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## The Mission of the Librarian

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# *The Mission of the Librarian*

By JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET

*Translated by James Lewis and Ray Carpenter*

■ I would like to warn you initially that what you are about to read does not exactly coincide with the title given to my speech, a title which I encountered upon reading the program of this congress. I make this a matter of note, because this title—*The Mission of the Librarian*—is enormous and frightening, and simply to accept it would be extremely pretentious. I could not pretend to teach the complex techniques of librarianship which for me are hermetic mysteries.

Even the word “mission” frightens me a little if I find myself obliged to use it in its full significance. The same applies to innumerable words of which we make daily use. If they suddenly began to function in the fullness of their true meanings, if upon our pronouncing and hearing them our minds understood at once their essential meanings, we would be frightened in the presence of the basic dramas which they contain.

## *The Personal Mission*

In order to demonstrate this with an example, it will be sufficient to look for a moment into the word “mission.” Mission means, first of all, that which a man has to do with his life. Apparently, then,

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JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET (1883-1955), the well-known Spanish philosopher and political scientist, delivered this address to the International Congress of Bibliographers and Librarians in Paris in 1934. It was published as “Mission du Bibliothécaire” in *Archives et Bibliothèques* (No. 2, 1935) and as “Misión del Bibliotecario” in *Revista de Occidente* (v. 47-48, 1935). This first English version was translated and edited by James Lewis and Ray L. Carpenter of the School of Library Science, University of North Carolina.

mission is something exclusive to man. Without man there is no mission. But the necessity expressed by the words "have to do" is a very strange condition and does not at all resemble the compulsion by which the stone gravitates towards the center of the earth. The stone cannot refuse to fall, but a man might very well not do that which he "has to do." Is this not curious? Here "necessity" is a thing most opposed to constraint—it is rather an invitation. Could anything be more gallant? Man finds himself invited to lend his consent to necessity. A stone, were it half-intelligent, might say upon observing this, "What good fortune to be a man! I have no choice but to fulfill my inexorable law: I must always fall. But what a man has to do or has to be is not imposed upon him, but proposed to him." But this imaginary stone would think thus because it was only half-intelligent. If it were completely so, it would see that this privilege of man's is a terrifying one. For it implies that at every moment of his life a man finds himself facing the various possibilities of acting and being, and that it is he alone who, consulting his unique responsibility, must decide in favor of one of them; that in order to decide to do this and not that, he must, whether he wishes to or not, justify the choice in his own eyes. That is, he must discover among the actions possible at that moment the one that possesses the most meaning, the one that is most his own. If he does not choose that one, he knows that he has deceived himself, falsified his own reality, and annihilated a moment of his vital time. There is no mysticism in what I say: it is evident that one cannot take a single step without justifying it before his own intimate tribunal. And so each of our acts must be drawn from the total anticipation of our destiny, the general program of our existence. This is true not only of the honest and heroic man, but also of the perverse and wicked. For the wicked man, too, is obliged to justify his acts in his own eyes and to find for them a meaning and a role in some program of life. Otherwise he would remain motionless, paralyzed like Buridan's ass.

Among the few papers that Descartes left after his death there was one written when he was twenty in which we read: "*Quod vitae sectabor iter?*" What way shall I choose in my life? This is a quotation taken from a verse of Ausonius, who in turn was translating an old Pythagorean poem entitled *De ambiguitate eligendae vitae*—concerning the perplexity in the choice of life.

Apparently man receives the inescapable impression that his life, and consequently his being, is something that he must choose. This is a stupefying fact, for it means that man—differing from all other entities of the universe which have their beings fixed in advance and exist precisely because of that—man is the unique and almost inconceivable reality who exists without having his being irremediably prefixed, who is not from the beginning what he is, who must choose his own being. And how shall he choose it? While calling to mind and considering the various kinds of life possible to him, a man observes that one of them attracts him more than the others—draws him, claims him, calls to him. This appeal that a certain kind of life has for us, this imperative cry, is called vocation.

In vocation, what is necessary for a man to do is not imposed upon him, but proposed to him. That is why life takes on the character of the realization of an imperative. It depends upon us to wish or not to wish to realize it, to be faithful or unfaithful to our vocation. But the vocation itself is not in our hands. That is why every human life has a mission. A mission is just this: the consciousness that every man has of his most authentic being, of that which he is called upon to realize. The idea of mission is, therefore, a constitutive ingredient of the human condition; and as I said a while ago, without man there is no mission. We may now add that without mission there is no man.

### *The Professional Mission*

It is too bad that we cannot now go deeply into this subject, one of the gravest and most fertile that exists: that of the relationship between man and his duty. For life is, before anything, something to do, a task. We do not give life to ourselves, life has been given to us. We encounter ourselves in its midst without knowing how or why. But that which has been given to us—life—now reveals itself as something we must make for ourselves, each man his own. In other words, to live we must always do something, under penalty of dying. Yes, life is a task; it gives us much to do, and the most important matter is to strike upon what is necessary to do. To this purpose we look around us at our social environment, and we find that it is made of a tissue of typical lives, lives that have certain gen-

eral lines in common: we find doctors, engineers, professors, physicists, philosophers, laborers, manufacturers, salesmen, soldiers, masons, cobblers, teachers, actresses, dancers, nuns, dressmakers, ladies of society. At first we do not see the individual life of each doctor and each actress, but only the generic and schematic architecture of each life. The lives differ one from the other by the predominance of a type of work—for example, what the soldier does and what the scholar does. These schematic trajectories of life are the professions, careers, or beaten tracks of existence that we find already established, defined, and regulated in our society. We then choose from among them the one that will be our own, our *curriculum vitae*.

This has happened to you also. At that moment when a man makes his most decisive resolutions more or less clearly, you have found in your social environment, outlined before your arrival, the way of life and the mode of being human which is that of a librarian. You did not have to invent it: it was already there, in the society to which you belong.

At this point we must go a little more slowly. I have just said that the way of life and the type of human task that is the librarian's existed before any of you, that it sufficed for you to look around you to find it, already representing the lives of many men and women. But this has not always been true. There have been epochs in which there were no librarians, although there were books—not to speak of those other long epochs when there were no librarians because there were no books. Does this mean that in those times when there were no librarians, although there were books, no men existed who occupied themselves with books in a way quite similar to that which constitutes your profession today? Undoubtedly there were people who were not content merely to read books, but who collected, arranged, and catalogued them, who took care of them. But had you been born in one of those times you would have looked around yourselves in vain, you would not have recognized in what these people did what we today call librarianship. Their conduct would have seemed to you what in fact it was—a singular, altogether personal mode of conduct, an individual trait, like the sound of one's voice or the harmony of his gestures. The proof of this is that at the death of these individuals, their occupation died with them, was not practiced above and beyond the individual lives which exercised it.

What I mean to imply here will become quite clear if we go to the other extremity of the development and ask ourselves: what happens today when a man who governs a public library dies? He leaves an empty place behind him; his occupation continues intact in the form of an official post which the state, the community, or some such corporation sustains by their collective will and power, even though it may be momentarily unoccupied and a salary continues to be assigned to this empty post. It follows that today the occupation of collecting, arranging, and cataloging books is no longer a purely individual pursuit but a post, a *topos*, a social position, independent of individuals, sustained, acclaimed, and decided by society as such, not simply by the occasional vocation of one person or another. That is why today we find the care of books impersonally established as a career or profession, and upon looking around us we see it clearly and solidly defined, like a public monument. Careers and professions are types of human tasks which society needs. One of these tasks has been, for some two centuries, that of the librarian. Every society of the West today needs a certain number of doctors, magistrates, soldiers, and librarians—to cure their citizens when sick, to administer justice to them, to defend them, and to make them read.

And now here is the same expression which I used a while ago, this time applied to society instead of to the individual man. For society, also, it is *necessary* to do certain things. It, too, has its system of necessities, of missions.

We find ourselves, then—and this is more important than perhaps one imagines—in the presence of a duality: the mission of the man, that which a man must do in order to be what he is, and the professional mission, in this case the librarian's mission, or what a librarian must do in order to be a good librarian. It is very important not to confuse the one with the other.

Originally all that which today constitutes a profession, trade, or office was the creative inspiration of a man who felt the radical need of dedicating his life to an occupation hitherto unknown, who invented a new task. His mission was that which was necessary to him. This man died and his mission died with him. But after a time the community decided that this occupation or something which resembled it was necessary in order that society subsist and

flourish. For example, there was once in Rome a man of the *gens Julia* whose name was Caius and whose surname was Caesar, and who had the idea of doing things no one had done before—among others, of proclaiming the right of Rome to the exclusive command of the world and the right of an individual to the exclusive command of Rome. This cost him his life. But a generation later Roman society felt, as a society, the need of someone doing again what Caius Julius Caesar had done. Thus it was that the void this man had left behind him, this empty design of his personal profile, found itself objectified, depersonalized into a magistracy, and the word “Caesar,” which had designated an individual mission, came to designate a collective necessity. But notice the profound transformation which a type of human task undergoes when, instead of a personal necessity or mission, it becomes a collective necessity, an office or profession. In the first case, a man does what he and he alone must do, freely, and according to his exclusive responsibility. On the other hand, when this man practices a profession he engages himself to the needs of society. He then has to renounce a good part of his liberty; he finds himself obliged to set aside his individuality. He cannot determine his actions exclusively according to his personal point of view, but according to a collective one, under pain of being a bad professional and of suffering the grave consequences that society, which is very cruel, imposes upon those who serve it badly.

Perhaps an example will clarify what I imply here. If a fire breaks out in a house where a man lives with a number of other people, he might, in the extremity of despair, content himself with the idea of his own body in cinders and make no effort to put out the fire. But if by chance he survives, and it is evident that he could have put out the fire that has cost so many lives, society will castigate him, because he has not done that which he ought to have done socially, that is to say for the collective, not the individual, necessity. The professions always represent this type of duty for those who practice them. Like the fire, they are inescapable urgencies which the social situation presents and which we must attend to, whether we wish to or not. That is why they are called *offices*, and all the duties of the state are especially qualified as *official*—for in the state society shows itself superlatively emphasized, sharply defined, one might say exaggerated.

Linguists encounter some difficulty in affixing the etymology of this word "official," a word by which the Latins designated duty. This is because, as often happens, they do not properly conceive the original, vital situation to which the word corresponds and in which it was created. But there is no semantic difficulty in recognizing that *officium* comes from *ob* and *facere*. The prefix *ob* generally means to go out promptly to encounter something, in this case a task. *Officium* means, then, to do without hesitation or delay the urgent duty, the task presented as inescapable.\* Is this not what constitutes the very idea of society? When we are presented with something as a duty, it is made clear that we have no margin in which to decide for ourselves whether or not it ought to be done. We may do it or not, but the fact that it ought to be done is indisputable—for such is duty. All this tells us that in order to determine the mission of the librarian we must begin, not with the man who practices the profession, his tastes, peculiarities, and suitabilities, nor with an abstract ideal which presumes to define once and for always what a library is, but with the social necessity which your profession serves. And that necessity, like everything else that is properly human, does not consist of a fixed magnitude; on the contrary, by its very essence it is variable, migratory, evolutionary—in short, historical.

### *History of Librarianship: The 15th Century*

If you will examine it now you will observe how clearly the duty of the librarian has varied in direct proportion to the significance of the book as a social necessity.

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\*The other meaning of *officium*—to place obstacles—though it seems to have a bellicose connotation, is related to the one already indicated. The urgent duty most characteristic of primitive life is the battle against the enemy, facing and opposing it. Thus it does not matter whether *officium* first means "to place obstacles" and later, by generalization, becomes the prototype of urgency, or whether, vice versa, duty in general becomes specialized to the more definite sense of opposition to the enemy.

It is a curious fact that the same idea of going promptly to some urgent duty also animates the word "obedience" which comes from *ob* and *audire*—that is to say, to immediately execute the order as soon as it is heard. In Arabic the expression which designates obedience is a combination of the two words "understood" and "done."





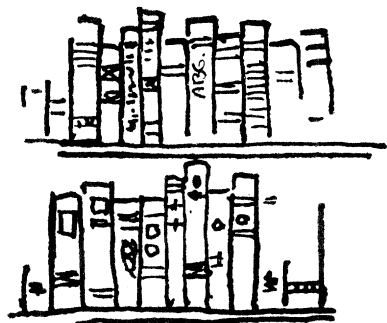
If it were possible to reconstruct the past exactly, we would discover with surprise that the history of librarianship shows us transparently the most secret intimacies of the evolution which the Occidental world has undergone. This would prove that we had envisioned the profession of the librarian, apparently so specialized and eccentric, in its effective and fundamental reality. When we envision anything whatever in its reality, no matter how diminutive and subordinate, it puts us in contact with all other realities, places us in the center of the world, and shows us in every direction the unlimited and pathetic perspectives of the universe. But, I repeat, we cannot even now begin that profound history of librarianship. That task remains for someone better gifted than I to undertake.

The functional relationship between what the librarian has done in each epoch and the significance of the book as a necessity among Occidental societies seems to me to be unquestionable.

For the sake of brevity, let us pass over Greece and Rome. That which was a book to them is a very strange thing to us, if described with precision. We shall speak only of the new populations who initiated a new growth upon the ruins of Greece and Rome. When, then, do we see the human figure of the librarian outlined for the first time against the social scene? When would a contemporary, in looking about him, have been able to find the silhouette of the librarian, a clearly defined public figure? Without doubt, at the beginning of the Renaissance. And take note, a little before printed books existed! During the Middle Ages the care of books was still infrasocial, not showing itself in public view; it was still latent, secret, one might say intestine, confined in the secret precincts of the cloisters. Even in the universities the practice was not outstanding. They no doubt kept the books necessary for the business of teaching, no more, no less, just as one keeps enough utensils for housekeeping. The guarding of books was not a special task. It was not until the dawn of the Renaissance that the pattern of the librarian's work distinguished itself from the other general ways of life and appeared

in public view. And—note this coincidence—it was just at this epoch also that for the first time the book, in the strict sense of the word—not the religious book nor the book of law, but the book written by an author, the book that is only a book, not a revelation or a code—it was just at this epoch that the book was first socially felt as a necessity. Long before this time, no doubt, one individual or another had felt this need of books, but more as a personal desire or pain, on his own account and at his own risk. At the time of which I speak the individual had already discovered that he need not experience this need by himself. He found it in the air, in the atmosphere, a thing recognized, one did not know exactly by whom; a need that seemed to be felt by “the others”—that vague collectivity, that mysterious substratum of all society. The attraction of the book, the hope invested in the book, already these had ceased to be the concern of one or another individual and possessed that anonymous and impersonal character that belongs to every collective validity. History is first of all the story of the emergence, development, and decadence of these social validities: opinions, norms, preferences, negations, and fears which individuals find already made in their social environment, and which they must take into account whether they wish to or not, just as they must take physical nature into account. It does not matter whether the individual is in accord with these validities, for the effective vigor which they enjoy does not depend upon whether you and I give them our assent; on the contrary, it is when our dissent comes in conflict with their granite hardness that we best understand to what point they are effectively in force.

In this sense, then, I say that up until the Renaissance the need of books did not constitute a social validity in full force. It became one at that time. And that is why we now see the librarian emerge immediately as a professional. But we may be still more precise. At this epoch the need for books took on the nuance of faith in books. The revelations that God had given to man lost their efficacy. People began to have faith in all that man thinks with his reason alone, and



consequently in all that man writes. What a strange and radical adventure for the Western world! And note how it sufficed for us merely to touch upon the history of librarianship in order to fall, as if through a trap-door, into the hidden depths of European evolution.

The social need for books consisted at that time merely of the need to have books—for there were few of them. In proportion to that need we see the corresponding growth of those librarians of genius who, during the Renaissance, deployed in the hunt for books unbelievable astuteness and tenacity. The compiling of catalogs was not yet an urgent affair. The acquisition and production of books, on the contrary, assumed heroic proportions. All this was in the fifteenth century.

It hardly seems due to pure chance that precisely in this epoch, when such a lively need for books was felt, printing was invented.

### *The Nineteenth Century*

Let us leap over three centuries and find ourselves in 1800. What has happened to books in the meantime? Many have been published; printing is no longer expensive. One no longer feels the lack of books, but the need to catalog them, there are so many. So much for the material quantity of books. As for their contents, the needs felt by society have also changed. Much of the hope founded upon books seems to have been realized. There are some things in the world that were not there before: the sciences of nature and history and much technical knowledge. The search for books has ceased to be a problem; there is now the problem of finding and encouraging readers. Libraries multiply at this stage, and with them the librarians. The role of the librarian has become a profession which occupies many men; but it is still a spontaneous, social profession. The state has not yet made it an official one.

The decisive step in the evolution of librarianship was taken a little later, toward 1850. The profession as a state office is not very old, then, and this detail concerning its age is of very great importance. Because history, everything historical—that is, everything human—is time in motion, and time in motion always means age. It follows that everything human is either in its infancy, its youth, its maturity, or its senility.

I am a little afraid at having pointed out this perspective to you for I fear that you are going to ask me with great curiosity in what age I think the profession is, and whether to be a librarian is to be, historically, young, mature, or aged. We shall see at the end whether I am able to give you some answer to this question.

But let us come back to the point of evolution where we were, to the moment when, approximately a century ago, the profession of librarian became an official one. No doubt you think, as I do, that the most important incident in the history of a profession is its passing from an occupation spontaneously favored by society, to a bureaucracy of the state. What is the cause of such an important change? Or at least, of what is it always a symptom? The state is also society, but not all of it. It is only a mode, or a part of it. Society, inasmuch as it is not the state, operates by the means of usage, custom, public opinion, language, etc.—in short, by the means of imprecise and diffuse validities. In the state, on the other hand, the effective vigor of everything social is raised to its highest power and becomes, so to speak, something solid, perfectly clear and precise. The state operates by the means of laws, terribly imperative announcements of an almost mathematical rigor. That is why I said a moment ago that the order of the state is the extreme form of the collective order, the superlative of the social. If we apply this to our present problem, we shall find that a profession does not become official and pass into the hands of the state until that moment when the collective need which it serves becomes extremely sharp and is no longer felt as a simple need but as an inescapable necessity, an urgency. The state does not admit superfluous occupations in its own orbit. Society feels at every moment that it has many things to do, but the state is careful to intervene only in those which apparently must be done. There was a time when the consultation of the auspices and other mysterious signs that the gods sent to their people were believed to be indispensable to the existence of society. That is why the ceremony of augury became an institution and an official duty, and the augurs and diviners formed an important bureaucracy.

The French Revolution, after its turbulent melodrama, had transformed European society. A so-called democratic body had succeeded the old aristocratic body. This society was the final consequence of the faith in books which had been felt in the Renaissance. Democratic society is a daughter of books, the triumph of the book

written by man over the book revealed by God, over the book of laws dictated by the autocracy. The revolt of the people had been accomplished in the name of all the things that we call reason, culture, etc. These abstract entities came to occupy in men's hearts the same central position formerly occupied by God, an entity no less abstract. There is always a strange propensity in man to nourish himself, above all, in the abstract.

The fact is that toward 1840 books were no longer a necessity in the sense of an illusion or a hope, but God having departed and the traditional authority of divine right having evaporated, there remained no more ultimate appeal than the book on which to found all that was social. It was therefore necessary to take refuge in the book as in a rock of salvation. The book became socially indispensable. This was the era in which appeared the phenomenon of copious editions. The masses threw themselves upon the volumes with an almost breathless urgency, as though books were balloons of oxygen. The consequence was that for the first time in Western history culture became a *raggione di stato*. The state made science and letters official. It recognized the book as a public function and as an essential political organism. By virtue of this, the profession of the librarian became a bureaucracy for reasons of state.\*

We have come, then, in the process of history, in the process of the human life of Europe, to the phase in which the book has become an indispensable necessity. Without the sciences, without the technologies, these societies so dense in population and of such a high standard of living could not have materially existed. Still less could they have lived morally without a vast repertory of ideas. There was only one vague possibility of making democracy effective: that the masses cease to be masses by dint of gulping enormous doses of culture, an effective culture, be it understood, germinating in each man, not merely received, heard, or read. The nineteenth century understood this from its beginning with perfect clarity. It is an error to believe that this century could have tried democracy without taking into account *a priori* that the enterprise was very improbable. It saw perfectly what had to be done—re-read St.-Simon, Auguste

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\*The same process created the mandarins in China when there was no god nor any strong commandments.

Comte, Tocqueville, and Macaulay. It tried to do it. However, it is important to recognize that it tried at first feebly and later frivolously.

But let us leave this now and go to what is more important to us. We have come to a point that is going to demand the most alert effort of attention, because the theme of the book and the librarian which up until this point has been sustained with an almost idyllic mildness is going to be suddenly transformed into a drama. And this drama, in my opinion, is going to constitute the most authentic mission of the librarian. Until now we have only considered what that mission has been; we have seen only the images of its past. Now the profile of a new task is going to rise before your eyes, a task incomparably higher, graver, more essential. One might say that until now the profession has lived only its hours of play and prelude—*Tanze und Vorspiel*. But now the serious part arrives, for the drama begins.

### *The New Mission*

Until the middle of the nineteenth century our Western societies felt that the book was a need, but this need bore a positive sign. I shall clarify briefly what I mean by this expression.

This life that we encounter, that has been given to us, has not been given to us ready-made. We must make it for ourselves. This means that life consists of a series of difficulties that must be resolved. Some are physical, securing nourishment, for example; others are called spiritual, such as not dying of boredom. Faced with these difficulties, man reacts by inventing physical and spiritual instruments which facilitate his struggle against them. The sum of these facilities which man thus creates is culture. The ideas that we forge for ourselves concerning things constitute the best example of that arsenal of instruments which we interpose between ourselves and the difficulties around us. A clear idea about a problem is like some marvelous apparatus which transforms the painful difficulty into a comfortable facility. But ideas are fleeting; for a moment they illuminate our minds with magic clarity, but a moment after, that light is extinguished. Memory must make an effort to conserve them, but memory is not even able to conserve our own ideas, and it is extremely important to conserve those of other men. It is so impor-

tant, that this is one of the most characteristic traits of our human condition. The tiger today must remain the same tiger as if there had never been any other tigers before him; he does not profit from the thousands of experiences that other tigers have had in the sonorous depths of the forests. Each tiger is therefore a first tiger; he must start again from the beginning his profession of tiger. But the man of today does not begin by being a man. He inherits the forms of existence, the ideas, the vital experiences of his ancestors. He begins at a level represented by the human past accumulated beneath his feet. Faced with no matter what problem, man does not find himself alone with his personal reaction, with whatever idea occurs to him, but has at his disposal all or many of the ideas, reactions, and inventions which his ancestors have already found. That is why his life is made up of the accumulation of other lives and why his life is substantially a progress. We will not discuss here whether he progresses toward the better, toward the worse, or toward nothing at all.

It must be of singular importance, then, to add to this instrument, the idea, another instrument which solves the difficulty of preserving all the ideas. That instrument is the book. Inevitably, the more one accumulates of the past, the greater is the progress. And thus it has happened that scarcely had the technical problem of having books been resolved by the means of printing, than the movement of history and the speed of progress began to accelerate, attaining today a rhythm that seems to us vertiginous. What would the men of more leisurely ages have thought of it? For it is not only a matter of our machines which produce things at stupefying speeds, nor of our vehicles which transport our bodies with an almost mythological celerity; it is a matter of the total reality which is our life, of the composite volume of history which has prodigiously augmented the frequency of its mutations and consequently its absolute movement, its progress. And all this is principally due to the facility which the book represents.

Here is why our societies have felt the book as a necessity; it was the necessity of a facility, of a beneficial instrument. But imagine the instrument invented by man to render a dimension of existence easier, transforming itself into a new difficulty. Imagine this instrument turning against man, becoming uncontrollable and provoking morbid and unforeseen consequences. It will remain no less neces-

sary, in the sense of facilitating the problem in view of which it was invented. But without ceasing to be necessary, and exactly because it is so necessary for this problem, it will add a new and unexpected anguish to our lives. Formerly it was a pure facility for us, and consequently represented in our lives a factor with a positive sign. Now its relationship with us becomes complicated, and it is charged with a negative sign.

This case is not purely hypothetical. Everything that man invents and creates to facilitate his life, everything that we call civilization and culture, reaches a point at which it turns against him. Precisely because it is a creation, it remains in the world, outside of the subject which created it. It enjoys its own existence, transforms itself into a thing, into a world which confronts man, and, thrust toward its own inexorable destiny, it becomes detached from the intention with which man had created it in order to escape from an occasional difficulty. This is the inconvenience of being a creator. This also happened to the god of Christianity: he created the angel with great mystical wings, and the angel revolted against him. He created man with no wings but the wings of imagination, but man also rebelled, revolted against him, and began to cause him difficulties. Cardinal Cusano said that man, being free, is a creator, but that he is free and a creator in the temporal instant, under the pressure of circumstance; for that reason he deserves the title of *Deus occasionatus*, a second-hand god. For that reason also, his creations turn against him. Today we live in an age extremely characteristic of this tragic situation. Economy, technology, all the facilities that man has invented today besiege him and threaten to strangle him. The sciences which have grown so fabulously, multiplying and specializing themselves, surpass the capacities of acquisition which man possesses. They torture and oppress him like the plagues of nature. Man is in danger of becoming the slave of his sciences. Study is no longer the *Otium* and the *Schola* as in Greece. Study is already beginning to inundate the life of man and to overflow its limits. The inversion characteristic of this revolt of human creations against their creator is already imminent. Man, instead of studying in order to live, soon must live in order to study.

Under one form or another, this has already happened several times in history. Man loses himself in his own wealth: his own cul-



ture, proliferating like tropical vegetation around him, ends by smothering him. What we call the historical crises are finally nothing but this. Man cannot be too rich; if an excess of facilities and possibilities are offered for his choice, he comes to grief among them; and confounded with possibilities, he loses the sense of the necessary.\*

This has been the perennial tragic destiny of the aristocracies: all of them finally degenerated because the excess of means and facilities atrophied their energies.

Are we going too far when we invite ourselves to reflect and ask ourselves whether Western societies are not already beginning to feel the book as an instrument in revolt, as a new difficulty? In Germany they are reading the book of Mr. Juenger in which one encounters sentences approximately like this: "It is a shame that we have come to this stage in our history without a sufficient number of illiterate people." You will tell me, perhaps, that this is an exaggeration. But let us not deceive ourselves. An exaggeration is always the extreme statement of something that is not in itself an exaggeration.

In all of Europe there exists the impression that there are too many books. It is the opposite of the Renaissance. The book has ceased to be an attraction and is felt instead as a heavy load. The man of science himself observes that one of the great difficulties of his work is to orient himself in the bibliography of his subject.

Let us not forget that always when an instrument created by man revolts against him, society in turn revolts against that creation, doubts its efficacy, feels an antipathy for it, and demands that it fulfill its primitive mission of pure facility.

Here then is the drama: the book is indispensable at this stage in history, but the book is in danger because it has become a danger for man.

One might say that a human need ceases to be purely positive and begins to charge itself with negativity at the very moment when it begins to seem indispensable. Every human need, if it really is

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\*Chateaubriand, who had much more talent and profundity than is recognized by the ignorant literary criticism of the past eighty years, has already said, "The invasion of ideas has succeeded the invasion of the barbarians; today's civilization, decomposing, is losing itself in itself." *Memoires d'outre-tombe*, Ed. Bire, VI, 450.

one, may in a sense be qualified as indispensable. This is obvious. But if we intend to obtain a clear concept of a need or necessity we immediately discover a double significance which must be given to the term "indispensable." I cannot go into the subject deeply at this moment, and I shall limit myself to transcribing a few lines from a course on "The Principles of Metaphysics" which I gave in 1933 at the University of Madrid, some parts of which have been published:

I call human need all that which is felt as literally indispensable—that is, that which we believe we cannot live without—or rather that which, even though in fact we could do without it, continues to be felt by us as a void or defect in our lives. Thus, eating is a literally indispensable need. But being happy, and being so in a certain and precise manner, is also a need. No doubt we are not happy, and that is to say in fact that we do without happiness and live unhappily. But—and here is the point—the feeling of the need for happiness continues to be still active within us. Then one may object that being happy is not a need, it is a mere desire. In fact it is, but this reveals to us that so many of our desires are only desires, and consequently things that we can completely forego, and without this renunciation leaving any amputation or emptiness in our lives. There are other desires which *as desires* we cannot do without, and that is to say that although we may be forced to renounce their satisfaction in the reality which they desire, we still cannot stop desiring even if we want to. That is why they demand to be called needs.

It is not good, in fact, for a thing to be vigorously indispensable even if we possess that thing in abundance, and even if its use and profit do not cost us any new difficulty. The sole characteristic of indispensability makes us feel enslaved by it. In this sense one may say that social needs become properly affairs of the state when they have already become negative. That is why everything that concerns the state is sad and painful and there is no means of completely freeing it of its aspects of a hospital, a barracks, or a prison.

Nevertheless, the fully negative character surges up when an instrument created as a facility spontaneously provokes an unforeseen difficulty and aggressively turns upon man. This is what is beginning to happen today with the book, and what has caused to disappear almost completely throughout Europe the ancient joy with which the printed page was welcomed.

All of this indicates to me that librarianship is entering its maturity. If life is a task, it follows that the different ages of life are

distinguished by different styles in the activity of man. Youth generally does not do what it does because it ought to do it, because it considers it inexcusable not to do it. On the contrary, as soon as youth observes that a thing is necessary, indispensable, it tries to avoid it, and if it does not succeed, carries out its task in sadness and disgust. The lack of logic implied in this attitude belongs to that magnificent treasure of absurdity of which youth happily consists. The young man embarks with enthusiasm only upon tasks which are presented to him as revokable, in which there is no restraint, and which can be perfectly replaced by others no less opportune and laudable. The young man needs to think that at any moment, if he so wishes, he can abandon the task and jump to another one. He thus avoids the feeling that he is a prisoner of a single task. In short, the young man is not bound to what he does; or equally, though he fulfills it carefully and even heroically, he almost never takes his task with complete seriousness. In the secret depth of his soul he refuses any irrevocable engagement and prefers to conserve a permanent freedom to do something else, even the opposite of what he is doing. Thus, his concrete occupation appears to him as a simple example of innumerable other tasks to which he may at any moment dedicate himself. Thanks to this private ruse he virtually obtains his ambition: to do everything at once, to enjoy at one time all the modes of being human. There is no use to try to deny it—the young man is essentially disloyal to himself; he plays with his mission as a toreador plays with a bull. His activity retains something of the games of childhood, it is almost always a mere experiment, a test, a pattern of no value.

The age of maturity conducts itself in the opposite fashion. It feels the fruition of reality, and reality in a duty is exactly the opposite of caprice. It is that which one cannot either do or not do with complete indifference; it is that which seems inexcusable and urgent. At this age life arrives at its own truth and discovers this essential platitude: that one life cannot live all lives, but on the contrary each life consists of “unliving” all others and remaining alone with itself. This vivid consciousness of not being able to be or to do but one thing at a time purifies our demands of what that thing shall be. We then feel a repugnance for that juvenile narcissism which *does* no matter what, precisely because it *doesn't* matter what, and which

nevertheless believes in its vanity that it is doing something. For the mature the only thing worth doing is that which is useless to avoid because it is inevitable; hence its preference for the problems which are problems in the superlative, that is to say problems which have become conflicts, necessities with a negative sign.

If we translate these distinctions between the ages in personal life into terms of collective life and of the professions, we shall discover that librarianship has reached the point where it must confront the problem of the book as a species of conflict.

Here, then, is the point at which I see the new mission of the librarian rise up incomparably higher than all those preceding. Up until the present, the librarian has been principally occupied with the book as a thing, as a material object. From now on he must give his attention to the book as a living function. He must become a policeman, master of the raging book.

### *The Book as a Conflict*

The gravest negative attributes that we begin to perceive today in the book are the following:

1. There are already too many books. Even when we drastically reduce the number of subjects to which man must direct his attention, the quantity of books that he must absorb is so enormous that it exceeds the limits of his time and his capacity of assimilation. Merely the work of orienting oneself in the bibliography of a subject today represents a considerable effort for an author and proves to be a total loss. For once he has completed that part of his work, the author discovers that he cannot read all that he ought to read. This leads him to read too fast and to read badly; it moreover leaves him with an impression of powerlessness and failure, and finally skepticism towards his own work.

If each new generation continues to accumulate printed paper in the same proportion as the last few generations, the problem posed by the excess of books will become truly terrifying. The culture which has liberated man from the primitive forest now thrusts him anew into the midst of a forest of books no less inextricable and stifling.

It would be useless to wish to resolve the conflict by supposing

that the need to read the books accumulated in the past does not exist and that it is a matter of one of those innumerable commonplaces, empty of sense, invented by that bigotry of "culture" which was still in force in some minds a few years ago. The truth is just the opposite. Under the surface of our epoch there is already germinating, though some individuals have not yet perceived it, a new and radical imperative for the intelligence: the imperative of historical consciousness. The following conviction will soon arise with forceful evidence: that if man truly wishes to enlighten his being and his destiny he must attain to an historical consciousness of himself. That is to say, he must seriously begin to do with history that which toward 1600 he seriously began to do with physics, and that history will not be the Utopia of science which it has been until now, but an effective knowledge. In order that it may be such, many exquisite ingredients are necessary. One of these, the most obvious, is precision. This attribute of precision is a formal and extrinsic element of the first stages of a science when that science reaches the moment of its authentic constitution. The history that is to be made tomorrow will no longer speak so lightly of epochs and centuries. It will articulate the past into very brief stages of organic character, into generations, and it will try to define quite rigorously the structure of human life in each one of these stages. For this purpose it will not be content to emphasize one or two works which are arbitrarily qualified as "representative." It will be necessary to read really and effectively all the books of a determined time, to register the description of them most carefully, finally establishing what I would call a "statistics of ideas" in order to determine strictly the chronological moment at which an idea germinated, the process of its expansion, its exact duration as a collective validity, and then the hour of its decline, of its petrification as a simple commonplace, and finally its disappearance behind the horizon of historic time.

This enormous task can never be accomplished unless the librarian makes every effort to reduce the difficulty in the measure in which it is incumbent upon him, freeing from useless efforts the men whose sad mission is, and must be, to read many books, as many books as possible—the naturalist, the doctor, the philologist, the historian. It is necessary that the collection of descriptive and selective bibliography upon a given subject cease to be a problem for an author.

That this has not already come to pass today seems incompatible with the accomplishment of our times. The economy of mental effort demands it urgently. It is necessary, then, to create a new bibliographic technique, one of vigorous automatic action. This technique will raise to its highest power the labor begun by librarians some centuries ago in the forms of catalogs.

2. But it is not only that there are too many books; they are being produced every day in torrential abundance. Many of them are useless and stupid; their existence and their conservation is a dead weight upon humanity which is already bent low under other loads. At the same time, it also happens that in all the disciplines one often regrets the absence of certain books, the lack of which holds up research. This fact is much more serious than the vague pronouncement leads one to suppose. It is incalculable how many important solutions upon the most diverse subjects never come to maturity because they encounter lacunae in previous research. The excess and the lack of books are of the same origin: production is carried on without regimen, almost completely abandoned to spontaneous chance.

Is it too Utopian to imagine in a not too distant future librarians held responsible by society for the regulation of the production of books, in order to avoid the publication of superfluous ones and, on the other hand, to guard against the lack of those demanded by the complex of vital problems in every age? All human tasks begin in a spontaneous and unregulated exercise; but also, when through their own extension they complicate and impinge upon one another, they come to submit to organization. It seems to me that the hour has arrived for the collective organization of book production; for the book itself, as a human modality, this organization is a question of life or death.

And let no one offer me the foolish objection that such an organization would be an attack upon liberty. Liberty has not come upon the face of the earth to wring the neck of common sense. It is precisely because some have wished to employ it in such an enterprise, because they have pretended to make of it the chief instrument of madness, that liberty is having a bad time in the world at present. The collective organization of book production has nothing to do with the subject of liberty, no more nor less than the need which

has demanded the regulation of traffic in the great cities of today. Moreover, this organization would not be of an authoritarian character, no more in fact, than the internal organization of works in a good academy of sciences.

3. Furthermore, the librarian of the future must direct the non-specialized reader through the *selva selvaggia* of books. He will be the doctor and the hygienist of reading. On this point also we find ourselves in a situation quite the reverse of that in 1800. Today people read too much. The condition of receiving without much effort, or even without any effort, the innumerable ideas contained in books and periodicals has accustomed the common man to do no thinking on his own account; and he does not think over what he has read, the only method of making it truly his own. In addition, there is that gravest and most radically negative character of the book, and we must dedicate our utmost effort of attention to it. A large part of today's terrible public problem proceeds from the fact that ordinary minds are full of ideas received in inertia, ideas half understood and deprived of their virtues. Ordinary minds are thus stuffed with pseudo-ideas. In this aspect of his profession, I imagine the librarian of the future as a filter interposed between man and the torrent of books.

In summation, to my mind the mission of the librarian ought to be, not as it is today the simple administration of the things called books, but the adjustment, the setting to rights, of that vital function which is the book.

