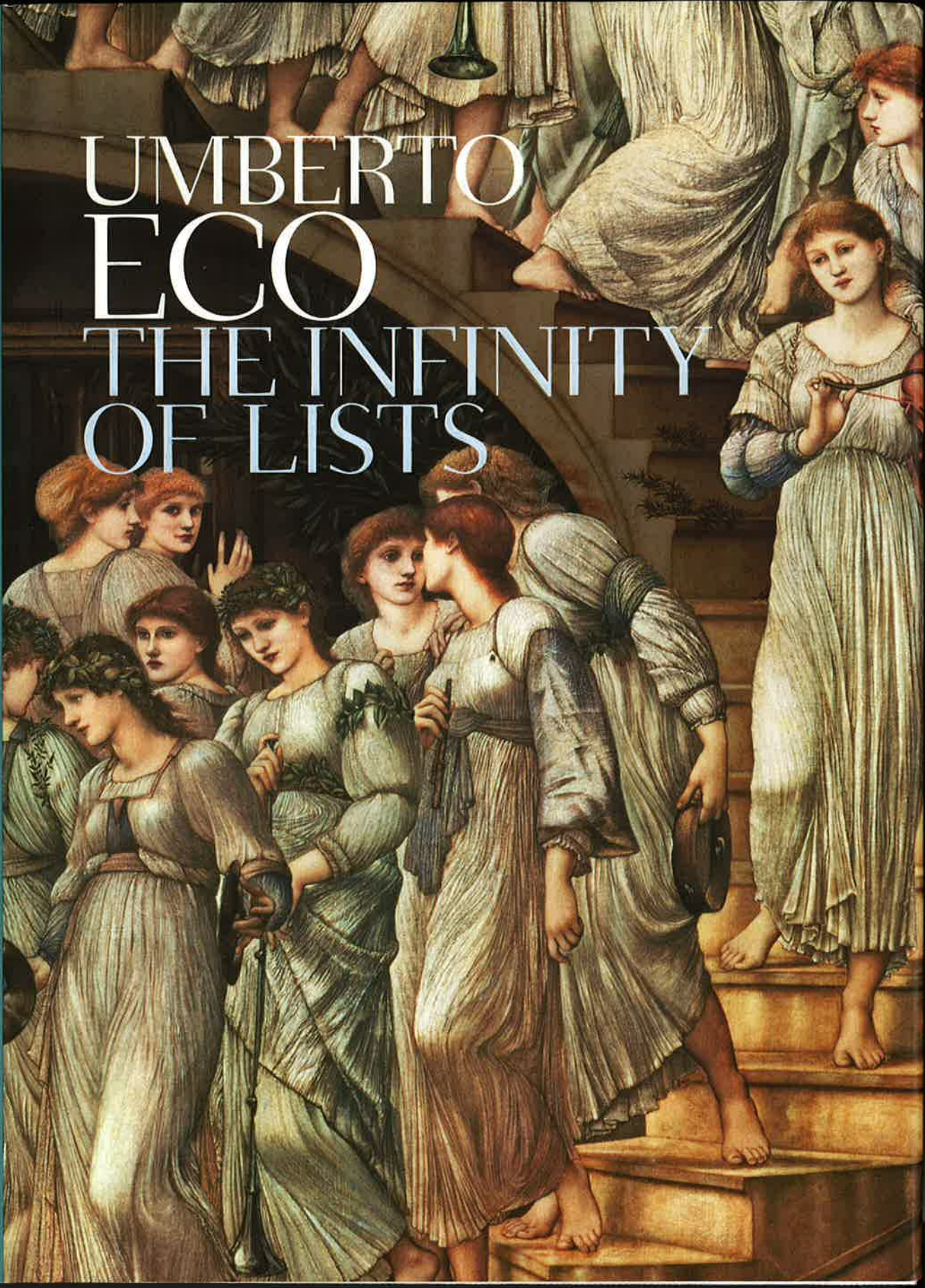


UMBERTO ECO

THE INFINITY OF LISTS

19. LISTS OF INFINITIES

Both narrative and philosophy have evoked the infinity of lists without attempting to draw up any list: they simply conceived of *containers* of infinite lists, or devices for *producing* an infinite list of elements.

The literary model is that of Borges' Library of Babel, which contains infinite volumes kept in an unlimited and periodic expanse of rooms. Thomas Pavel, in his book *Fictional Worlds* (Harvard University Press, 1986), draws inspiration from this idea of Borges when he invites us to conduct a fascinating mental experiment: let us suppose that an omniscient being is able to write or read a Magnum Opus, which contains all true statements about both the real world and all possible worlds. Naturally, since it is possible to talk of the universe in diverse languages, and each language defines it in a different way, there exists a Maximal Collection of Magnum Opuses. The collection of Daily Books by a given individual must be shown on the Day of Judgement, together with that of the Books that evaluate the lives of families, tribes and nations.

But the angel who writes a Daily Book does not line up only true statements: he connects them, assesses them, and builds them into a system. And since on Judgement Day individuals and groups will each have a defending angel, for each one the defenders will rewrite another astronomical series of Daily Books where the same statements will be linked up differently, and compared differently to the statements in some of the Magnum Opuses.

Heinrich Johann Vogeler
Baku (Agitationstafel), 1927,
Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie

Since infinite alternative worlds are part of each of the infinite Magnum Opuses, the angels will write infinite Daily Books in which they mix statements that are true in one world and false in another. If we consider that some angels are clumsy, and mix statements that a single Magnum Opus records as mutually contradictory, in the end we would have a series of Compendia, of Miscellanies, and of Compendia of Fragments of Miscellanies, which will amalgamate strata of books of different origins, and at that point it will be very difficult to say which books are true and which are fictitious, and with respect to which original book.

Joaquin Torres-Garcia
New York Street Scene, 1920,
New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery

Maria Helena Vieira da Silva
The Library, 1949,
Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne,
Centre Georges Pompidou

We will have an astronomic infinity of books each of which straddles different worlds, and stories that some have considered to be true will be seen as fictitious by others.

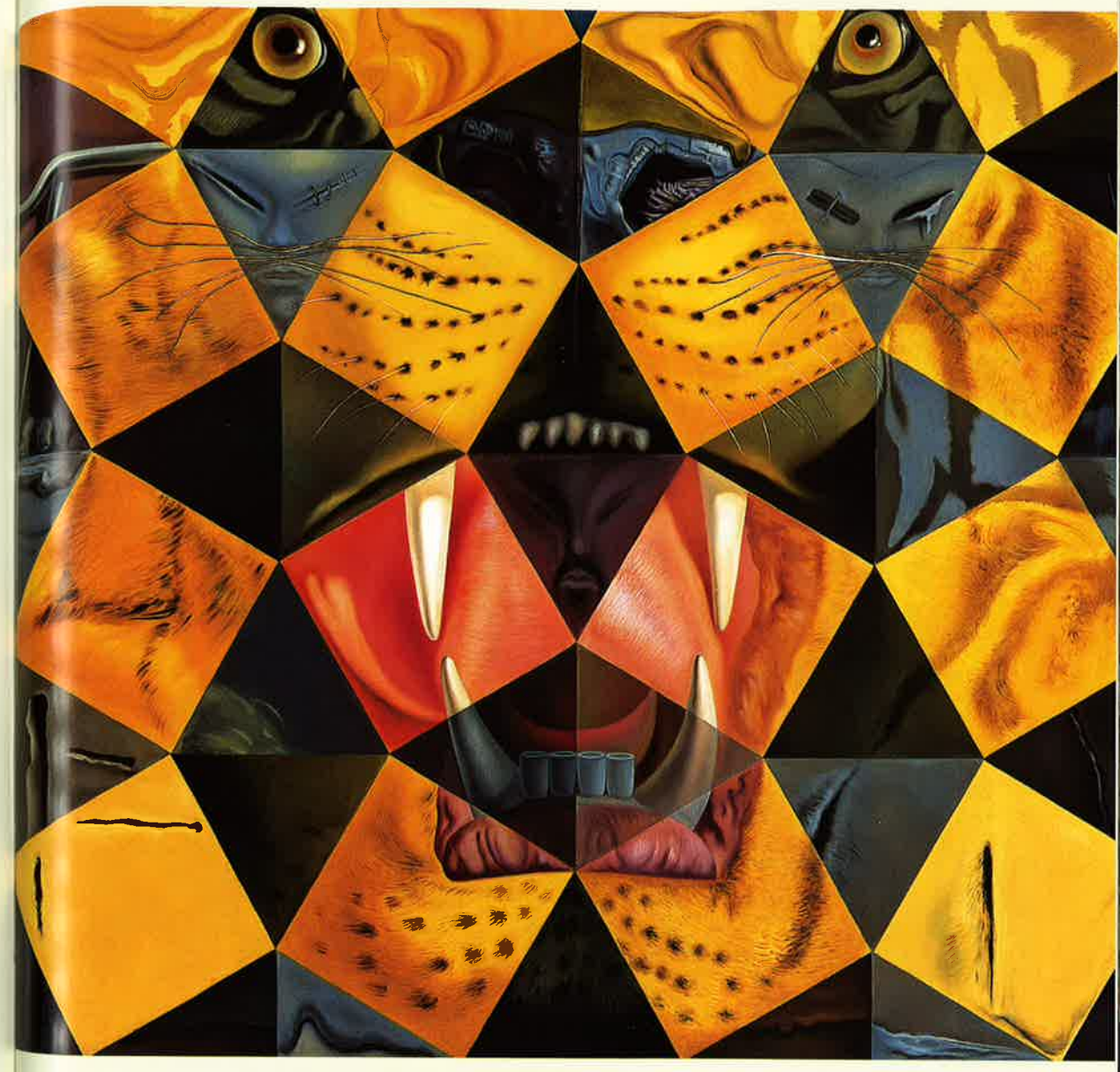
Pavel writes these things to make us understand that we already live in a universe of this kind, except that the books were not written by archangels but by us, from Homer to Borges; and he suggests that the legend he recounts is a very good portrayal of our situation with regard to the universe of statements that we are accustomed to accept as "true". So the *frisson* with which we perceive the ambiguous confines between fiction and reality is not only equal to the one that seizes us when faced with the books written by angels, but also to that which should seize us when faced with the series of books that represent, authoritatively, the real world.

One of the properties of Borges' Library is also that of displaying

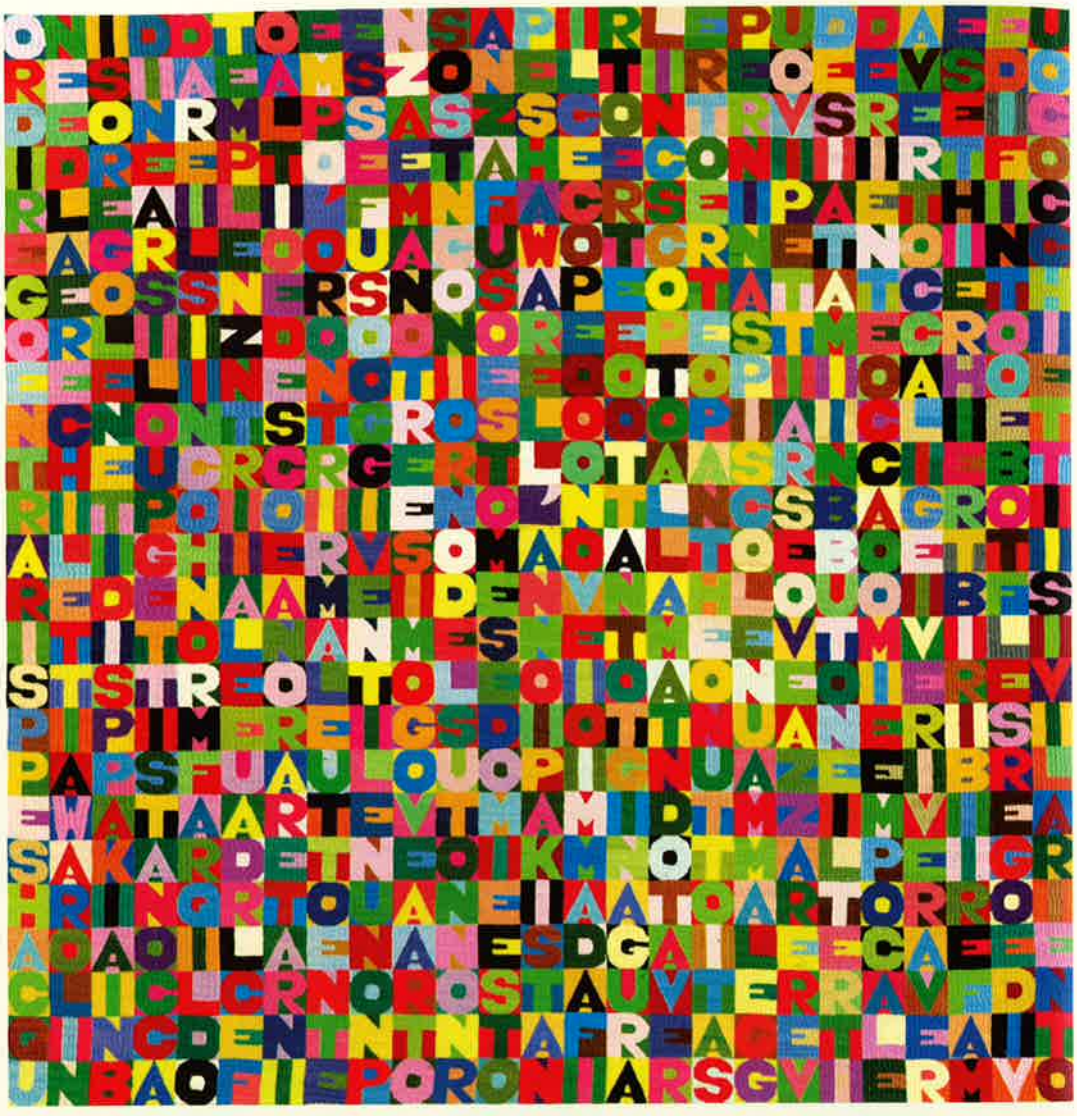
books that contain all the possible combinations of twenty-five orthographical symbols, so that we cannot imagine any combination of characters that the Library has not foreseen. This was the old dream of the cabalists, because only by making infinite combinations of a finite series of letters could we hope one day to formulate the secret name of God.

In 1622 Pierre Guldin (*Problema arithmeticum de rerum combinationibus*) calculated how many words could have been produced with the twenty-three letters of the alphabet used at the time, combining them two by two, three by three, and so on, until he got to words twenty-three letters long, without taking into account repetitions and without worrying whether the words that could be engendered made sense or were pronounceable, and he came to a number in excess of seventy thousand billion billion (which would have taken more than a million billion billion letters to write). If we were to write all these words in registers of one thousand pages, at 100 lines per page and 60 characters per line, we would need 257 million billion registers of this kind; and if we wished to put them in a library equipped with cubic constructions measuring 432 feet per side, each capable of housing 32 million volumes, then we would need 8,052,122,350 such libraries. But what realm could contain all these buildings? If we calculate the surface available on the entire planet, we could house only 7,575,213,799 of them!

The same combinatorial enthusiasm persuaded Marin Mersenne (*Harmonie universelle*, 1636) to consider not only the words *pronounceable* in French, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Chinese and all other possible tongues, but also the number of possible musical sequences. Mersenne shows that to note all the *melodies* producible would require more reams of paper than those needed to span the distance between the earth and the sky and, if each sheet contained 720 melodies of 22 notes apiece and if each ream were compressed to less than one inch in thickness, since the melodies producible with 22 notes are over twelve thousand billion billion, by dividing this figure by the 362,880 melodies that can be contained in a ream, we would still get a sixteen-figure number, while the inches spanning the centre of the earth and



Salvador Dalí
Fifty Abstract Paintings Which Seen from Two Yards Change into Three Lenins Masquerading as Chinese and Seen from Six Yards Appear as the Head of a Royal Tiger, 1962,
Figueres, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí

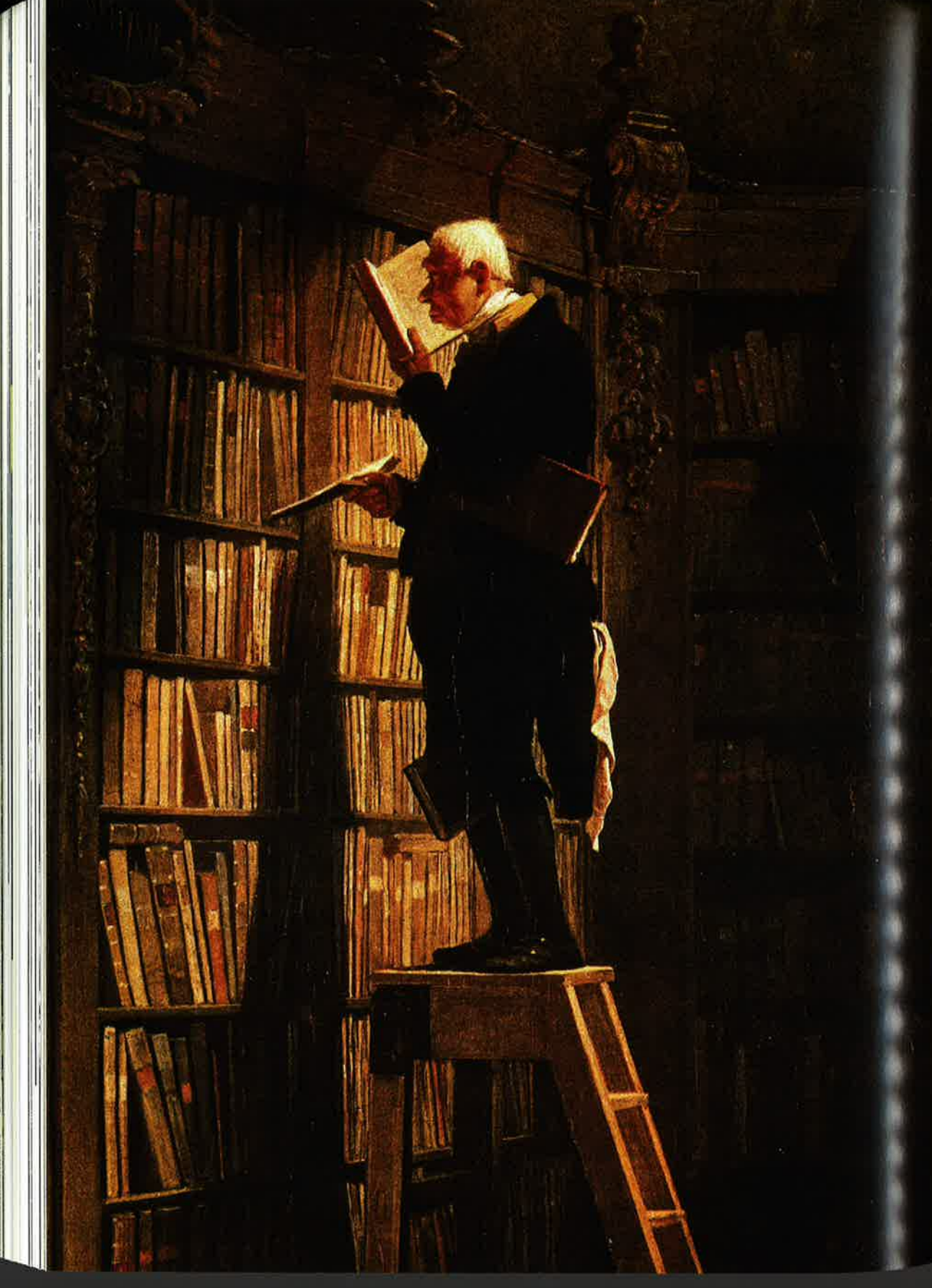


Alighiero Boetti,
Untitled, 1987,
Kassel, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel,
Neue Galerie

the stars are only a fourteen-figure number. And if we wished to write down all these melodies, one thousand per day, we would need almost twenty-three thousand million years.

In his brief text *Horizon de la doctrine humaine*, Leibniz wondered what might be the maximum number of statements, true, false and even non-existent, that could be formulated using a finite alphabet of twenty-four letters. Given that one can make words thirty-one letters long (of which Leibniz found examples in Greek and Latin), with the alphabet it is possible to produce 24^{32} thirty-one-letter words. But how long can a statement be? Given that it is possible to imagine statements as long as a book, the sum of statements, true or false, that a man can read in a lifetime (calculating that he reads one hundred pages per day and that each page contains one thousand letters), is 3,650,000,000. And even if this man lived a thousand years "the longest sentence utterable, or the biggest book a man can manage to read, will amount to 3,650,000,000,000 [letters], and the number of all the truths, falsehoods, utterable or, rather, readable sentences, pronounceable or not pronounceable, meaningful or less so, comes to $24^{365,000,000,0001} - 24/23$ [letters]".

These are fantasies where mathematics verges on metaphysics. But basically contemporary literature has tried to take these combinatory possibilities and to use them to draw up real lists, or induce the reader to do so, and this is the case with *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* by Raymond Queneau (Paris, Gallimard, 1961), a book whose pages are divided into horizontal bands which, upon leafing through, we can combine in different ways the fourteen lines of a sonnet, so as to compose one hundred thousand billion poems. The author points out that the texts producible are 10^{14} (and hence a finite number) but even if you read them twenty-four hours a day it would take two hundred million years to finish the task.



20. EXCHANGES BETWEEN PRACTICAL AND POETIC LISTS

The voraciousness of the list often prompts us to interpret practical lists as if they were poetic lists—and in effect what often distinguishes a poetic list from a practical one is only the intention with which we contemplate it.

It is not impossible to read a poetic list as if it were a practical one. Let us take Borges' list of animals: in a Latin-American literature exam it would be the (practical) list of animals to be remembered in order to quote Borges' text correctly. Likewise, it is possible to read a practical list as if it were a poetic one: for many people this series—Bacigalupo, Ballarin, Maroso, Grezar or Martelli, Rigamonti, Castigliano, Menti, Loik, Gabetto, Mazzola, Ossola—would appear to be a hotchpotch of names; others will see it as a (practical) list of the members of Torino soccer team who were wiped out in a tragic air crash in 1949; but for a great many nostalgic fans it has become a poetic list, a kind of mantra to be recited with emotion.

It has been pointed out[1] that the two lists that follow would seem to be very similar to Borges' list of animals. The first includes a counter, a rigid piece of metal or wood, musical notation for a repeating pattern of musical beats, the act of preventing, a unit of pressure equal to a million dynes per square centimetre, a submerged (or partly submerged) ridge in a river, the legal profession, a stripe, and a block of a solid substance. The second list assigns to the same set a tight cluster of people or things, any of various fastenings formed by looping and tying a rope (or cord) upon itself or to another rope

Carl Spitzweg
Der Bücherwurm (The Bookworm) (detail), 1850,
private collection

Jacques-Louis David
Consecration of the Emperor Napoleon I and Coronation of the Empress Josephine, 1807,
Paris, Musée du Louvre

or to another object, a hard cross-grained piece of wood, something twisted and tight and swollen, a unit of length used in navigation, a soft lump or unevenness in a yarn, a sandpiper that breeds in the Arctic, and the embedding of a circle in three-dimensional Euclidean space,

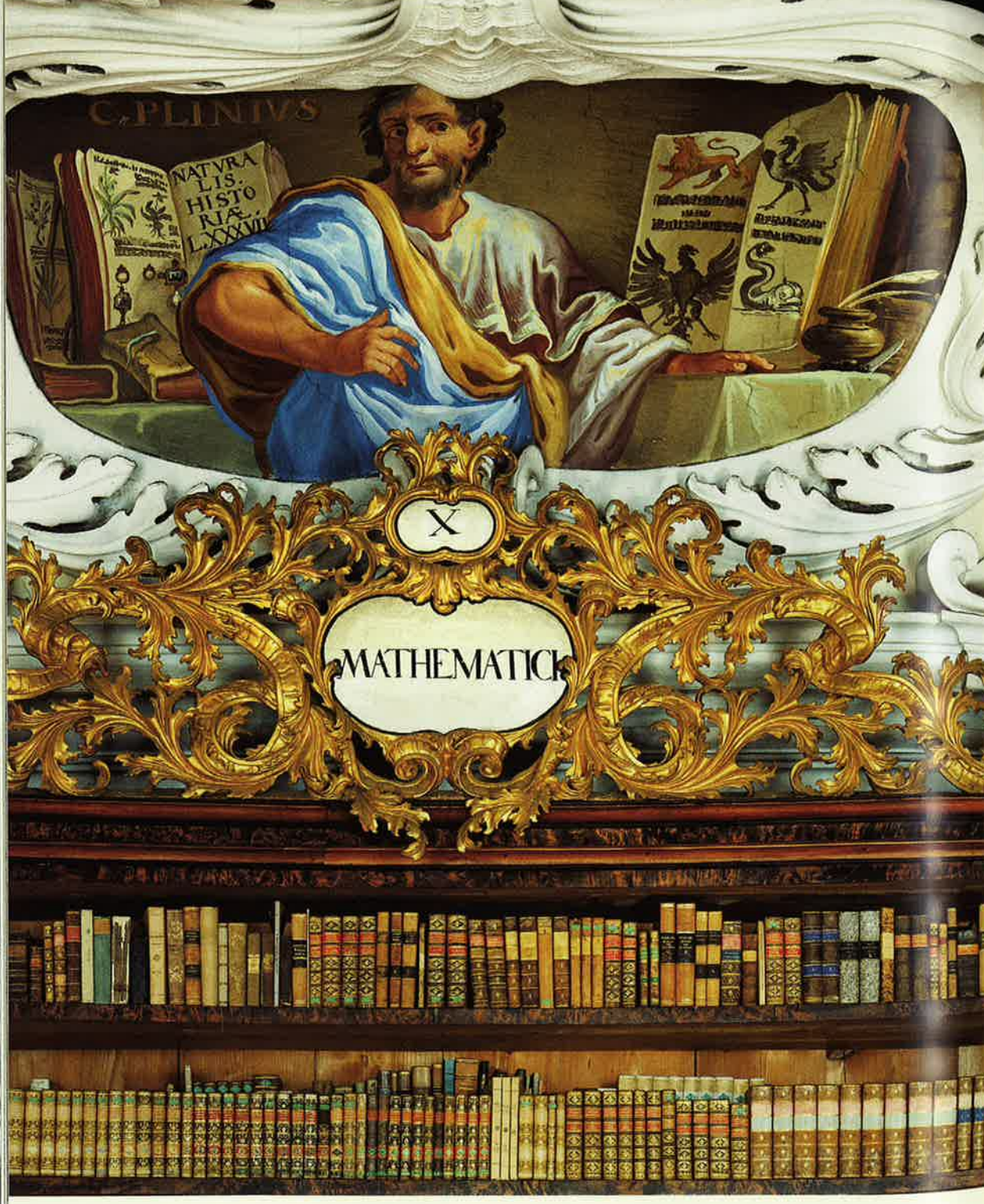
If we consult a dictionary, we see that the first set embraces most of the possible meanings of the word *bar*, while the second refers to most of the possible meanings of the word *knot*.

A restaurant menu is a practical list. But in a book on culinary matters a list of the diverse menus of the most renowned restaurants would already acquire a poetic value. And in the same way one might daydream about the abundance of an exotic cuisine on reading (not with a view to ordering, but for aesthetic reasons) the menu of a Chinese restaurant with its pages and pages of numbered dishes.

It is unlikely that in painting the *Wedding at Cana* Veronese intended to portray one by one the participants at that event (given that he no information about them), but in painting the coronation of Napoleon I, David certainly included in the picture all the persons he believed to have been present at the ceremony; but this does not prevent their number (and the difficulty of counting them all) from making us feel a hint of dizziness at this perhaps incomplete plurality.

This possibility of reading a practical list as a poetic one or vice-versa also occurs in literature. See the gigantic portrayal of the Convention made by Hugo in *Ninety-Three*. He wanted to represent the titanic dimensions (in an ideal and moral sense) of the Revolution through the physical proportions of its assembly. It is conceivable that what takes up page after page may serve the function of a practical list; yet no one can fail to see the effect of incompleteness it creates, as if it were the representation, through the abridged example of those few hundred names, of the immense tide that was sweeping over France in that fateful year.

Félix Vallotton
The Library, 1885-1925,
Saint-Germain-en-Laye,
Musée Maurice Denis - Le Prieuré



Imaginary portrait of Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus), 1684-1692, Kremsmünster, Benediktinerstift, Library

But the most convincing examples are the catalogues of the great libraries, such as the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, or the Library of Congress in Washington: their purpose is certainly practical but the bibliophile attempting to read all those titles and murmur them like a litany would find himself in the same situation as Homer faced with his warriors. In any case this is what happens when we read the catalogue of the works of **Theophrastus** drawn up by Diogenes Laërtius (*Life of Theophrastus*, 42–50), where the titles of books (most of which are lost) now appear to us not so much as an inventory but as an incantation. Perhaps **Rabelais** was thinking of endless lists of this type when he invented the catalogue of books kept in the Abbey of Saint Victor. Apparently practical, nonetheless Rabelais' list is poetic because the books do not exist and it is not clear whether it is the incongruousness of the titles or the size of the list that affords us a glimpse of the infinity of bestiality.

The appetite for lists about books has fascinated many writers, from **Cervantes** to **Huysmans** and **Calvino**; moreover it is well known that bibliophiles read the catalogues of antiquarian bookshops (which are certainly meant to be practical lists) as fascinating portrayals of a land of Cockaigne or desires, and they get as much pleasure out of this as a reader of Jules Verne gets from exploring the deeps of the silent oceans and encountering terrifying sea monsters.

Another lover of old books, Mario Praz, in a text for catalogue 15 of the 1931 Libreria della Fiera Letteraria, observed how bibliophiles read antiquarian bookshop catalogues with the same pleasure as others read thrillers. "You can be sure," he said, "that no reading has ever generated such swift, moving action as that of an interesting catalogue." But immediately after this he gives us an idea of how even uninteresting catalogues can be read in the same way.

1. Claudio Paolucci, a personal communication.

DIOGENES LAËRTIUS (180-240 A.D.) THE LIVES AND OPINIONS OF EMINENT PHILOSOPHERS FROM "THEOPHRASTUS", BOOK XIII

Three books of the First Analytics; seven of the Second Analytics; one book of the Analysis of Syllogisms; one book, an Epitome of Analytics; two books, Topics for referring things to First Principles; one book, an Examination of Speculative Questions about Discussions; one on Sensations; one addressed to Anaxagoras; one on the Doctrines of Anaxagoras; one on the Doctrines of Anaximenes; one on the Doctrines of Archelaus; one on Salt, Nitre, and Alum; two on Petrifactions; one on Indivisible Lines; two on Hearing; one on Words; one on the Differences between Virtues; one on Kingly Power; one on the Education of a King; three on Lives; one on Old Age; one on the Astronomical System of Democritus; one on Meteorology; one on Images or Phantoms; one on Juices, Complexions, and Flesh; one on the Description of the World; one on Men; one, a Collection of the Sayings of Diogenes; three books of Definitions; one treatise on Love; another treatise on Love; one book on Happiness; two books on Species; on Epilepsy, one; on Enthusiasm, one; on Empedocles, one; eighteen books of Epicheiremes; three books of Objections; one book on the Voluntary; two books, being an Abridgment of Plato's Polity; one on the Difference of the Voices of Similar Animals; one on Sudden Appearances; one on Animals which Bite or Sting; one on such Animals as are said to be Jealous; one on those which live on Dry Land; one on those which Change their Colour; one on those which live in Holes; seven on Animals in General; one on Pleasure according to the Definition of Aristotle; seventy-four books of Propositions; one treatise on Hot and Cold; one essay on Giddiness and Vertigo and Sudden Dimness of Sight; one on Perspiration; one on Affirmation and Denial; the Callisthenes, or an essay on Mourning, one; on Labours, one; on Motion, three; on Stones, one; on Pestilences, one; on Fainting Fits, one; the Megaric Philosopher, one; on Melancholy, one; on Mines, two; on Honey, one; a collection of the Doctrines of Metrodorus, one; two books on those Philosophers who have treated of Meteorology; on Drunkenness, one; twenty-four books of Laws, in alphabetical order; ten books, being an Abridgment of Laws; one on Definitions; one on Smells; one on Wine and Oil; eighteen books of Primary Propositions; three books on Lawgivers; six books of Political Disquisitions; a treatise on Politicals, with reference to occasions as they arise, four books; four books of Political Customs; on the best Constitution, one; five books of a Collection of Problems; on Proverbs, one; on Concretion and Liquefaction, one; on Fire, two; on Spirits, one; on Paralysis, one; on Suffocation, one; on Aberration of Intellect, one; on the Passions, one; on Signs, one; two books of Sophisms; one on the Solution of Syllogisms; two books of Topics; two on Punishment; one on Hair; one on Tyranny; three on Water; one on Sleep and Dreams; three on Friendship; two on Liberality; three on Nature; eighteen on Questions of Natural Philosophy; two books, being an Abridgment of Natural Philosophy; eight more books on Natural Philosophy; one treatise addressed to Natural Philosophers; two books on the History of Plants; eight books on the Causes of Plants; five on Juices; one on Mistaken Pleasures; one, Investigation of a proposition concerning the Soul; one on Unskilfully Adduced Proofs; one on Simple Doubts; one on Harmonics; one on Virtue; one entitled Occasions or Contradictions; one on Denial; one on Opinion; one on the Ridiculous; two called Soirees; two books of Divisions; one on Differences; one on Acts of Injustice; one on Calumny; one on Praise; one on Skill; three books of Epistles; one on Self-produced Animals; one on Selection; one entitled the Praises of the Gods; one on Festivals; one on Good Fortune; one on Enthymemes; one on Inventions; one on Moral Schools; one book of Moral Characters; one treatise on Tumult; one on History; one on the Judgment Concerning Syllogisms; one

on Flattery; one on the Sea; one essay, addressed to Cassander, Concerning Kingly Power; one on Comedy; one on Meteors; one on Style; one book called a Collection of Sayings; one book of Solutions; three books on Music; one on Metres; the Megades, one; on Laws, one; on Violations of Law, one; a collection of the Sayings and Doctrines of Xenocrates, one; one book of Conversations; on an Oath, one; one of Oratorical Precepts; one on Riches; one on Poetry; one being a collection of Political, Ethical, Physical, and amatory Problems; one book of Proverbs; one book, being a Collection of General Problems; one on Problems in Natural Philosophy; one on Example; one on Proposition and Exposition; a second treatise on Poetry; one on the Wise Men; one on Counsel; one on Solecisms; one on Rhetorical Art, a collection of sixty-one figures of Oratorical Art; one book on Hypocrisy; six books of a Commentary of Aristotle or Theophrastus; sixteen books of Opinions on Natural Philosophy; one book, being an Abridgment of Opinions on Natural Philosophy; one on Gratitude; one called Moral Characters; one on Truth and Falsehood; six on the History of Divine Things; three on the Gods; four on the History of Geometry; six books, being an Abridgment of the work of Aristotle on Animals; two books of Epicheiremes; three books of Propositions; two on Kingly Power; one on Causes; one on Democritus; one on Calumny; one on Generation.

The Library of St. Gallen, **1761, St. Gallen, Benedictine abbey**

FRANÇOIS RABELAIS
FIVE BOOKS OF THE LIVES, HEROIC DEEDS AND SAYINGS OF GARGANTUA AND HIS SON PANTAGRUEL
BOOK II, CHAPTER 7 (1564)

How Pantagruel came to Paris, and of the choice books of the Library of St. Victor.

In his abode there he found the library of St. Victor a very stately and magnific one, especially in some books which were there, of which followeth the Repertory and Catalogue, Et primo,

The for Godsake of Salvation.
The Codpiece of the Law.
The Slipshoe of the Decretals.
The Pomegranate of Vice.
The Clew-bottom of Theology.
The Duster or Foxtail-flap of Preachers, composed by Turlupin.
The Churning Ballock of the Valiant.
The Henbane of the Bishops.
Marmotretus de baboonis et apis, cum Commento Dorbellis.
Decretum Universitatis Parisiensis super gorgiasitate muliercularum ad placitum.
The Apparition of Sancte Geltrude to a Nun of Poissy, being in travail at the bringing forth of a child.
Ars honeste fartandi in societate, per Marcum Corvinum (Ortuinum).
The Mustard-pot of Penance.
The Gamashes, alias the Boots of Patience.
Formicarium artium.
De brodiorum usu, et honestate quartandi, per Sylvestrem Prioratem Jacobinum.
The Cosened or Gulled in Court.
The Frail of the Scriveners.
The Marriage-packet.
The Cruizy or Crucible of Contemplation.
The Flimflams of the Law.
The Prickle of Wine.
The Spur of Cheese.
Ruboffatorium (Decrotatorium) scholarium.
Tartaretus de modo cacandi.
The Bravades of Rome.
Bricot de Differentiis Browsarum.
The Tailpiece-Cushion, or Close-breech of Discipline.
The Cobbled Shoe of Humility.
The Trivet of good Thoughts.
The Kettle of Magnanimity.
The Cavilling Entanglements of Confessors.
The Snatchfare of the Curates.
Reverendi patris fratris Lubini, provincialis Bavardiae, de gulpendis lardslicionibus libri tres.
Pasquilli Doctoris Marmorei, de capreolis cum artichoketa comedendis, tempore Papali ab Ecclesia interdicto.
The Invention of the Holy Cross, personated by six wily Priests.
The Spectacles of Pilgrims bound for Rome.
Majoris de modo faciendi puddinos.
The Bagpipe of the Prelates.
Beda de optimitate triparum.
The Complaint of the Barristers upon the Reformation of Comfits.
The Furred Cat of the Solicitors and Attorneys.
Of Peas and Bacon, cum Commento.
The Small Vales or Drinking Money of the Indulgences.
Praeclarissimi juris utriusque Doctoris Maistre Pilloti, &c., Scrap-farthingi de botchandis glossae Accursianae Triflis repetitio enucidi-luculidissima.
Stratagemata Francharchiaeri de Baniolet.
Carlbumpkinus de Re Militari cum Figuris Tevoti.
De usu et utilitate flayandi equos et equas, authore Magistro nostro de Quebecu.
The Sauciness of Country-Stewards.
M.N. Rostocostojambedanesse de mustarda post prandium servienda, libri quatuordecim, apostillati per M. Vaurillonis.
The Covillage or Wench-tribute of Promoters.
(Jabolenus de Cosmographia Purgatorii.)
Quaestio subtilissima, utrum Chimaera in vacuo bonbinans possit comedere secundas intentiones; et fuit debatuta per decem hebdomadas in Consilio Constantiensi.
The Bridle-champer of the Advocates.

Smutchudlamenta Scoti.
The Rasping and Hard-scraping of the Cardinals.
De calcaribus removendis, Decades undecim, per M. Albericum de Rosata.
Ejusdem de castramentandis criminibus libri tres.
The Entrance of Anthony de Leve into the Territories of Brazil.
(Marforii, bacalarii cubantis Romae) de peelandis aut unskinnandis blurrandisque Cardinalium mulis.
The said Author's Apology against those who allege that the Pope's mule doth eat but at set times.
Prognosticatio quae incipit, Silvii Triquebille, balata per M.N., the deep-dreaming gull Sion.
Boudarini Episcopi de emulgentiarum profectibus Aeneades novem, cum privilegio Papali ad triennium et postea non.
The Shitabranna of the Maids.
The Bald Arse or Peeled Breech of the Widows.
The Cowl or Capouch of the Monks.
The Mumbling Devotion of the Celestine Friars.
The Passage-toll of Beggarliness.
The Teeth-chatter or Gum-didder of Lubberly Lusks.
The Paring-shovel of the Theologues.
The Drench-horn of the Masters of Arts.
The Scullions of Olcam, the uninitiated Clerk.
Magistri N. Lickdishetis, de garbellisiftationibus horarum canonicarum, libri quadriginta.
Arsiversitatorium confratriarum, incerto authore.
The Gulsgoatony or Rasher of Cormorants and Ravenous Feeders.
The Rammishness of the Spaniards supergivuregondigaded by Friar Inigo.
The Muttering of Pitiful Wretches.
Dastardismus rerum Italicarum, authore Magistro Burnegad.
R. Lullius de Batisfolagiis Principum.
Calibistratorium caffardiae, authore M. Jacobo Hocstraten hereticometra.
Codtickler de Magistro nostrandorum Magistro nostratorumque beuvetis, libri octo galantissimi.
The Crackarades of Balists or stone-throwing Engines, Contrepate Clerks, Scriveners, Brief-writers, Rapporters, and Papal Bull-despatchers lately compiled by Regis.
A perpetual Almanack for those that have the gout and the pox.
Manera sweepandi fornacellos per Mag. Eccium.
The Shable or Scimetar of Merchants.
The Pleasures of the Monachal Life.
The Hotchpot of Hypocrites.
The History of the Hobgoblins.
The Ragamuffinism of the pensionary maimed Soldiers.
The Gulling Fibs and Counterfeit shows of Commissaries.
The Litter of Treasurers.
The Juglingatorium of Sophisters.
Antipericatametanaparbeugedamphicribratio nes Toordicantium.
The Periwinkle of Ballad-makers.
The Push-forward of the Alchemists.
The Niddy-noddy of the Satchel-loaded Seekers, by Friar Bindfastatis.
The Shackles of Religion.
The Racket of Swag-waggers.
The Leaning-stock of old Age.
The Muzzle of Nobility.
The Ape's Paternoster.
The Crickets and Hawk's-bells of Devotion.
The Pot of the Ember-weeks.
The Mortar of the Politic Life.
The Flap of the Hermits.
The Riding-hood or Monterg of the Penitentiaries.
The Trictrac of the Knocking Friars.
Blockheadodus, de vita et honestate bragadochiorum.
Lyrippii Sorbonici Moralisationes, per M. Lupoldum.
The Carrier-horse-bells of Travellers.
The Bibbings of the tippling Bishops.
Dolloporediones Doctorum Coloniensium adversus Reuclin.
The Cymbals of Ladies.
The Dunger's Martingale.
Whirlingfriskorum Chasemarkerorum per Fratrem Crackwoodloguetis.

Manufacture of Playing Cards in a House in Place Dauphine, c. 1680,
Paris, Musée Carnavalet

MIGUEL DE CERVANTES
DON QUIXOTE
FROM CHAPTER VI (1615)

Of the Diverting and Important Scrutiny Which the Curate and the Barber Made in the Library of Our Ingenious Gentleman

He was still sleeping; so the curate asked the niece for the keys of the room where the books, the authors of all the mischief, were, and right willingly she gave them. They all went in, the housekeeper with them, and found more than a hundred volumes of big books very well bound, and some other small ones. The moment the housekeeper saw them she turned about and ran out of the room, and came back immediately with a saucer of holy water and a sprinkler, saying, "Here, your worship, señor licentiate, sprinkle this room; don't leave any magician of the many there are in these books to bewitch us in revenge for our design of banishing them from the world."

The simplicity of the housekeeper made the licentiate laugh, and he directed the barber to give him the books one by one to see what they were about, as there might be some to be found among them that did not deserve the penalty of fire.

"No," said the niece, "there is no reason for showing mercy to any of them; they have every one of them done mischief; better fling them out of the window into the court and make a pile of them and set fire to them; or else carry them into the yard, and there a bonfire can be made without the smoke giving any annoyance." The housekeeper said the same, so eager were they both for the slaughter of those innocents, but the curate would not agree to it without first reading at any rate the titles.

The first that Master Nicholas put into his hand was "The four books of Amadis of Gaul." "This seems a mysterious thing," said the curate, "for, as I have heard say, this was the first book of chivalry printed in Spain, and from this all the others derive their birth and origin; so it seems to me that we ought inexorably to condemn it to the flames as the founder of so vile a sect."

"Nay, sir," said the barber, "I, too, have heard say that this is the best of all the books of this kind that have been written, and so, as something singular in its line, it ought to be pardoned."

"True," said the curate; "and for that reason let its life be spared for the present. Let us see that other which is next to it."

"It is," said the barber, "the 'Sergas de Esplandian,' the lawful son of Amadis of Gaul."

"Then verily," said the curate, "the merit of the father must not be put down to the account of the son. Take it, mistress housekeeper; open the window and fling it into the yard and lay the foundation of the pile for the bonfire we are to make."

The housekeeper obeyed with great satisfaction, and the worthy "Esplandian" went flying into the yard to await with all patience the fire that was in store for him.

"Proceed," said the curate.

"This that comes next," said the barber, "is 'Amadis of Greece,' and, indeed, I believe all those on this side are of the same Amadis lineage."

"Then to the yard with the whole of them," said the curate; "for to have the burning of Queen Pintiquiniestra, and the shepherd Darinel and his eclogues, and the bedevilled and involved discourses of his author, I would burn with them the father who begot me if he were going about in the guise of a knight-errant."

"I am of the same mind," said the barber.

"And so am I," added the niece.

"In that case," said the housekeeper, "here, into the yard with them!"

They were handed to her, and as there were many of them, she spared herself the staircase, and flung them down out of the window.

"Who is that tub there?" said the curate.

"This," said the barber, "is 'Don Olivante de Laura.'"

"The author of that book," said the curate, "was the same that wrote 'The Garden of Flowers,' and truly there is no deciding which of the two books is the more truthful, or, to put it better, the less lying; all I can say is, send this one into the yard for a swaggering fool."

"This that follows is 'Florismarte of Hircania,'" said the barber.

"Señor Florismarte here?" said the curate; "then by my faith he must take up his quarters in the yard, in spite of his marvellous birth and visionary adventures, for the stiffness and dryness of his style deserve nothing else; into the yard with him and the other, mistress housekeeper."

"With all my heart, señor," said she, and executed the order with great delight.

"This," said the barber, "is 'The Knight Platir.'"

"An old book that," said the curate, "but I find no reason for clemency in it; send it after the others without appeal;" which was done.

Another book was opened, and they saw it was entitled, "The Knight of the Cross."

"For the sake of the holy name this book has," said the curate, "its ignorance might be excused; but then, they say, 'behind the cross there's the devil;' to the fire with it."

Taking down another book, the barber said, "This is 'The Mirror of Chivalry.'"

"I know his worship," said the curate; "that is where Señor Reinaldos of Montalvan figures with his friends and comrades, greater thieves than Cacus, and the Twelve Peers of France with the veracious historian Turpin;

page 386: Benedetto and Giuliano da Maiano (workshop of) *The Studiolo of Duke Federico da Montefeltro: Wood Intarsia Depicting the Interior of a Library with semi-open Cabinets in which an Hourglass and a Candlestick can be seen between the Books*, **15th century,** Urbino, Palazzo Ducale

Gustave Doré illustration for Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, **Paris, 1863**

however, I am not for condemning them to more than perpetual banishment, because, at any rate, they have some share in the invention of the famous Matteo Boiardo, whence too the Christian poet Ludovico Ariosto wove his web, to whom, if I find him here, and speaking any language but his own, I shall show no respect whatever; but if he speaks his own tongue I will put him upon my head."

"Well, I have him in Italian," said the barber, "but I do not understand him."

"Nor would it be well that you should understand him," said the curate, "and on that score we might have excused the Captain if he had not brought him into Spain and turned him into Castilian. He robbed him of a great deal of his natural force, and so do all those who try to turn books written in verse into another language, for, with all the pains they take and all the cleverness they show, they never can reach the level of the originals as they were first produced. In short, I say that this book, and all that may be found treating of those French affairs, should be thrown into or deposited in some dry well, until after more consideration it is settled what is to be done with them; excepting always one 'Bernardo del Carpio' that is going about, and another called 'Roncesvalles;' for these, if they come into my hands, shall pass at once into those of the housekeeper, and from hers into the fire without any reprieve."

To all this the barber gave his assent, and looked upon it as right and proper, being persuaded that the curate was so staunch to the Faith and loyal to the Truth that he would not for the world say anything opposed to them. Opening another book he saw it was "Palmerin de Oliva," and beside it was another called "Palmerin of England," seeing which the licentiate said, "Let the Olive be made firewood of at once and burned until no ashes even are left; and let that Palm of England be kept and preserved as a thing that stands alone, and let such another case be made for it as that which Alexander found among the spoils of Darius and set aside for the safe keeping of the works of the poet Homer. This book, gossip, is of authority for two reasons, first because it is very good, and secondly because it is said to have been written by a wise and witty king of Portugal. All the adventures at the Castle of Miraguarda are excellent and of admirable contrivance, and the language is polished and clear, studying and observing the style befitting the speaker with propriety and judgment. So then, provided it seems good to you, Master Nicholas, I say let this and 'Amadis of Gaul' be remitted the penalty of fire, and as for all the rest, let them perish without further question or query."

"Nay, gossip," said the barber, "for this that I have here is the famous 'Don Belianis.'"

"Well," said the curate, "that and the second, third, and fourth parts all stand in need of a little rhubarb to purge their excess of bile, and they must be cleared of all that stuff about the Castle of Fame and other greater affectations, to which end let them be allowed the over-seas term, and, according as they mend, so shall mercy or justice be meted out to them; and in the mean time, gossip, do you keep them in your house and let no one read them."

"With all my heart," said the barber; and not caring to tire himself with reading more books of chivalry, he told the housekeeper to take all the big ones and throw them into the yard. It was not said to one dull or deaf, but to one who enjoyed burning them more than weaving the broadest and finest web that could be; and seizing about eight at a time, she flung them out of the window.

In carrying so many together she let one fall at the feet of the barber, who took it up, curious to know whose it was, and found it said, "History of the Famous Knight, Tirante el Blanco."

"God bless me!" said the curate with a shout, "'Tirante el Blanco' here! Hand it over, gossip, for in it I reckon I have found a treasury of enjoyment and a mine of recreation. Here is Don Kyrieleison of Montalvan, a valiant knight,

and his brother Thomas of Montalvan, and the knight Fonseca, with the battle the bold Tirante fought with the mastiff, and the witticisms of the damsel Placerdemivida, and the loves and wiles of the widow Reposada, and the empress in love with the squire Hipolito—in truth, gossip, by right of its style it is the best book in the world. Here knights eat and sleep, and die in their beds, and make their wills before dying, and a great deal more of which there is nothing in all the other books. Nevertheless, I say he who wrote it, for deliberately composing such fooleries, deserves to be sent to the galleys for life. Take it home with you and read it, and you will see that what I have said is true."

"As you will," said the barber; "but what are we to do with these little books that are left?"

"These must be, not chivalry, but poetry," said the curate; and opening one he saw it was the "Diana" of Jorge de Montemayor, and, supposing all the others to be of the same sort, "these," he said, "do not deserve to be burned like the others, for they neither do nor can do the mischief the books of chivalry have done, being books of entertainment that can hurt no one."

"Ah, señor!" said the niece, "your worship had better order these to be burned as well as the others; for it would be no wonder if, after being cured of his chivalry disorder, my uncle, by reading these, took a fancy to turn shepherd and range the woods and fields singing and piping; or, what would be still worse, to turn poet, which they say is an incurable and infectious malady."

"The damsel is right," said the curate, "and it will be well to put this stumbling-block and temptation out of our friend's way. To begin, then, with the 'Diana' of Montemayor. I am of opinion it should not be burned, but that it should be cleared of all that about the sage Felicia and the magic water, and of almost all the longer pieces of verse: let it keep, and welcome, its prose and the honour of being the first of books of the kind."

"This that comes next," said the barber, "is the 'Diana,' entitled the 'Second Part, by the Salamancan,' and this other has the same title, and its author is Gil Polo."

"As for that of the Salamancan," replied the curate, "let it go to swell the number of the condemned in the yard, and let Gil Polo's be preserved as if it came from Apollo himself: but get on, gossip, and make haste, for it is growing late."

"This book," said the barber, opening another, "is the ten books of the 'Fortune of Love,' written by Antonio de Lofraso, a Sardinian poet."

"By the orders I have received," said the curate, "since Apollo has been Apollo, and the Muses have been Muses, and poets have been poets, so droll and absurd a book as this has never been written, and in its way it is the best and the most singular of all of this species that have as yet appeared, and he who has not read it may be sure he has never read what is delightful. Give it here, gossip, for I make more account of having found it than if they had given me a cassock of Florence stuff."

He put it aside with extreme satisfaction, and the barber went on, "These that come next are 'The Shepherd of Iberia,' 'Nymphs of Henares,' and 'The Enlightenment of Jealousy.'"

"Then all we have to do," said the curate, "is to hand them over to the secular arm of the housekeeper, and ask me not why, or we shall never have done."

"This next is the 'Pastor de Filida.'"

"No Pastor that," said the curate, "but a highly polished courtier; let it be preserved as a precious jewel."

"This large one here," said the barber, "is called 'The Treasury of various Poems.'"

"If there were not so many of them," said the curate, "they would be more relished: this book must be weeded and cleansed of certain vulgarities which it has with its excellences; let it be preserved because the author is a friend of mine, and out of respect for other more heroic and loftier works that he has written."

"This," continued the barber, "is the 'Cancionero' of Lopez de Maldonado."

"The author of that book, too," said the curate, "is a great friend of mine, and his verses from his own mouth are the admiration of all who hear them, for such is the sweetness of his voice that he enchants when he chants them: it gives rather too much of its eclogues, but what is good was never yet plentiful: let it be kept with those that have been set apart. But what book is that next it?"

"The 'Galatea' of Miguel de Cervantes," said the barber.

"That Cervantes has been for many years a great friend of mine, and to my knowledge he has had more experience in reverses than in verses. His book has some good invention in it, it presents us with something but brings nothing to a conclusion: we must wait for the Second Part it promises: perhaps with amendment it may succeed in winning the full measure of grace that is now denied it; and in the mean time do you, señor gossip, keep it shut up in your own quarters."

"Very good," said the barber; "and here come three together, the 'Araucana' of Don Alonso de Ercilla, the 'Austriada' of Juan Rufo, Justice of Cordova, and the 'Montserrate' of Christobal de Virues, the Valencian poet."

"These three books," said the curate, "are the best that have been written in Castilian in heroic verse, and they may compare with the most famous of Italy; let them be preserved as the richest treasures of poetry that Spain possesses."

The curate was tired and would not look into any more books, and so he decided that, "contents uncertified," all the rest should be burned; but just then the barber held open one, called "The Tears of Angelica."

"I should have shed tears myself," said the curate when he heard the title, "had I ordered that book to be burned, for its author was one of the famous poets of the world, not to say of Spain, and was very happy in the translation of some of Ovid's fables."

JORIS-KARL HUYSMANS AGAINST THE GRAIN FROM CHAPTER 3 (1884)

The second half of the fifth century had arrived, the horrible epoch when frightful motions convulsed the earth. The Barbarians sacked Gaul. Paralyzed Rome, pillaged by the Visigoths, felt its life grow feeble, perceived its extremities, the occident and the orient, writhe in blood and grow more exhausted from day to day.
In this general dissolution, in the successive assassination of the Caesars, in the turmoil of carnage from one end of Europe to another, there resounded a terrible shout of triumph, stifling all clamors, silencing all voices. On the banks of the Danube, thousands of men astride on small horses, clad in rat-skin coats, monstrous Tartars with enormous heads, flat noses, chins gullied with scars and gashes, and jaundiced faces bare of hair, rushed at full speed to envelop the territories of the Lower Empire like a whirlwind.
Everything disappeared in the dust of their gallopings, in the smoke of the conflagrations. Darkness fell, and the amazed people trembled, as they heard the fearful tornado which passed with thunder crashes. The hordes of Huns razed Europe, rushed toward Gaul, overran the plains of Chalons where Aetius pillaged it in an awful charge. The plains, gorged with blood, foamed like a purple sea. Two hundred thousand corpses barred the way, broke the movement of this avalanche which, swerving, fell with mighty thunderclaps, against Italy whose exterminated towns flamed like burning bricks.
The Occidental Empire crumbled beneath the shock; the moribund life which it was pursuing to imbecility and foulness, was extinguished. For another reason, the end of the universe seemed near; such cities as had been forgotten by Attila were decimated by famine and plague. The Latin language in its turn, seemed to sink under the world's ruins. Years hastened on. The Barbarian idioms began to be modulated, to leave their vein-

stones and form real languages. Latin, saved in the debacle by the cloisters, was confined in its usage to the convents and monasteries. Here and there some poets gleamed, dully and coldly: the African Dracontius with his *Hexameron*, Claudius Memertius, with his liturgical poetry; Avitus of Vienne; then, the biographers like Ennodius, who narrates the prodigies of that perspicacious and venerated diplomat, Saint Epiphanius, the upright and vigilant pastor; or like Eugippus, who tells of the life of Saint Severin, that mysterious hermit and humble ascetic who appeared like an angel of grace to the distressed people, mad with suffering and fear; writers like Veranius of Gevaudan who prepared a little treatise on continence; like Aurelianus and Ferreolus who compiled the ecclesiastical canons; historians like Rotherius, famous for a lost history of the Huns.

Des Esseintes library did not contain many works of the centuries immediately succeeding. Notwithstanding this deficiency, the sixth century was represented by Fortunatus, bishop of Poitiers, whose hymns and *Vexila regis*, carved out of the old carrion of the Latin language and spiced with the aromatics of the Church, haunted him on certain days; by Boethius, Gregory of Tours, and Jornandez. In the seventh and eighth centuries since, in addition to the low Latin of the Chroniclers, the Fredegaires and Paul Diacres, and the poems contained in the Bangor antiphonary which he sometimes read for the alphabetical and mono-rhymed hymn sung in honor of Saint Comgill, the literature limited itself almost exclusively to biographies of saints, to the legend of Saint Columban, written by the monk, Jonas, and to that of the blessed Cuthbert, written by the Venerable Bede from the

notes of an anonymous monk of Lindisfarn, he contented himself with glancing over, in his moments of tedium, the works of these hagiographers and in again reading several extracts from the lives of Saint Rusticula and Saint Radegonda, related, the one by Defensorius, the other by the modest and ingenious Baudonivia, a nun of Poitiers.

But the singular works of Latin and Anglo-Saxon literature allured him still further. They included the whole series of riddles by Adhelme, Tatwine and Eusebius, who were descendants of Symphosius, and especially the enigmas composed by Saint Boniface, in acrostic strophes whose solution could be found in the initial letters of the verses.

His interest diminished with the end of those two centuries. Hardly pleased with the cumbersome mass of Carlovingian Latinists, the Alcuins and the Eginhards, he contented himself, as a specimen of the language of the ninth century, with the chronicles of Saint Gall, Freculfe and Reginon; with the poem of the siege of Paris written by Abbo le Courbe; with the didactic *Hortulus*, of the Benedictine Walafrid Strabo, whose chapter consecrated to the glory of the gourd as a symbol of fruitfulness, enlivened him; with the poem in which Ermold the Dark, celebrating the exploits of Louis the Debonair, a poem written in regular hexameters, in an austere, almost forbidding style and in a Latin of iron dipped in monastic waters with straws of sentiment, here and there, in the unpliant metal; with the *De viribus herbarum*, the poem of Macer Floridus, who particularly delighted him because of his poetic recipes and the very strange virtues which he ascribes to certain plants and flowers; to the aristolochia, for example, which, mixed with the flesh of a cow and placed on the lower part of a pregnant woman's abdomen, insures the birth of a male child; or to the borage which, when brewed into an infusion in a dining room, diverts guests; or to the peony whose powdered roots cure epilepsy; or to the fennel which, if placed on a woman's breasts, clears her water and stimulates the indolence of her periods.

Apart from several special, unclassified volumes, modern or dateless, certain works on the Cabbala, medicine and botany, certain odd tomes containing undiscoverable Christian poetry, and the anthology of the minor Latin poets of Wernsdorf; apart from *Meursius*, the manual of classical erotology of Forberg, and the diaconals used by confessors, which he dusted at rare intervals, his Latin library ended at the beginning of the tenth century.

And, in fact, the curiosity, the complicated naivete of the Christian language had also foundered. The balderdash of philosophers and scholars, the logomachy of the Middle Ages, thenceforth held absolute sway.

The sooty mass of chronicles and historical books and cartularies accumulated, and the stammering grace, the often exquisite awkwardness of the monks, placing the poetic remains of antiquity in a ragout, were dead. The fabrications of verbs and purified essences, of substantives breathing of incense, of bizarre adjectives, coarsely carved from gold, with the barbarous and charming taste of Gothic jewels, were destroyed. The old editions, beloved by Des Esseintes, here ended; and with a formidable leap of centuries, the books on his shelves went straight to the French language of the present century.

Jean-Charles Cazin
Interior of the Study of Doctor X, **19th century,**
Arras, Musée des Beaux-Arts

ITALO CALVINO
IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A TRAVELER
FROM CHAPTER 1 (1979)

So, then, you noticed in a newspaper that *If on a winter's night a traveler* had appeared, the new book by Italo Calvino, who hadn't published for several years. You went to the bookshop and bought the volume. Good for you.

In the shop window you have promptly identified the cover with the title you were looking for. Following this visual trail, you have forced your way through the shop past the thick barricade of Books You Haven't Read, which were frowning at you from the tables and shelves, trying to cow you. But you know you must never allow yourself to be awed, that among there extend for acres and acres the Books You Needn't Read, the Books Made For Purposes Other Than Reading, Books Read Even Before You Open Them Since They Belong To The Category Of Books Read Before Being Written. And thus you pass the outer girdle of ramparts, but then you are attacked by the infantry of the Books That If You Had More Than One Life You Would Certainly Also Read But Unfortunately Your Days Are Numbered. With a rapid maneuver you bypass them and move into the phalanxes of the Books You Mean To Read But There Are Others You Must Read First, the Books Too Expensive Now And You'll Wait Till They're Remaindered, the Books ditto When They Come Out In Paperback, Books You Can Borrow From Somebody, Books That Everybody's Read So It's As If You Had Read Them, Too. Eluding these assaults, you come up beneath the towers of the fortress, where other troops are holding out:

the Books You've Been Planning To Read For Ages,

the Books You've Been Hunting for Years Without Success,

the Books Dealing With Something You're Working On At The Moment,

the Books You Want To Own So They'll Be Handy Just In Case,

the Books You Could Put Aside Maybe To Read This Summer,

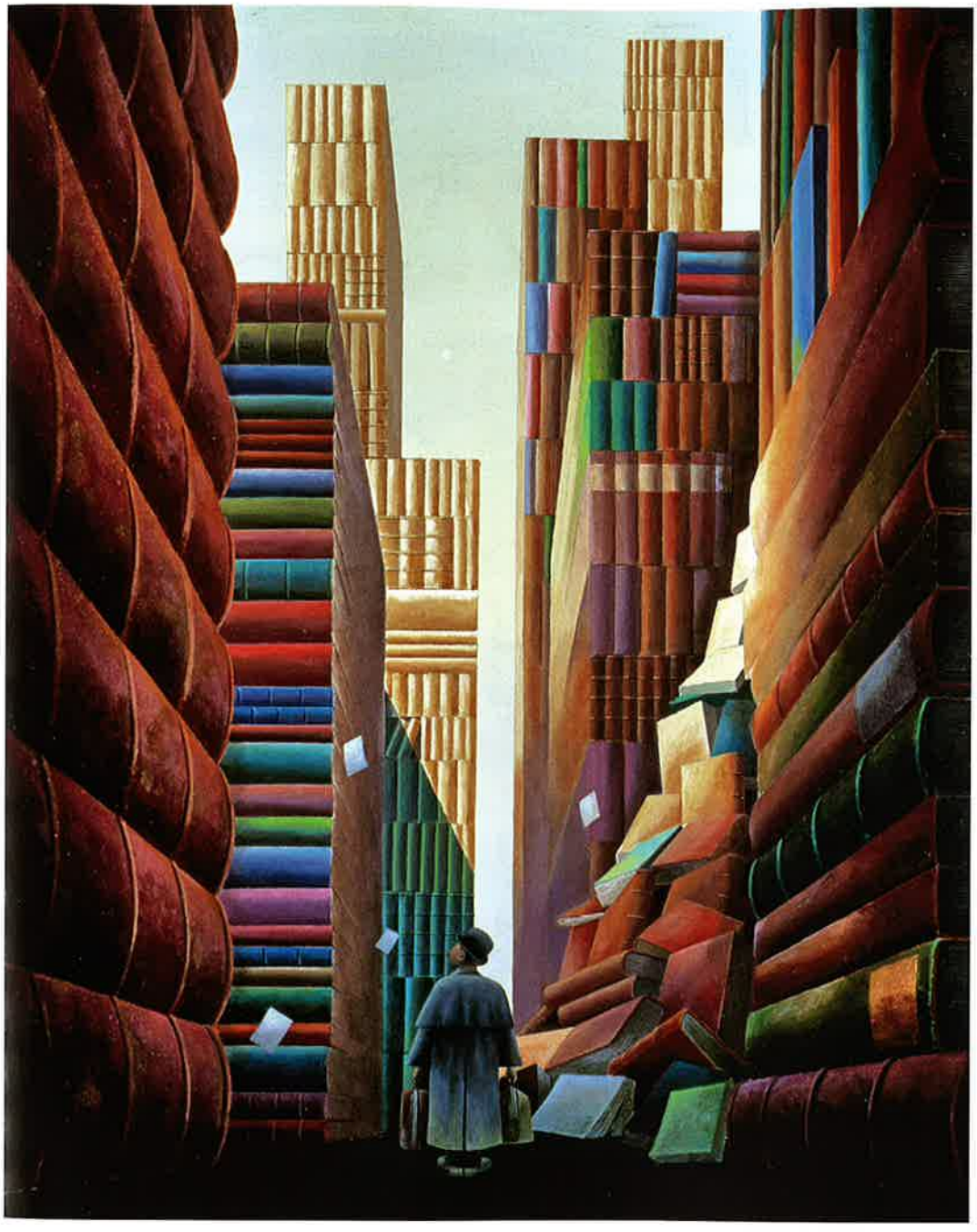
the Books You Need To Go With Other Books On Your Shelves,

the Books That Fill You With Sudden, Inexplicable Curiosity, Not Easily Justified.

Now you have been able to reduce the countless embattled troops to an array that is, to be sure, very large but still calculable in a finite number; but this relative relief is then undermined by the ambush of Books Read Long Ago Which It's Now Time To Reread and the Books You've Always Pretended To Have Read And Now It's Time To Sit Down And Really Read Them.

With a zigzag dash you shake them off and leap straight into the citadel of the New Books Whose Author Or Subject Appeals To You. Even inside this stronghold you can make some breaches in the ranks of the defenders, dividing them into New Books By Authors Or On Subjects Not New (for you or in general) and New Books By Authors Or On Subjects Completely Unknown (at least to you), and defining the attraction they have for you on the basis of your desires and needs for the new and the not new (for the new you seek in the not new and for the not new you seek in the new).

All this simply means that, having rapidly glanced over the titles of the volumes displayed in the bookshop, you have turned toward a stack of *If on a winter's night a traveler* fresh off the press, you have grasped a copy, and you have carried it to the cashier so that your right to own it can be established.



Bob Lescaux
Writing, 1999,
private collection

21. A NON-NORMAL LIST

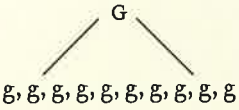
Let us go back to Borges' list of animals and repeat it because it needs to be re-read carefully: animals would therefore be "belonging to the emperor, embalmed, trained, suckling pigs, mermaids, fabulous, stray dogs, included in the present classification, those who struggle like madmen, countless, drawn with a very fine camel-hair brush, etcetera, those who have broken the vase, those that look like flies from a distance". Foucault observed that the monstrosity brought into circulation by Borges in his enumeration "consists of the fact that precisely the common space of the encounters to be found therein is reduced to nothing. That which is impossible is not the nearness of things, but the very site in which they could exist."[1] The list, in point of fact, defies any reasonable criterion of set theory because there can be countless mermaids, fabulous stray dogs, and suckling pigs belonging to the emperor which have broken the vase, and above all one cannot understand what sense there may be in putting that *etcetera* not at the end, in the place of other elements, but *among* the elements of the list itself. But this is not the only problem. The thing that makes the list really disquieting is that, among the elements it classifies, it also includes those already classified.

Here, at most, the ingenuous reader will feel bewildered. But the expert reader of the logic of sets perceives the vertigo that had once stunned Frege faced with the objection made by the young Russell. Let us establish that a set is normal when it does not also include itself. The set of all cats is not a cat, but a concept, and we might

Claudio Parmiggiani
Salita della memoria (Memory's Ascent), 1977,
Brescia, Collection Campiani

represent the situation as in Figure 1, where the capital *G* is the concept of cat that brings together all the individuals *g*, real cats that exist or that never existed or will exist. But there are also sets (called non-normal) that are elements of themselves. For example the set of all concepts is a concept and the set of all infinite sets is an infinite set. Hence (taking *X* as the set and *x* as its elements) we ought to represent this situation as in Figure 2.

(Figure 1)



(Figure 2)

x, x, x, x, X, x, x, x

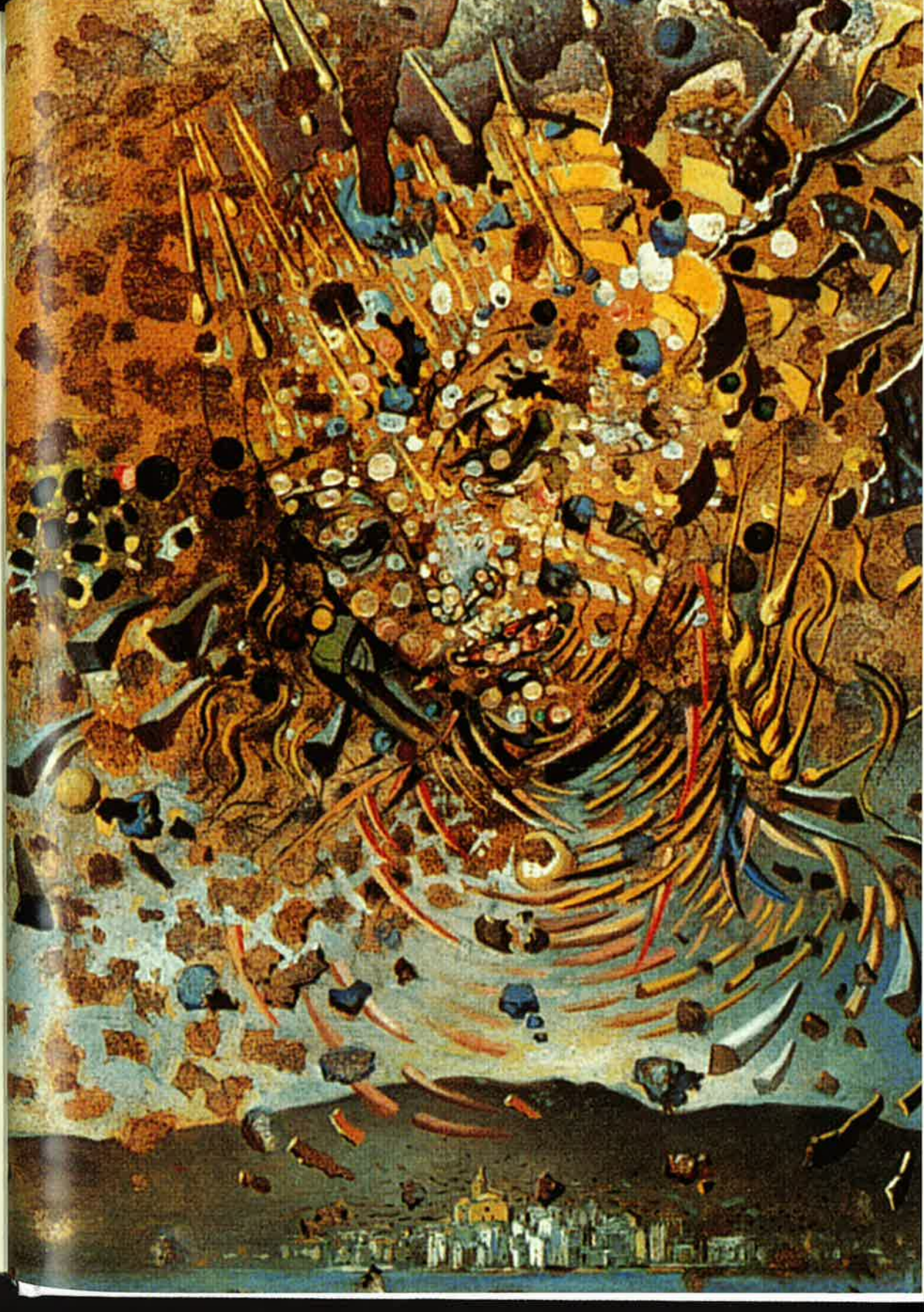
Now, how is the set of all normal sets? If it were a normal set and if it looked like Figure 1, we would have an incomplete set, because it does not also classify itself. If it were a non-normal set and it looked like Figure 2 we would have an illogical set, because among all the normal sets we would have also classified a non-normal set. Hence the paradox that ensues from this.

All Borges did was to play with this paradox. Either that of the animals is a normal set and hence it must not also contain itself, but this is what happens in Borges' list. On the other hand, if it were a non-normal set, the list would be incongruent because something would appear among the animals that is not an animal, because it is a set.

With Borges' classification the poetics of the list reaches the acme of heresy and blasphemes all preconstituted logical order. And it makes us think of Apollinaire's prayer and challenge in *La jolie rousse*:

You whose mouth is made in the image of God's
Mouth that is order in itself
Be indulgent in comparing us
With those who were the perfection of order
We who seek adventure everywhere

Salvador Dalí
Head Bombarded with Grains of Wheat (Particle Head over the Village of Cadaqués), 1954,
private collection



We are not your enemies
We wish to give you vast and strange territories
Where the mystery in bloom offers itself to he who would pluck it
With fires new and colours never seen
With a thousand imponderable phantasms
Requiring an infusion of reality

[...]

Pity for us who always battle on the frontiers
Of the boundless and the future
Pity for our errors and pity for our sins

[...]

Many things there are I dare not tell you
Many things you would not let me say
Have pity on me.

1. Michel Foucault, *Prefazione*, in *Le parole e le cose* (Milan, Rizzoli, 1967).

APPENDIX

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UNATTRIBUTED ILLUSTRATIONS
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Note on translation of the anthology

For passages previously unpublished in English and not mentioned in this bibliography, the translations herein are my own; all are based on the original-language versions named in the headings of each excerpt. Given the nature of Closky's, Prévert's, and Balestrini's poetic texts—all of which rely on alphabetic, syllabic, and other strictly language-based devices—I preferred to leave them in French rather than try to render their meanings in a translation that would lose the list-like sense of the original. Although every effort was made to create an accurate, fluid rendition of all selections, in certain cases content necessarily took precedence over form, in order to provide readers with an English version that clearly conveys the list-driven character of these particular texts. Reflecting on his own work as reader, writer, and translator, Nabokov once concluded, "The clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase." While I aimed to keep clumsiness to a minimum, it is in a similarly utilitarian spirit that I present these various excerpts. Naturally, any and all inaccuracies are my own.

—Alta L. Price