PAUL OTLET, AN ENCOUNTER

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▪ De auteur beschrijft hoe hij in Paul Otlet geïnteresseerd raakte en vertelt over zijn onderzoek naar en publicaties over het leven en het werk van Otlet als een pionier in de ontwikkeling van ideeën over de moderne informatie-maatschappij. Hij bespreekt het belang van de collecties en de inzet van het personeel van de "nieuwe" Mundaneum te Bergen, museum-archieven opgericht met de steun van de Franse Gemeenschap met de nadruk op de mogelijkheden van hun nieuwe samenwerking met Google.

▪ L'auteur décrit comment il s'est intéressé à Paul Otlet et raconte quelques-unes de ses propres recherches et publications sur la vie et le travail d'Otlet comme pionnier du développement des idées sur la société moderne de l'information. Il discute aussi de l'importance des collections et du personnel du "nouveau" Mundaneum, musée-archives créé à Mons avec le soutien de la Communauté française de Belgique, insistant sur le potentiel de leur nouvelle coopération avec Google.

An encounter

In the mid 1960s, I had come to the US from Australia to further my studies of librarianship at the University of Illinois (for a master's degree) and had then gone to the University of Chicago (for a PhD degree). At Chicago, I had written a seminar paper on the history of the International Federation for Documentation and in the course of this had become very much interested in Paul Otlet. I began to study the similarities between Otlet and Leibniz's speculations about how to create a new kind of encyclopedia deriving from the analysis of documents, the classification of ideas, and the possibilities of new kinds of linguistic computation. I published an article in the *Library Quarterly* about this. My studies had suggested to me how little we really knew at that time about Otlet and his work, so much seemed to have been forgotten about them. I raised a series of questions about them that formed the proposal for my doctoral dissertation. In seeking answers to these questions, and with financial support from the University of Chicago, I came to Brussels.

Here, having been in touch with Georges Lorphèvre, who had become Paul Otlet's secretary in the late 1920s after the death of Louis Masure, I immersed myself for six months in 1967 and another two months in 1968 in the documentation that was contained in the Mundaneum then in the Parc Léopold and entered from the Avenue du Maelbeek. In 1941, the German occupying forces had expelled Otlet and the Mundaneum from locations initially provided for them by the Belgian government as early as 1910 in the left wing of the Palais du Cinquantenaire, though there were many ups and downs in the relationship with their "landlord" in the years that followed. The same year, the Ville de Bruxelles provided new locations in an old anatomy building in the Parc Léopold for what remained of the Mundaneum. On my arrival there, I found the situation pretty much as Otlet had left it at his death in 1944, though Georges Lorphèvre and André Colet were still trying to continue to carry on the work of the Mundaneum with the help of a few now very elderly *Amis du Palais Mondial*. Every nook and cranny of this building, including the glass-roofed dissecting theatre at the top, were crowded with documents of various kinds, not least piles of copies of the many publication of the Institut International de Bibliographie (IIB, then IID then FID) and the Union des Associations Internationales, but also with the seemingly never ending "notes" in typescript and manuscript that Otlet wrote on the multifarious subjects that interested him. Many of these notes have been collected and inventoried today as *Notes numérotées* in the Mundaneum in Mons. The numbered files of the formal archives of the Institut and Office International de Bibliographie, however, had been carefully set up in the main office of the Building. I went through these archives one after the other from beginning to end. They are what today have been inventoried as *Dossiers numérotés* in the Mundaneum in Mons. Almost at the end of my stay in Brussels all those years ago, I stumbled upon what had been Otlet's office. It was as though he had just got up and left it, as we see it in the photographs we have of him sitting at his desk behind piles of papers, a teapot in front of him, M. Colet standing behind, though the office had gathered dust and cobwebs and there were several baskets overflowing with documents beside the desk. I have never been sure why Georges Lorphèvre had not mentioned its existence to me; perhaps because he was so busy and rarely present and was not, I think, much interested in what I was doing.

I wrote my doctoral dissertation and a revision of it was eventually published for FID in the Hague

by its Russian member, VINITI in Moscow (The All Union Institute of Scientific and Technical Information of the USSR Academy of Sciences). *The Universe of Information: The Work of Paul Otlet for Documentation and International Organization* was published in English in a hideously designed type font, the book itself hideously bound in black buckram. It was also published in Russian in a book of a better appearance. This was in 1975 at the height of the Cold War. In my naïveté, I had not realized that I would have little or no communication with my "publisher" and certainly no say in how the book might appear. Nevertheless, it was the first full study with everything comprehensively documented of Otlet and his work for documentation and international organization. It has since been published in Spanish and was digitized a few years ago in the University of Illinois IDEALS institutional repository[1]. The only other complete biography of Otlet is Francoise Levie's superb, more personal study of 2006, *L'homme qui voulait classer le monde*, that draws on much documentation that I had not seen[2]. The Mundaneum has recently published a collection of essays about Otlet that should be noted here too[3].

Otlet, the Internet and the World Wide Web

For many years, I paid no further attention to Otlet, having become for a while, as I wrote my book, in a sense too close to him and so rather "fed up" with him. With the advent of networked computing, the Internet and the World Wide Web, however, I began to think how prescient had been Otlet's thinking about what he called documentation and the organization and dissemination of knowledge. I began to argue that in Otlet's technological world, a pre-digital world of cards and cabinets and classification (and eventually microfilm), he had provided a theoretical basis for, and described many of the functionalities characteristic of today's information technology and the uses to which it has been put. Two articles that might be mentioned in this context are *Visions of Xanadu: Paul Otlet (1868-1944) and Hypertext*[4] and *The origins of information science and the International Institute of Bibliography/International Federation of Documentation (FID)*[5]. I also decided to translate a selection of his papers to make his ideas better known in the English-speaking world and this book is now freely available[6].

For me, Otlet is a remarkable figure both in what he was able to do in creating the Mundaneum and its institutional components (bibliography, iconography, museum, library and international center) but also how he was able to speculate and imagine so much. I think of his many pre-World War I articles about the nature, function and future of the book; his experiments as early as 1905-6 with Robert Goldschmidt on microfilm; his awareness as he and his colleagues developed the tables and combinatorial capabilities of the Universal Decimal Classification, of the importance of being able to reach into and organize the contents of documents (the sort of thing, for example, we create effortlessly with keyword searches in *Google*). Above all there are his magisterial if sometimes tedious *Traité de documentation* and *Monde* with their vision of new approaches to the nature of knowledge and its representation in documents, of multimedia "substitutes" for the book, and of universal networked access to information that is so reminiscent of the internet and web. Otlet's analysis of the multitudinous technical, scientific, internationalist and organizational phenomena of his day and the extrapolations he tried to make systematically from them, led him to formulate striking ideas about innovations in technology, the advent of globalization and the emergence of "the information society".

A remarkable establishment: the "new" Mundaneum, Mons

The reestablishment of the Mundaneum in Mons as a museum and archive is in my view a major event in the intellectual life of Belgium. Its opening attracted considerable international interest at the time. Indeed I participated in a short documentary film for Dutch TV about it and Otlet, not long after it was opened[7]. But the "new" Mundaneum has over its short life gone from strength to strength as more and more of its archival collections have been organized and inventoried. The collections are extraordinarily rich. For a description see *Mundaneum: Archives de la Connaissance* (the collections are more fully described in *Mundaneum: Archives of Knowledge*)[8]. For the Belgian student and historian, the archives and documentation available in the Mundaneum are simply treasure troves awaiting much fuller exploitation than has hitherto been the case, though use has been rapidly increasing. But I suspect that anyone who is interested in almost any area of European history in the first half of the 20th century might well find something of value in these collections, so immensely ramified and various were the networks in which Otlet and La Fontaine took an active part. And of course the two men tended to retain compulsively the documentation arising from these interactions. The agreement that has recently been reached for cooperation between the Mundaneum and Google has wonderful echoes historically, of course, but it also has the possibility of

increasing the visibility of the Mundaneum internationally. This I am sure will help in the greater dissemination of knowledge about its invaluable resources. To the extraordinarily expert personnel who offer researchers unstinting aid and advice in the use of these resources, I want to offer publicly in these pages the most sincere hommage.

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Notes

1   Rayward, W. Boyd. *The Universe of Information: The Work of Paul Otlet for Documentation and International Organization.* FID Publication 520. Published for the International Federation for Documentation by the All-Union Institute for Scientific and Technical Information (VINITI), USSR Academy of Sciences, 1975
     Rayward, W. Boyd. *Universum informastsii Zhizn' i deiatl' nost' Polia Otle*. R.S. Giliarevesky (Trans.). VINITI, 1976 ;
     Rayward, W. Boyd.; Rived, P.A. (trans.) *El Universo de la Documentación: la obra de Paul Otlet sobra documentación y organización internacional.*. 2nd. Ed. Mundarnau, 1999
     Available on: <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/651> (consulted on 30 April 2012).

2   Levie, F. *L'homme qui voulait classer le monde - Paul Otlet et le Mundaneum*. Éditions Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2006.

3   Gillen, J. (ed). *Paul Otlet, (1868-1944) Fondateur du Mundaneum : Architecte du savoir, Artisan de paix*. Éditions Nouvelles, 2008.

4   Visions of Xanadu: Paul Otlet (1868-1944) and Hypertext. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 1994, 45, p. 235-250. <http://people.lis.illinois.edu/~wrayward/Visions%20of%20Xanadu_JASIS.pdf> (consulted on 30 April 2012).

5   The origins of information science and the work of the International Institute of Bibliography/ International Federation for Information and Documentation (FID). *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 1997, 48, p. 289-300.

6   Otlet, P*.; W. B. Rayward (Ed. and trans.). *International Organization and Dissemination of Knowledge: Selected Essays of Paul Otlet.*.Elsevier, 1990. Available on: <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/4004> (consulted on 30 April 2012).

7   *Alle Kennis van de Wereld (Biography of Paul Otlet)* [online video]. 1998. <http://archive.org/details/paulotlet> (consulted on 30 April 2012).

8   *Le Mundaneum, les archives de la connaissance.* Éditions Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2008
     Rayward W.B. (transl. and adapt.). *Mundaneum: Archives of Knowledge.*. Occasional Papers 215. Graduate School of Library and Information Science, May 2010. <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/15431> (consulted on 30 April 2012).