

M. Otlet's *Traite de Documentation*.

A Review by Prof. Francois-Clement Frémisseur, of Paris

M. Otlet is by training a lawyer and by inclination a dreamer and a fool. Alas, his new book, in which he parades his idiocy for all the world to see, confirms his position as a man whose mind has lost all focus. We live in dangerous times; M. Otlet proposes that we make matters worse by building for ourselves a future in which all knowledge will be available to all men at the touch of a button. This, of course, can only lead to idleness and confusion, for he supposes that knowledge is wisdom.

Let us swiftly review M. Otlet's recent history, for it will be well-known to all readers of the *Occasional Journal of Academic Critique for the Île de France* that he and I have crossed swords before. While still a student - and, we might suppose, a poor one at that - he pondered on the difficulty of gleaning information from books. 'So many books,' he lamented: 'A book can soon become outdated, it constitutes something completed, finished, not susceptible to addition. It is impossible to link to similar or connected items, and research requires handling great masses of heavy paper.' Indeed, M. Otlet: one can go back over centuries of European literature, and find similar complaints from students of every age; I would refer our readers to the poems of François Villon - let it not be forgotten what happened to that young man! Surely, the best of books are heavy and complex items, requiring diligent study, focus and unflinching application. But this was not for our butterfly Belgian, Monsieur Paul Otlet. He wished immediate gratification, the ability to pick up a book and have it explained to him - on the cover perhaps? such things now happen! Indeed, he aspired to a regime in which a man need not lift up or open a book at all, but have all the world's wisdom delivered to him in digestible mouthfuls. A man who prefers to eat *amuse-bouches* rather than a hearty meal.

Notwithstanding his idle nature, M. Otlet proceeded, at the dawn of this dangerous new century, to begin a collection of index-cards on which snippets of information were recorded. Index cards - oh! visiting cards of the Devil, one would say: no bigger than a woman's hand, and ten times as treacherous! He employed the dubious schemes of Mr Dewey to classify his cards, so that a man in search of information on a butterfly might turn to a card index at 595.789 and learn all there is to know about a butterfly, without having to go to the trouble of finding a book, opening it and reading and learning. God forbid, said, M. Otlet, that a man should take up his net and jar on a warm summer's afternoon and go out into the forests and meadows to observe these creatures in their natural habitat. Let him be satisfied with some other man's trite observations, passed on third-hand, that he need not bother himself with assiduity and discipline.

In 1919, when all of Europe lay prostrate after four years of Hell and was on the very precipice of Bolshevik Terror, the deluded government of Belgium was persuaded by our languid lawyer to set aside an entire wing of the substantial Palais du Cinquantaire in Brussels, to accommodate his absurd collection of index-cards. Which, in volume, had now grown to over one million. One million indexed cards, which he proclaimed gravely would transform the world's knowledge from the disorder and gravity of books into the order and lightness of facts. Facts, M. Otlet, facts, facts, facts: facts do not constitute wisdom, every educated man knows that! But evidently, the government of Belgium did not know that, at least for a few months.

While the collection was housed in the inestimable halls of the palace, a gentleman could, for a modest fee, write in to M. Otlet with a question, and his small army of clerks, and females, would search out appropriate index-cards purporting to contain an answer, copy the cards out - doubtless in careless manuscript, for such skills now atrophy among the young - or perhaps on a mechanical type-writer - and send the information back to the inquirer. Thus, supposed our Belgian lawyer, would the wisdom of nations be increased.

By good fortune, the Belgian attempt to play host to the headquarters of the League of Nations failed, and M. Otlet, who had misled the authorities by suggesting that his larder of intellectual canapés would somehow tempt the world's leaders to Brussels, was evicted from the premises, in favour of an exhibition mounted by the rubber-industry. But he continued to follow his delusions, and in 1928 persuaded that apostate Swiss gentleman, M. Jeanneret - or, for those who like their names to be avant-garde, Le Corbusier - that priest of ugly concrete and functionalism - that absurd clown who (as many will recall with a sense of gratitude to the Deity) forgot his India ink when competing to design the League of Nations building in Geneva - in 1928, I say, he persuaded this Corbusier to design a building to house M. Otlet's frothy collection: the *Mundaneum*, it was to be called, for it was to hold all of the world's knowledge. All of the world's knowledge? In Geneva, surrounded by avalanches? We think not, M. Otlet and M. Corbusier.

Let us remind ourselves of M. Le Corbusier's design - a ziggurat to be entered at the apex, reached by lifts or by a ramp two kilometres long; visitors so deluded as to take the trouble to do so could then descend through many floors, reversing the ascent of man age by age, until they reached the heart of the building where there was to be a library, in the shape of a prism, containing ... books! Book, yes; books, but also, unavoidably, M. Otlet's burgeoning collection of index-cards. As an after-thought, there would also be a World University, a 3000-seat auditorium, a stadium, the offices of the International Olympic Committee, an airport, a radio-station and a zoo: in short, the worst excesses of popular entertainment and monuments to eclectic adventurism. The judgement of the astute Czech architect Karel Teige, as many of our colleagues will remember, was that this was 'an illusion, a vain wish, a utopia'. Le Corbusier was nettled by this analysis but had little to say to defend himself; and, of course, this fantasy was never constructed - there was, as Teige declared at the time, 'neither constituency nor funding'.

Nothing disheartened, M. Otlet has continued to grow his delusive collection of little cards, keeping pace, one must suppose, with the never-ending publication of books, both weighty and light, wise and foolish - having nothing better to do, he has them all indexed and cross-indexed. He records proudly, in the foreword to his new book, to which we must now reluctantly return, that he has now 15,646,364 cards, not to mention vast piles of - indexed, of course - photographs, microforms (what, are we to think, are these?) and newspapers: a gigantic conflagration waiting to occur, putting the Reichstag fire of recent memory to shame. These items were until recently housed in a parking garage, since M. Otlet has been obliged to move his collection on, doubtless having trouble paying the rent. Where they are now, M. Otlet does not deign to explain.

What he does wish to share with us, in his book, is a wild nightmare, a fashioned dream of avant-garde idiocy, fed by indolence and the greed of superficiality. It is the "new documentation". I urge my readers to imbibe a hasty *pastis* or perhaps a calming glass of good, full-bodied Bordeaux, before attempting to read the next paragraph.

What M. Otlet now proposes is that his vast storehouse of knowledge be housed in some secure central location, and that the deluded of the world, seeking information, need do no more than sit with a telephone receiver to their ears. Their questions would be launched across the telephone wires, and received by the library assistant. The information, once retrieved from card, photograph or newspaper (or microform?), would be placed underneath an electronic television camera and the gentleman enquirer would, still sitting in his armchair half-way across the world, or in the next street, view the information directly upon a flickering screen, or 'electric telescope'. My sensitivities are appalled by this vision of the future! 'Cinema,' boasts Otlet, 'phonograph, radio, television have in fact become the new book.' A disturbing image, certainly, and a filthy thought, worse than any back-street pornographer's. But more offensively still, any such student of trivial information retrieved remotely could share his discoveries with others, by the use of voice and image and the telephone system: the acquisition of knowledge thus becomes a social occasion, a cocktail party of dilettantes, a students' gathering, a network of socialites, with all that that implies.

How ugly! How plebeian! I need not add a single word to those interminable ones which M. Otlet has written in his book. I need not tell my academic friends and colleagues that they will gain little profit from this book, other than a sharp insight into the decline of civilisation. If M. Otlet's future is what lies in store for us - electronic television, telephone, knowledge acquired and transmitted remotely, shared unthinkingly with others - I have no doubt that we have reached the end of the Ascent of Man, and are about to plunge down an icy slope into a dark chasm of inconsequentiality and confusion.

Paris, 1934