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The Library and the Librarian as a Theme in Literature

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Teresa Vilariño Picos,
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Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.5 (2011)**
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Ed. María Teresa Vilariño Picos and Anxo Abuín González
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Abstract: In her article "The Library and the Librarian as a Theme in Literature," Teresa Vilariño Picos explores in several languages and genres (literature, cinema, television), the image of the library and the librarian. Vilariño Picos argues that the image of the library and the librarian often refer the reader or viewer to a perception where the space of books represents universal humanity and knowledge despite the often negative view depicted. In Vilariño Picos's discussion particular attention is paid to the works of Elias Canetti, Jorge Luis Borges, Umberto Eco, and David Lodge in literature and Alain Resnais film and Manolo Valdés in art. As well, she explores the theme in videogames and television series.

María Teresa VILARIÑO PICOS

The Library and the Librarian as a Theme in Literature

In literature, the character of the librarian has two main variants: it can be a person who feels the duality of the passion for reading and the need to communicate it. The librarian would be both the guardian of books and the guardian of souls, curator of history and of the community. The librarian is often described as a visionary in contact with written history and experience (Chaintreau and Lemaître 21). Sometimes librarians become irascible, sour, misanthropic, unbearable heroes. The second type of librarians are similar and follow the same pattern. In the case of women, for example, they are bitter, neglected women who have spent their life among books. An example is in the scene showing the arrival at the library in *Citizen Kane*: it is an enormous, inhospitable place and the door through which one enters is heavy and opens with a screeching noise. The gatekeeper is a black-haired woman with glasses, dressed austerely and with behavior to match. Here we have the second variant of the character, which paints the librarian with the grotesque image of a hostile and unfriendly being. In Western literature, the importance of the theme of the library is even greater. For Walter Benjamin the book needs company and requires the context of other books to which it always refers. The library facilitates concrete, physical transtextuality, the finding and production of references between the individual pieces of the collection. The book is understood as a secular extension of humanity's imagination, of its memory and, to some extent, all books have an element of consecration. Libraries have been associated with the idea of a dense physical space, a venerated space, a temple of knowledge, a heavenly space removed from real life in which we can spot the distracted reader lost in books and, ultimately, in thought (see, e.g., Artal). It is not surprising, therefore, that silence should be one of the qualities most staunchly defended by librarians. The library, as place of study, is thus associated with an area reserved for children and young people. And, since we come from a print culture, in our collective unconscious, the library is twinned with the act of reading: the library rises infinite, out of proportion, in expectation without the horizon of expectation, in the absolute impatience of a desire for memory (Derrida).

In her work on children's literature Ana Garralón concludes that the library appears but rarely, which is especially disappointing, since the topics of children's books are closely related to the protagonists' daily lives and one would hope that the writers would have reflected the evolution and the growing activity of libraries. Along with a few stereotypical examples (libraries without patrons, almost exclusively female staff), Garralón refers to works of children's literature in which libraries and their workers were valued, understood and presented as helpful, active professionals. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the hero is punished for taking a library book and on another occasion the friends go to the library. Harry enters the Forbidden Section (where entry requires permission from a professor) until the librarian throws him out, brandishing a feather duster. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, with the heroes once again looking for a book in the Forbidden Section, the woman librarian is described as an unpleasant looking and acting person. Using the library, the friends uncover mysteries like that of the Philosopher's Stone. The library is strange, just like magic, the raison d'être of the school, but it is an ally of the protagonists.

The library appears in many detective or horror novels as a disquieting place, for example in Agatha Christie's *The Body in the Library*, Arturo Pérez Reverte's *El Club Dumas*, or Carlos Ruiz Zafón's *The Shadow of the Wind*. Pérez-Reverte's libraries are not public ones for general use, but as in *La Carta esférica*, in *El Club Dumas*, and *La piel del tambor* the specialized libraries of book collectors or antique dealers. There, the expert is able to reveal the mysteries of a manuscript, a nautical document, or an atlas for which people commit theft and even murder. In Pérez Reverte's novels we find the myth of the library as the key space in which to understand events or unravel plots by getting to the bottom of the mysteries of books. The author asks the reader to revisit his novel, to discover the books it contains, to retrace the steps he took to write it, and thus to engage with the literature it recalls (see, e.g., Perona). The library is also a laboratory in which to carry out experiments on the most basic and instinctive of human emotions. In H.P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow Out of Time*, a professor at a university suffers from dreams that transfer his consciousness to the body of

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an unimaginable creature from a distant past. The new body belongs to a member of the a race of creatures from a dying world who have transported themselves into the future in order to perpetuate the species. For this purpose, they have sent their minds en masse to possess the minds of the new species better than their own. And in science fiction libraries are the vestiges of a better past. In Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, the "bibliophilic and bibliocidal society" (Balló and Pérez 271; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) functions as the prototype of the universe of oppressive technology. The library and the book here work as "fatalistic settings of new totalitarianisms" inside parables of a technified, dehumanized and authoritarian future (Balló and Pérez 271).

In Cervantes's *Don Quixote* we find three libraries: the knight's own, Juan Palomeque's, and Diego de Miranda's. In his domestic space, Don Quixote has reserved a spot for his books. Thus, from the beginning of the novel, Cervantes creates his identity and his insanity in a way closely linked with books and the library, the surroundings which produce the break with his until then quiet home life. What is different with our knight, Edward Baker argues, is not reading in itself, but the desire to read and to be transformed into the language of his reading: "the project of constructing an identity in and through that language" (Baker 93). The identity of the library has so possessed him that Don Quixote goes out into the world with his library on his shoulders, because the text that comprises it has melded with the identity that the knight errant has created (Baker 96). Don Quixote has a desire to be an other who is composed solely of the written word. Umberto Eco considers libraries as the locus of the search for the true word, a search that becomes infinite and hopeless and he sees a clear similarity between *Don Quixote*'s library and the library in Jorge Luis Borges's texts: Don Quixote, in his desire to find in the outside world the adventures told in the fantastical world of his novels, has compared the world to his library. In the case of Borges, it works the other way round; his libraries are equivalent to the universe. Borges's library of Babel go one step further than intertextuality, to the point where they approach hypertextuality, in the sense that a book not only speaks of other books, but that inside one book we can enter one or multiple others. Thus, the true hero of the library of Babel is not the hero himself, but his reader, "new Don Quixote," as Eco says, active, adventurous, "unfailingly inventive, alchemically combinatory, capable of taming windmills and turning them forever" (Eco, *Sulla letteratura* 127).

With regard to the library in French-language literature, Christine Montalbetti completed a detailed study of the links between the library and travel literature through examples taken from Chateaubriand's, Lamartine's, Gautier's, and Stendhal's novels (on the library in French-language literature see also Géal). In the work of the texts Montalbetti discusses the world that is uncovered is viewed as a book that must be read, following the idea Michel de Montaigne had already developed. This double hermeneutic of reading implies the recognition of the object of reference as an object difficult to interpret, while at the same time conjecturing that only the narrator is qualified for the task of understanding the calligraphy of the universe. In Elias Canetti's *Auto de fe* is a further example of the treatment of the theme of libraries. The novel is populated by a multitude of characters absorbed in books, who die for books, who burn books, and who come to identify both psychologically and physically with books. Physical libraries, like the one in the house of protagonist Professor Peter Kien's house (we might better say that his entire house is a library), live side by side with the libraries held in the protagonist's head. In *Auto de fe* the library functions as memory, the library as truth, a place of learning and knowledge. Professor Peter Kien, a scholar specialized in Sinology, tall and lean, laconic and unsociable, of reserved temperament, taciturn and devoid of all vanity possesses one of the largest private collections in the city, approximately twenty-five thousand volumes. The interesting thing is that, for no readily apparent reason, Kien always carries a small part of his library around with him, a second library "as varied and reliable as the real one" (28). This mental library is the most essential part of his body, and is exaggeratedly precise, as if it had a perfect memory. But the library is also a place of death where Kien commits suicide as an act of rebellion against his psychologist brother, his wife, whom he believes to have been assassinated, against the dwarf, against the world. His books are his and he dies with them:

> Books fall from the shelves to the floor. Kien picks them up in his long arms. Without making noise, so that no one outside can hear him, he takes pile after pile to the lobby and stacks them up against the iron door. As the savage noise eats away at his brain, he builds a solid trench with his books. The lobby fills up with volumes. Finally he has

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to resort to the stairwell. In no time he reaches the roof. He returns to his study. The yawning shelves strike him. Before the desk the rug is burning. He heads for the back room, next to the kitchen, and takes out the old newspapers. He removes page after page, crumples them up, wads them together and throws them into the corners. Then he brings the ladder to the centre of the room where it used to be. He climbs up to the sixth rung, watches the fire and waits. When at last the flames reached him, he broke into laughter and laughed hard as he had never laughed in his life. (664-65)

Metafictional descriptions of the library and the librarian have become more pronounced postmodernist literature and the library has become, in large part owing to Borges, one of the most frequented spaces, surely because of its identification with the ideas of network, flow, labyrinth, like the limitless Aleph in which all knowledge meets. Pere Gimferrer postulates that there is no more appropriate place to pronounce the name of Borges than in the library (13). For Borges, himself a librarian in the National Library in Buenos Aires, the library is the universe, and he often imagines heaven as a library. There are two essays and one short story of Borges's which are significant for the interpretation of the theme of the library. I am referring to "La biblioteca de Babel," "La biblioteca total," and "Del culto de los libros." In "La biblioteca total" Borges imagines an infinite collection that would be a "complete library," a library of astronomical proportions and that would hold in its "blind" volumes the knowledge of all human knowledge. The library would be a collection of different worlds, of all worlds, a complete recollection of humanity. Yvette Sánchez argues that desire for a total library might go back to Jonathan Swift (116): on one of his travels Gulliver learns of a professor in the Academy of Lagado who aims to produce the complete library through a book machine operated by forty students daily. An infinite number of papers which contain all the words ever to have existed in the language, put together in no particular order, will be shuffled by a machine of wood and wire to create thousand and thousands of bits of sentences collected in order to produce all the books which have ever been written or ever will be. The total library is the exponent of the total book, a compendium of all the books any librarian has ever been lucky enough to peruse and that Borges wishes humans had discovered and read. The library is the metaphor for chaos and chance, and the library, then, is the metaphor for the universe.

Borges's "Biblioteca de Babel" contains the image of a library and of its mirror image where an infinite library can amalgamate all books from all times and places. The tall stranger with indistinct features who one day knocks on the protagonist's door is a Bible seller. The copy of the Good Book found in Bikanir, an octavo volume, the *Holy Writ* with the subtitle "Bombay," is a terrifying, monstrous book, as the protagonist comments near the end of the story. Put simply, its "page count is exactly infinite. No page is the first; none the last" (1 374). The infinite book, the Book of Sand, fuels the character's worry, distrust, and misanthropy, and the best place to get rid of it is in the National Library on Mexico Street: "I thought about fire, but I feared that burning an infinite book would be a similarly infinite task and would suffocate the planet with its smoke. I recalled having read that the best place to hide a leaf is in a forest. Before my retirement, I had been working at the National Library, which houses 900.000 books; I know that to the right of the lobby there's a spiral staircase that disappears into the basement, where the newspapers and maps are kept. I took advantage of a momentary lapse of concentration on the part of the employees to lose the Book of Sand on one of the musty shelves. I tried not to notice how high or how far from the door. I feel some relief now, but I still don't want to even set foot on Mexico Street" (1 376). The library, that closed environment that holds all the knowledge of humanity, is for Borges the greatest example of freedom of thought, of a spirit receptive to everything, able to learn what remains alive through the passage of time. In Borges's texts, the catalogue is clearly associated with the library and is presented as the conjunction of order and chaos.

In Eco's *The Name of the Rose* we have the postmodern image of the library. As Matei Calinescu argues, Eco's novel — a thriller which combines the structure of the detective novel with the historical and exotic setting of a fourteenth-century abbey in the north of Italy — takes the subject to a different level through its use of a variety of different codes: the philosophical — it presents the reader with the metaphysical problem of discerning who is guilty in the text, the cultural — since *The Name of the Rose* plays intertextually with references to other works from the Bible to Borges, and the semiotic — since it uses the mystery as the structure for a reflection on the sign. The library is as unfathomable as the truth which rests in it and as deceitful as the lies that it guards. It is a spiritual as well as a

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physical labyrinth (*The Name of the Rose* 37). It is rejected and despised as a pack of lies by some of the monks of the abbey, like Ubertino, who sees it as "the temptation of the century." Jorge, blind like Borges and like Jorge of Burgos, shows how the library is proof of the truth and of error (*The Name of the Rose* 123). The library is a great labyrinth, sign of the labyrinth that is the world. "When you enter, you know not whether you will exit … hunc mundum tipice laberinthus denotat ille" (*The Name of the Rose* 149-50). And the library, paying homage to the library of Alexandria, perishes in the flames, after Jorge of Burgos, the great Minotaur, commits the sin of book burning with the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics.* The sacred and inaccessible place is threatened by a "common fire" and the sparks fly up the walls and the fire consumes the books of the cabinets, the library becomes a great fireplace, a giant sacrificial pyre (*The Name of the Rose* 455). The structure of the work is also labyrinthine. According to Javier Rodríguez Pequeño, Eco presents a historical maze, a medieval one, the metaphor for an ideological, theological and literary maze. The labyrinth that would contain all these other ones is the labyrinth of a detective novel structure: "all the labyrinths converge in the detective novel labyrinth, in the investigation, which in turn focuses on and manifests itself in the labyrinth that is the abbey library" (142).

At the same time, clichés of the library persist: for example, Tom Wolfe extends his harsh opinion of US-American society to the one public library he mentions in *A Man in Full*. And in David Lodge in *The British Museum is Falling Down* presents through the use of irony and pastiche a character, Adam Appleby, who is working in the reading room in the British Museum. A graduate student in English literature, Appleby is preparing a dissertation on a second-rate author, Egbert Merrymarsh, in the Reading Room of the library. In one passage, Lodge, imitating the style of Kafka, describes the nightmare the protagonist goes through in order to renew his Reading Room card, which is destroyed by the same librarians who should have simplified his task. And another curious moment occurs when he accidentally enters the storage area of the library, wanders through the stacks of the cupola that fill the reading room as through a maze only to exit again by pretending to be a librarian counting books. Appleby descends into the very pits of the library, inhabited by delinquents and exiles: "the staircase spiralled up into darkness, like a fire escape in hell, fixed there to delude the damned" (98). In *The British Museum* the library appears an unreal place with incomprehensible planning. From the beginning, the library is seen as a giant womb, a "vaginal passage," and the scholars or readers curl up on their desks like "foetus-like, over their books, little buds of intellectual life thrown off by some gigantic act of generation performed upon that nest of knowledge, those inextricable ovaries of learning, the concentric inner rings of the catalogue shelves" (49). The library of the British Museum, exponent of the male sex, is the spatial background where a character is formed who eventually adopts the stylistic and thematic tone of the novels he is studying and this causes us to reflect on the theme of Catholic sexuality, dominated by the imperatives of the Church. At the end of it all Adam Appleby is struck by a special type of academic neurosis, in the words of his friend Camel, and is no longer capable of telling life from fiction.

In some US-American teen series of novels — many of which take place in an environment of education — the everyday use of enviable school libraries as the setting for rendez-vous, as a place to study and research assignments, especially during exam periods, is the reflection of a library experience different from such in Europe. As far as animated series go, *The Simpsons* as a far-reaching phenomenon in terms of viewing public, as well as broadcast time and ability to create fashions and symbols. Bart and Lisa search in the library for a book with a spell to make their zombiefied fellow citizens revert to being human (e.g., about Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*). In terms of comedy series, there is the eccentric mime *Mr. Bean*, who in a library of deathly silence and leaden air is tormented by a book. In cinema, the library is often the setting for the search for some piece of information or clue that will help to reveal or understand a problem, for example in *The Da Vinci Code* or in *National Treasure.*

In painting and sculpture, for example in Manolo Valdés's *Libros IV*, we find that focus is on matter and materiality and where aesthetic principles converge. For Valdés there is no difference between form and content: matter is substance, but also plot reflected in layers and layers of paper, superimposed, in the stains and the patches connected in a unifying language which combines lived experience and artistic experience. His sculptures in wood, libraries, and Greek vases in one swoop

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bring us closer to nature and to the invention of art, the primitive, almost sacred, suggestion of matter, and the subtleness of the symbols of representation.

In the last twenty years, the physical conception of the library has undergone a change. The idea of the virtual library is a dream predicated on an extensive collection of data accessible instantly from any geographical location. The impossible paradigm of the universal collection and inevitable destruction are two characteristics mark the idea of imaginary libraries for Mario Teessier. From Vannevar Bush's Memex project, in which he attempted to reproduce the associative character of the human mind to Theodor Nelson's Xanadu project and the current re-creation of the ancient Library of Alexandria on the world wide web, the world of information technology has echoed the importance of the library in the conception of various products. Such is the case with Rand Miller and Robin Miller's *Myst*: the world of *Myst* — with large success in videogames — remains one of the most curious texts for the defence of books as sources of knowledge, as we see at the beginning of the game: the surrealist island on which we land as players is a space criss-crossed by the influence of the book, a space where beginning the game implies opening this central book, the book that transports the reader to the world of *Myst.* The importance of books is highlighted with the appearance of the subspace of the library. *Myst* is a videogame in that it calls attention to the textuality of each medium, privileging the textuality of the written word itself. Books, the different notes we discover on our voyage, turn out to be archaic forms of writing, and thus, sources of all truth. The conventional text becomes the only source of stable and reliable information in *Myst*.

I close my discussion of the theme of the library with Alain Resnais's black and white documentary *Toute la mémoire du monde* about the National Library of France. The library Resnais depicts is a mechanized one in which the postmen who bring sacks of books march in formation, like a band of circus musicians, and a large staff of indexers, cataloguers, filers, bookbinders, and shelvers follow the progress of the book down the librarian's assembly line until it reaches the reading room. The enormous compilation that would contain all the memory of the world would be an advance of the virtual library. The first part of the documentary stresses the idea that libraries are created to collect unnameable writings, since we have a short memory and a record must remain. This infinite quantity of material strikes terror into our hearts, terror that we will find ourselves stuck in the intensity of the writing, the agglomeration of words. The library, then, rises up as a fortress that, paradoxically, will ensure our freedom. The series of arches, doors, staircases, mazes multiplied in space and expanded limitlessly form the space of the National Library in Paris. The library is like a tangle of floors connected by elevators and the librarian-operator plunges dangerously into the intricate labyrinth of shelves. In its depths we find everything ever written in France, all the symbols drawn are represented in the different and so varied sections that make up the framework of its rooms: the manuscript section, the periodicals section, the image section, the coins section (these last three are of course museums), and the maps and cartography section. Its "gigantic memory" houses treasures that are organized, separated, analyzed, scrutinized, classified, methodically numbered, as we mentioned, by the librarians. The fortress must necessarily be governed according to strict rules in order to avoid the risk of it turning into a "lawless country." The library holds the vestiges of the past, the marks of the present and the predictions for an uncertain future civilization. The library is a "great mind," an "exemplary memory" that we must save from destruction.

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