REMEMBERING FOR THE FUTURE
THE SURVIVAL OF WRITING AND READING UNDER THE TYRANNY OF IMAGE

Michael Krüger

The dream of paradise, as Jorge Luis Borges envisaged it, took the form of a vast library containing the unabridged text of everything ever written down by human beings. Not everything thought throughout history by humans has been written down, partly from fear of censorship by the state or the church or the state church, partly from fear of consequences, for what has been set down in writing is in the world and can be used in evidence for or against its author.

But everything ever written could not be squeezed into a conventionally furnished dream, not even if we dreamed for a thousand and one nights. Ever since writing was invented as a vehicle for ideas about what humans should and shouldn’t do, the written document has weighed us down, not merely because law and order and prohibitions and restrictions were amongst the first things written about, but because the secondary literature, the commentaries, soon exceeded the original in volume, growing beyond all bounds. This is why libraries were created. While they are, for some, a reflection of paradise, a wonderful dream of abundance and eternity, for others they are a nightmare and a prison.

Some fundamentalists dream, again, of the disappearance of all books, leaving only one, the first and only book from which all others have evolved. Reduction of complexity, as the sociologists would say. But we can’t turn back the clock, and now we are surrounded by masses of texts that threaten to smother us. In order to continue building the pyramids of language, the historical sciences deal with increasingly smaller segments, which often disregard the view of the whole. And there is no end in sight. The invention and differentiation of script can be seen as a curse as well as a blessing. Maybe this is why, in the midst of civilization, there is more

In addition to his role as publisher of Carl Hanser Verlag in Munich, at the time of writing, Michael Krüger was editor of the literary magazine Akzente and writer.
and more silence and speechlessness—and in this empty territory powerful, archetypal images, which we thought reason had silenced forever, are rising again. The struggle between language and image that we witness today is far from over.

Since the early 18th century, the problem of the library as a dream of paradise has become increasingly acute. Until then, one had but to amass whatever served the purpose of broadening knowledge. Then something was added, serving, above all, the purpose of entertainment: the novel, the belles lettres. Until the 18th century, it was relatively easy to imagine a library encompassing the entire positive knowledge of the world. The best examples were provided by the Utopian literature at the time of the French Revolution. With their Encyclopédie Diderot and d’Alembert even tried to compress this knowledge into a kind of pocket library. Whoever studied it, they hoped, would be a happier person. Much has been thought and written about the close links between study—that is to say, reading, thinking and writing—and happiness, the happiness of the individual and of society. Literary history is full of these stories of happiness. We publishers should read them whenever we become unsure of our profession.

All 18th century autobiographies reveal how literature opened up the world. Even in the 20th century, writers continued to bear witness to ways in which the order of the printed word has saved them from the world’s chaos. And yet, in Western societies today, voices are rising which deny the necessity of linking happiness and literature. Elias Canetti once remarked, matter-of-factly, that he wanted to live for as long as it would take him to read all the important books. He was convinced that he could convey something essential only when he had read everything about the fundamentals of our civilization. Everything. All historical and religious works, the entire literature of fairy tales and legends, and all important novels, too. He actually read about 1,000 novels at the most, which corresponds roughly to the annual output of a large modern publishing corporation. Nobody today can have an overview of what has been written, printed and distributed in the last 250 years. An experienced reader needs a good two minutes to read a page of prose, a week for a full-scale novel, a month for War and Peace, six months for Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past, and so on. Woody Allen said: ‘I have done a course in diagonal reading and am now able to read War and Peace in twenty minutes. I can say: it’s about Russia.’ I had a friend in Berlin, a professor of economics, who wanted to have only very well-read students in his seminars and who, accordingly, gave out lists of books he considered essential reading: from Adam Smith, via the three volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital, to Keynes, Rapaport and