

“Gabriel Zaid is a marvelously elegant and playful writer—a cosmopolitan critic with sound judgment and a light touch. He is a jewel of Latin American letters, which is no small thing to be. Read him—you’ll see.”

—Paul Berman, Editorial Board, *Dissent*

“Gabriel Zaid’s defense of books is genuinely exhilarating. It is not pious, it is wise; and its wisdom is delivered with extraordinary lucidity and charm. This is how Montaigne would have written about the dizzy and increasingly dolorous age of the Internet. May *So Many Books* fall into so many hands.”

—Leon Wieseltier, Literary Editor, *New Republic*

“With cascades of books pouring down on him from every direction, how can the twenty-first-century reader keep his head above water? Gabriel Zaid answers that question in a variety of surprising ways, many of them witty, all of them provocative.”

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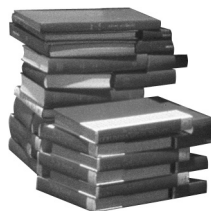
“A truly original book about books. Destined to be a classic.”

—Enrique Krauze, Editor, *Letras Libres*

SORT OF BOOKS

*London 2004*

# SO MANY BOOKS



*by* GABRIEL ZAID

*Translated by Natasha Wimmer*

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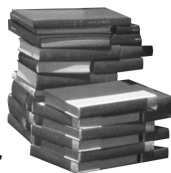
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SO MANY BOOKS





## To the Unrepentant Reader

THE READING OF BOOKS is growing arithmetically; the writing of books is growing exponentially. If our passion for writing goes unchecked, in the near future there will be more people writing books than reading them.

Midway through the fifteenth century, when books were first printed, a few hundred titles were published each year, in editions of hundreds of copies. Most were ancient texts (Biblical, Greek, Roman, or the works of the church fathers) or explications and commentaries on those same texts, although some contemporary works were allowed to mingle with the classics. Perhaps this is why we have felt ever since that to see our words in type is to be consecrated, to be immortalized.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, our universal graphomania produces a million titles a year, in printings of thousands of copies. Very few books are reprinted; even fewer are

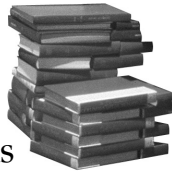
translated. Many authors don't write for their readers, but to pad out their resumé's. At the other extreme are those who write for the market, and make money by educating, informing, or entertaining. The books we cherish are the exceptions: old books worthy of rereading (the classics) and contemporary books written in the same tradition.

This tradition is a robust one, which has been enriched by the innovations that seemed to threaten it. When the book first appeared, Socrates rejected it as inferior to conversation. When the printing press first appeared, some stubborn readers refused to permit industrial products in their libraries and hired scribes to copy printed books. When the television first appeared, the end of the book was proclaimed. The same happened with the arrival of the CD-ROM and the e-book. When the market began to consolidate around a few bestsellers, chain stores, online booksellers, and publishing conglomerates, it was feared that diversity would suffer. But huge sales for a few titles don't mean that all other books will disappear—rather, that those other books are relatively obscure. Our new technologies (the Internet, print-on-demand) are increasing the millions of

titles available. And the conversation continues, unheeded by television, which will never report: “Yesterday, a student read Socrates’ *Apology* and felt free.”

The freedom and happiness experienced in reading are addictive, and the strength of the tradition lies in that experience, which ultimately turns all innovations to its own ends. Reading liberates the reader and transports him from his book to a reading of himself and all of life. It leads him to participate in conversations, and in some cases to arrange them, as so many active readers do: parents, teachers, friends, writers, translators, critics, publishers, booksellers, librarians.

The uniqueness of each reader, reflected in the particular nature of his personal library (his intellectual genome), flourishes in diversity. And the conversation continues, between the excesses of graphomania and the excesses of commerce, between the sprawl of chaos and the concentration of the market.



## An Embarrassment of Books

THOSE WHO ASPIRE to the status of cultured individuals visit bookshops with trepidation, overwhelmed by the immensity of all they have not read. They buy something that they've been told is good, make an unsuccessful attempt to read it, and when they have accumulated half a dozen unread books, feel so bad that they are afraid to buy more.

In contrast, the truly cultured are capable of owning thousands of unread books without losing their composure or their desire for more.

“Every private library is a reading plan,” the Spanish philosopher José Gaos once wrote. So accurate is this observation that in order for it also to be ironic the reader must acknowledge a kind of general unspoken assumption: a book not read is a project uncompleted. Having unread books on display is like writing cheques when you have no money in the bank—a way of deceiving your guests.

In a book neatly entitled *A Handbook of Consumer Motivations*, Ernest Dichter speaks of this guilty conscience as it affects mail-order book club members. There are those who sign up with the idea that they are gaining entrance to a cultural extravaganza. But as the books arrive and the time required to read them adds up, each new shipment becomes a less-than-festive reproach, an accusation of failure. Finally the discouraged members withdraw, resentful that books are still being sent, even though they have paid for them.

This explains the invention of books that aren't meant to be read. Books, in other words, that can be displayed without consequences or guilt: dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases, art books, cookbooks, reference books, bibliographies, anthologies, complete works. Books that tasteful gift-givers prefer—because they're expensive, which is a sign of esteem, and because they don't threaten the recipient with the task of responding to the questions "Have you read it yet? What did you think of it?" In fact, the most uncommercial slogan in the world might be: "Give a book! It's like giving an obligation."

Authors aren't so mindful of their readers. Even excepting the extreme cases (those writers who

call to see what page you're on, when you'll finish, and above all, when you'll publish a long, intelligent, and objective review), they feel obliged to bestow obligations each time they publish. It is understood that the elegant sidestep in such cases is to reply immediately with a card that reads: "I just received your book. What a wonderful surprise! I congratulate you, and I congratulate myself in advance for the pleasure that reading it will give me." (Mexican writer Alfonso Reyes used printed cards, with blank spaces for the date, name and title.) Otherwise, the debt multiplies and compounds as time passes, until the moment comes when the pending responsibility of reading the book, writing a letter (which can no longer be so short), and coming up with praise that isn't false or faint becomes a nightmare. It's hard to say whether this or the card sent by return mail is worse.

But there is more: what to do, physically, with the book? The author might appear one day and discover it in pristine, untouched condition. A good strategy, which unfortunately also requires discipline, is to ruffle the first pages upon receiving it and insert a bookmark as proof of your good

intentions. Or make it disappear, explaining (if necessary) that a friend was so excited to see it that she borrowed it before you could read it. In this case, it is prudent to remove the dedication page: signed books have an unfortunate habit of ending up in the hands of dealers, and there are terrible stories about books by Rilke fulsomely dedicated to Valéry and later found in bookstalls on the Seine. Or there is the story about the Mexican author who found his book—uncut—in a used bookshop, and bought and re-sent it to his friend, “With the renewed affection of Artemio de Valle-Arizpe.”

A terrible solution is to keep books until you’ve accumulated a library of thousands of volumes, all the while telling yourself that you know you don’t have the time to read them but that you’ll be able to leave them to your children. This is an excuse that grows weaker and weaker as science makes ever greater strides. Almost all books are obsolete from the moment they’re written, if not before. And marketing strategies engineer the planned obsolescence even of classic authors (with new and better critical editions) to eliminate the ruinous transmission of tastes from one generation to

the next, which once upon a time so stifled the market.

The creation of an obsolete library for one's children may only be justified in the way that the preservation of ruins is justified: in the name of archaeology. Better excuses exist for collecting books than the construction of a library for posterity. If you amass a collection dedicated to the history of the Mexican state of Tlaxcala, or, better yet, of editions of *Don Quixote*, no one can expect you to have read *Don Quixote* thousands of times, once for each edition — though plenty of innocent visitors will be scandalized to see the same title repeated over and over. Isn't it a little like having your picture taken thousands of times and from thousands of angles with the only big fish you ever caught in your life?

In keeping with the Categorical Imperative of Reading and Being Cultured, a library is a trophy room. *The Magic Mountain* is like an elephant's foot, lending prestige, serving as a footstool, and prompting the discussion of dangerous trips to Africa. And what about the lion who winked an eye at the hunter before falling at his feet? Thus, the owner of Churchill's memoirs, signed and unread, can

say: “Poor Winston! I’m keeping them as they were when I got them, out of respect for his memory. What a formidable British lion! I begged the taxidermist to be careful to preserve the wink . . .”

Hunters are famous for exaggerating. That is why it is a matter of professional ethics for the reader who aspires to be cultured never to display pieces that haven’t been properly bagged—not to mention pieces that were actually read by a friend, or the guide, on cultural safari. As a result, a book can only be seen as a dissected cadaver, not a captive live animal. Tigers in the gas tank? All right. But roaring all over the house, lounging in the bathroom or on the bed, stretching and yawning in the windows, perched on shelves? Never! Out of respect for one’s guests.

The Categorical Imperative derives from the old belief in the sacredness of books. In *In Search of a Better World*, Karl Popper surmises that Western democratic culture was born with the establishment of the book market in Athens, in the fifth century before Christ: the book as commercial product did away with the book as sacred object. But did it really? The market is ambivalent. To have at home and at hand what once could only be

viewed in the temple is a great boon for demand, because books embody all the prestige of the temple. Democratic desacralization flourishes like simony: it allows the selling of something priceless. It doesn't do away with sacred books; it causes them to multiply.

Socrates criticized the fetishization of the book (*Phaedrus*). Two centuries later in another book-centred culture (the Biblical world), it was written in *Ecclesiastes* (12:12) that “. . . of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.” In the first century, Seneca wrote to Lucilius: “In the multitude of books is distraction.” Ibn Khaldun, in the fourteenth century: “Too many books on a subject make it more difficult to study” (*The Muqaddimah*, VI, 27). Montaigne: “To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books” (*Essays*, III, 13). Don Quixote, upon learning of the writing of *Don Quixote*: “There are those who compose books and pop them out like so many buns” (II, 3). Samuel Johnson: “No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a public library; for who can see the wall crowded on every side by mighty volumes, the works of laborious

meditations and accurate inquiry, now scarcely known but by the catalogue . . ." (*Rambler* No. 106, March 23, 1751).

I once proposed a chastity glove for authors who were unable to contain themselves. But an icy plunge works too: like Johnson, writers can try submersion in a great library, among a multitude of neglected authors, to discourage themselves. Progress has ordered things so that all citizens, not just the prophets, may give themselves the luxury of preaching in the desert.

What could bring a halt to the proliferation of books? For a time, it seemed as if television might. Marshall McLuhan wrote (wrote!) prophetic books about the end of the age of the book. But the explosion of publishing left McLuhan himself preaching in the desert.

Until 1947, there were only seven commercial television channels in the United States, which became 50 in 1949 (when the major networks appeared) and 517 in 1960. From 1947 to 1960, the percentage of households with television sets jumped from almost zero to 88 percent. The stage was thus set for the demise of the book. Nevertheless, the number of titles published each year in

the same period more than doubled: from seven thousand to fifteen thousand. Even more surprising, from 1960 to 1968, the number of titles doubled again, and in a shorter period, whereas the number of homes with television sets could naturally only rise to the saturation point: 98 percent (*Statistical Abstract of the United States*).

In the middle of the fifteenth century, the printing press with movable type appeared in Europe. It didn't immediately replace the copyists, or printing with wooden blocks, but it made many more titles available. From 1450 to 1500, between 10,000 and 15,000 titles were published (the so-called incunabula) in 30,000 to 35,000 editions, with average printings of 500 copies, according to Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin (*The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450–1800*) — say 250 titles per year, starting with 100 in 1450. By 1952, 250,000 were being published (Robert Escarpit, *The Book Revolution*). This implies a rate of growth five times that of the population.

It was assumed that television would put an end to both explosions, but that end never came, as can be seen in the statistics for the year 2000, extrapolated from the *UNESCO Statistical Yearbook*

*1999.* Since the invention of the television, the world population has grown 1.8 percent each year (as compared to 0.3 percent annually over the preceding five hundred years) and the publication of books has grown 2.8 percent (as compared to 1.6 percent).

Date	1450 (Gutenberg)	1950 (Television)	2000
Titles per year	100	250,000	1,000,000
Population (in millions)	500	2,500	6,000
Titles per million inhabitants	0.2	100	167

From these rough figures, some rough interpolations may be made. Five hundred titles were published in 1550, 2,300 in 1650, 11,000 in 1750, and 50,000 in 1850. In 1550 the cumulative bibliography was approximately 35,000 titles; in 1650 it was 150,000; in 1750 it was 700,000; in 1850 it was 3.3 million; in 1950 it was 16 million; and in 2000 it was 52 million. In the first century of printing (1450–1550), 35,000 titles were published; in the last half-century (1950–2000), there were a thousand times more — 36 million.

The human race publishes a book every thirty seconds. Supposing an average price of £20 per

book and an average thickness of two centimetres, twenty million pounds and close to fifteen miles of shelves would be required for the yearly addition to Mallarmé's library, if today the poet wished to be able to say:

The flesh is sad, alas! and I've read all the books.

Books are published at such a rapid rate that they make us exponentially more ignorant. If a person read a book a day, he would be neglecting to read four thousand others, published the same day. In other words, the books he didn't read would pile up four thousand times faster than the books he did read, and his ignorance would grow four thousand times faster than his knowledge.

"There is so much to learn and so little time to live," as Baltasar Gracián wrote. But once again, the aphorism functions poetically, transcending its quantitative truth, its melancholic tone erasing the feelings of guilt aroused by our finiteness in the face of the infinite tasks demanded by the Categorical Imperative. Yes, there is something deeply sad about visiting a library or bookshop full of

books that we will never read. Something that brings to mind the following lines by Borges:

There is a mirror that has seen me for the last time.  
There is a door I have shut until the end of the  
world.

Among the books in my library (I have them  
before me)

There are some I shall never reopen.

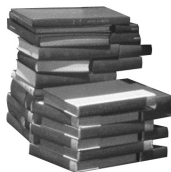
Why read? And why write? After reading one hundred, one thousand, ten thousand books in a lifetime, what have we read? Nothing. To say “I only know that I’ve read nothing,” after reading thousands of books, is not false modesty. It is strictly accurate, to the first decimal place of zero percent. But is that not perhaps exactly, Socratically, what our embarrassment of books should teach us? To be aware of our ignorance, to fully accept it; to go from being simply ignorant to being consciously ignorant?

Maybe our understanding of our finiteness is the only access we have to the totality that beckons and vanquishes us, that creates an outside totalizing ambition in us. Maybe all experience of

infinity is an illusion, if it is not precisely an experience of finiteness. And maybe the measure of our reading should therefore be, not the number of books we've read, but the state in which they leave us.

What does it matter how cultivated and up-to-date we are, or how many thousands of books we've read? What matters is how we feel, how we see, what we do after reading; whether the street and the clouds and the existence of others mean anything to us; whether reading makes us, physically, more alive.

## Complaining About Babel



ALMOST ALL BOOKS sell thousands of copies, not dozens or hundreds of thousands, let alone millions. It is said — unthinkingly — that this is a bad thing.

A film requires hundreds of thousands of viewers to justify the investment. What is the fate of films that could never attract such large audiences? They aren't made. As a result, the number of films produced worldwide is not even 1 percent of the number of books published. If books were to cost as much as films to produce and distribute (as some do, like encyclopedias), an audience of hundreds of thousands would be required — a Hollywood-sized audience. And what would happen to the 99 percent of books that could never sell hundreds of thousands of copies? No one would publish them.

Books are so cheap that, unlike newspapers, radio, or television, they can be published free of

advertisements, and for a few thousand interested readers. To finance almost any book, it is enough to find three thousand readers willing to pay six hours' worth of minimum-wage salary. Naturally, if thirty thousand readers could be reached, it would be possible to lower the price — by half, say. But it isn't easy to reach thirty thousand readers. Not because the lower price is still too high, but for a reason we prefer to ignore: the majority of titles published are of no interest to thirty thousand people — you couldn't even give away that many copies.

Book people (authors and readers, publishers and booksellers, librarians and teachers) have a habit of feeling sorry for themselves, a tendency to complain even when all is well. This makes them see as a failure something that is actually a blessing: The book business, unlike newspapers, films, or television, is viable on a small scale. In the case of books, the economic threshold, or the minimum investment required to gain access to the market, is very low, which encourages the proliferation of titles and publishing houses, the flourishing of various and disparate initiatives, and an abundance of cultural richness. If the threshold of viability were

as high as it is for the mass media, there would be less diversity, as is true of mass media. Let us suppose that only one of every hundred titles were published, but for readerships the size of film audiences. What advantage would that scenario offer? None at all, because those titles are already being published today: they're our bestsellers. On the other hand, the ninety-nine books not of interest to a huge public would be lost. The film business requires the elimination of perhaps as many as 99 percent of all possible films. The book business doesn't. If the book is appropriate for a broader public, it can reach a broader public. If it isn't, it may still be viable, as long as it is of interest to a few thousand readers.

What reasons are there for demanding that all books sell millions of copies? Vanity (the author's, the publisher's) or national pride? If a book, as compared to a film, is commercially viable even if it doesn't interest more than a few people, why not publish it? It is natural that a more populous, richer, better-educated society should fuel demand for certain titles, but it doesn't follow that such a society should therefore stop publishing books that sell fewer copies. On the contrary, as the

population of a country increases and it becomes richer and better educated, it paradoxically publishes more titles with lower sales: the variety of specialities and interests grows, and it becomes easier to attract a few thousand readers interested in something very specific. The number of titles that are viable in printings of a few thousand copies rises.

This situation allows us to understand a little-known fact, one of those facts that is hardly ever stated, since it defies conventional wisdom: Most of the titles published in rich countries sell no more than a few thousand copies, just as is true in the rest of the world. How can this be? Isn't there always talk about massive printings? There is talk, and these printings do exist, but they exist side by side with small printings, which are the majority and are never discussed. The true editorial superiority of rich countries lies in their ability to more easily reach a few thousand buyers willing to pay £20 (or much more) for a book of very limited appeal. It lies in the fact that they publish ten times more titles per capita than poorer countries, because they are able to afford the

luxury of publishing an infinite variety of titles in small printings.

In many areas, progress destroys diversity. Not so with books. After Gutenberg, mass market journalism, film, television, computing, satellite communications, and the Internet have all appeared. With each new development, the end of the book was prophesied, and each time more books were published, with greater ease and on more diverse subjects. Now, print-on-demand systems make printings of fifty or one hundred copies cost-effective. And what does this mean? It has become possible to publish books that interest no more than fifty or one hundred people. Of course, there will always be some author who, instead of appreciating the benefits of this system, will say, “How is it possible that no more than fifty (or one hundred) copies of my *Deconstructive Hermeneutics* have been sold? There must be a conspiracy against me. Publishers and booksellers are in it for the money—they only promote books that are easy to sell. How will humanity, numbed by television and consumerism, hermeneutically deconstruct itself? Nothing will change until Everything changes . . .”

But let us suppose that, at last, Everything does change; that the Golden Age is upon us; that a universal library system is established (a great Library of Babel) that holds every book ever published, more than fifty million titles; that every human being is allowed to collect a salary for dedicating himself solely to the reading of books; that, under these conditions, each reader is able to read four books a week, two hundred a year, ten thousand in a half-century. It would be as nothing. If not a single book were published from this moment on, it would still take 250,000 years for us to acquaint ourselves with those books already written. Simply reading a list of them (author and title) would take some fifteen years. When we say that books should be read by everyone, we aren't thinking. Our simple physical limitations make it impossible for us to read 99.9 percent of the books that are written.

Humankind writes more than it can read. If for every book published one or two languish unpublished, then two or three million books are written each year. Xlibris, "a strategic partner of Random House Ventures" specializing in vanity publishing, estimates that for every book published in the

United States there are nine unpublished manuscripts (*Harper's Magazine*, December 2000). And yet a full-time reader can't read more than two hundred, one out of every ten or fifteen thousand.

Would it be desirable for just a few books to be published each year, books that everyone in the world could read? Each of us dreams of having the world's full attention, of everyone else falling silent to hear what we have to say, of everyone else giving up writing in order to read what we have written. There exists a belief that at least a few things should be read by the whole world. But what could be said to everyone? If there were a permanent universal assembly, at which a microphone was passed around so that each person could speak to the crowd, we would scarcely have time to say hello and sit down. The universal dialogue would be reduced to a recognition of the self, a kind of Babelian poem of creation consisting of everyone saying "Good morning" to one another. Maybe that is what life is: We stand up and say hello and then disappear. But it is difficult to accept that idea. In our hello is a yearning for eternity, a yearning that makes us cling fiercely to the microphone and leads to totalitarian communion.

Everyone must listen to what I have to say. The never-ending salutation is the expression of a never-ending *I*, echoing from the centre of the universe. It resounds in the speeches of the Führer; in Mao's *Little Red Book*; in Psalm 49:

Hear this, all ye people; give ear, all ye  
inhabitants of the world:  
Both low and high, rich and poor, together.  
My mouth shall speak of wisdom; and the  
meditation of my heart shall be of understanding.

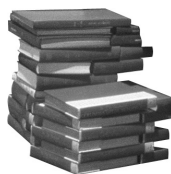
It is a noble temptation, that desire to seize the microphone, to refuse to let the world go (for its own good), to subject it to one's wise words and good intentions. Nevertheless, even at gatherings of specialists the conversation must be broken up when the crowd reaches a certain size, so that the participants don't dwell on generalities and are able to address more subjects, able to say more, in smaller groups. There is no such thing as an infinite capacity for communication. Even supposing that every specialist had the same expertise and interest in every subject, there would be no time to address all subjects in a general gathering.

Our simple physical limitations decree that as the number of participants rises, the average time for dialogue decreases. The participation of the whole world in a conversation doesn't enrich the dialogue; it diminishes it.

Imagine an agora, a marketplace, a cocktail party, where multiple conversations are under way. The microphone appears. The many circles become one circle, different conversations become the same conversation. Is this a good thing?

It is a myth: a myth of transparency, of the Tower of Babel replaced by a totalitarian *I*. We complain about the confusion of languages, the multiplicity of conversations, because we dream of the world's undivided attention, beyond the grasp of our finiteness. But culture is a conversation without a centre. The true universal culture isn't the utopian Global Village, gathered around a microphone; it is the Babel-like multitude of villages, each the centre of the world. The universality accessible to us is the finite, limited, concrete universality of diverse and disparate conversations.

## Books and Conversation



THANKS TO BOOKS, we know that Socrates distrusted books. He compared them to conversation and believed they fell short. He told Phaedrus that writing is a simulation of speech, which may seem an aid to memory, knowledge, and imagination, but is ultimately counterproductive. People rely on it and fail to develop their memory, knowledge, or imagination. Even worse, they begin to believe they know things because they own books.

Conversation depends on those who take part in it: who they are, what they know, what interests them, what they've just said. In contrast, books are unfeeling monologues: They ignore the circumstances in which they're read. They repeat the same things over and over, without taking the reader into account. They pay no heed to his questions or responses.

An author's ideas suffer the same fate, being exposed to incomprehension and separated from

their creator, who is not present to explain or defend them.

Books represent the harvest, not the creative process. On the other hand, ideas sown in conversation sprout and produce new ideas.

In sum, intelligence, experience, and the creative life develop and are propagated through live speech, not dead letters.

This argument embodies a criticism of progress that dates back to prehistoric times. It is the resistance to fire in the hearth and domesticated plants in the garden; the battle of the natural versus the artificial, the raw versus the cooked, the live versus the dead. Paradoxically, these arguments reach us via the medium they reject. Socrates, true to his convictions, didn't record them. Maybe Phaedrus committed them to memory—Socratically—and repeated them in other conversations, with Plato eagerly listening. Maybe Plato himself, realizing the incongruity of copying down what he had heard, had a moment of doubt. Fortunately for us, he opted to write: he was Socratic and anti-Socratic at the same time. He brought to life in books the dialogues that still question our bookish lives today.

The same questions are raised, thousands of years later, about the printed word, film, music, television, computers. For example, musicians chide us for listening to background music while we busy ourselves at other tasks. The truly musical thing, the Socratic thing, would be to meet with friends to play, to improvise a jazz dialogue dependent on the players, the mood, the inspiration . . .

But who can complain, two hundred years after Mozart's death, about being offered a compact disc collection of all his compositions? Who can complain about possessing the complete works of Plato? Today it is easy to buy such treasures, at prices that seem excessive but are actually negligible. Just compare them to the cost of buying a cathedral or a single painting by Van Gogh. Or to the cost of sitting down and carefully reading all of Plato's dialogues, or listening to all of Mozart's music.

Today it is easier to acquire treasures than it is to give them the time they deserve. And so the arguments of Socrates weigh on us, waiting on the bookshelf for our notice, and Mozart's themes come and go with little fanfare, like the sound of

the wind in the trees, which fades and is lost or suddenly asserts itself and transports us.

Modern productivity reduces the cost of mechanical reproduction and increases the cost of Socratic reproduction. Intelligent conversations like those engaged in by Socrates and Phaedrus, who meet on the street, begin discussing a clever passage by Lysias on love, and go for a walk outside of Athens to debate its meaning, are only possible in an underdeveloped world, where productivity is low and there is plenty of free time. In the modern world, with everyone travelling by car, and leaving just enough time to get where they are going, Socrates and Phaedrus would never meet. And in the unlikely event that they did, it would be hard for them to find a place to stop, not to mention the time. It is hardly to be expected that they would cancel their plans like two idlers just to talk.

Confronted with the choice between having time and having things, we've chosen to have things. Today it is a luxury to read what Socrates said, not because the books are expensive, but because our time is scarce. Today intelligent conversation and contemplative leisure cost infinitely

more than the accumulation of cultural treasures. We now have more books than we can possibly read. The knowledge accumulated in our print culture infinitely surpasses the learning of Socrates. In a survey of reading habits today, Socrates would score low. His scant scholarship and his lack of academic titles, foreign languages, resumé, and published work would prevent him from competing for important posts in the cultural bureaucracy, which would confirm his criticism of the written word: The simulation and credentials of learning have come to carry more weight than learning itself.

But the written word, that dry husk of speech, doesn't have to supplant speech. It can fortify it, or fertilize it. As dead matter, it can either suffocate life or nourish it, kill or invigorate. The important thing is not to lose sight of which should be in the service of which. Keeping that in mind, we can accept Socrates' criticism and come out in defence of the book:

"You're right—if books don't encourage us to live life to the fullest, they are dead. You're right—when the miracle of inspired life presents itself, it would be ridiculous to prefer books. But we no

longer have the leisure of free afternoons in Athens. And the simulacrum of inspired life that exists in the great books seems more than a simulacrum: it seems like life itself, like latent inspiration waiting to be reclaimed. The dead text of Plato's *Dialogues* preserves the germ of your contagious freedom."

Underdeveloped worlds, old and new, have never lacked for founding fathers: people capable of using their skill as speakers to make oases spring up in the cultural desert. The lessons of Socrates—in the form of public discussions, the preaching of missionaries, the teaching of rural schoolmasters, the salons of the great conversationalists—may radiate throughout the community, raising the quality of local life and unleashing its creative possibilities. But thousands of years after writing was invented and centuries after the printing press was introduced, this encouragement doesn't have to be purely oral.

The inertness of the printed word is not a failing of print but a failing of life. There is much dead text in conversation, in the university, in sermons, in speeches, in the words and acts of everyday life. Just consider a medieval scenario

that persists to this day: In the classroom, the teacher reads his lecture, and the students take notes. What is the role of the teacher here? Not the Socratic role of the spiritual midwife who guides the intelligence of his interlocutor into the world, but the phonographic role of a needle tracing the written word. Today, when an excess of population, an excess of academicism, and the excessive cost of personal attention make it impossible to have a Socrates in every classroom, at what level is the classroom not an obsolete machine in comparison to other forms of teaching and inspiration, like the library?

Culture is conversation. Writing, reading, editing, printing, distributing, cataloguing, reviewing, can be fuel for that conversation, ways of keeping it lively. It could even be said that to publish a book is to insert it into the middle of a conversation, that to establish a publishing house, bookshop, or library is to start a conversation—a conversation that springs, as it should, from local debate, but that opens up, as it should, to all places and times.

Culture, in the anthropological sense of “way of life,” manifests and reproduces itself live, but it is

also a collection of works, tools, codes, and repertoires that may or may not be inert text. The same is true of culture in the limited sense of “cultural activities”. In both senses, what is important about culture is how alive it is, not how many tons of dead prose it can claim. The Socratic demands of a convivial culture (as Ivan Illich would call it) can be fulfilled, or not, in the agora or in books, the classroom or the library, the café or the bookshop; with recent or medieval technology and in rich or poor communities. The superiority of some cultures or cultural media over others, when it exists, resides in the liveliness or level of vitality they produce, which can only be felt, not measured by statistics. Credentials and statistics are beside the point.

Boredom is the negation of culture. Culture is conversation, liveliness, inspiration. In championing books that matter to us, we can't restrict ourselves to increasing sales, printings, number of titles, news, cultural events, jobs, costs, and all other measurable quantities. The important thing is creative vitality, which we can sense if not measure; it lets us know when we're headed in the right direction, although there are no set rules for encouraging it.

*Some examples:*

■ A two-year-old child is at the dinner table with her parents; they are talking to guests in a language that she has never heard before. All of a sudden, she starts to babble, as if she were speaking that language. She wants to participate in the conversation and is confident that she can. In a way, this child is repeating the adventure of learning to talk. And if she lived in the country of the friends who are visiting, she would surely master their language, the same way people learn to swim: by diving right in. Observing this urge to communicate, Paul Goodman, author of *Growing Up Absurd*, believed that children could learn to read spontaneously; that the problem was school, which made them lose the desire. With a school teacher's Socratic irony, he said that if children went to school from the day they were born in order to be taught how to speak, a good percentage of the population would be unable to do so, or would stutter.

■ A person comes late to a conversation and believes that he can't follow it, that he needs to be better informed: as if knowledge were something other than conversation itself, as if it were

something to be acquired elsewhere first. Friends recommend that he take certain classes, which bore him; that he study handbooks, which bore him; that he read the classics, which also bore him. The truly enlightened thing would be to recommend that he have more confidence in his appetite for conversation; to tell him that if he is interested in something he doesn't understand, he should pay more attention, ask questions, reflect, consult dictionaries, manuals, classics, but all in the service of his desire to participate in the ongoing conversation. There is no point in recommending that he try to learn the dictionary from start to finish, systematically, from A to Z. The dictionary, like all study plans, is justified by its use as an aid to conversation, not by its own merits. Naturally, if upon looking up a word he discovers others that interest him, or if upon consulting a classic he finds that his interest goes beyond the matter at hand, he should allow himself to be carried away by curiosity, surprise, astonishment, enjoyment. The desire to follow a conversation that you don't understand is a healthy sign, not an indication of lack of preparation. Discipline is good in the service of desire. Without desire, there is no living culture.

||| A young writer dreams of writing novels, but feels he isn't ready. He is advised to read the great novelists, but in the originals. He becomes enamoured of Dostoyevsky, and twenty years later, instead of a novelist he has become a translator from the Russian. Or he is advised to get his doctorate in literature with a speciality in narrative theory, and twenty years later he isn't a novelist but a professor of semiotics. What one should really say to him is this: What novels have you read that you couldn't put down? Keep reading books like that, and take a look at these others, which might interest you too. What has most excited you to write? Keep writing the same kind of thing, and once you are writing—not before—study the art of writing from the outside, reading this or that book. Don't bury yourself in the history or the theory of the novel without having first fallen under the spell of fiction, without having been seized by the creative thrill of novels.

||| The grandchildren of a forgotten writer have the funds to publish a monumental edition of his complete works. Respect for one's elders may work in the interests of culture, especially when it

ensures the care of archives, objects, editions, and all the many other things that might be damaged or lost. It is even more helpful when it facilitates research, with proper or at least careful classification, annotation, indexes, and critical editions. But monuments are designed for ceremonies, not conversation. To incorporate a forgotten writer into a conversation, it is necessary to be familiar with the conversation, to judge where to gain entry and what to introduce; on what subjects and at what time and place to give voice to the forgotten writer; to choose the right text to start people talking. After a few poems, stories, or essays are published in magazines or newspapers, a publishing house (one that conducts the right sort of conversation) should then pick one of his books for publication. And so on, successively, as if he were a living writer, letting one or two years pass between books. This is how writers of other eras, or contemporary writers from other countries, have come to form part of local conversations, gaining access to them by marking their pace and heeding their limitations. Not all conversations are particularly open or intelligent.

■ Many authors send their writing to a publisher without first informing themselves about the character of the house and its list. This is like talking without listening. A friend familiar with the on-going “conversation” might say this to the writer: “It is useless for you to send this to such-and-such a publisher. Don’t you read what he publishes? Your work isn’t right for any of his imprints (or any section of his magazine). He just rejected this or that magnificent translation. Why? Because he doesn’t publish books in translation. Hadn’t you noticed? I hadn’t either, but looking through his catalogue, I realized it was true. You can, of course, try the XYZ Institute. Their editorial policy is so amorphous that everything has a place there; but by the same token, you’ll be buried in a warehouse, not inserted into an ongoing conversation. You have to find publishers who en-gage in lively conversations, who have access to readers to whom you really have something to say in the judgment of the publisher. Or somehow you must start a conversation yourself, until the audience you have amassed attracts a publisher.”

||| Juan José Arreola, a man who did much to renew Spanish prose, and a great educator in the Socratic tradition of teaching through conversation, also knew how to use publishing to energize Mexican literature. His legendary small-press series *Los Presentes* led to the formation of a lively circle of young writers who set in motion a number of other initiatives. And he did this with very little material support. Today, when so many institutions possess hundreds of times more resources, it is amazing how few publications and cultural activities make any difference at all. Why is this so? Perhaps because many publishers are not aware that the true art of publishing involves placing the text in the middle of a conversation; knowing how to feed the flames.

This same Arreola coined a publishing maxim: All good publishers have a department of exceptions. But note, exceptions have no meaning when a publisher's list is amorphous. They are only possible when the conversation has an organizing principle. Only at a well-organized table is it possible to see that one of the guests is out of place, that he should be at a different table. The

rule of not publishing literature in translation is ridiculous as a general principle, but it gives shape to the conversation of a certain table. Without this coherence, there can be no good publishers, distributors, booksellers, librarians, or reading club and book club administrators.

Culture makes us think in abstract terms, with chaotic results for many endeavours. If we understand culture as a conversation, we can make specific judgments, determining who has something of interest to say to whom, and how, when, and where to bring them together. It helps us to accept that, of everyone in the whole world, the people who will read a new book are so few that a list of them could theoretically be drawn up. The list would be different for each book, of course. In very rare cases, it might be millions of names long, manageable only by the computers of the major book clubs or the big direct-sales companies. But most commonly—in any language—the list is thousands of names long; not even tens of thousands. And just a few thousand copies, read by the right people, are enough to change the course of conversation, the boundaries of literature, and our intellectual life. What sense is there, then, in

launching books into infinity so that they are lost in the chaos? With few exceptions, the world of the book has no connection to massive and undifferentiated markets; it relies instead on segmented clienteles, specialized niches, and members of different clubs of enthusiasts. But not all publishers, booksellers, and librarians see the importance of giving shape to these clubs; of making lists of potential readers; of welcoming and facilitating direct contact; of taking into account the tastes and opinions of the participants; of organizing coherent and lively conversations. The success that many small and medium-sized houses have had along these lines confirms the idea that organizing the world of books is like organizing a conversation.

Dear Socrates—Phaedrus was right when he remarked on your special talent for inventing Egyptian tales about the origin of writing. But your criticism helps us to identify the true role of books, which is to continue our conversation by other means.