May I start with what the French call *une précaution oratoire*, an informal warning: no extensive research went into this paper, but it is based on a lifelong experience, the better part of which was devoted to international cooperation. I have been too much of an actor, too little of a detached observer.

Shortly after I entered the profession, close to the end of World War II, a senior colleague told me a story that four young American librarians had reorganized the old Vatican library. For a long time I believed that it was a joke to oppose a dynamic American counterculture to the static wisdom embedded in a centuries-old collection of secular and religious manuscripts. When I realized that the story was true, I faced at once a problem which has never left me since—library techniques versus subject knowledge. Time and again this tension turned up when I tried to compare American and European librarianship. Over the years I have expressed it in many different ways. If I remember one of the better ones, I would say in retrospect what I said about five or six years ago on the occasion of the dedication of a new library building at UCLA: “In Europe, the libraries are better than the librarians,” sternly refusing to add the expected second part of the sentence. The fact that one day I would dedicate a new American library could not have occurred to me when I entered the profession, but if it had, I...
would have considered it to be a joke, like that of the young American librarians reorganizing the Vatican library.

You should know that I never had any formal library training, as is the case still today with nearly all librarians from the European continent working in research libraries. The only relationship of these librarians with formal training is that they nearly all teach in library schools at the sub-university level. I committed the same sin, but only for a short time. I even had to look up my poorly kept archives to see what course I gave. Also like these other librarians I had an academic training. In my case it was Dutch poetry of the nineteenth century. This subject was never of any use in my professional work, but the training it supplied has always been an invaluable asset. So you will easily understand that professional training, in the sense that you use the word, has not the same importance in my thinking as it does in yours. It is one of the advantages of comparative librarianship that it forces one to question the automaticity of priorities.

I started this paper with the direct question of library techniques versus subject knowledge because it has been my life’s experience that you need a few ideas – they may even be preconceived ideas – to face the reality of the surrounding world. This reality being a library, the complexity of the relationship between form and content, between library technique and subject knowledge, between typography and literary quality, represents one such idea. Modern linguistics has given a new dimension to the distinction the old antinomy made between le contenant et le contenu, the signifier and the signified. I guess that such a need for fixed ideas is what was called in the nineteenth century a philosophy of life. For me this has also meant a never-ending crossing of the ocean to try to understand on both sides the roots and the flowers of the professional trees. In my contacts with American librarianship, the Library of Congress came before ALA. My love affair with the Library of Congress (LC) started more than a quarter of a century ago. That was when the Librarian of Congress issued a notice saying that some false rumours were spread that he was going to accept an important international appointment. His name was Luther H. Evans, soon to become director-general of UNESCO.

Early in 1951 I was appointed consultant at LC for a six-week period, which allowed me to say, until two years ago, at every reception in the Whittall Pavilion, that I was the oldest staff