

.....你的沙制的绳索.....

乔治·赫伯特

线是由一系列的点组成的；无数的线组成了面；无数的面形成体积；庞大的体积则包括无数体积.....不，这些几何学概念绝对不是开始我的故事的最好方式。如今人们讲虚构的故事时总是声明它千真万确，不过我的故事一点不假。

我单身住在贝尔格拉诺街一幢房子的五楼。几个月前的一天傍晚，我听到门上有剥啄声。我开了门，进来的是个陌生人。他身材很高，面目模糊不清。也许是我近视，看得不清楚。他的外表整洁，但透出一股寒酸。他一身灰色的衣服，手里提着一个灰色的小箱子。乍一见面，我就觉得他是外国人。开头我认为他上了年纪，后来发现并非如此，只是他那斯堪的纳维亚人似的稀疏的、几乎泛白的金黄色头发给了我错误的印象。我们谈话的时间不到一小时，从谈话中我知道他是奥克尼群岛人。

我请他坐下。那人过了一会儿才开口说话。他散发着悲哀的气息，就像我现在一样。

“我卖《圣经》，”他对我说。

我不无卖弄地回说：

“这间屋子里有好几部英文的《圣经》，包括最早的约翰·威克里夫版。我还有西普里亚诺·德巴莱拉的西班牙文版，路德的德文版，从文学角度来说，是最差的，还有武加大拉丁文版。你瞧，我这里不缺《圣经》。”

他沉默了片刻，然后搭腔说：

“我不光卖《圣经》。我可以给你看看另一部圣书，你或许会感兴趣。我是在比卡内尔一带弄到的。”

他打开手提箱，把书放在桌上。那是一本八开大小、布面精装的书。显然已有多人翻阅过。我拿起来看看，异乎寻常的重量使我吃惊。书脊上面印的是“圣书”，下面是“孟买”。

“看来是十九世纪的书，”我说。

“不知道。我始终不清楚，”他回答说。

我信手翻开。里面的文字是我不认识的。书页磨损得很旧，印刷粗糙，像《圣经》一样，每页两栏。版面分段，排得很挤。每页上角有阿拉伯数字。页码的排列引起了我的注意，比如说，逢双的一页印的是40.514，接下去却是999。我翻过那一页，背面的页码有八位数。像字典一样，还有插画：一个钢笔绘制的铁锚，笔法笨拙，仿佛小孩画的。

那时候，陌生人对我说：

“仔细瞧瞧。以后再也看不到了。”

声调很平和，但话说得很绝。

我记住地方，合上书。随即又打开。尽管一页页地翻阅，铁锚图案却再也找不到了。我为了掩饰惶惑，问道：

“是不是《圣经》的某种印度斯坦文字的版本？”

“不是的，”他答道。

然后，他像是向我透露一个秘密似的压低声音说：

“我是在平原上一个村子里用几个卢比和一部《圣经》换来的。书的主人不识字。我想他把圣书当作护身符。他属于最下层的种姓，谁踩着他的影子都认为是晦气。他告诉我，他那本书叫‘沙之书’，因为那本书像沙一样，无始无终。”

他让我找找第一页。

我把左手按在封面上，大拇指几乎贴着食指去揭书页。白费劲：封面和手之间总是有好几页，仿佛是从书里冒出来的。

“现在再找找最后一页。”

我照样失败。我目瞪口呆，说话的声音都变得不像是自己的：

“这不可能。”

那个《圣经》推销员还是低声说：

“不可能，但事实如此。这本书的页码是无穷尽的。没有首页，也没有末页。我不明白为什么要用这种荒诞的编码办法。也许是想说明一个无穷大的系列允许任何数项的出现。”

随后，他像是自言自语地说：

“如果空间是无限的，我们就处在空间的任何一点。如果时间是无限的，我们就处在时间的任何一点。”

他的想法使我心烦。我问他：

“你准是教徒喽？”

“不错，我是长老会派。我问心无愧。我确信我用《圣经》同那个印度人交换他的邪恶的书时绝对没有蒙骗。”

我劝他说没有什么可以责备自己的地方，问他是不是路过这里。他说打算待几天就回国。那时我才知道他是苏格兰奥克尼群岛的人。我说出于对斯蒂文森和休谟的喜爱，我对苏格兰有特殊好感。

“还有罗比·彭斯，”他补充道。

我和他谈话时，继续翻弄那本无限的书。我假装兴趣不大，问他说：

“你打算把这本怪书卖给不列颠博物馆吗？”

“不。我卖给你，”他说着，开了一个高价。

我老实告诉他，我付不起这笔钱。想了几分钟之后，我有了办法。

“我提议交换，”我对他说。“你用几个卢比和一部《圣经》换来这本书，我现在把我刚领到的退休金和花体字的威克里夫版《圣经》和你交换。这部《圣经》是我家祖传。”

“花体字的威克里夫版！”他咕哝说。

我从卧室里取来钱和书。我像藏书家似的恋恋不舍地翻翻书页，欣赏封面。

“好吧，就这么定了，”他对我说。

使我惊奇的是他不讨价还价。后来我才明白，他进我家门的时候就决心把书卖掉。他接过钱，数也不数就收了起来。

我们谈印度、奥克尼群岛和统治过那里的挪威首领。那人离去时已是夜晚。以后我再也没有见到他，也不知道他叫什么名字。

我本想把那本沙之书放在威克里夫版《圣经》留下的空当里，但最终还是把它藏在一套不全的《一千零一夜》后面。

我上了床，但是没有入睡。凌晨三四点，我开了灯，找出那本怪书翻看。其中一页印有一个面具。角上有个数字，现在记不清是多少，反正大到九次幂。

我从不向任何人出示这件宝贝。随着占有它的幸福感而来的是怕它被偷掉，然后又担心它并不真正无限。我本来生性孤僻，这两层忧虑更使我反常。我有少数几个朋友，现在不往来了。我成了那本书的俘虏，几乎不再上街。我用一面放大镜检查磨损的书脊和封面，排除了伪造的可能性。我发现每隔两千页有一帧小插画。我用一本有字母索引的记事簿把它们临摹下来。簿子不久就用完了。插画没有一张重复。晚上，我多半失眠，偶尔入睡就梦见那本书。

夏季已近尾声，我领悟到那本书是个可怕的怪物。我把自己也设想成一个怪物：睁着铜铃大眼盯着它，伸出带爪的十指拨弄它，但是无济于事。我觉得它是一切烦恼的根源，是一件诋毁和败坏现实的下流东西。

我想把它付之一炬，但怕一本无限的书烧起来也无休无止，使整个地球乌烟瘴气。

我想起有人写过这么一句话：隐藏一片树叶的最好的地点是树林。我退休之前在藏书有九十万册的国家图书馆任职，我知道门厅右边有一道弧形的梯级通向地下室，地下室里存放报纸和地图。我趁工作人员不注意的时候，把那本沙之书偷偷地放在一个阴暗的搁架上。我竭力不去记住搁架的哪一层，离门口有多远。

我觉得心里稍稍踏实一点，以后我连图书馆所在的墨西哥街都不想去了。

The Book of Sand (translated from the Spanish) by Jorge Luis Borges

...thy rope of sands...

George Herbert (1593-1633)¹

Lines consist of an infinite number of points; planes an infinite number of lines; volumes an infinite number of planes, hypervolumes an infinite number of volumes... No, this, this more geometrico, is definitely not the best way to begin my tale. Affirming a fantastic tale's truth is now a story-telling convention; mine, though, is true. I live alone, in a fourth-floor apartment on Calle Belgrano. One evening a few months ago, I heard a knock on the door. I opened it and in walked someone I had never met before. He was a tall man, of indistinct features. My myopia perhaps made me see him that way. Everything about him spoke of an honest poverty. He was dressed in grey and carried a grey valise. I sensed immediately that he was a foreigner. At first I thought him an old man; later I noticed that what misled me was his sparse hair, an almost-white blond, like a Scandinavian's. Over the course of our conversation, which would last no longer than an hour, I learnt that he hailed from the Orkneys.

I showed him his seat. The man paused a moment before speaking. He exuded a melancholy air, as do I now.

"I sell Bibles," he told me.

Not without pedantry I responded:

"In this house there are several English Bibles, including John Wyclif's, the first of all. I also have Cypriano de Valera's, Luther's — which, as a piece of literature, is the worst of the lot — and a copy of the Vulgate in Latin. As you can see, it's not Bibles I have a need for."

After a brief silence he responded:

"I don't sell only Bibles. I can show you a sacred book that might interest you. I acquired it in the outskirts of Bikanir."

He opened his valise and placed the book on the table. It was a clothbound octavo volume which had undoubtedly passed through many hands. I examined the book; its unexpected heft surprised me. On the spine was printed Holy Writ and below that Bombay.

"From the nineteenth century I'd hazard," I observed.

"I don't know. I've never known," was the response.

I opened it at random. The characters were unfamiliar. The pages, which appeared to me worn and of poor typographic quality, were

printed in two columns like a Bible. The text was cramped and arranged in versicles. In the upper corner of each page were Arabic numerals. It caught my attention that the even-numbered page bore, let's say, the number 40,514 and the odd-numbered page that followed 999. I turned the page; the overleaf bore an eight-digit number. Also printed was a small illustration, like those in dictionaries: an anchor drawn in pen and ink, as though by a child's unskilled hand.

It was then that the stranger told me:

"Study the page well. You will never see it again."

There was a threat in what he said, but not in his voice.

I took note of the page and shut the volume. I reopened it immediately.

In vain I searched for the figure of the anchor, page after page. To hide my discomfort, I said to him:

"This is a version of the Scripture in some Hindustani language, right?"

"No," he replied.

Then he lowered his voice as if entrusting me with a secret:

"I acquired the book in a small town on the plains for a few rupees and a Bible. Its owner didn't know how to read. I suspect that he saw the Book of Books as an amulet. He was of the lowest caste; people weren't able to step on his shadow without contamination. He told me that his book is called the Book of Sand because neither the book nor sand possess a beginning or an end."

He suggested I try finding the first page.

I placed my left hand on the cover and opened the book with my thumb and forefinger almost touching. All my efforts were useless: several pages always lay between the cover and my hand. It was as though the pages sprouted from within the book.

"Now search for the last page."

Again I failed; I only managed to stammer in a voice not my own:

"This cannot be."

Always in a low voice, the Bible seller said:

"It cannot be, yet it is. The number of pages in this book is exactly infinite. No page is the first; none the last. I don't know why they're numbered in this arbitrary way. Perhaps it's to demonstrate that an infinite series includes any number."

Later, as if he were thinking aloud:

“If space is infinite, we are in no particular point in space. If time is infinite, we are in no particular point in time.”

His musings irritated me. I asked him:

“You’re a religious man, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m Presbyterian. My conscience is clear. I’m sure I didn’t cheat the native when I gave him the Lord’s Word in exchange for his diabolical book.”

I assured him that he had no reason to reproach himself, and I asked him if he was just passing through these lands. He replied that he was thinking of returning to his homeland in a few days. It was then that I learnt he was Scotch, from the Orkney Isles. I told him that I had a special affection for Scotland because of my love of Stevenson and Hume.

“And of Robbie Burns,” he corrected.

While we spoke, I continued exploring the infinite book. With a false indifference I asked him:

“Do you intend to offer this curious specimen to the British Museum?”

“No. I offer it to you,” he said, and offered a high price.

I replied, in all honesty, that the price was too high for me and I remained in thought. After a few minutes I had come up with a plan.

“I propose a trade,” I said. “You obtained this volume for a few rupees and the Holy Scripture; I offer you my retirement funds, which I’ve just been paid, and the Wyclif Bible in gothic lettering. I inherited it from my parents.”

“A black-letter Wyclif!” he murmured.

I went to my bedroom and I brought back the money and book. He turned the pages and studied the binding with the fervour of a bibliophile.

“It’s a deal,” he said.

I was astonished that he did not haggle. Only afterwards did I realise that he had entered my house with the intention of selling the book. He didn’t count the bills; he put them away.

We chatted about India, the Orkneys and the Norwegian jarls who had governed them. Night had fallen by the time he had left. I never saw him again, nor do I know his name.

I thought of keeping the Book of Sand in the space left behind by the Wyclif Bible’s absence. In

the end I opted to hide it behind several misshapen volumes of *Thousand and One Nights*.

I went to bed and could not sleep. At around three or four in the morning I turned on the light. I searched for the impossible book and turned its pages. In one of them I saw printed a mask. In the corner the page bore a number — I don’t remember which anymore — that was raised to the ninth power.

I showed my treasure to no one. Against the joy of possessing the book grew the fear that it would be stolen, and later the suspicion that it was not truly infinite. Both these worries aggravated my already long-standing misanthropy.

I had few friends still alive; I stopped seeing them. Prisoner of the Book, I almost never left the house. I examined the worn spine and cover with a magnifying glass, and I discounted the possibility of some kind of artifice. I found that the small illustrations were spaced two thousand pages apart from one to the other. I noted them down in a small alphabetised notebook, which did not take long to fill. They never repeated. At night, in the scarce intervals insomnia withdrew its hold over, I dreamed of the book.

Summer was coming to an end and I realised that the book was monstrous. There was no consolation in the thought that no less monstrous was I, who perceived the book with eyes and touched it with ten nailed fingers. I felt the book to be a nightmarish object, something obscene that slanders and compromises reality.

I thought of fire, but I feared that the burning of an infinite book would be just as infinite and suffocate the planet with smoke.

I remember having read that the best place to hide a leaf is in a forest. Before retiring I worked in the National Library, which housed nine-hundred thousand books; I know that to the right of the lobby a curved staircase descends to the basement, where the newspapers and maps are stored. I took advantage of the librarians’ inattentiveness for a moment to lose the Book of Sand in one of the humid shelves. I tried not to notice how high or how far from the door.

I feel somewhat relieved now, but I do avoid even passing by Mexico Street.²

Translator’s notes

¹ The quote appears in English in the Spanish original.

² The National Library of Argentina is found on Mexico Street (calle México) in Buenos Aires.