The Great Library of Alexandria Burnt: Towards the History of a Symbol

Author(s): Jon Thiem

Source: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Oct. - Dec., 1979, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1979), pp. 507-526

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/2709356

THE GREAT LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA BURNT: TOWARDS THE HISTORY OF A SYMBOL

By Jon Thiem

Theodotus. What is burning there is the memory of mankind.

Caesar. A shameful memory. Let it burn.

Shaw, *Caesar and Cleopatra,* Act II

Heav'ns! what a pyle! whole ages perish there:

And one bright blaze turns Learning into air.

Pope, *Dunciad Variorum,* Bk. III, lines 69-70

And ther was brent, which was ful gret pite,

The famous librarie in Egipt of the kyng,

Ful fourti thousande volumys their liggyng.

Lydgate, *Fall of Princes,* Bk. VI, lines 2588-2590

I. Few scholars of today would insist that the burning of the Alexandrian library benefited learning; rather, the image of its ancient literary treasures perishing in the flames would evoke a feeling of incalculable cultural loss. Yet if the destruction of this unique collection represents for us a tragic instance of history consuming itself, such a solemn view has not always prevailed. Since the Renaissance, when a revival of learning was spread by means of the printed book, outstanding literati have portrayed learning as a vanity, as something to be reviled. For the *learned* antagonist of letters, the burning of the great library of Alexandria came to be invoked and celebrated; cited as a model for action; or put forth as a sacrilegious jest. Beneath such sentiments lay perhaps the sense that the burning was a fortunate misfortune symbolizing the ecstatic annihilation of the memory of historical man.[1] The purpose of this essay will be to document and understand some of the more notable variations of this paradoxical motif.

Impressive as its destruction must have been, the origins of the Alexandrian library remain less obscure than its ultimate fate. Situated in the Mouseion (Museum) in the Brucheum quarter of the city, the first

[1] For an introduction to the "book as symbol" see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages,* trans. W. R. Trask (Princeton, 1967), ch. 16.

or "Mother" library was founded between 300-290 B.C. by the first Ptolemy, possibly on the advice of Demetrius of Phaleron.[2] Succeeding Ptolemies, particularly Philadelphus, were renowned in the Renaissance as enlightened rulers for they enriched the "Mother" library to the extent that it became the largest collection of ancient learning and letters the world had known, with an inventory of around 490,000 papyrus rolls.[3] The second or "Daughter" library, probably founded before 200 B.C., was located within or near the Temple of Serapis (Serapeum) in another section of the city. Most modern literati fail to distinguish between the "Mother" and "Daughter" libraries. That there were two Alexandrian libraries, however, helps account for various traditions telling of three major conflagrations: first, Julius Caesar may have inadvertently burned all or part of the Mouseion library in 47 B.C.; then, the Emperor Theodosius may have provoked the burning of the Serapeum library circa 390 A.D.; and finally, the Caliph Omar may have ordered the burning of the same library circa 642 A.D. Specialists have at one time or another disputed each of the burnings, and no date or dates have produced a consensus of opinion.[4] What seems indisputable is that at some point in history, the Alexandrian library, center and symbol of Hellenistic culture, burned.

The precise seed of truth about the destruction may have been lost forever among the luxuriant tales that sprouted from it. Whatever the

[2] In this paragraph I have consulted three present-day studies dealing with the Alexandrian library: Edward Alexander Parsons, *The Alexandrian Library: Glory of the Hellenic World: Its Rise, Antiquities, and Destructions* (Amsterdam, 1952), passim; P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford, 1972), I, ch. 6; and Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford, 1968), 98-104. Pfeiffer, 99-104, concludes that the evidence for Demetrius of Phaleron's role in founding the library is flimsy, though he admits that the Peripatetic probably advanced learning at Ptolemy's court. I have followed Fraser, 315 and 321, who sees no reason to doubt the traditional view of Demetrius of Phaleron's influence on founding the library. Pfeiffer, 217n, follows Dion Cassius (XLII, 38) in asserting that the Caesarian fire destroyed not the library but only harbor warehouses where grain and books were stored. Pfeiffer also casts doubt on the story that Anthony gave Cleopatra the Pergamum collection to make good the loss; see 236-37.

[3] This figure is Fraser's, I, 329. The more traditional one was 700,000; others were 70,000 and 40,000; see Parsons, 292, 298, 305, 306. For Humanistic praise of Ptolemaic learning and patronage of the library, see Boccaccio, note 15 below; Thomas Elyot, *The boke named the Gouernour* (London, 1531), fol. 38v; Loys LeRoy, *De la vicissitude ou variété des choses* (1575; rpt. Paris, 1584), fol. 76r; and Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. A. R. Shilleto (London, 1893), II, 200-01.

[4] Parsons examines the major stories and their sources, 273-429. Most modern authorities—such as A. J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt* (Oxford, 1902)—have doubted the Saracen burning under Omar, but Parsons, who disputes the Caesarian and Christian destructions, argues that the Saracen one did occur.

historical reality may have been, our inquiry will address the legendary and symbolic ramifications of the burning in western consciousness. As so often happens in legends, historical actuality must have receded behind the lineaments of stories that gratified special cultural desires, from among the intelligentsia in this case. Let us note that the appeal and doubtfulness of the legends owe much to the status of the three alleged perpetrators of the deed: all were celebrated rulers representing distinctive religious and cultural orientations. As a result, the Alexandrian library retains in legend the distinction of having succumbed to (or endured) successive pagan, Christian, and Saracen depredations. Of the three, literati and poets drew mostly on those featuring Julius Caesar and the Caliph Omar; Theodosius claims much less attention. Before and after the eighteenth century the Caesarian tale predominates, whereas the age of Enlightenment cultivated a taste for the story of Omar, which is retold or mentioned by Pope, Diderot, Voltaire, and Gibbon, among others.[5]

The legend of Omar, introduced into European letters through the Latin translation (1650) of a medieval Arabic source, dramatized the conflagration better than any other account, which explains in part the continuous interest in the library of Alexandria during the Enlightenment.[6] Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* offers the fullest eighteenth-century discussion of the various legends and their sources; though Gibbon doubted the veracity of the Omar story, he gives it more space than the others. The legend intrudes into his history of the Arabic conquest of Egypt (circa 640 A.D.). After the Arab commander Amrou (Amr) had conquered Alexandria, his friend, John the Grammarian, asked to be given the Royal library:

Amrou was inclined to gratify the wish of the grammarian, but his rigid integrity refused to alienate the minutest object without the consent of the caliph; and the well-known answer of Omar was inspired by the ignorance of a fanatic. "If these writings of the Greeks agree with the book of God, they are useless and need not be preserved; if they disagree, they are

[5] For Rousseau and Gibbon, see below. Pope alludes to the Saracen burning in *The Dunciad Variorum* (1729), collected in *The Poems of Alexander Pope . . . Twickenham Text,* ed. J. Butt (London, 1965), 405 and note. Diderot retells the tale in his article "Bibliothèque" (1752) in the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné . . .* (rpt. Genève, 1777). Voltaire alludes to the burning of Omar in his *Essai sur les moeurs* (1756), vol. XI of *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire,* ed. L. Moland (Paris, 1878), 211. See also Isaac Disraeli on the "Destruction of Books" (1791), in vol. I of *Curiosities of Literature,* ed. B. Disraeli (London, 1868), 47-49.

[6] Edward Pocock's *Specimen Historiae Arabum* (Oxford, 1650) translates Abulfaragius's *History of the Dynasties* (written before 1287) from Arabic. There are two earlier accounts by Abd al Latif (before 1231) and Ibn al Kifti (before 1248); see Parsons, 388-397.

pernicious and ought to be destroyed." The sentence was executed with blind obedience; the volumes of paper or parchment were distributed to the four thousand baths of the city; and such was their incredible multitude that six months were barely sufficient for the consumption of this precious fuel.[7]

The story appealed to both the sentimentality and cynicism of the age; confirming its views of revealed religion, the tale also tickled the eighteenth-century fancy for the Oriental. Gibbon shows his characteristic narrative finesse in retelling the familiar story before attacking its authenticity.

On demolishing the credibility of the Omar account, Gibbon proceeds to argue that even had the Saracen destruction occurred, the effect on learning would have been slight (V, 453-55). In an earlier volume he had indignantly recounted how the Christians in Theodosius's reign had devastated the library.[8] Hence few valuable papyri would have fed the later fire, while those added later contained only "the ponderous mass of Arian and Monophysite controversy" (V, 454). Then Gibbon makes an astonishing avowal: "a philosopher may allow, with a smile, that [the Saracen destruction of theological controversy] was ultimately devoted to the benefit of mankind" (V, 454-455). Earlier, had he not denounced the destructive bibliophobia of the Christians, and Seneca's indifference to the Caesarian burning (V, 454 note)? True, the smile indicates pleasure at seeing follies of the past burned; but then Gibbon denies the importance of earlier fires when he concludes that no "important truth, [no] useful discovery in art or nature, has been [thereby] snatched away from the curiosity of modern ages" (V, 455).[9] Here is the ancient commonplace *Veritas Filia Temporis:* truth is the daughter of time, whose depredations spare the good, destroying only the false and worthless. The shift in tone from indignation to mischievous delight

[7] Vol. V (1788) of Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* ed. in 7 vols. by J. B. Bury (rpt. London, 1896-1900), 453. Gibbon follows closely Abulfaragius's account as translated into Latin. Hereafter, references to Gibbon will be to Bury's edition.

[8] Vol. III (1781) of Gibbon, 201: "The valuable library of Alexandria was pillaged or destroyed [by the Christians]; and, near [sic] twenty years afterwards, the appearance of the empty shelves excited the regret and indignation of every spectator whose mind was not totally darkened by religious prejudice. The compositions of ancient genius, so many of which have irretrievably perished, might surely have been excepted from the wreck of idolatry, for the amusement and instruction of succeeding ages." According to Gibbon's account, the Christian bigotry of the Alexandrian bishop Theophilus caused a civil war between the pagan worshippers of Serapis and the Christians (c. 390 A.D.). During a truce, the Emperor Theodosius ordered the abolition of pagan idolatry, whereupon Theophilus led the Christians in the destruction of the Serapeum and its famous library.

[9] This statement contradicts his earlier opinion, cited in note 8 above.

may induce us to see in Gibbon's devious smile acknowledgement of an unresolvable conflict between his role as historian and his beliefs as a philosophe. To the historian the records of the past are sacred, but to the philosophe many of these records express a folly that merits destruction.[10] This conflict subsides into the complacency of the *Veritas Filia Temporis* argument, which is finally an ingenious form of "sour grapes."

Gibbon plainly enjoyed airing what he thought was a heterodox view: that the loss of Alexandrian libraries did not much matter. But his generalization that "every scholar, with pious indignation, has deplored the irreparable shipwreck of the learning, the arts, and the genius, of antiquity" at Alexandria, was ill founded (V, 453). To depreciate or applaud the loss of the Alexandrian library had already become a modern convention, one indebted to an ancient precedent. Perhaps the first extant mention (probably Caesar's) of an Alexandrian destruction is found in Seneca's *De Tranquillitate Animi* (49 A.D.):

> Forty thousand books were burned at Alexandria; let someone else praise this library as the most noble monument to the wealth of kings, as did Titus Livius, who says that it was the most distinguished achievement of the good taste and solicitude of kings. There was no "good taste" or "solicitude" about it, but only learned luxury. . . .[11]

Seneca criticizes the bibliophilia of collectors who do not read, and recommends limiting one's library to a few good authors. For the Roman Stoic, the library of Egypt served the Ptolemies as ostentation rather than as an ancilla to learning (II, 246-249). His reservations contribute to that classical critique of bibliomania, found earlier in Plato, later in Lucian, and inspired perhaps by envy as much as by the guilt every intellectual feels at not having read all the books in his library.[12]

From Seneca's time to the sixteenth century, commentators on the Alexandrian destruction are rarely so indifferent to the loss as Seneca. To the medieval scholar, who in his bookishness prized all written authorities, the destruction was a lamentable catastrophe: "Who would not shudder at such a hapless holocaust," writes Richard de Bury, "where ink is offered up instead of blood, where the glowing ashes of cracking parchment were incarnadined with blood, where the devouring flames consumed so many thousands of innocents in whose mouth was no guile,

[10] See for instance, Peter Gay, *Style in History* (New York, 1974), 35.

[11] Seneca, *De Tranquillitate Animi,* rpt. and trans. in vol. II of *Moral Essays,* trans. J. W. Basore (London, 1932), 246-247. Seneca is the only classical commentator known to have made light of the Alexandrian loss; see Parson, 291-307.

[12] Plato, *Phaedrus,* sects. 274-276; and "The Ignorant Book Collector" (ca. 170 A.D.), collected in *Lucian with an English Translation,* by A. M. Harmon (London, 1921), III, 173-211.

where the unsparing fire turned into stinking ashes so many shrines of eternal truth?"[13] Likewise, Laurent de Premierfait and John Lydgate in their early fifteenth-century translations of Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* interpolate passages praising the Ptolemies for their book-collecting, and Lydgate laments the loss of the library as a "ful gret pite."[14] It is, however, in Boccaccio's preface to the *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium,* rather than in his *De Casibus,* that we find the first mention by a Renaissance author of the burning. The friend of Petrarch writes as a self-conscious collector eager to preserve books from the depredations of religious zealots and worldly rulers. He pays tribute to the cult of books, as do other early Humanists, and though aware of Seneca's opinion, he opposes it: "You will admit," he writes, "that a great many collections have perished by fire and flood. Even had the Alexandrian library, which Philadelphus long since collected with utmost care, been the only one lost, the loss would have been appalling, since it contained, according to the Ancients, any book you might want."[15] Boccaccio unabashedly envies the Ancients their ability to get from a library any book they wanted.

For the first modern justification of the Alexandrian loss as a fortunate misfortune, we must turn to a treatise by the sixteenth-century Humanist Louis LeRoy. It is in the sixteenth century that the modern depreciation of the book appears, a development which occurs in connection with the conspicuous advent of the printed book and with the flowering of the vanity of learning tradition.[16] Yet LeRoy, who resurrects the Senecan view of libraries, is no praiser of folly, and he regards printing as a great blessing to humanity. Not before Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (1643) will the figure of the Alexandrian conflagration lend its splendor to the vanity of learning tradition.

[13] Richard de Bury, *Philobiblon: The Text and Translation of E. C. Thomas* (Oxford, 1970), 72-75. The *Philobiblon* was completed in 1345. Awareness of the burning existed in the early Middle Ages; see King Alfred's Old English version of Orosius, in R. Pauli, *The Life of Alfred the Great* [and] *Alfred's . . . Orosius,* trans. B. Thorpe (London, 1873), 486-87.

[14] Laurent de Premierfait's *Boccace Des Nobles Maleureux* (Paris, 1494), fols. 188v-189r; and Lydgate's *Fall of Princes,* ed. H. Bergin (London, 1967), pt. III, 744.

[15] *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's* Genealogia Deorum Gentilium *in an English Version . . .,* trans. C. G. Osgood (New York, 1956), 8; and Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri,* ed. V. Romano (Bari, 1951), I, 5.

[16] Among such praisers of folly—see Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly* (Cambridge, 1963)—were Erasmus, Cornelius Agrippa, Rabelais, Montaigne, and Cervantes; and recall the wit derived at the expense of the Humanistic cult of books. Though none of these writers alludes to the Alexandrian fire, Cervantes and Montaigne seem to countenance the burning of libraries: *Don Quixote,* Pt. I, chap. 6; and *"Du pedantisme," Essais,* Bk I, chap. 25, in Montaigne, *Oeuvres complètes,* ed. A. Thibaudet and M. Rat (Paris, 1962), 143.

LeRoy's *De la vicissitude ou variété des choses* (1575) studies the rises and falls of nations and finds that though such vicissitudes take place in cycles, some cumulative development of learning occurs. In the concluding chapter, where he invokes the destruction of the Alexandrian library, LeRoy summarizes his theory of progress and takes a definite stand in the *Querelle* of the Ancients and Moderns: he attempts to justify the modern pursuit of novelty without denigrating the ancient contribution to civilization.[17] Deprecating the Moderns' uncritical devotion to antiquity, he challenges his contemporaries to discover new truths and write new books. The recent discoveries of printing and gunpowder prove that the Ancients were not omniscient, while the vicissitudes of history have entailed the loss of much of their learning. In this context the Alexandrian library represents the cumulative authority of classical learning, and its destruction exemplifies the corrosive action of time on the intellectual legacy of the past.

LeRoy felt that the weight of this classical past, symbolized in the Alexandrian library, lay like a burden on the present, smothering its originality. Even so, he counters those opponents of new works who assert that there are already too many books in the world; but his arguments often appear inconsistent with his views, which attests to the ambivalence of his position as a Humanist defending the claims of the Moderns:

> Certainly, [he begins] if all that hath bin written by the auncient Philosophers, Historiographers, Oratours, Poets, Physitians, Diuines, and Lawiers, had come to our hands, all had bin full of bookes; and we should haue had no other moueables in our house but bookes: we should be constrained to go, sit and lie vpon bookes. And yet there remaine so many, and are made from day to day, that the age of man could not suffice to read, not onely the writings in many disciplines; but in one particuler: and seldome are the Inuentories found perfect.[18]

This extraordinary vision of a world wholly encumbered by books indicates LeRoy's fear that the past, in the form of learning, may engulf the present; the vision anticipates Borges's "Library of Babel" where the cosmos is portrayed as a nearly infinite library (see below). Though all the works of the past have not survived, printing "from day to day" pours books into the world. Thus the modern renovation of the Senecan view

[17] Loys LeRoy, *Of the Interchangeable Course, or Variety of Things in the Whole World . . .*, trans. R. Ashley (London, 1594), fols. 127r-130v; and Loys LeRoy, *De la vicissitude ou variété des choses en l'univers . . .* (1575; rpt. Paris, 1584), fols. 248r-255v. In this paragraph I have drawn on Werner L. Gundersheimer's *The Life and Works of Louis LeRoy* (Geneva, 1966), 102-127; and Hans Baron, "The *Querelle* of the Ancients and the Moderns as a Problem for Renaissance Scholarship," *JHI*, 20 (Jan. 1954), 8-10.

[18] LeRoy, trans. Ashley, fol. 128v; and *De la vicissitude*, fol. 251r.

grows out of an embarrassment of riches: thanks to the new proliferation of old learning, a scholar could no longer demonstrate mastery of all works in his field. Leroy's insight records the demise of the Renaissance intellectual; henceforth the destruction of books at Alexandria will not seem so tragic a loss as it did to the book-impoverished scholars of the Middle Ages or early Renaissance.

> Seauen hundred thousand Volumes were found in the Librarie of *Alexandria,* which were all burned together by a mischance of fire. The learned caried their books thither from all parts, as to the Theater of learning; and they read them in the *Museum.* . . . *Liuie* calleth that great Librarie, a worthy work of kingly care, and magnificence: But *seneca* saith, that it was neither care, not magnificece; but a studious pompe or superfluity; & yet not studious; because the Ks. Ptolomeyes had not erected it to serve for study, but for a shew and spectacle. As we see many priuate men also which haue gathered many togither, wel printed, boud, & gilded: to serve only for ornaments, which they never looke in themselves, nor suffer others for feare of fouling them.[19]

This passage initiates a catalogue of the libraries and voluminous works of the Ancients, most of which, according to LeRoy, have been unfortunately lost. Yet LeRoy proceeds to suggest that the loss of the Alexandrian and other libraries proved a fortunate misfortune for it gives the Moderns an opportunity to replenish learning with new discoveries so that they too might enjoy great honor:

> But seeing that the arts & sciences begin, & grow; are changed . . . and are lost by negligece, slouth, forgetfulness, and ignorance; it being a thing most requisite that trueth should remain amongst men: It behoueth of necessity that the first being abolished, others should come in their places; and that the old books being lost, there should be made new.[20]

Had the Alexandrian library escaped destruction, there would have been more than enough books in the world and fewer grounds to justify the creativity of the Moderns.

After LeRoy, this notion, that the loss of ancient achievements at Alexandria enables and excites the creativity of the Moderns, becomes a European commonplace. In his *Vulgar Errors* (1646), Thomas Browne, for instance, implies that it had been no loss if all the ancient poets and poetical writers had perished in the Alexandrian fire: "For were a pregnant wit educated in ignorance [of the ancient poets], receiving

[19] LeRoy, trans. Ashley, fol. 129r; and *De la vicissitude,* fols. 251r-251v. Sebastian Brant in his *Narrenschiff* (1494) adopts the Senecan view that the Ptolemys's book-collecting was vain; but he ignores the burning: see *Sabastian Brants Narrenschiff,* ed. F. Zarnke (1854; rpt Hildesheim, 1961), 4-5.

[20] LeRoy, trans. Ashley, fol. 129v; and *De la vicissitude,* fol. 253r.

only impressions from realities; upon such solid foundations, it must surely raise more substantiall superstructions, and fall upon very many excellent strains, which have been jusled off by their intrusions."[21] Likewise, over two centuries later, the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt in his lecture "Über Glück and Unglück in der Weltgeschichte" (1871) asks if the destruction of the Alexandrian collection was truly a misfortune. To show the vanity of dwelling on the supposed fortunes and misfortunes of history, he proposes to inquire into the "most justified indictments" of history, specifically those condemning the destruction of art and literature.[22] As chief example he takes the loss of the Alexandrian library, a loss he appreciates; though, he writes, "we have enough to do to cope with the learning of modern times, . . . we mourn for the supreme poets whose works have been lost, and the historians too represent an irreparable loss because the continuity of intellectual tradition has become fragmentary over long and important periods."[23] Yet destruction also brings certain cultural advantages such as the "unfulfilled longing" (*"unerfüllte Sehnsucht"*) which impels us to reverence those fragments of the past we have. The great loss provides that "capacity for worship" which "is as important as the object we worship."[24] Then Burckhardt discredits the idea that the Alexandrian destruction was a misfortune; he concludes with the phoenix argument for creativity born of destruction:

> It may be, too, that those great works of art had to perish in order that later art might create in freedom. . . . if, after the middle of the eighteenth century, in the enthusiastic revival of philological and antiquarian studies, the lost Greek lyric poets had suddenly been rediscovered, they might well have blighted the full flowering of German poetry.[25]

Finally, we find a variation of this commonplace in Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1901): Caesar, after allowing the Alexandrian library to burn, claims he will build the future with the ruins of the past.[26]

II. Eternity, according to Thomas Browne, is "farre more venerable then antiquitie"; in that judgement lies the key to Browne's attitude to

[21] *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (*Vulgar Errors*), reprinted in *The Prose of Sir Thomas Browne,* ed. N. Endicott (Garden City, N.Y., 1967), 145.

[22] Jacob Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History,* ed. J. H. Nichols (New York, 1943), 367; and Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen über Geschichtliches Studium,* vol. IV of *Gesammelte Werke,* ed. R. Stadelmann (Basel and Stuttgart, 1970), 194.

[23] *Force and Freedom,* 367-368; and *Werke,* IV, 194.

[24] *Force and Freedom,* 368; and *Werke,* IV, 195.

[25] *Force and Freedom,* 368; and *Werke,* IV, 195.

[26] Bernard Shaw, *Caesar and Cleopatra: A History,* collected in vol. II of *Collected Plays with their Prefaces,* ed. Dan H. Laurence (London, 1971), 219.

the loss of the Alexandrian library.[27] To show the development of another symbolic facet of the Alexandrian figure, we must now turn back to the seventeenth century and the vanity of learning tradition. It is in the *Religio Medici* (1643) that Browne invokes the Alexandrian burning:

> I have heard some with deepe sighs lament the lost lines of *Cicero;* others with as many groanes deplore the combustion of the Library of *Alexandria;* for my owne part, I thinke there be too many [books or libraries] in the world, and could with patience behold the urne and ashes of the *Vatican* [library], could I with a few others recover the perished leaves of *Solomon.* . . . Some men have written more than others have spoken; *Pineda* quotes more Authors in one worke [1,040], than are necessary in a whole world. Of those three great inventions of *Germany,* there are two which are not without their incommodities, and 'tis disputable whether they exceed not their use and commodities. 'Tis not a melancholy *Utinam* ["if only"] of mine owne, but the desire of better heads, that there were a generall Synod; not to unite the incompatible differences of Religion, but for the benefit of learning, to reduce it as it lay at first in a few and solid Authors; and to condemne to the fire those swarms and millions of *Rhapsodies,* begotten onely to distract and abuse the weaker judgements of Scholars, and to maintaine the Trade and Mystery of Typographers. [sect. 24]

Unlike LeRoy, Browne continues and enriches the vanity of learning tradition. So while he shares some of LeRoy's views, Browne's preferences for eternity over antiquity, and for the study of scripture over humane letters, provoke a sharp critique of the Humanistic cult of books and classical learning. The diminished value of antiquity for Browne is evident from the passage quoted: Cicero's lost lines are not missed while Solomon's are; the loss of the Vatican library, the modern equivalent of the Alexandrian because of its wealth of classical codices, might be tolerated; and the "swarms of *Rhapsodies,*" i.e. Humanistic digests of past learning, should be burnt.[28] Hence the Alexandrian library symbolizes the pernicious legacy of antiquity. Further, in its concentration of useless books it exemplifies the curse of print which disseminates "rhapsodies" and so corrupts the reading public. Finally, by putting forth the burning of the Alexandrian library as a model for contemporary policy, Browne adds a significant dimension to its symbolic meaning.

Browne announces that his general synod on the Alexandrian pattern will benefit learning. By learning he does not, however, intend knowledge of the classics, which he elsewhere castigates for reinforcing

[27] *Religio Medici* (1643), reprinted in *The Prose of Sir Thomas Browne,* op. cit., sect. 28. Hereafter, all references will be to this edition of the *Religio Medici.*

[28] For commentary on Browne's anti-Humanism in this passage, see Vittoria Sanna, ed. and trans., *Religio Medici* (Cagliari, 1959), II, 171-174.

the follies and supineness of the reading public;[29] rather he means the "two bookes from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of his servant Nature, that universall and publik Manuscript" (sect. 16). Browne's hostility to classical letters grows out of his views as a Christian and Physician or natural philosopher. Humanism leads the reading public astray for it publishes opinions that are neither Christian—that is, directed to holy scripture—nor empirical, that is, derived by trial and error from the book of nature. For LeRoy, the weight of the classical past housed at Alexandria was merely depressing; for Browne it is also dangerous to readers. So Browne's devaluation of humane letters as the supreme cultural medium crystallizes in the image of the Alexandrian library burnt, and finds its contemporary application in a general synod based on the Alexandrian precedent.

From the publication of Rousseau's *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750), several French proposals for general synods to reduce learning acknowledge the precedence of the Saracen devastation at Alexandria. Hence Browne's recommendation of a general synod, grounded on the pernicious effects of learning and the Alexandrian precedent, becomes the prototype of a second European commonplace. Rousseau, Browne's successor in the vanity of learning tradition, reputedly welcomed the destruction of libraries, which led a contemporary to write: "Omar is the genius who directs . . . [the pen] of M. Rousseau."[30] The citizen of Geneva denied the accusation on several occasions, but his opinion in the first *Discours* made the judgment stick. In the last pages of this work Rousseau condemns the amorality of modern philosophy—especially Berkeley, Spinoza, and Hobbes—and proceeds to disparage printing as the "art of perpetuating the extravagance of the human mind," by which the "shameful monuments" of modern thought will endure.[31] A footnote on printing follows:

Considering the awful disorders printing has already caused in Europe, and judging the future by the progress that this evil makes day by day, one can easily predict that sovereigns will not delay in taking as many pains to banish this terrible art from their states as they once took to establish it. . . . It is said that Caliph Omar, consulted on what should be done with the library of Alexandria, replied in these terms: If the books in this library contain things opposed to the Koran, they are bad and must be burned. If they contain only the doctrine of the Koran, burn them anyway—they are superfluous. Our learned men have cited this reasoning as the

[29] See *Vulgar Errors*, op. cit., 142; and chap. 6, 122-129: "Of Adherence unto Antiquity."

[30] Quoted in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts*, ed. G. R. Havens (New York, 1946), 243. Hereafter *Discours*.

[31] Jean -Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, trans. R. D. and J. R. Masters (New York, 1964), 61; and *Discours*, 155.

height of absurdity. However imagine Gregory the Great in place of Omar, and the Gospel in place of the Koran, the library would still have been burned, and it would be perhaps the finest deed in the life of that illustrious pontiff.[32]

Rousseau falls short of advocating the destruction of contemporary libraries, but he does approve the abolition of the printing press, the chief modern means of preserving and spreading learning. The grounds of Rousseau's opposition to the spread of humane letters seem to resemble Browne's, but the Genevan, insisting less than Browne on the falsity of learning, rather stressed the decadent influence of learning, however truthful, on the reading public. Whereas Browne's main target was the learning of antiquity, Rousseau not only opposes that, but also modern empirical science, and particularly the enlightened dogma that encyclopedism—the spread of simplified learning among the people—would result in moral progress. Thus he disapproves of "compilers of works who have indiscreetly broken down the door of the sciences and let into their sanctuary a populace unworthy of approaching it."[33] Typography, by giving general access to such works, promotes the decadence of a people, not their progress. For Rousseau, then, as for Browne, the proliferation of letters through printing finds its appropriate symbol in the immense library of Alexandria: the library, as propagator of letters, was to the past what printing is to the eighteenth century, so the burning of the Alexandrian library becomes a *figura* for the abolition of the pernicious press.

Oddly enough, it is in the utopian fictions of historical optimists like Sébastien Mercier and Étienne Cabet, rather than in the culturally pessimistic writings of Rousseau, that we find the most vivid manifestations of our commonplace; this fact alone reflects the protean vitality of the Alexandrian motif. In his utopian romance *L'An 2440* (1770), Mercier, for instance, depicts a future golden age almost as impoverished of books as the primordial one. The time traveller-narrator in his tour of utopia visits the Royal library: it is housed in a colossal hall which dwarfs a small cabinet containing the entire collection of books. When the visitor protests, the Royal librarian, a man of letters, replies that "a numerous library [is] the seat of the greatest extravagancies and the most idle chimeras . . . [we] have therefore destroyed all these authors who buried their thoughts under a monstrous heap of words or phrases."[34]

[32] *The First and Second Discourses,* 61; and *Discours,* 155-56.

[33] *The First and Second Discourses,* 62; and *Discours,* 157-58.

[34] [Sébastien Mercier], *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred,* trans. W. Hooper (Philadelphia, 1795), 168; and [Sébastien Mercier], *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante* (1770; rpt. London, 1772), 187-88. See René Godenne "La Bibliothèque de l'homme de l'an 2440 selon L. S. Mercier," *The French Review,* 45 (Feb., 1972), 571-79.

Then, in proof that the future has not wholly effaced the past, the librarian invokes the Alexandrian precedent: "we have therefore done from an *enlightened* zeal, what the barbarians once did from one that was blind: however, as we are neither unjust, nor like the Saracens, who heated their baths with the *chef d'oeuvres* of literature, we have made an election" my italics).[35] Here we witness the fulfillment of that Enlightenment impulse to order and reduce the immense bulk of the past to the more convenient dimensions of an encyclopedia; after the destruction of all that is judged dangerous or repetitious, few books remain. The complete works of Catullus, Petronius, Herodotus, Sappho, and Aristophanes are among those annihilated. Mercier's vicarious pleasure in this fictional version of the Alexandrian fire suffuses the description of the event: the "tremendous mass [of books] was set on fire, and offered as an expiatory sacrifice to veracity, to good sense, and true taste. The flames greedily devoured the follies of mankind, as well ancient as modern; the fire continued long."[36] The burden of the past acquires here an appropriate numerical value with the burning of a huge pile of books and journals, five or six hundred thousand commentators, a billion romances, eight hundred thousand volumes of law, etc.

Mercier hoped, perhaps in vain, to distinguish the policies of the new order from those of the Saracen regime. Similarly, in Cabet's utopian romance *Voyage en Icarie* (1839) when a tourist compares the Icarian destruction of books to "ferocious Omar burning the library of Alexandria," the utopian host replies: "We do in favor of humanity what its oppressors did against it: we have made a fire to burn bad books while brigands or fanatics set fire to pyres in order to burn innocent heretics."[37] While Mercier and Cadet in their allusions to Alexandria recognize the antiquity of the practice of book burning, both, consistent with their belief in progress, protest that the motives of modern liquidations are rational and moral rather than fanatical. The utopians betray no doubts about their method of selecting books for irrevocable destruction, about the self-evident nature of their morality, or about the permanent character of their own world view. Succeeding ages are denied the right of choosing what they would read for it is assumed that after the introduction of the new order the world view will remain forever the same: thus the new order presumes to have brought historical time to its conclusion. For the modern utopian the destruction of the learning of the past, or its radical revision and reduction, represents the cessation of historical process and constitutes a basic precondition for happiness and justice.

[35] *Memoirs,* 170; and *L'An,* 190. [36] *Ibid.*

[37] Etienne Cabet, *Voyage en Icarie* (1839; rpt. Paris, 1848), 127. My translation.

A common thread of argument, then, runs through authors so diverse in their views as Browne, Rousseau, Mercier, and Cabet: the bulk of letters and learning ought to be destroyed in order to ensure the moral and mental well-being of the people. The fact that the motif of the Alexandrian destruction, and those proposals modelled on it, should appeal to authors with such contrary beliefs and purposes, must make us pause here for a question: Do the manifest arguments for destruction adequately explain the currency of our motif or may some deeper satisfaction occasion its broad appeal for men of learning? In Mercier for example, we saw how destructive enthusiasm seemed to overbalance the (suspect) social and moral arguments offered to justify it.

III. In the late nineteenth century the figurative significance of the Alexandrian library and its destruction grows; in this enlargement of meaning we may eventually read an answer to the question just posed. The spate of scholarly monographs on the Alexandrian library—by Parthey (1838), Klippel (1838), Ritschl (1838), and Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1881)—reflects the historical passion of a century that invented Higher Criticism and *Kulturgeschichte,* propagated the historical novel, and excavated Troy.[38] So when in a history play written at the end of the century we find that the Alexandrian library has come to symbolize the historical memory of humanity, the result does not astonish.

Shaw's historical comedy *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1901) wittily adapts the figure of the burning Alexandrian library to chastise the historicism of the age.[39] Caesar, who may be related to Nietzsche's Superman, combines the decisiveness of the professional soldier with the urbane wit of the cosmopolitan man of letters.[40] In Act II we find Alexandria under siege; Caesar orders the ships in the west harbor (near the library) to be fired, but the Egyptians do the job before his order can be executed. Then, at one point, Theodotus, the pedantic tutor of

[38] See Parsons, x, on nineteenth-century scholarship.

[39] Bernard Shaw, *Caesar and Cleopatra: A History,* collected in vol. II of *Collected Plays with their Prefaces,* ed. Dan H. Laurence (London, 1971). Hereafter all references to Shaw's play will be to this edition.

[40] Shaw refers to "Our newest idol, the Superman" in the preface to *Three Plays for Puritans,* in *Collected Plays,* II, 33. On the relation of Shaw and Caesar to Nietzsche, see Eric Bentley, *The Cult of the Superman: A Study of the Ideas of Heroism in Carlyle and Nietzsche . . .* (London, 1947), 164-174; and David S. Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England 1890-1914* (Toronto, 1970), 170-192. A major source of Shaw's Caesar is the Caesar of Theodor Mommsen, portrayed in his *Römische Geschichte* (1854-1856; rpt. and rev. Berlin, 1881), III, bk. 5, chap. 10. See Louis Crompton, *Shaw the Dramatist* (London, 1971), 59-61; Stanley Weintraub, "Shaw's Mommsenite Caesar," in *Anglo-German and American-German Crosscurrents,* ed. P. A. Shelley and A. O. Lewis, Jr. (Chapel Hill, 1962), 257-71; and Gordon W. Couchman, *This Our Caesar* (The Hague, 1973), 55, 78-82. As Couchman, 57, points out, Shaw diverges from Mommsen over Caesar's attitude to the burning of the library.

Ptolemy, "rushes in, tearing his hair, and squeaking the most lamentable exclamations" (218); he finally gives out that the harbor fire has spread to the library of Alexandria: "The first of the seven wonders of the world perishes" (219). Caesar, who thought someone might have been killed, replies: "Is that all?" The ensuing dialogue between Caesar, the "suprahistorical thinker," and Theodotus, the Alexandrian scholar, calls for quotation:[41]

Theodotus. (unable to believe his senses) All! Caesar: will you go down to posterity as a barbarous soldier too ignorant to know the value of books?

Caesar. Theodotus: I am an author myself; and I tell you it is better that the Egyptians should live their lives than dream them away with the help of books.

Theodotus. (kneeling, with genuine literary emotion: the passion of the pedant) Caesar: once in ten generations of men, the world gains an immortal book.

Caesar. (inflexible) If it did not flatter mankind, the common executioner would burn it.

Theodotus. Without history, death will lay you beside your meanest soldier.

Caesar. Death will do that in any case. I ask no better grave.

Theodotus. What is burning there is the memory of mankind.

Caesar. A shameful memory. Let it burn.

Theodotus. (wildly) Will you destroy the past?

Caesar. Ay, and build the future with its ruins. [219][42]

In this concise exchange Shaw succeeds in recapitulating the two commonplaces used to rationalize the Alexandrian destruction: 1) books are vanities that menace the well-being of the people; and 2) the integrity of the past is a hindrance to present and future creativity. But in making the Alexandrian destruction stand for the annihilation of the past, of the memory of mankind, Shaw surpasses the claims of his predecessors in this argument. Caesar in his irreverence for the past anticipates

[41] Caesar, in the following exchange, resembles Nietzsche's "suprahistorical thinker" who "comes even to be weary of the letters that are continually unrolled before him"; see Friedrich Nietzsche "The Use and Disadvantage of History" (1874), in *Thoughts out of Season,* trans. A. Collins (Edinburgh, 1915), II, 14; and Nietzsche, "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie," in vol. I of *Werke in Drei Bänden,* ed. K. Schlechta (Munich, 1954), 120. Shaw, who had read some Nietzsche in German before *Caesar and Cleopatra,* may have known this essay; see *Nietzsche in England 1890-1914,* 188.

[42] When Caesar eventually allows Theodotus to go to save the library, it is only a ploy by which to divert Egyptian soldiers from the siege.

the totalitarianism of modern dictators such as Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, whose strength and efficiency Shaw came later to admire.[43]

Shaw's ideas in this respect show a distinct affinity to those of Nietzsche in two of his early essays; these may serve us as a gloss on the Caesar-Theodotus exchange. In *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872) Nietzsche, with deliberate anachronism, characterizes the modern intellectual as the "Alexandrian man, who is at bottom a librarian and corrector of proofs, and wretchedly goes blind from the dust of books and from printers' errors."[44] Modern man tries to console himself by collecting the literature and art styles of the past, but this historical enterprise results only in the wretchedness of the Alexandrian librarian.[45] In his later essay, "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie" (1874), Nietzsche outlines a psychology of historicism and further defines the Alexandrian malady: "by excess of history life becomes maimed and degenerate, and is followed by the degeneration of history as well."[46] As an antidote to degeneracy, the historian's disease, Nietzsche suggests the power of forgetting. For the German psychologist, the science of forgetfulness, rather than the preservation of learning and the past, constitutes the precondition of happiness and the vigorous life.[47] Theodotus, then, takes after Nietzsche's wretched Alexandrian; Caesar, who when he orders the burning of the "memory of mankind" in the interests of "life" and the "future," resembles Nietzsche's "suprahistorical thinker" for whom forgetfulness is the key to equanimity and decisiveness of action.

Shaw's Caesar, throughout this scene ironically crowned with laurel, confesses himself an author and yet would destroy a great collection of books. That the most bookish of men should smile upon the destruction of learning constitutes the central paradox of our subject. Nietzsche, Burckhardt, and LeRoy were, after all, academics, university professors. Browne's library at his death numbered nearly three thousand volumes and Gibbon's was considered imposing. Shaw and Mercier wrote and published voluminously, while Cabet, like Marx, spent his English exile in the library of the British Museum. The paradox is accentuated when we recall that nearly all of these literati approved the annihilation of history, yet could not dispense with an appeal to historic precedent—Alexandria. The real problem resides in finding what common motive or motives might have induced such a number and diversity of literati

[43] See Couchman, *This Our Caesar,* 167-68.

[44] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner,* trans. W. Kaufmann (New York, 1967), sect. 18; and "Die Geburt der Tragödie," in *Werke,* ed. K. Schlechta (Munich, 1954), I. sect. 18.

[45] "Die Geburt der Tragödie," sect. 18.

[46] *Thoughts out of Season,* II, 16; and *Werke,* I, 121.

[47] *Thoughts out of Season,* II, 8-12; and *Werke,* I, 116-19.

to invoke the Alexandrian burning in the way they did. One motive may lie hidden in an insight of LeRoy's: after printing, no one man could any longer master the learning of a single discipline. For the man of letters embarrassed by the proliferation of learning, the vision of learning destroyed or reduced at Alexandria might offer intense gratification. A second motive arises from the fear, intimated by LeRoy, that books threaten to replace or usurp the prerogatives of the world. Emerson, in his lecture "The American Scholar," formulated the problem with exactness: "Hence the book-learned class, who value books as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul. Hence . . . the bibliomania of all degrees."[48] The book-learned know best the dangers and temptations of bibliomania. As some deny the world for the soul, or vice versa, so the scholar may deny both world and soul for the Third Estate of books. Hence the compensatory appeal of the Alexandrian motif: here the world revenges itself on the usurping Third Estate.

A third possible motive, which complements the others, stems from Nietzsche's theory of historical forgetting. The man of letters, through his intimate relation to the books and learning of the past, feels more sharply than others the excess and "terror of history."[49] Or, to paraphrase Nietzsche, the modern intellectual dwelling among the works of the past, is most apt to despise the past: the radical antagonism between historicism and a vital modern consciousness can only be discovered through the intensive study of history.[50] The study of history is the despair of the modern intellectual for through it he confronts his failure to comprehend the tragic and labyrinthine past of mankind: the whole endeavor seems futile, life-denying. Hence the secret longing for a benign state of forgetfulness, a state to efface the malignancy of historical memory. Such a state of cultural amnesia can be vicariously enjoyed by celebrating the Alexandrian destruction. As a potent symbol of the annihilation of memory, the figure of the burning at Alexandria may serve as a safety valve to express and diffuse this particular historical despair, this professional hazard of the book-learned. In so doing, the Alexandrian motif may ironically further the historical enterprise whose vanity it declares.

Postscript. In the final analysis the glorification of the Alexandrian destruction by western literati attests to the strength of the printed book as a cultural force in modern history. I wish to conclude this essay by hazarding a speculation about the contemporary status of our symbol

[48] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" (delivered 1837), collected in *The Portable Emerson,* ed. M. Van Doren (New York, 1972), 29.

[49] I use Mircea Eliade's term, see *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return,* trans. W. R. Trask (1949; rpt. New York, 1959), 150.

[50] Nietzsche, *Werke, op. cit.,* I, 155.

in a period reputedly witness to the decline of the printed word. To do so, let us look into the works of an author (and librarian) who, though virtually blind, survives into the period in question. In the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, the cult of books stands as a central, if ambivalent, theme. His surrealistic parable "La Biblioteca de Babel" represents the universe as a monstrous library whose nearly-infinite number of books "register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols"; it contains, in short all possible books, nonsensical and legible, past and future.[51] Within its volumes we might find, for example, the complete works of Shakespeare and the same works lacking a key line; pages of gibberish; a verbatim copy of the essay at hand. Citizens of this world search in vain for the "fundamental law" of the library, so the definition of man as the "imperfect librarian" (*"el imperfecto bibliotecario"*) suits. One lesson of this parable may be that great libraries with their repetitious, contradictory contents are no less perplexing than the world they are meant to explain. Yet if Borges sees in these endless stacks the configurations of hell, he elsewhere confesses that he "had always thought of Paradise/In form and image as a library."[52] For the Argentine librarian, then, books constitute a treasured Third Estate which may nevertheless threaten to supplant the world.

What if the world, as at Alexandria, should supplant the book? Borges alludes to the destruction of the Alexandrian library on at least three occasions. He accepts the Shavian view that the devastation represents the negation of the past, but unlike Shaw and other literati discussed, he does not approve of it. In the first paragraph of his essay "Del culto de los libros" he faults Shaw for an anachronism in the library scene of *Caesar and Cleopatra:* "In my opinion," he writes, "the historical Caesar would approve or condemn the command that [Shaw] attributes to him, but he would not consider it, as we do, a sacrilegious joke. The reason is clear: for the ancients the written word was merely a succedaneum of the spoken word."[53] Borges's insight, that the Moderns regard the wilful destruction at Alexandria as a sacrilegious joke, calls to mind Gibbon's smile. Yet it can be gathered from his tone, here and elsewhere, that the destruction of the memory of mankind is not for him a matter of levity. The first essay of *Otras Inquisiciones,* which substantiates this feeling, consists of an inconclusive string of hypotheses to

[51] Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings,* trans. D. A. Yates and J. E. Irby (New York, 1964), 54; and Borges, *El Jardin de senderos que se bifurcan* (Buenos Aires, 1942), 98.

[52] Borges, *Selected Poems 1923-1967,* ed. N. T. Di Giovanni (New York, 1972), 116-17.

[53] Borges, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952, trans.* R. L. C. Simms (Austin, 1975), 116; and Borges, *Otras Inquisiciones* (1937-1952) (Buenos Aires, 1952), 136.

account for the fact that the first Emperor of China, who built the Great Wall, also ordered all books written before his reign to be burned. In the concluding paragraph Borges identifies the Chinese with the Alexandrian burning; once again Caesar is the perpetrator: "The tenacious wall [of China], which at this moment, and always, projects its system of shadows over lands I shall never see, is the shadow of a Caesar who ordered the most reverent of nations to burn its past; and that idea—apart from the many conjectures it permits—is probably what we find so touching."[54] Borges discovers a rare kind of aesthetic pleasure in contemplating the monumental symmetries of history: the construction of a wall, the destruction of the past; a Chinese ruler who orders the annihilation of history, a Roman ruler who repeats this order. Even so, the adjectives "reverent" and "touching" proclaim Borges's sympathies. This elegiac strain endures in the third allusion to the Alexandrian loss, which now serves as a metaphor for the author's blindness. In the "Poema de los dones" he applauds God, who with "splendid irony/Granted me books and blindness at one touch":

> In vain the day
> Squanders on these same eyes its infinite tomes,
> As distant as the inaccessible volumes
> Which perished in Alexandria.[55]

Like Boccaccio and Richard de Bury, then, Borges regrets the destruction of the Alexandrian library. The sole example of Borges may not establish the conclusion that contemporary literati sympathize with the medieval view of book destruction, rather than with modern glorifications of it. Perhaps it is only a coincidence that Julius Caesar in Rex Warner's novel *Imperial Caesar* (1960) describes as "unfortunate" the loss of books he instigated at Alexandria.[56] But in two futurological novels (of the 1950's) in which virtually all books have been burned because the masses regard them as dangerous, the authors plainly identify with the small minority of bibliophiles.[57] One suspects that the burning of books in contemporary fiction expresses the hostility to letters of a culture dominated by electronic media. From a sociological standpoint, it may even be argued that the situation of the contemporary humanist resembles that of the medieval scholar more than that of the modern man of letters. The humanist of today, after all, belongs to a bookish intelligentsia which is in good measure estranged from the values of a predominantly post-literate culture. Will the world finally

[54] *Other Inquisitions,* 5; and *Otras Inquisiciones,* 11.

[55] *Selected Poems,* 116-17.

[56] Rex Warner, *Imperial Caesar* (Boston, 1960), 220.

[57] Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* ["the temperature at which book-paper catches fire and burns"] (1953, rpt. New York, 1973), *passim;* and Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959; rpt. New York, 1972), 52-54.

succeed in supplanting the book, as it endeavored to do at Alexandria? Or will the splendid irony of history grant us, on the one hand, ever-greater libraries of Alexandrian dimensions and, on the other, a society ever more reluctant to heed the printed word? If this is the case, the man of letters may come to see in the flames at Alexandria a figure of the fate of books in our own time, and come to deplore, once again, the loss of the Great Library of Alexandria.

University of Texas at Dallas.