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The Library — An Elegy?

Tuesday, January 24, 2006

Matthew Battles, who works in the Houghton Library at Harvard University, has written an elegant book on the “unquiet” history of the library. It is a feast for a bibliophile, and Battles takes his reader through the travail of the library, from Alexandria’s great fire to the repression of the dictators. Finally, he ends with the big question of the library’s survival in the digital age. Here are two of his most eloquent paragraphs. Savor them and head for the nearest library:

What we face is not the loss of books but the loss of a world. As in Alexandria after Aristotle’s time, or the universities and monasteries of the early Renaissance, or the cluttered-up research libraries of the nineteenth century, the Word shifts again in its modes, tending more and more to dwell in pixels and bit instead of paper and ink. It seems to disappear thereby, as it must have for the ancient Peripatetics, who considered writing a spectral shibboleth of living speech; or the princely collectors of manuscripts in the Renaissance, who saw the newly recovered world of antiquity endangered by the brute force of the press; or the lovers of handmade books in the early nineteenth century, to whom the penny dreadful represented the final dilution of the power of literature. And yet, the very fact that the library has endured these cycles seems to offer hope. In its custody of books and the words they contain, the library has confronted and tamed technology, the forces of change, and the power of princes time and time again.

And,

Here in the stacks, the library may seem the place books go when they die. In their totality, they disappear amid their own splendid mystifications. From age to age, libraries grow and change, flourish and disappear; blossom and contract—and yet through them all we’re chasing after Alexandria, seeking a respite on Parnassus, haunted by the myths of knowledge and of wholeness that books spawn when massed in their millions. The divine irony that Borges discovered while groping his way through the stacks strikes the sighted librarian just as powerfully: preserving themselves, the books elude us. And yet it’s this that inspires more books, goading us to finish them, to complete the set, to add another book to the collection.

Someone needs to set that to music. Matthew Battles’ book, *Library: An Unquiet History*, is published by W. W. Norton & Company in New York, 2003.

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