# Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of Arranging One's Books[1]

Georges Perec

Every library[2] answers a twofold need, which is often also a twofold obsession: that of conserving certain objects (books) and that of organizing them in certain ways.

One of my friends had the idea one day of stopping his library at 361 books. The plan was as follows: having attained, by addition or subtraction, and starting from a given number *n* of books, the number K = 361, deemed as corresponding to a library—if not an ideal then at least a sufficient library—he would undertake to acquire on a permanent basis a new book X only after having eliminated (by giving away, throwing out, selling, or any other appropriate means) an old book Z, so that the total number K of works should remain constant and equal to 361:

K + X > 361 > K—Z.

As it evolved, this seductive scheme came up against predictable obstacles for which the unavoidable solutions were found. First, a volume was to be seen as counting as one (1) book even if it contained three (3) novels (or collections of poems, essays, etc.); from which it was deduced that three (3) or four (4) or *n (n)* novels by the same author counted (implicitly) as one (1) volume by that author, as fragments not yet brought together but ineluctably bringable together in a Collected Works. Whence it was adjudged that this or that recently acquired novel by this or that English-language novelist of the second half of the 19th century could not logically count as a new work X but as a work Z belonging to a series under construction: the set T of all the novels written by the aforesaid novelist (and God knows there are some!). This did not alter the original scheme in any way at all: only instead of talking about 361 books, it was decided that the sufficient library was ideally made up of 361 authors, whether they had written a slender opuscule or enough to fill a truck.

This modification proved effective over several years. But it soon became apparent that certain works, romances of chivalry, for example, had no author or else had several authors, and that certain authors—the Dadaists, for example—could not be kept separate from one another without automatically losing 90 per cent of what made them interesting. The idea was thus reached of a library restricted to 361 *subjects*—the term is vague but the groups it covers are also vague at times—and up until now that limitation has been strictly observed.

So then, one of the chief problems encountered by the man who keeps the books he has read or promises himself that he will one day read is that of the increase in his library. Not everyone has the good fortune to be Captain Nemo: "The world ended for me the day my *Nautilus* dived for the first time beneath the waves. On that day I bought my last volumes, my last pamphlets, my last newspapers, and since that time I would like to believe that mankind has neither thought nor written."

Captain Nemo's 12,000 volumes, uniformly bound, were thus classified once and for all—and all the more simply because the classification, as is made clear to us, was uncertain, at least from the linguistic point of view (a detail which does not at all concern the art of arranging a library but is meant simply to remind us that Captain Nemo speaks all languages indiscriminately). But for us, who continue to have to do with a human race that insists on thinking, writing, and above all publishing, the increasing size of our libraries tends to become the one real problem. For it is not too difficult, very obviously, to keep ten or 20 or let us say even a hundred books; but once you start to have 361, or a thousand, or three thousand, and especially when the total starts to increase every day or thereabouts, the problem arises, first of all of arranging all those books somewhere and then of being able to lay your hand on them one day when, for whatever reason, you either want or need to read them at last or even to reread them.

Thus the problem of a library is shown to be twofold: a problem of space first of all, then a problem of order.

## 1. Of Space

### 1.1. Generalities

Books are not dispersed but assembled. Just as we put all the pots of jam into a jam cupboard, so we put all our books into the same place, or into several same places. Even though we want to keep them, we might pile our books away into trunks, put them in the cellar or the attic, or in the bottoms of wardrobes, but we generally prefer them to be visible.

In practice, books are most often arranged one beside the other, along a wall or division, on rectilinear supports, parallel with one another, neither too deep nor too far apart. Books are arranged—usually—standing on end and in such a way that the title printed on the spine of the work can be seen (sometimes as in bookshop windows, the cover of the book is displayed, but it is unusual, proscribed, and nearly always considered shocking to have only the edge of the book on show).

In current room layouts, the library is known as a "corner" for books. This, most often, is a module belonging as a whole to the "living room," which likewise contains a

– drop leaf drinks cabinet

– drop leaf writing desk

– two-door dresser

– hi-fi unit

– television console

– slide projector

– display cabinet

etc.

and is offered in catalogs adorned with a few false bindings. In practice books can be assembled just about anywhere.

1.2. Rooms where books may be put

– in the entrance hall

– in the sitting room

– in the bedroom(s)

– in the john

Generally speaking, only one kind of book is put in the room you cook in: the ones known as "cookbooks."

It is extremely rare to find books in a bathroom, even though for many people this is a favorite place to read in. The surrounding humidity is unanimously considered a prime enemy of the conservation of printed texts. At the most, you may find in a bathroom a medicine cupboard and in the medicine cupboard a small work entitled *What to Do before the Doctor Gets There*.

1.3. Places in a room where books can be arranged

On the shelves of fireplaces or over radiators (it may be thought, even so, that heat may, in the long run, prove somewhat harmful),

between two windows,

in the embrasure of an unused door,

on the steps of a library ladder, making this unusable (very chic),

underneath a window,

on a piece of furniture set at an angle and dividing the room into two (very chic, creates an even better effect with a few potted plants).

1.4. Things which are not books but are often encountered in libraries

Photographs in gilded brass frames, small engravings, pen and ink drawings, dried flowers in stemmed glasses, matchbox holders containing, or not, chemical matches (dangerous), lead soldiers, a photograph of Ernest Renan in his study at the Collège de France,[3] postcards, dolls' eyes, tins, packets of salt, pepper and mustard from Lufthansa, letter scales, picture books, marbles, pipe cleaners, scale models of vintage cars, multicolored pebbles and gravel, ex votos, springs.

2. About Order

A library that is not arranged becomes disarranged: this is the example I was given to try and get me to understand what entropy was and which I have verified experimentally several times.

Disorder in a library is not serious in itself; it ranks with "Which drawer did I put my socks in?" We always think we shall know instinctively where we have put such and such a book. And even if we do not know, it will never be difficult to go rapidly along all the shelves.

Opposed to this apologia for a sympathetic disorder is the small-minded temptation toward an individual bureaucracy: one thing for each place and each place for its one thing, and vice versa. Between these two tensions, one which sets a premium on letting things be, on a good-natured anarchy, the other that exalts the virtues of the *tabula rasa,* the cold efficiency of the great arranging, one always ends by trying to set one's books in order. This is a trying, depressing operation, but one liable to produce pleasant surprises, such as coming upon a book you had forgotten because you could no longer see it and which, putting off until tomorrow what you will not do today, you finally redevour lying face down on your bed.

2.1. Ways of arranging books

– alphabetically

– by continent or country

– by color

– by date of acquisition

– by date of publication

– by format

– by genre

– by major periods of literary history

– by language

– by priority for future reading

– by binding

– by series

None of these classifications is satisfactory by itself. In practice, every library is ordered starting from a combination of these modes of classification, whose relative weighting, resistance to change, obsolescence, and persistence give every library a unique personality.

We should first of all distinguish stable classifications from provisional ones. Stable classifications are those which, in principle, you continue to respect; provisional classifications are those supposed to last only a few days, the time it takes for a book to discover, or rediscover, its definitive place. This may be a book recently acquired and not yet read, or else a book recently read that you do not quite know where to place and which you have promised yourself you will put away on the occasion of a forthcoming "great arranging," or else a book whose reading has been interrupted and that you do not want to classify before taking it up again and finishing it, or else a book you have used constantly over a given period, or else a book you have taken down to look up a piece of information or a reference and which you have not yet put back in its place, or else a book that you cannot put back in its rightful place because it does not belong to you and you have promised several times to give it back, etc.

In my own case, nearly three-quarters of my books have never really been classified. Those that are not arranged in a definitively provisional way are arranged in a provisionally definitive way, as at the OuLiPo. Meanwhile, I move them from one room to another, one shelf to another, one pile to another, and may spend three hours looking for a book without finding it but sometimes having the satisfaction of coming upon six or seven others which serve my purpose just as well.

2.2. Books very easy to arrange

The big Jules Vernes in the red binding, very large books, very small ones, Baedekers, rare books or ones presumed to be so, hardbacks, volumes in the Pléiade collection, the Présence du Futur series, novels published by the Editions de Minim, collections, journals of which you possess at least three issues, etc.

2.3. Books not too difficult to arrange

Books on the cinema, whether essays on directors, albums of movie stars, or shooting scripts. South American novels, ethnology, psychoanalysis, cookery books (see above), directories (next to the phone), German Romantics, books in the Que Sais-je? series (the problem being whether to arrange them all together or with the discipline they deal with), etc.

2.4. Books just about impossible to arrange

The rest: for example, journals of which you possess only a single issue, or else *La Campagne de 1812 en Russie* by Clausewitz, translated from the German by M. Bégouën, Captain-Commandant in the 31st Dragoons, Passed Staff College, with one map, Paris, Librairie Militaire R. Chapelot et Cie, 1900; or else fascicule 6 of Volume 91 (November 1976) of the *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)* giving the program for the 666 working sessions of the annual congress of said Association.

Like the librarians of Babel in Borges' story, who are looking for the book that will provide them with the key to all the others, we oscillate between the illusion of perfection and the vertigo of the unattainable. In the name of completeness, we would like to believe that a unique order exists that would enable us to accede to knowledge all in one go; in the name of the unattainable, we would like to think that order and disorder are in fact the same word, denoting pure chance.

It is also possible that both are decoys, *trompe l'oeils* intended to disguise the erosion of both books and systems. It is no bad thing in any case that between the two our bookshelves should serve from time to time as joggers of the memory, as cat rests and as lumber rooms.

NOTE

1 / First published in *L'Humidité,* 1978.

2 / A library I call a sum of books constituted by a non-professional reader for his own pleasure and daily use. This excludes the collections of bibliophiles and fine bindings by the yard, but also the majority of specialized libraries (those in universities, for example) whose particular problems match those of public libraries.

3 / A famously pompous, high-minded 19th-century scholar and writer, unlikely to have appealed to GP.

SOURCE

Georges Perec, "Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of Arranging One's Books," *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces,* Penguin, London 1999, p. 148–155.