have survived moves, thefts, acts of God, oblivion in the hands of absent-minded friends, trace the pattern of something that resembles our life. My geography in in these pages: Buenos Aires, Paris, London, the vastness of Canada, the always far-away South Seas. I am grateful that chance has allowed me to set up my books in this secret corner of France where I hope, one day, my ghost, in the dark, may still turn the yellowing pages.

ⁱ “Je passe là et la plupart des jours de ma vie, et la plupart des heures du jour; je n’y suis jamais la nuit.”