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A Reader  
on Reading

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## Notes Towards a Definition of the Ideal Library

And noticed that they were filled with cupboards and bookshelves.

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Chapter 1

THE IDEAL LIBRARY IS MEANT for one particular reader. Every reader must feel that he or she is the chosen one.

Above the door of the ideal library is written a variation of Rabelais's motto: "LYS CE QUE VOUDRA," "Read what you will."

The ideal library is both virtual and material. It allows for every technology, every container, every manifestation of the text.

The ideal library is of easy access. No high stairs, no slippery esplanades, no confusing multiplicity of doors, no intimidating guards must stand between the reader and the books.

The ideal library has comfortable but supportive seats with armrests and a curved back, like those of the lamented Salle Labrousse at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. The ideal library has ample desks, preferably with smooth leather tops, sockets for electronic equipment (on condition that they perform in utter silence), and soft individual lights that remind you of the green-glass reading lamps at the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires.

In 1250, Richard de Fournival compared the ideal library to a *hortus conclusus*, a walled garden.

The ideal library has warm walls of brick or wood, and also cool glass windows that open onto peaceful vistas. The ideal library is never a *hortus entirely conclusus*.

The ideal library holds mainly, but not only, books. It also collects maps, pictures, objects, music, voices, films, and photographs. The ideal library is a reading place in the broadest meaning of the term.

The ideal library allows every reader access to the stacks. A reader must be granted the freedom of chance encounters.

No shelf in the ideal library is higher or lower than the reach of the reader's arm. The ideal library does not require acrobatics.

In the ideal library it is never too warm or too cold.

The ideal library organizes without labeling.

No section in the ideal library is conclusive.

The map of the ideal library is its catalogue.

The ideal library has easy and plentiful access to food, drink, and photocopying machines.

The ideal library is both secluded and public, intimate and open to social intercourse, meant for meditation and for dialogue, parsimonious and generous, erudite and questioning, full of the despair of plenty and the hope of what has not yet been read.

The ideal library holds the promise of every possible book.

Every book in the ideal library has its echo in another.

The ideal library is an everlasting, ever-renewed anthology.

The ideal library has no closing hours.

The ideal library allows scribbling in its books.

The ideal library is both popular and secret. It holds all the acknowledged classics and all the classics known to only a few readers. In the ideal library Dante's *Commedia* sits next to Phil Cousineau's *Deadlines*, Montaigne's *Essays* next to Eduardo Lourenço's *Montaigne*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* next to Edgardo Cozarinsky's *The Bride of Odessa*, Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* next to Lázló Flöldényi's *Dostoyevsky Reads Hegel in Siberia and Bursts into Tears*.

In the ideal library, the reader's task is to subvert the established order.

The number of books in the ideal library varies. The Library of Alexandria is said to have held seven hundred thousand scrolls; Jorge Luis Borges's bookshelves contained barely five hundred volumes; the Birkenau concentration camp for children had a clandestine library of eight precious books that had to be hidden away in a different place every night.

Even when built out of walls and shelves and books, the ideal library is in the mind. The ideal library is the remembered library.

The ideal library suggests one continuous text with no discernable beginning and no foreseeable end.

In the ideal library there are no forbidden books and no recommended books.

The ideal library is familiar both to Saint Jerome and to Noam Chomsky.

In the ideal library no reader ever feels unwanted.

Every page in the ideal library is the first. None is the last.

Like Paul Valéry's boxes in the brain, the ideal library has sections inscribed thus: *To study on a more favorable occasion. Never to be thought about. Useless to go into further. Contents unexamined. Pointless business. Known treasure that can only be examined in a second life. Urgent. Dangerous. Delicate. Impossible. Abandoned. Reserved. Let others deal with this! My strong point. Difficult. Etc.*

The ideal library disarms the curse of Babel.

The ideal library symbolizes everything a society stands for. A society depends on its libraries to know who it is because libraries are society's memory.

The ideal library can grow endlessly without demanding more physical space, and can offer knowledge of everything without demanding more physical time. As a beautiful impossibility, the ideal library exists outside time and outside space.

Ancient ossuaries bore the inscription "What you are, we once were; what we are, you shall be." Much the same can be said of the ideal library's books and of their readers.

The ideal library is not an ossuary.

Some of the earliest libraries were kept by Egyptian priests, who furnished the departed souls with books to guide them through the kingdom of the dead. The ideal library maintains this soul-guiding function.

The ideal library both renews and preserves its collection. The ideal library is fluid.

There are certain books that, in themselves, are an ideal library. Examples: Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Dante's *Commedia*, Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*.

No compass is necessary in the ideal library. Its physical appearance is also its intellectual structure.

The architect of the ideal library is, first and foremost, an ideal reader.

The impossible task of every tyrant is to destroy the ideal library.

The impossible task of every reader is to rebuild the ideal library.

The ideal library (like every library) holds at least one line that has been written exclusively for you.