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The book in Globalization times

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In a lost corner of the British Museum, in London, there is a tiny clay tablet on which are carved some verses about the Flood. These verses, which belong to the Babylonian poem *Gilgamesh*, were written in cuneiform script more than four thousand three hundred years ago. The tablet was part of King Arsubanipal's Library, one of the first libraries now known. The sparkles of imagination of the unknown author of the *Gilgamesh* enlightened then only a handful of human beings: may be two hundred, may be a thousand. In that vast dawn of the species, reading was a much less frequent kind of knowledge than the knowledge of agriculture and of war. Stories perpetuated through the voice of the rhapsodists which sang and improvised while the rest heard and modified what they heard with the peals of their memory. Apart from a few stories about kings and warriors looking for eternity, the only purpose of those primitive clay tablets was commerce, and to record a few great events: victories, conquests, imperial rites.

Who knows how many independent writing systems were conceived then in other latitudes. The number of systems which has survived is cabalistical, seven, and all of them originated in the East of Greece, in Crete, in the Mesopotamia, in the Nile and Indo valleys, among the large rivers of China, in the Anatolia plateau, in the ancient Persian city of Susa. It took the species two millenniums to knit the words together and establish with them that melody that we now know as *book*. The first books did not tell stories. They were divination formulas, the reading of flying birds, of the movement of the grass, of the roam of the animals. Through nature, human beings tried to decipher their destiny. And books were something like the fixedness of destiny, eternity immobilized in words.

Perhaps the book's greatest wonder resides in its capacity of transforming itself, of being first a voice which is enriched from generation to generation, until someone, afraid that the voice might get lost in the winds of time orders to retain it in manuscripts, as it happened with the *Iliad* and *A Thousand and One Nights*, to become later a sacred text, a printed sheet of paper, the Library of Babel, a virtual symbol that glides in computers. At the original core of the book, we find, of course, writing; and

Aristotle, the 15th century Chinese sages, as well as Voltaire and the Encyclopedists agreed on its definition. In his *Logic*, Aristotle said “that spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and that written words are the symbols of spoken words”. According to Tai T’ung, the Chinese defined writing as the “painted word”, and speech as “the breath of vowels”. Voltaire said something similar: “Writing is the painting of the voice; the more it bears a resemblance, the better”.

Throughout the long illiterate dawn of history, men composed books without knowing they were doing so, voices, successions of stories that were unfolded in the public space: the squares, the temples, the academies. The notion of author in the sense we understand it now did not exist: writing or creating was a collective activity, an argument, a dialogue like the ones Plato transcribed. *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey* resulted from the work of many men or, if you wish to say, of all the Homers that worked on them between the 8th and 6th centuries Before Christ. Every *Iliad’s* copyist added a line or deleted a scene, until that mobile space became fixed; the same happened with the canonical gospels and the apocryphal ones, with Confucius’ texts burnt by the first Chinese Emperor and rewritten by the memory of his disciples, and even with a famous novel, the profuse and medieval *Shui-hu-zhuan*, or *The Water Margin*, whose hundreds of episodes could be thousands, hundreds of thousands or just one.

The force of the book resides in its protean power, in being a voice or volume or virtual sign or all of them at the same time, to spring up from one person or to embody, on its own, a whole culture.

In ancient times, those who heard the words of a book, or copied them, or read them bestowing oral shape to what was written (because silent reading is, as it is known, a late ceremony), interchanged the book with their community. Reading was something that belonged to the public sphere, and to enrich what was being read with additions or comments, instead of being forbidden, deserved collective gratitude. Although later on the Doctors of the Church drew a division line between private or sacred knowledge and public or lay knowledge, many poems, chivalric novels and popular tales were the result of the work of generations that had been depositing on them their cultural sediments and linguistic changes, as in the case of *Amadis de Gaula*, the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Poem of the Cid* and the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*. At the same time, it was through some great individual creations that the notion of author began to be imposed. That notion appears in the *Divine Comedy* by Dante, in Geoffrey Chaucer’s tales, in the *Book of Good Love* by the Archpriest of Hita, and in a woman that preceded all of them, Lady Shikibu Murasaki, who, between the years 1001 and 1003 recreated and embellished the Japanese language like her *Genji monogatari*, the first and one of the most splendid novels that we can recall.

The invention of the printing press was decisive in the relationship between author and reader due to the fact that the book was installed in the private sphere. It was introduced in the intimacy of men, it became the companion of loners, the confidant of illusions and secrets, the transmitter of ciphered messages. Besides, it enabled each phrase to be read according to the mood that each reader had at a certain moment of their lives. At the same time, the sense of the phrase could shift in the reader’s imagination as time went by, such as Jorge Luis Borges accurately described in his short story *Pierre Menard, author of Don Quixote*.

A short time after Gutenberg’s first Bibles, in 1474, Aldus Manutius launched in Venice the adventure of publishing some works that he needed for his humanistic courses. He first printed, in manageable format, a few Greek classics: Sophocles, Aristotle, Plato, Thucydides; he then went on in Latin, with Virgil, Horace and Ovid, and completed the collection with dictionaries and grammar treatises. These editions, the most splendid ones in the history of printing, had been conceived with an even more extraordinary purpose. They had been edited by Manutius without any notes or commentaries, so that readers would relate to the book in a direct way, away of all mediation and, in that way, could establish a dialogue “with the glorious dead” in their own manner.

The book as a kind of dialogue with the dead is an idea that will resound five centuries later, when Michael de Certeau defines history as the staging of a population of dead people, and when Jean-Paul

Sartre states that all piece of work only becomes real and has sense the moment it is perceived by somebody else, appropriated by that someone. The reader's intimacy with the book engendered thousands of Don Quixote, thousands of young Werther, all equally desperate, but all of them with a different kind of despair; legions of Madame Bovary, of David Copperfield, of Leopold Bloom, of Humbert Humbert and Lolitas. Although I am only mentioning characters in novels, the intimacy created by the printed word covers all the array of human knowledge: cinema, history, science, philosophy, what was first imagination and then sign. Sooner or later, any sign finds its most noble way of dissemination through the library: as a manuscript, a photograph, an engraving, an essay for an expert, a newspaper, a magazine, a book and virtual information.

The kingdom of virtuality has given us back, in a certain way, the communal way of reading, of communicating and interacting through signs. Thus, mankind has been turning from the original agora, from the creation of language by superimposed layers, to the intimacy between reader and text, and from there has returned to a different form of agora, in which the reader, alone in front of his keyboard, knits his experience with infinite texts that he comes across on the web. The books and information that circulate in that virtual space can be found and taken by anyone –in fact, that is what frequently happens–, modified by comments or rewrites that are created while reading. Once I read in one of those public forums where thousands of people navigate, that an impetuous participant had been rewriting the Quixote, translating Sancho Panza's refined speech when he says good-bye to his post as governor in the Barataria Island into the rural language of a Spanish peasant from the 16th century. That intrusion led to an endless debate, in which linguistic students and worshippers of the Golden Age intervened and corrected the original correction or proposed other variants to the same speech. In this unlimited spider web, the text remained the text, faithful to its original fixedness, but at the same time it opened up, now, like a delta in which everybody meddled with the text and turned it upside down. The text was hurt, but at the same time it was revived because any word which is exhumed and questioned is also alive.

Little by little, this new form of agora, that purgatory or heaven of virtuality has started growing like an uncontrollable tree. The library of Babel, that one in which Borges included all past books and all non-written books, and variations of each one of them, has arrived sooner than expected. It is already among us.

The philosopher Paul Virilio wrote that if the central element of modernity was the velocity of matter –Fernand Braudel spoke of the “slowness of transport” in his history of European civilization from the 15th to the 18th centuries–, the core data of postmodernity is the velocity of light. “The human being – writes Virilio– is overcome by a technology that, nonetheless, has been created by his mind and his hands, and it is capable of executing actions that go far beyond what we understand by past and by future”. On the web, in internet, which has global dispersion, there is, in fact, neither day nor night and not even hours. I read today what happened yesterday on the Island of Pascua and what happened tomorrow in Tokyo. My time is double or multiple. We are, now, beings immersed in an ocean of time that moves faster than our imagination.

It would be wrong to think, as other false prophets have already preached, that virtual information will end with the book as we know it: that is to say, as the rectangular object made of cardboard, fabric or leather, inside of which there are sheets of paper covered with signs. Maybe the book transmutes into other books, we have seen that already. Maybe the pages of an entire library can be moved by a slight touch with the index finger, as it happened to me when I watched, in a museum on Sixth Avenue in New York, the pictures of children and adolescents taken by the Oxford deacon whom we know by the name of Lewis Carroll. But the book will prevail in the shape it assumed more than five hundred and fifty years ago, because there will always be someone that would prefer or rather choose to reach intimacy with an author in that way, through the pages that come alive as the book is opened. There will always be someone who would like to return to a book only in the edition in which he found it the first time, to the dedications, recollections, and the past that have remained attached to that object. William Gates himself, owner of Microsoft, explained in 1999 that “reading from a screen is undoubtedly an inferior experience to reading from paper. But even I, that can have access to the most

costly screens,” he said, “would rather have the texts that are more than four or five pages long printed.”

All great cultures have been created around a sacramental book, and for some nations like the Jewish one, the book was, during many centuries, the only possible homeland. From the Old Testament, from the Gospel, from the *Torah*, from the *Qu’ram*, from Confucius’ *Shu* and *Yi*, from the Buddhist’s canonical *Buddhavacana* we have learnt almost everything that man has imagined about God, or – according to faith– has been revealed by the Holy Spirit. The list is endless: the Mayan *Chilam Balam* and *Popol Vuh*, the cosmologies of almost illiterate peoples such as the warao from the Amacuro Delta, the sacred texts from the south of the Nile and from the Greenland plains should also be included. Books are not only the compass that indicates our identity and our diversity, but also the point of reference to understand the Other and the others.

During my adolescence, librarians seemed to me extensions of God, heirs of an inexhaustible knowledge. Almost all of my education comes, more than from university texts, from the volumes I borrowed from Sarmiento Library in Tucuman when I was between 11 and 18 years old. Every morning I returned the book which I had borrowed the day before and the librarian, a history teacher who had been dismissed because she had dissented from the government, always set aside for me an amazingly new book. That is how, I had access to the unforgettable knowledge of Herodotus, of Thucydides, to Plato’s dialogues, to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, to Shakespeare’s six great tragedies, to the Quixote, to Testut-Latarjet’s anatomy (which I examined as if it were a novel), to Dumas’ fictions on the 16th century, to Hermann Broch’s trilogy *The Sleepwalkers*, to Franz Kafka’s *The Castle*, to Borges’ short stories, to Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s heated writings.

At that point in time, not so long ago, the book kept its aura of holiness, which, according to Borges, it should never lose. I wouldn’t speak of holiness, perhaps, I *should* speak of dignity. Half a century ago, the book was still the source of all knowledge, and not –as it occurred later– another kind of merchandise. At that time the nature of the book was not being threatened by multinational joint ventures or the torrents of globalization that might stimulate economy and production, but not the imagination and the freedom to create. The book resists, but the market advances like a horde. Perhaps two personal anecdotes may be of use to exemplify clearly what I mean.

A few months ago, I went to a branch of Borders, in East Brunswick, New Jersey. It is one of those huge supermarkets where books, records, calendars and congratulation cards coexist. In general, Borders, Barnes and Noble and chains of this sort –like Fnac in France and Spain– sell some classic masterpieces in accessible editions. What I was trying to find that day was a copy of *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* in the annotated edition for secondary school. I looked for it in the shelves where the previous week I had found for my daughter *The Tragedy of Richard The Third* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, from the same author, but I could not find it. I did find the book I needed in editions of complete works which were of no use to me, so I went to the information desk for help. A negligent employee had taken refuge there behind a sports magazine. I asked him to check in the computer if there were any extra copies in stock and I gave him the complete title of the book. It was not registered in their database. I suggested then to try with the abridged title, *Romeo and Juliet*. No luck. So, I said: ‘Let’s try with the name of the author.’ The employee looked at me with supreme indifference and asked: ‘Could you spell out the name, please?’ It seems a pathetic joke. It is not. At the end of May, I went to Fnac in Madrid to buy any edition of the *Buscón* by Quevedo, the familiar name given to the picaresque novel *La vida del buscón llamado don Pablos*, by Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas. I asked an employee who was putting on some make-up: ‘Where can I find *El Buscón* by Quevedo?’ The answer was even more disappointing than in New Jersey. She went to her computer, checked in the database and found no information at all. Helpful, she then added, ‘Let’s see... by the title of the book, that novel is not available. It might be easier if we tried by the name of the author.’

The battles in times of globalization are no longer fought to conquer new readers or to create them, but to prevent the market from *uneducating* them, and to prevent readers from giving up the habit of

regarding the book as way of looking at themselves too. Globalization, together with oceans of information to process and books to read, has engendered, at the same time, abysses of inequality which before had been impossible to imagine, because what is globalized is the market, not people. One fifth of the world population does not have access to any kind of education yet, and more than the remaining three fifths cannot buy books, because food, accommodation and clothing come first in a family's basic list, and frequently, with the salaries they earn, they cannot afford any of these. Today one thousand five hundred million people lack drinking water and more than a thousand million people live overcrowded in miserable and unworthy homes. A thousand million people cannot read nor write.

But statistics are not important. What matters here has to do with reasons related to moral issues and to justice, which could upset the most indifferent spirits, although it means nothing to the greedy ones. One thousand three hundred million people live on less than a dollar a day. How can they think of buying books? And, at the other end of the social ladder, the three richest men in the world earn more than the total national product of the forty three poorest countries in the world.

Globalization has increased poverty and the dependency of weaker countries, but I hope that, in the long run, it will open the eyes of more and more people. We are in the remotest corner of the world; every day when we wake up we feel the weight of the map on our shoulders, but we are also in the centre, because ignorance makes us all equal. A peasant from Ohio, from Périgord or from Ukrania can know as little about quantum physics or space exploration techniques as a peasant in the Argentine prairies or a craftsman in Zimbabwe. Perhaps the peasant in Ohio can watch the images of Mars on television without any problem, and perhaps the peasant from the pampas will have the light cut off while he is watching TV. But essentially, what makes us equal is not what we know, but what we do not know. In that orphanage of the global universe, the book is our only tool for understanding, the circulatory system that enables communication. What wars have done throughout history to separate us and take us back to the past, has been compensated by what the book has done to unite us and to place us in the future.

To celebrate the existence and the multiplication of libraries, thus, is not only an act of justice. It is also a way of proclaiming, as William Faulkner in the speech he gave when he received the Nobel Prize, that “the inexhaustible human voice is still talking. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail, because he has a soul that speaks in books, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance”.

We are in a country where its biggest library, the National Library, acquired the value of symbol through the work of Jorge Luis Borges, who was its director for eighteen years. Borges was proud of the fact that he had been preceded by two great blind writers –like him–, and in his “Poema de los Dones” he elaborated a net of symbols where blindness, reading and the happiness of books allowed him to imagine Paradise in the shape of a library. Borges writes: “From this city of books/ a pair of eyes without light were made the owners/ that can only read in the libraries of dreams”.¹

Borges' Paradise has always been modest –at the most, a million of volumes– and was signalled by a singular fate. The palace that housed the National Library on Mexico Street was, first, at the beginning of the 20th century, the site of the National Lottery, as it is evidenced by representations of Fortune that can still be seen on the façade: winged nymphs blind in the eyes too, and big bronze lottery wheels. More than two decades ago, were the books moved to the other end of Buenos Aires, and in the ancient building, of a Renaissance Milanese style, the Music National Centre (Centro Nacional de Música) was located. Where before the rumor of luck and, later, the secret clamor of books was heard, there are now violins, trombones, bassoons and pianos. The fate of things has always been strange in Argentina.

¹ The original text in Spanish says: “De esta ciudad de libros hizo dueños/a unos ojos sin luz, que sólo pueden/leer en las bibliotecas de los sueños”.

Two amazing libraries were housed in this continent of amazement. One of them has the breath of myths. It was gathered by the kings of Portugal during four centuries, from the 15th to the 18th. Some time before the earthquake that destroyed Lisbon in 1755, it held almost seventy thousand volumes – an enormous figure at the time–, in addition to rare documents, codices, incunabula, engraving collections, scores, maps. As Lilia Moritz Schwarcz says in an exceptional book, a *Longa Viagem da Biblioteca dos Reis*, that accumulation of literate riches was the true symbol of the Portuguese monarchy.

This fact was verified when the whole court of Braganca, threatened by the Napoleonic invasion, ran away to Brazil in November 1807. The removal of the books was a matter of State, as well as that of the royal attributes. Even so, some precious treasures were left in the open for months, in a ship anchored a few miles away from the port of Lisbon. A printed Bible by Gutenberg in Mainz and a Book of Hours from the 14th century were saved *in extremis*, while it was raining, by a librarian whose name deserves to be remembered, Luis Joaquin dos Santos Marrocos, because it was he who, in March 1811, transported the remaining 87 boxes of books which had been sailing between Portugal and the Azores Islands to the “barbarian tropical colony”.

After a long maritime misfortune, the giant library drifted on land too. The first volumes were placed in the catacombs where lay the remains of some Carmelite friars, but as new shipments arrived, the place became insufficient, so King Joao VI chose the last floor of a hospital to place the library, until it was finally located in a building near the Royal Palace, in Rio de Janeiro, where it began to irradiate its influence over the emerging Brazilian empire. Something strange, however, must have happened at the port of Salvador, in the Bay of Todos los Santos, where the first ship with the court and the books anchored. Two or three boxes were lost when disembarking; and that seemed to be their fate, to be lost forever, until in 1984, some illustrations from a cabinet of curiosities from the Ancient Royal Library, in which serpents and butterflies were depicted, were found in an altar of the ‘sertao’, at the northeast of Brazil, where they were used for religious invocations. In one way or the other, the books fulfilled the dreams of mankind: for some it meant knowledge, for others freedom, for others faith, will to believe.

The other library of prodigies is the one J. Pierpont Morgan decided to build on Madison Avenue, between 36th and 37th street in New York, thirty years before Borges wrote *The Library of Babel*. Borges’ library based its wealth on quantity, and that excessive ambition made it useless. The fame of Morgan’s Library derives from quality. It only holds the books that humankind considers indispensable, but with an invariable attribute: all are unique copies, volumes condemned to eternity.

Morgan’s crazy library has, nevertheless, little to do with knowledge. It only praises the glories of edition and of writing. Although, the banker had read few books, he learnt to buy them with the knowledge of a scholar. During a trip to Europe in 1860 he found, who knows how, the manuscript of *Endymion*, a poem in four parts that John Keats had published in 1818. About the same time, he persuaded Charles Dickens to give him, for almost nothing, the copybook where he had written “A Christmas Carol”, one of the most popular stories in the history of literature.

Following the advice of his nephew Junius, Morgan bought Assyrian tablets, gospels enlightened by medieval monks, Gutenberg’s first Bible, the first printout of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* (Venice, 1478), the first edition of Shakespeare’s comedies, stories and tragedies (London, 1623), the *Principia mathematica*’s manuscript, where Newton formulated the Law of gravity, the *Encyclopédie* edited by Diderot, all the editions imaginable of *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupéry.

In the palace on Madison Avenue there are more valuable manuscripts than in the British Museum. There we can find the only surviving fragments of *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, the last version of John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, several letters by George Washington, by Jane Austen, and by William Thackeray, the original copy of Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, Byron’s *Don Juan*, the complete text of Oscar Wilde’s *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, and the thirty five pages in which Einstein explains how he came up with the theory of relativity.

Although all the great masters of humankind were, mostly, oral masters, men keep looking in books for that suspension of wisdom, that breath of eternity that it seems it cannot be found anywhere else: neither in oratory nor in the fugitive cinema.

The book is like water. Locks and dams are imposed on it, but it always ends up coming through. It seems to be strengthened by adversity. Even in the worst moments, the ideas that later turned into the Word, have evaded censorship and gags to tell a few home truths and keep on being incorruptible and submissive while everybody around shuts up, yields and is corrupt. The most varied weapons have been tried to silence them: they have been repressed with imprisonment, with the stocks, being burnt at the stake, with false voluntary confessions like Galileo's before the Inquisition, and Isak Babel's before Stalin. Bribery has also been tried, the seduction of awards and honors, the hospice, threats of death, exile, but still the ideas turned into Words, the Word, did not succeed in burying or taming its truths.

The written word lasted and prevailed in spite of the fires that had plotted to destroy it, since Emperor Shih Huang-ti, who constructed the Great Wall of China ordered to burn all the books prior to his reign, except for some treatises on agriculture, only to prove –in vain– that world history began with him. The same fanaticism led to the merciless assault on the library that the Ptolomies had created in Alexandria three centuries before the Christian era, and which succumbed to the fire during one of the civil wars that took place under Emperor Aurelian's rule, about the year 273. Thousands of books were also burnt by the Nazis, in 1933, and in a more stealthily manner, but not less cruel, several thousands of books were burnt here, in the square of a regiment in Córdoba, at the beginning of 1977.

Intolerance claimed one of the most lamentable victims in Baghdad, on April 14th, 2003, a month after the invasion of Iraq and the same day that we learnt that Saddam Hussein had escaped. The plunder devoured the city with a blind impetus and the National Library also succumbed that afternoon. At least 800 thousand volumes were then burnt and stolen, as if they were the ones to be blamed for Western misfortunes. Omar Khayyam's entire collection was destroyed; and the microfilm machines and the boxes containing documents of the extinguished Ottoman Empire were destroyed by mortar bullets. The Sumerian cuneiform tablets and almost all Babylonian scriptures belonging to the poem *Gilgamesh* were also stolen or destroyed. The Library director was able to save some clay fragments from which the following verses have been ripped off:

*"Humbaba's roar is a Flood, his mouth is Fire, and his breath is Death!
He can hear 100 leagues away any rustling(?) in his forest!
Who would go down into his forest!"*²

These frugal lines belong to the third tablet, much less fortunate than the eleventh tablet, the one that speaks about the Flood, in the British Museum.

But neither the hatred of the barbarians nor the intolerance of unjust men have been able to destroy the book, whose memory is also the memory of mankind.

In any of its forms, either in *Gilgamesh's* cuneiform tablets or in the hand-made copies of prayer books made by the monks in the medieval monasteries or in Gutenberg's first Bible, in Dickens' pamphlets, in the three cds that comprise the thirty volumes of the Encyclopaedia Britannica or in the archives that people exchange on internet, the book has always been not only a celebration of knowledge, but also, and first of all, a celebration of life. And what does celebrating life mean in times of market, financial and technological integration? It means to celebrate the values that define the best of the human spirit: language, imagination, freedom, a keen desire for justice, the search for equality. We, here and now, still imagine Paradise as some kind of library.

² *The Epic of Gilgamesh* translated by Maureen Gallery Kovacs