Brian Dillon:

The Enigmatic Archive

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The book, at first, lies flat. It is no more than a slight elevation of the surface on which it rests, a discrete plateau that rises above the landscape of a desk or table. Unopened, the book presents an almost uniform surface, engrained only by minor imperfections or abrasions of its dark boards. It looks not only closed, but somehow reticent or self-involved, as though it does not wish to give up its secrets too swiftly. It hardly casts a shadow on the white plain around it.

Once opened, the book presents a spatial paradox. On the one hand, it aspires still to the platitude of two dimensions; instead of admitting its full three-dimensionality, it simply spreads itself laterally across its support – a hand reaches out, perhaps, to smooth the pages where they have ruffled into unreadable folds. On the other hand, the directions in which the book might be said to move now start to multiply. The unseen or unread pages extend before us like a succession of rooms to be travelled through; page numbers help us to remember our way back. On a single page – or rather on two pages, because the modern book is always a diptych – the eye wanders vagrantly across the surface, from one image to another (for this is, crucially, an illustrated book) or gets lost in the depths of a single picture. Lines or blocks of text draw the gaze horizontally, or force it to shuttle back and forth so that it descends vertically, to the lower limit of the page.

The vocabulary that we use (at least in English) to describe it – this curious object that is never quite itself – suggests that the book comprises a much larger spatial volume than may at first appear; we talk about it almost as if it were a habitable space. The word 'volume' already confirms this; a collection of two-dimensional surfaces is conceived as having a thickness that we never actually experience, trapped as we are on the surface of one page at a time. Publishers speak of the 'extent' of a book – by which they mean the number of pages – and printers of the empty central 'gutter' between two pages of text. These metaphors have to do with bounded space, with a kind of containment; but in truth the book escapes its margins and borders, and is theoretically infinite.

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The spaces embodied and imagined in *The Infinite Library* are at once modest and extravagant, localized and limitless. As regards the fantastical expansion of these spaces – the way the disparate fragments of the project seem to imply an infinite unfolding – we can read in *The Infinite Library* a deliberate homage to Jorge Luis Borges. In his celebrated story 'The Library of Babel', the Argentinean fictionist presents a library which is also the universe itself, a vertiginous realm 'composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings. From any of the hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors. The distribution of the galleries is infinite.'[1] Into this rigidly self-replicating and never-ending world is inserted an infinite number of books; that is, all the books that could possibly exist do so here, in the library. Somewhere among this measureless profusion of volumes, there must also reside, conjectures the tale's melancholy narrator, a single book that is the summation of all the others.

'The Library of Babel' is but the most obvious of Borges's tales to which *The Infinite Library* may be said to refer. The fatal theme of the double is everywhere in Borges's fiction; at times, it is directly related to the book as a physical or metaphysical object. Most famously, in 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', Borges imagines a writer who proposes to write Cervantes' novel again: not to copy or imitate it, but to write as if for the first time the precise text that the Spanish novelist wrote. The resulting book unravels and rearticulates the original novel in a new (but at the same time identical) form; literary history folds back upon itself, and swallows its own tail: 'Menard (perhaps without wanting to) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the halting and rudimentary art of reading: this new technique is that of the deliberate anachronism and erroneous attribution…. This technique fills the most placid works with adventure.'[2]

The ideal book – the book that contains all books – has long been a favourite fantasy of Western writers and thinkers; it animates, for example, the great encyclopedias of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But this compendious desire took on a particular resonance in the Modernist literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some decades before the appearance of the encyclopaedic novels of Marcel Proust and James Joyce, the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé had dreamed of a perfect book that would emulate the openness, diversity and unpredictability of the modern newspaper. In place of the monotony of page after page of identical (and 'unbearable') columns of text, the book would unfold so that its frontiers were no longer clear. It would fray at the edges, as it were, into flourishes and digressions; literature would become explicitly a matter of graphic arrangement on, and beyond, the page.[3]

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There are certainly echoes of the fantastical books of Borges and Mallarmé in the objects, installations and films that make up *The Infinite Library*. But the transformations and expansions that Epaminonda and Cramer effect on the book – its elaboration into a quasi-fictional library of chimerical or hybrid volumes – has more in common with the anatomy of the book proposed in more specific and prosaic terms by the French novelist Michel Butor. In his essay 'The Book as Object', first published in 1964 – in the decade, in other words, when many of the books in *The Infinite Library* were produced – Butor considers the post-war proliferation of books and concludes that 'we are rediscovering the book as total object. Not long ago, the modes of its production, of its distribution, forced us to speak only of its shadow. The changes that have occurred in these realms are lifting the veils. The book is again beginning to appear in its true shape before our eyes.'[4]

According to Butor, the traditional book is merely a 'volume' or container for a discrete and uniform content; the conventional narrative or essay must be read from start to finish and from left to right: 'the two other dimensions and directions of the volume – from top to bottom for the column, from nearer to farther for the pages – we generally regard as quite secondary in relation to the first axis.'[5] It is these secondary directions or dimensions that constitute for Butor the liberated and liberating space of the modern book. He has in mind especially those books that we do not read sequentially, such as catalogues, dictionaries and manuals. We might add to that list all manner of illustrated texts: encyclopedias, art monographs, technical treatises, books about natural history or far-flung and exotic locations.

Such books, in Butor's schema, are expansive and unbounded; they comprise networks or patterns rather than straight narrative lines or clearly defined paragraphs and chapters. The borders of the book, in other words, have begun to blur; or rather, in the contemporary illustrated book we discover once again the original unboundedness of the book as object. The early-modern book, Butor reminds us, was complexly decorated with footnotes, glosses and devices that pointed outside of the space of the individual volume. It is this tendency of the book to unfurl itself endlessly that for Butor we must now re-animate – in short, the infinitude of the book, which implies in turn the limitlessness of the library or archive.

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The books in *The Infinite Library* are no longer themselves. For sure, they have all the appearance of self-same and restricted objects; the books are characterized by a particular austerity of outward design: dark covers, no dust-jackets, clean endpapers with discrete colophons containing the artists' names and the place of each book in the expanding series. In fact, the apparently unified and inviolate volume has been filleted and splayed, turned inside out and reanimated with scurrilous inserts from elsewhere. The book no longer simply refers outside of itself, but has come to embody that outside in its very fabric. At the same time, there is a sense of the book folding in upon itself – confusion reigns among the dimensions in which it has its being – in a movement that has no logical conclusion.

In dismantling books and reconfiguring them as bibliographic monsters, Epaminonda and Cramer effect a number of distinct operations on the objects at hand. The simplest is to insert images from one book into the pages of another, the first volume appearing to remain substantially intact. In some cases, the interpolations may be scarcely noticeable, merely a matter of substituting one illustration for another so that the graphic rhythm of the page remains uninterrupted. In others, the insertions are new leaves slipped between the existing pages, obvious invaders or parasites on the host volume. At times, garish colour intrudes on monochrome arrangements of text and image, thrusting forwards into the notional space that the page conjures. Still, a certain discretion prevails; *The Infinite Library* is not exactly an exercise in jarring montage. Even at their most visually disjunctive the books involved seem to respect each other's conventions of design and production; their union is subtle and ironic, almost neutral.

Nonetheless, there is some violence involved, even if it is not the violence of Modernist juxtaposition. Here is Butor, commenting on the graphical representation of one text within another: 'reproducing a page, or even a line, within another page affords an optical partitioning whose properties are quite different from those of the usual partitioning of a quotation. It serves to introduce new tensions into the text, the very tensions we so often feel today in our cities covered with slogans, titles and signs, noisy with broadcast songs and speeches, those shocks and jolts which occur when what we are reading or listening to is brutally occulted.'[6] *The Infinite Library* treats images as if they were such displaced quotations: they both refer outside of the interrupted page and introduce a new distinction or distance on the plane of the page itself.

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In some instances, *The Infinite Library* leaves the page intact, without overlaying it with an image excised from another book. Instead, a variety of geometric figures are enigmatically added to the page. The motifs may be so subtle as hardly to disturb the image or page, as in the small circles that randomly dot the wildlife photographs in Book #8 – *Im Wald und auf der Heide*, of 1956 – or the gird of small crosses that covers but does not obscure the athletes in Book #9, *Deutsche Sport*, published in 1967. In other examples – Book #11, *Praxis der Farben-fotografie*, from 1951, is a case in point – the intervention is considerably more extreme: here, each photograph has been almost totally obscured by a solid black rectangle, leaving visible only a narrow border of mostly abstract colour. In either case, the effect is in part to suggest a new space – something like Butor's 'nearness' – that opens up between the reader's eye and the flat page.

The case of Book #11 is instructive in another sense. Among the properties of the book remarked upon by Butor is its inherent symmetry. The book is always already, in its physical form and graphic layout, a kind of doubling: 'the first characteristic of today's Western book in this respect is its presentation as a diptych: we always see two pages at once, one opposite the other…. The seam, in the middle of the diptych, creates a zone of reduced visibility; this is why glosses are often arranged symmetrically: the right margin being best for the right page, the left for the left.'[7] In *The Infinite Library*, two copies of the same book are sometimes subtly interleaved, a page here and there repeating itself unexpectedly. The most ambitious instance is Book #12, *Die Schweigende Welt* (1956): the entire book has been doubled to form a symmetrical whole, its photographic sequence of underwater exploration advancing and then retreating like a photographic tide or an instance of time travel.

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It is perhaps no accident that the illustrated books repurposed by Epaminonda and Cramer date mostly from the 1950s and 1960s. Specific innovations in post-war book design and production – notably the use of colour photography and the variety of page layouts, including the use of full-bleed images – made, as Butor noted at the start of the 1960s, for an expanded notion of the capabilities of the book to present different kinds of visual and textual content within the same abstract space of the page. According to Butor, 'newspapers, radio, television and movies will force books to become increasingly "fine", increasingly dense. We will shift from an object of consumption in the most trivial sense of the term to an object of study and contemplation, which transforms the way we know and inhabit the universe.'[8] This almost utopian project of the book is for Butor both the result of, and a necessary counter to, the effects of contemporary information technologies; technology allows, in the era of recorded sound, the moving image and the beginnings of computerized data storage, for a conception of the book as total, simultaneous presentation of knowledge. *The Infinite Library* is in this sense also an archaeology of Modernist styles of display of information and artefacts. Each book is both an enigmatic object in and for itself, and a fragment in the wider network of relations and reminders that constitutes the project's notional archive or museum.

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The title that Epaminonda and Cramer have given their project is in part ironic, because all libraries are infinite, at least in principle. In his 1974 essay 'Species of Spaces', the experimental writer Georges Perec considers what we might call the metaphysics of the page, the way it is first of all nothing and subsequently something, even if only a few signs that orient the reader according to the horizontal and vertical. Perec, like Butor, imagines the potentially endless proliferation of such pages: 'you could, if you were to pull apart all the printed books kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale and spread the pages carefully out one beside the other, cover the whole, either of the island of St. Helena or of Lake Trasimeno.'[9] At one time or another, he writes, 'almost everything passes through a sheet of paper': the universe is tirelessly documented in letters, diaries, official documents, shopping lists, train tickets and doctors' notes. A vast library trails each human life, mirroring the expansion of the 'real' library.

But this profusion of text and image is not merely to be characterized by its expansiveness, nor its interior recursions and repetitions. There is a kind of hope embodied in the book and the library which these late-Modernist writers – even as they playfully anatomize the book as object and the library as model of all human knowledge, even as they acknowledge that (as Borges puts it) the library is endless and cyclical, and a single book scarcely less involuted and unfathomable – are still not willing to relinquish. It is an optimism elegantly expressed in another meditation on the book and the archive from the same era. In Alain Resnais's poetic documentary *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956), the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris stands not only for the sum of human knowledge, but for a collective project of discovery and liberation: 'here we catch a glimpse of a future in which all mysteries are resolved. A time when we are handed the keys to this and other universes. And this will come about because these readers, each working on his slice of universal memory, will lay the

fragments of a single secret end to end, a secret with a beautiful name, a secret called happiness.' *The Infinite Library*, in its coolly enigmatic rearranging of the remnants of an imaginary archive, houses ghosts of this utopian project, even as it assures us, following Borges, that he secret is endlessly repeated and never to be revealed.

[1] Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Library of Babel’, in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970), p. 78.

[2] Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*’, in *Labyrinths*, p. 71.

[3] Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Quant au livre’, in *Mallarmé*, trans. Anthony Hartley (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965), p. 179ff.

[4] Michel Butor, ‘The Book as Object’, in *Inventory*, ed. Richard Howard (London, Jonathan Cape, 1970), pp. 43-44.

[5] Ibid., p. 44.

[6] Ibid., p. 55.

[7] Ibid., p. 55.

[8] Ibid., p. 43.

[9] Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock (London, Penguin, 1997), p. 10.