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Source: *October*, Spring, 2002, Vol. 100, Obsolescence (Spring, 2002), pp. 133-153

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/779096>

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Tradition's Destruction: On the Library of Alexandria

DANIEL HELLER-ROAZEN

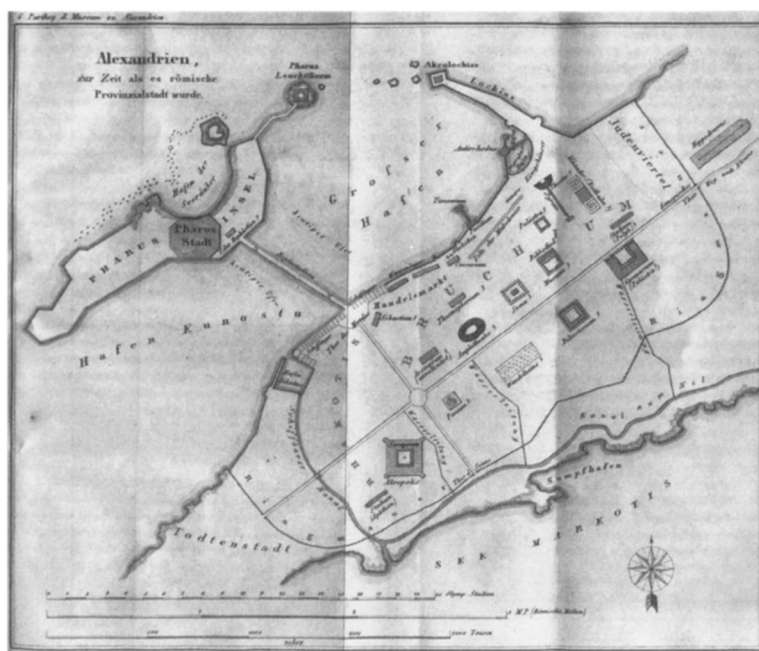
Recapitulating Disasters

"I shall not recapitulate the disasters of the Alexandrian library," Edward Gibbon writes in the fifty-first chapter of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.¹ The historian resolves, with these words, to remain silent about that which distinguishes the Alexandrian library above all else: its "disasters." But it would be rash to conclude that Gibbon, therefore, simply fails to address the calamities that he so clearly avoids. With the characteristically double gesture of a disavowal, he at once invokes and distances them. His discussion of the institution and posterity of the library cannot but call to mind the destructions that he passes over in silence; it frames, without recounting, the very "disasters" that it will not "recapitulate."

Gibbon's words, in this way, register the singular status that the Library of Alexandria still occupies today: that of an institution in which the conservation and the destruction of tradition can hardly be told apart, an archive that, in a vertiginous movement of self-abolition, threatens to coincide entirely with its own destruction. The pages that follow consider the structure and sense of this singular archive. The form they take is less that of the modern scholarly article, which aims at the formulation and demonstration of a novel argument, than that of the "memory notices," "textual remarks," and "commentaries" (ὑπομνήματα) of antiquity, which sought to recall and explicate certain decisive aspects of the texts that preceded them.² In this case, the remarks and commentaries, which refer to a corpus of classical and late ancient works that is at once literary, historiographical, scientific, and philosophical, recall precisely that which Gibbon excluded from his monumental *History*: the many "disasters" that the Library of Alexandria, in its life and afterlife, simultaneously remedied, incited, and suffered.

1. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersely (London: Allen Lane [The Penguin Press], 1994), vol. 5–6, p. 285.

2. On the ὑπομνήματα, see Franz Bömer, "Der Commentarius: Zur Vorgeschichte und literarischen Form der Schriften Caesars," *Hermes* 81 (1953), pp. 210–50, esp. pp. 215–26; Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 48–49.



The Cage of the Muses

Ancient visitors to Alexandria often remarked that it bore the form of a chlamys, the mantle worn by Macedonian and Thessalian hunters and soldiers and, later, Greek and Roman warriors.³ Like the chlamys, whose length was double its width, the city founded by Alexander in 331 B.C. was roughly rectangular in shape, bordered by the Mediterranean to the north and by Lake Mareotis to the south. Any reconstruction of the topography of the city must rely principally on Strabo, who arrived in Egypt on a military campaign in the entourage of Prefect Aulus Gallus in 24 B.C., remaining in Alexandria, as he tells us, for “a long time,” before describing the Ptolemaic center in detail in the seventeenth book of his *Geography*.⁴ The “long sides” of Alexandria, Strabo explains, “are those that are bathed by the two waters, having a diameter of about thirty stadia, and the short sides are the isthmuses, each being seven or eight stadia wide and pinched in on one side by the sea and on the other by the lake.”⁵ Alongside the Great Harbour, which stretched across the north-eastern coast from the promontory of Lochias to the causeway that joined the city to the island of Pharos, lay the region Strabo calls “the Palaces” (τὰ βασιλεία), which acquired the name “Brucheion” in Roman times. Composing a third or fourth of the ancient city, this area housed the royal grounds and gardens as well as the offices of government and public institutions.⁶ It was also home to the most celebrated of all

3. Plutarch, *Alexander*, 5–11; Strabo, *Geography*, XVII, 1, 8.

4. P. M. Fraser reckons Strabo’s stay in Alexandria to have lasted four years. See Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), vol. 2, pp. 12–13, n. 23.

5. XVII, 1, 8; the text cited here is that of *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), p. 33.

6. Strabo, XVII, 1, 8. On Strabo’s account and the topography of the city, see Fraser, *Ptolemaic*

Map of ancient Alexandria at the time at which it became a Roman colony.

Alexandrian inventions, the Ptolemaic Μουσείον, “shrine of the Muses,” or “Museum,” which constituted the largest center of learning in the ancient world.

Among classical sources there exist two accounts of the foundation of the Ptolemaic Museum. One tradition, whose earliest source lies in the *Letter to Philocrates* of the second century B.C.,⁷ identifies it as the creation of the second Ptolemaic monarch, Ptolemy Philadelphus, who ruled in Alexandria from 285 to 246 B.C.⁸ This explanation of the origin of the Museum can be found again in a number of later writers, such as Philo, Josephus, Athenaeus, Epiphanius, and the Byzantine scholiast Tzetzes.⁹ A second tradition instead attributes the foundation of the Museum to Ptolemy Soter, “the first of the Macedonians to establish the wealth of Egypt,” as Tacitus calls him.¹⁰ The sole document supporting this tradition dates from the second century A.D., when Irenaeus offers the following account of the institution of the library within the Alexandrian Museum: “Ptolemy the son of Lagos [that is, Ptolemy I] had the ambition to equip the library established by him in Alexandria with the writings of all men as far as they were worth serious attention.”¹¹ Since the classical authors who attribute the foundation of the Museum to Ptolemy Philadelphus err in their accounts of the administrative history of Alexandria, relating that the second Ptolemaic king was counseled by a scholar who in fact had been exiled at the start of the king’s reign, it is generally accepted today that Irenaeus’s account is the most probable, and that the fabled “shrine of the Muses” of Alexandria dates back to the time of its first ruler after the death of Alexander, at the very beginning of the third century B.C.¹²

Strabo devotes two sentences to the workings of the Museum in his account of Alexandria, and they furnish us with the fullest and most detailed account of its nature and organization. “The Museum,” he writes, “is a part of the Palaces,”

has a walkway [περίπατον], an arcade [ἐξέδραν], and a large house, in which there is the eating hall for the men of learning [φιλολόγων ἀνδρῶν] who share the Museum. They form a community with property in

Alexandria, vol. I, “Foundation and Topography,” pp. 3–37.

7. On the *Letter*, see its most recent English edition, in which it appears as *Aristeas to Philocrates* (*Letter of Aristeas*), ed. and trans. Moses Hadas (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951). Fraser (*Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. I, p. 696) dates the letter “as early as about 160 BC”; for Fraser’s reasoning, see *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, II, pp. 970–72, n. 121.

8. *Aristeas to Philocrates*, 9–10, *apud* Eusebius *Praeparatio Evangelica*, VIII, 1. It is worth observing, however, that unlike many later texts clearly founded on it, the *Letter* discusses not the Museum but solely the Alexandrian Library.

9. See Mostafa El-Abbadi, *The Life and Fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1990), p. 79.

10. Tacitus, *Histories*, IV, 831.

11. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 21, 2, *apud* Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, vol. 8, 11–15.

12. On the inconsistency in the *Letter of Philocrates*, see Hades’s editorial remarks to the relevant passage (*Aristeas to Philocrates*, pp. 96–97); on the time of the foundation of the Museum, see Fraser (*Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. I, pp. 321–22), who indicates that the *Letter*’s identification of Demetrius of Phaleron as the first Librarian of the Museum is at odds with its ascription of the foundation of the Museum to Ptolemy II, since Demetrius, the advisor of Ptolemy I, was immediately exiled upon Philadelphus’s rise to the throne.

common and a priest in charge of the Museum, who was formerly appointed by the kings but is now appointed by Caesar.¹³

Strabo's few lines leave no doubt that the Museum was modeled, in its form and function, on the two great centers of learning of classical Athens, the Platonic Academy and the Aristotelian Lyceum.¹⁴ Demetrius of Phaleron, whom classical authors credit with the establishment of the royal library,¹⁵ had been a pupil in the Aristotelian Academy before ruling as tyrant of Athens for ten years, being expelled in 307 B.C., and arriving in Egypt some ten years later; and the structure of the "shrine to the Muses" he is thought to have instituted under Ptolemy Soter bears the traces of the Attic center at which he studied. We know from Diogenes Laertius that the Academy contained a "shrine to the Muses" (μουσεῖον) and, like the Alexandrian Museum, had "arcades" (ἐξέδρας) in addition to the famous "walkway" (περίπατον) from which the Peripatetic school drew its name.¹⁶ And the rules of the Lyceum, as we learn from Theophrastus's will, stipulated that its members were to "not to alienate their property or devote it to their private use," but maintain their institution as a "temple," just as the Alexandrian Museum, in Strabo's account, housed a "community with property in common and a priest,"¹⁷ becoming a secular institution only long after its founding, at the time of the Roman Empire.¹⁸ Certain questions about the Ptolemaic Museum, to be sure, remain. Were there private quarters, or (as one might infer from Strabo's term for their "community," σύνοδος) did the scholars admit no individual property? Was there teaching in the Museum and, if there was, what was its form, and where did it take place? The classical sources suggest no clear answers.

More can be said about the activity and achievement of the "men of learning" (φιλολόγων ἀνδρῶν) who dwelt and worked in the Museum. Their profession could not be better expressed than by the epithet that Strabo attributes to Philotas of Cos, perhaps the first great Hellenistic literary figure: "at once poet and critic" (ποιήτης ἄμα καὶ κριτικός).¹⁹ They were not only dedicated to the composition of literary works; at the same time, they also formulated the principles and practices of the first textual criticism in the West. Their scholarship took the form of a massive project aimed at the conservation and, more radically, the "emendation" and "rectification" (διορθοῦν) of the works of the classical Greek authors: it is here that the many forms of textual criticism still employed by modern literary and historical

13. Strabo, *Geography*, XVII, 1, 8. Translation modified. See Gustav Parthey's comments on this passage in *Das alexandrinische Museum* (Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1838), pp. 51–56.

14. See El-Abbadi's helpful remarks, *The Life and Fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria*, pp. 84–90.

15. On Demetrius, see the *Aristeas to Philocrates*, pp. 9–10; Plut., *Apothegms of Kings and Generals*, 189; Aelian, *Varia Historia*, III, 17; and Diogenes Laertius, V, 77–80, where a list of Demetrius's works is given.

16. See the account of Polemon, who ran the Academy from 314 to ca. 276 B.C., in Diogenes Laertius, IV, 19: "He would withdraw from society, confining himself to the garden of the Academy; his scholars remained in small cells nearby, living close to the shrine of the Muses [μουσεῖον] and the arcades [ἐξέδρας]."

17. Diogenes Laertius, V, 51–52.

18. As Fraser remarks, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 1, p. 313.

19. Strabo, *Geography*, XIV, 657.

scholarship, from the purification of diction to the practice of marginal annotation and the division and ordering of metrical sequences, are invented and refined.²⁰ The history of the Alexandrian Museum may well be regarded as the history of the development of classical scholarship as such, from the time of its first “learned man,” Zenodotus of Ephesus (ca. 285 to ca. 270 B.C.), who was not only an early lexicographer of literary Greek but also the first critical editor of Homer, to that of its last great figure, Aristophanes of Byzantium (ca. 204 to 189 B.C.), who has been called the “founder of Greek punctuation”²¹ and is largely responsible for the fundamental definition of the metrical and prosodic units of poetry (παράγραφος, στροφή, αντίστροφος, and ἐποδός) accepted by all subsequent readers of classical literature.²²

Not all the contemporaries of the Museum appreciated the activity that transpired behind its walls. In two of the hexameters of his *Silloi*, Timon of Phlius, a student of Pyrrhon the Skeptic who lived in the third century B.C., expressed a view of the institution that was hardly flattering:

βιβλιακοὶ χαρακίται ἀπείριτα δηριόντες
Μοῦσέων ἐν ταλαμῶ.

Many are feeding in populous Egypt, scribblers on papyrus, incessantly
wrangling in the bird-cage of the Muses.²³

It is difficult, however, not to read Phlius's reference to the “scribblers” (χαρακίται) of the Museum (which archly alludes to the Greek term for the pen behind which rare birds were kept, χάραξ)²⁴ as a document of the prominence and importance of the very institution it mocks. After the “scribbles” of the many birds “feeding in Egypt,” classical letters would never be the same. Works would henceforth be produced and reproduced, throughout the Greek and Roman world, in the form they acquired in Alexandria: introduced by a summary statement (ὑποθέσις) describing their content, accompanied by critical marginal signs (σημεῖα) explaining obscure or doubtful passages, their lines (κῶλα), if they were in verse, clearly separated and numbered, the papyrus scrolls on which they were copied bearing the thin strip of parchment (σίλλυβος, later called *index* or *titulus* by the Romans) that recorded their name and author.²⁵ The “cage of the Muses” would not leave even that most minimal element

20. See Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, pp. 87–209. On διορθοῦν and διορθώσεις in particular, see *ibid.*, pp. 215–33.

21. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, p. 179.

22. On Zenodotus, see “Zenodotus and His Contemporaries,” Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, pp. 105–22; on Aristophanes, see “Alexandrian Scholarship at Its Height: Aristophanes of Byzantium,” in *ibid.*, pp. 171–209.

23. Fr. 12 Diels (= 60 Wachsmuth); on Timon's verses, see Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, pp. 97–98.

24. Luciano Canfora, *La biblioteca scomparsa* (Palermo: Sellerio Editore, 1998), p. 45.

25. See Giorgio Pasquali's incisive remarks on the importance of the Museum for classical letters in his entry “Biblioteca,” which appears in the *Enciclopedia italiana di scienze, lettere e arti* (Milan and Rome: Bestetti & Tumminelli, 1930), vol. 6, pp. 942–47.

of writing, the letter, intact: classical paleographers have observed that, during the age of the Museum, the Greek script underwent a series of radical alterations, determining the form it would retain until long after the fall of the Roman Empire.²⁶

The Cosmic Library

The treasure of the Museum, of course, was the Library. Its fame in the ancient world was such that when Athenaeus discussed Ptolemaic book collections in the second century A.D., he could dismiss the subject of the Library itself, asking: “What reason is there for me even to speak of the number of books, the establishment of libraries, and the collection in the Museum, considering how they are in the memories of everyone [πᾶσι τούτων ὄντων κατὰ μνήμην]?”²⁷ It is precisely on these matters, however, that memory fails us today. The very question of the relation of the Museum to its Library, which no account of either institution can avoid, remains difficult to resolve with any precision. It has been observed that, by virtue of “an unusual coincidence,”²⁸ none of the classical texts that have been transmitted to us ever mentions the two Ptolemaic establishments at once. In the third century B.C., the poetry of Herodas, like that of Timon, alludes to the Museum, but not to the Library;²⁹ later, the *Letter of Aristaeus* discusses the formation of the Library in some detail, without ever naming the Museum itself; and when Strabo, in the passage we have examined, describes the scholarly center of Alexandria, he omits any reference to its Library. The Greek and Latin terms for “library” (βιβλιοθήκη, bibliotheca) are of little assistance in these matters, for they are defined by classical and late ancient sources as signifying simply “repository of books” (*nam βιβλιοθήκη librorum θήκη reposito interpretatur*, we read in the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville);³⁰ “shelf,” “box,” or “cupboard,” as well as “archive” or “papyrus-roll collection” could translate the ambiguous term invoked by the works that refer to the Alexandrian holdings.³¹ It is impossible, for these reasons, to establish whether the Library constituted a building of its own and, if it did, whether it was physically separated from the Museum; but the lack of any explicit ancient identification of the “repository of books,” as distinct from the “shrine of the Muses,” suggests that the Library most probably coincided, to a greater or lesser degree, with the Museum itself.³²

26. See C. H. Roberts, *Greek Literary Hands: 350 B.C.–A.D. 400* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), xv; see diagrams 1–5.

27. Athenaeus, V, 203 E.

28. El-Abbadi, *The Life and Fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria*, p. 90.

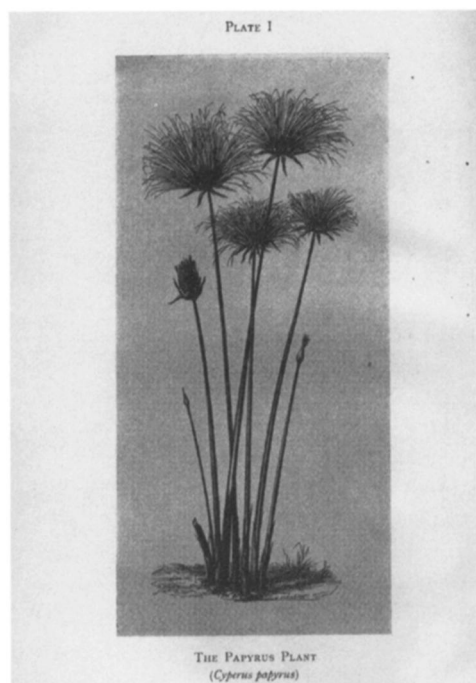
29. Herodas, *Mimes*, I, vv. 26–33.

30. Isidore, *Etymologiae sive Originum*, VI, 3, 1.

31. On the term and concept of “library” in Greek and Roman antiquity, see the *Handbuch der Bibliothekswissenschaft*, ed. Georg Leyh, vol. 3: *Geschichte der Bibliotheken* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1955), pt. 1, ch. 2: Carl Wendel and Willi Göber, “Das Griechisch-Römische Altertum,” esp. pp. 52–24; see also Canfora, who recalls that the primary meaning of βιβλιοθήκη is simply “shelf” (*La biblioteca scomparsa*, p. 86).

32. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 1, p. 324.

The classical sources provide only the most cursory accounts of the Library.³³ The *auctor* to whom we must turn for a detailed account of the Alexandrian institution is neither Hellenistic nor Roman but, rather, Byzantine, the twelfth-century commentator and scholiast Johannes Tzetzes, whom the great philologist Richard Bentley, anticipating the judgment of many modern scholars, once dubbed “a Man of much rambling Learning.”³⁴ Two pages of Tzetzes’s *Prooemium*, his introduction to the study of Aristophanes, contain the fullest known discussion of the operation of the Library, which, although immediately based on late ancient grammatical treatises and literary digests, is thought to reach back “ultimately to some Alexandrian sources of the Ptolemaic period.”³⁵



The text itself has been transmitted to us in three Greek editions, a Humanist translation, and in the form of a Latin scholium to Plautus, attributed to a certain “Caecius,” which was discovered in the first half of the nineteenth century.³⁶ The versions of the text, broadly speaking, concur in all important matters. In each case, the description of the Library opens with an account of the scholarly activity without which it would not have been imaginable. “Under the royal patronage of Ptolemy Philadelphus,” Tzetzes tells us, “Alexander of Aetolia edited [διώρθωσαν] the books of tragedy, Lycophron of Chalcis those of comedy, and Zenodotus of Ephesus those of Homer and the other poets.”³⁷ The work of “editing” (the verb to which Tzetzes has recourse, διορθοῦν, indicates at once textual comparison, recitification, and edition) thus lay at the foundation of the Alexandrian collection; the Ptolemaic archive collected above all restored works, texts assembled for the first time, far from the time and place of their production, in their totality and purity. At this stage of its development, the acquisition and ordering of the books

33. See the fragments assembled by Friedrich Schmidt, *Die Pinakes des Kallimachos* (Berlin: Emil Ebering, 1922), pp. 8–15. Schmidt fails to record the passage from Irenaeus cited above, which should also be considered in this context: Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 21, 2, *apud* Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, V, 8, 11–15.

34. Dr. Richard Bentley’s *Dissertations upon the Epistles of Phalaris, Themistocles, Socrates, Euripides, and Upon the Fables of Aesop*, ed. Wilhelm Wagner (Berlin: S. Calvary and Col, 1874), p. 85.

35. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 1, p. 321; see Fraser’s note on this subject, II, p. 474, n. 108.

36. The Greek texts are published in Georg Kaibel’s *Comicorum Graecorum Fragmenta, auctore Udalrico de Williamowitz-Moellendorf collecta et edita*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1899), pp. 17–34; an English translation and a commentary, which is not always reliable, may be found in Edward Alexander Parsons, *The Alexandrian Library: Glory of the Hellenic World* (New York: Elsevier Press, 1952), pp. 106–21.

37. Kaibel, *Comicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, vol. 1, 28, pp. 31–32.

The Papyrus plant. From F. W. Hall, A Companion to Classical Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913).

was therefore overseen by a director who was at once an editor of texts and a bibliographer of works, a “Librarian” whom Tzetzes refers to as βιβλιοφύλαξ, literally, “guardian of books” (a term that in Ptolemaic Egypt acquired the acceptance of “keeper of archives”³⁸) and whom the tenth-century Byzantine lexicon *Suda* calls simply προστάτης, “director.” The history of the Library, as Tzetzes presents it, is largely the tale of the succession of its directors, from Zenodotus, at the beginning of the third century B.C., to Aristarchus of Samothrace, who is thought to have resigned from his position in 145 B.C.³⁹ In most cases, little is known of the librarians that does not concern the Alexandrian collection itself. Vitruvius left us the following portrait of Aristophanes of Byzantium, in which the life of the man can hardly be separated from that of his archive: “Every day,” Vitruvius writes, “he did nothing other than read and reread all the books of the Library, for the whole day, examining and reading through [*perlegere*] the order in which they were shelved.”⁴⁰

Tzetzes relates that the Alexandrian holdings were collected in two separate Libraries, one outside the Palace and the other within it.⁴¹ Epiphanius, a source from the fourth century A.D., tells us more: the first Library, he writes, was situated in the Brucheion and was the larger and more important of the two; the “outer library” was founded later, located in the temple of Serapis, and called the “daughter” (θυγάτηρ) of the principal collection.⁴² According to Tzetzes, the “outer library” contained 42,800 papyrus rolls, which he simply calls “books” (βιβλοι). He is more precise in his description of the holdings of the royal collection, which, he reports, consisted of 400,000 “composite rolls” (συμμιγεῖς) and 90,000 “single rolls” (ἀμιγεῖς).⁴³ Everything, of course, depends on the sense of the bibliographical terms employed here. The most likely interpretation of the Hellenistic expressions is that the “composite” books (συμμιγεῖς) were rolls containing several works, while the “single” books (ἀμιγεῖς) instead consisted of one work alone.⁴⁴ Together, the holdings of the two Alexandrian collections were to represent the entirety of the literary tradition, gathered, Tzetzes

38. See Fraser’s comments on the Alexandrian nomenclature, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 1, p. 322.

39. El-Abbadi, *The Life and Fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria*, pp. 93–94. In addition to the editions of Tzetzes, an Oxyrhynchus papyrus (P. Ox. 1241) provides important information about the succession of the Alexandrian librarians.

40. Vitruvius, *De architect.* VII, prooem. 8–9.

41. Kaibel, *Comicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, Pb, sec. 20, p. 19; Mb, sec. 29, p. 29. On ms. Ma, see Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 2, pp. 477–78, n. 130.

42. Epiphanius, *De mens. et pond.*, 166 B (12, 24ff. Dind), reproduced in Schmidt, *Die Pinakes des Kallimachos*, pp. 11–12.

43. Kaibel, *Comicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, Pb, section 20, p. 19; the corresponding passage in Mb (in *ibid.*, section 29, p. 31) gives the same account.

44. See Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 1, p. 329, who, following Birt (*Das antike Buchwesen* [Leipzig: 1882], pp. 486–90), rejects the reading of the terms suggested by Friedrich Ritschl in his *Die alexandrinischen Bibliotheken unter den ersten Ptolemäern und die Sammlung der Homerischen Gedichte durch Pisistratus nach Anleitung eines Plautinischen Scholions* (Breslau: G. P. Aderholz, 1838), pp. 21–34. See also Luciano Canfora, “Le biblioteche ellenistiche,” in *Le biblioteche nel mondo antico e medievale*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo (Rome: Editori Laterza, 1989), pp. 5–24, esp. pp. 12–13. Cf. the remarks of Rudolf Blum, who follows the same interpretation, in *Kallimachos: The Alexandrian Library and the Origins of Bibliography*, trans. from the German by Hans H. Wellisch (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 107.

writes, "from everywhere" (ἀπανταχόθεν, *ubique terrarum* as we read in the anonymous Humanist translation)⁴⁵ for the purposes of study and critical attention.

The sources of the collection became, already in the ancient world, the subject of much discussion. Many of the works housed in the Alexandrian collections, to be sure, would have constituted reproductions of texts that would not have been difficult to obtain during the centuries of its operation. But books also arrived in Alexandria by more circuitous routes. Galen, who was himself intimately familiar with the textual history and criticism of the Hippocratic corpus and who often commented on the Library, furnishes us with two striking accounts of the procedures by which the Ptolemaic rulers and librarians acquired the works they wished to collect. Explaining how the copy of the *Epidemics* that once belonged to the physician Mnemon of Side came to be housed in Alexandria, Galen recounts that the Ptolemies issued an edict ordering all ships arriving at the port to be searched for books that might be aboard them. If any were found, they were to be immediately confiscated and copied; the originals were then to be added to the collection, while the duplicates were to be returned to the owners. Such books, Galen remarks, were marked as such in the Library, where they bore a specific label: "from the ships" (ἐκ πλοίων).⁴⁶ The Ptolemaic acquisitiveness also turned, in a more dramatic case, against the state whose own production constituted the greatest part of its holdings. The Athenian authorities granted Ptolemy III permission to borrow the manuscripts of the dramatic works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, to reproduce them in Alexandria; once transcribed in Egypt, the copies were then sent back to the Athenian state archives, while the originals joined the Ptolemaic collection.⁴⁷

All of the sources, classical and postclassical, attribute the same aim to the Alexandrian accumulation of books: to constitute an archive in which the totality of literary works would be meticulously ordered and secured. The terms by which Greek and Roman authors explain the Ptolemaic project differ, but these are variations on a theme; the purpose of the monumental collection, in each case, remains unchanged. "To collect . . . all the books in the world" (τὸ συναγεῖν . . . ἅπαντα τὰ κατὰ τὴν οἰκουμένην βιβλία),⁴⁸ explains the *Letter of Aristeas*, the oldest document that bears witness to the existence of the Library. The explanations offered by the later sources are, in some sense, only echoes: the Library was meant "to collect all the books of the inhabited world," writes Flavius Josephus, in the first century A.D.;⁴⁹ it sought to constitute "a collection of all men's writings," aiming to "assemble the writings of all men," recount Justin and Irenaeus, a hundred years later; its creators wanted nothing else, affirms Saint Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century, than "to collect books that were in every place."⁵⁰

45. In Schmidt, *Die Pinakes des Kallimachos*, pp. 9–10.

46. *Comm. in Hipp. Epidem.* iii (xvii a 606–7) (= *Corpus medicorum Graecorum*, vol. 10, 2, 1, pp. 78ff.).

47. In *Hipp. de Natura Hominis* I, 44–105 (= *Corpus medicorum Graecorum*, vol. 5, 9, 1, p. 55).

48. *Aristeas to Philocrates*, p. 9.

49. *Antiquitates Judaicae*, XII, 12, 14.

50. *Adv. Haer.*, III, 21, 2.

The nature of the Alexandrian holdings, in the accounts of the classical and medieval sources, thus remains constant, despite—or, rather, because of—the alterations and discrepancies in the classical and medieval descriptions of their exact contents. The *Letter of Philocrates* tells of the dedication of the Ptolemaic authorities to the project of translating barbarian works into Greek, the subject of the epistle itself being precisely the redaction of the Septuagint; and subsequent discussions of the Library, both pagan and Jewish, stress the inclusion of biblical as well as Greek works in the collection.⁵¹ By the time of Epiphanius, however, the consistency of the collection's contents has changed: the works “from everywhere” now include not only the works of Greek writers (“poets and prose writers, orators, and sophists, physicians, professors of medicine, and historians”) and not only those of peoples represented in the Hebrew Bible (“the Elamites and Babylonians, the Assyrians and Chaldeans, and the Syrians”), but also those of the peoples with whom the fourth-century Hellenistic world of Epiphanius was in contact (“the Romans, Phoenicians, Indians, and Persians”).⁵² In the *History of the Wise* of Ibn al-Qifti, a twelfth-century Arabic historian who discusses the history of the Library and its fate after the Arab conquest of Egypt, the tale of Ptolemaic bibliomania is again recounted, in terms that owe much to the Aristean *Letter*. No reference to the Hebrew holdings of the collection remains in this account of the Alexandrian archive, but by now the scope of the Ptolemaic collection has nevertheless swelled again, to include works not only of “India, Persia, and Babylonia,” but also of the peoples (in fact unknown, of course, to the Alexandrians themselves) of “Jurjan” (Georgia) and “Arman” (Armenia).⁵³

No term could better characterize the simultaneously altering and immutable object of the Alexandrian archive than the one that, at the time of the Library's foundation and growth, acquires a novel significance as a *terminus technicus* of philosophical parlance: “the world” (ὁ κόσμος). The concept lay at the center of Stoicism, the “School of the Porch” that flourished as never before in Alexandria and that, for this reason, could be defined, above all, as a doctrine of the world. For the ethical and political philosophy of the Stoa taught nothing if not that the multiplicity of peoples, “united among themselves in one society and commonality” (*quasi civili conciliatione et societate coniunctos*),⁵⁴ formed a single “great city” (μεγαλόπολις, *magna urbs*) ruled by a one law.⁵⁵ The Library, the crowning achievement of Ptolemaic Egypt, was the archive of this “megalopolis”;

51. See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, I, 22; Anatolius, *apud* Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII, 32, 17; Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, VIII, 1; St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lect. Cath.*, IV, 34; Chrysostom, *Hom. super Matth.*, V, 2.

52. Epiphanius, 166 Bff.

53. Ibn al-Qifti, *History of the Wise Men*, cited in El-Abbadi, *The Life and Fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria*, pp. 168–69. On the Library of Alexandria in the Arabic literary tradition, see Pierre Casanova, “L’incendie de la bibliothèque d’Alexandrie par les arabes,” *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, Comptes rendus des séances de l’année 1923* (Paris: A. Picard, 1923), pp. 163–71.

54. Cicero, *De nat. deor.*, II, 78, in *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, ed. Hans von Arnim (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1905), 3 vols., vol. 2, fr. 1127.

55. See *ibid.*; Philo, *Quaest. et solut. in Exodum* I, 1 (=von Arnim, ed., *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, vol. 2, fr. 584).

and the form in which it collected works “from everywhere,” arranged according to a single order, mirrored that of the Hellenistic “world,” defined by the Stoics precisely as one organized “society [or republic] of all” (πολιτεία τοῦ παντός).⁵⁶ The cosmic Library could only be Alexandrian.

Pinacography

Novel in its size and scope, the Alexandrian collection demanded a new form of writing: a guide was needed for the registration, identification, and summary of the many rolls, Greek and barbarian, prose and verse, contained in the shelves of the Library. It was not long before one was invented. Shortly after the time of the constitution of the collection under the direction of Zenodotus, its first director, Callimachus, “both poet and scholar” (ποιητής ἄμα καὶ γραμματικὴν), as Strabo calls him,⁵⁷ and perhaps the greatest of the Hellenistic literary figures, produced a work unlike any before it, which lies at the origin of the technologies of the catalogue, the bibliography, and the biobibliography: the *Pinakes*, literally “Tablets” or “Tables,” which aimed to record the totality of classical letters in a summary abbreviation.

No trace remains of the complete *Pinakes*, and any understanding of their form and contents must, as a result, involve a certain work of reconstruction, based upon classical and medieval testimonia and ancient citations of the “Tables.” Two medieval texts furnish us with information concerning the title and time of production of the *Pinakes*. The first can be found in a biographical entry of Suda, which may once have formed the introduction to an edition of Callimachus’s poems. Here we read that Callimachus composed a work that bore the title *Tables of All Those Who Were Eminent in All Kinds of Literature and of Their Writings in One Hundred and Twenty Books* (Πίνακες τῶν ἐν πάσῃ παιδείᾳ διαλαμψάντων καὶ ὧν συνέγραψαν. ἐν βιβλίῳ κ' καὶ ρ').⁵⁸ The second, later, and less reliable account of the *Pinakes* is that of Tzetzes, who informs us that, after a thorough “critical revision” (ἀνόρθωσις) of the books in the Library, Callimachus made “Tables” of them.⁵⁹ Scattered remarks among classical sources, however, allow us to define the characteristic traits of the genre created by Callimachus; and here we may also make use of those fragments from the *Pinakes* transmitted in texts of later Greek and Roman authors.⁶⁰

The “Tables” appear to have been divided into sections, defined by genre, and subsections, composed of lists of works of individual authors. Within each sec-

56. Dio Chrysost., *Or.* XXXVI, sec. 37 (=von Arnim, ed., *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, vol. 2, fr. 1129).

57. Strabo, XVII, 3, 22.

58. See Suda, Καλλιμάχος (= Call. test. 1).

59. Tzetzes, in Kaibel, *Comicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, Pb. 19, section 20. On Tzetzes’s remarks on the *Pinakes* and the various versions in which they are preserved, see Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, pp. 127–28.

60. See Rudolf Blum’s analysis of selected classical passages in which the text of the *Pinakes* is partially quoted (*Kallimachos*, pp. 152–54). On the principles of ordering that can be attributed to the *Pinakes* on the basis of the classical and medieval sources, see Schmidt, *Die Pinakes des Kallimachos*, pp. 46–98; Carl Wendel, *Die griechisch-römische Buchbeschreibung, verglichen mit der des Vorderen Orients* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1949 [Hallenische Monographien, 3]), pp. 24–79; and Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, pp. 128–34.

tion, authors were classified alphabetically, and each entry included a short biographical sketch followed by the enumeration of the author's works, defined in turn by their opening words, their titles (where they had them: certain works of oratory and lyric poetry posed specific problems here),⁶¹ and an estimate of the number of lines of which each work consisted (in στίχοι, if it was in prose, and in ἔπη, if it was in verse). Extant sources name as generic sections "oratory" (ῥητορικά), "laws" (νόμοι), and "other writings" (παντοδαπά συγγράμματα); but the references to the "Tables" among classical writers suggest that the *Pinakes* were also composed of classes including the works of epic, lyric, tragic, and comic poets, as well as the those of philosophers, historians, and physicians.⁶² The form of such "Tables," to be sure, inevitably gave rise to certain technical difficulties: where, for example, to list an author such as Prodicus, who wrote on oratory and philosophical subjects, and where to place Theodectes, who was by all accounts "both rhetorician and tragedian" (ῥητορικά καὶ τραγικός)? Yet despite these limitations, the "Tables," once composed, proved invaluable; and it was not long before Callimachus's work was transcribed and disseminated throughout the Hellenistic world. Supplements, such as the treatise "On [or Against: Πρός] the *Pinakes* of Callimachus"⁶³ by the later scholar, Aristophanes of Byzantium, only confirmed the indispensability of the original.

Hovering between the forms we would today call catalogue, biography, and bibliography, the "Tables" were what no other work before them had been: a single repertory of all literature, which at once introduced, identified, and summarized the totality of writing in the compressed and ordered space of the index. Its design was soon imitated: the "Tables" of the holdings at Pergamon, the anonymous "catalogue of Rhodes" of the first century B.C., and the collections of ancient biographies, from Hermippus of Smyrna to Diogenes Laertius, all follow in the wake of the Alexandrian *Pinakes* and would not have been possible without them.⁶⁴ The influence of Callimachus's "Tables," more broadly, has been traced not only through the Western Middle Ages, but even to the masterpiece of classical Islamic literature that is the *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadim, the tenth-century Iraqi belletrist, who defines his work in terms that strikingly recall the form and purpose of the Alexandrian "index": "this is a catalogue," al-Nadim writes, in his introduction, "of the books of all peoples, Arab and foreign, existing in the language of the Arabs, as well as of their scripts, dealing with various sciences, with accounts of those who composed them and the categories of their authors, together with their relationships and records of their times of birth, length of life, and times of death, and also the localities of their cities, their virtues and faults, from the beginning of the formation of each science to this our time, which is the year three hundred and seventy-seven after the Hijrah."⁶⁵

61. See Blum's remarks on this subject, *Kallimachos*, p. 156.

62. See Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, pp. 128–29; Schmidt, *Die Pinakes des Kallimachos*, pp. 49–57.

63. The Greek title is ambiguous, as Pfeiffer has noted (*History of Classical Scholarship*, p. 133).

64. On post-Alexandrian forms of pinacography, see Blum, *Kallimachos*, pp. 182–225.

65. The *Fihrist of al-Nadim: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, ed. and trans. Bayard Dodge, vol.

Like every technical advance in the forms of writing, the *Pinakes* marked a rupture in the tradition from which they emerged, and Callimachus's monumental and unprecedented attempt to conserve the past could not but alter it forever. The works listed in the 120 books of the "Tables" could be inscribed in the archive of "all kinds of literature" (πᾶσα παιδεία) only by being transcribed in a new form; they were transmitted in being transformed. "Pinacography," in short, did not leave that which it absorbed intact. In the moment in which it was recorded on the "Tablets" of the Callimachian index, each work was inevitably set in a new and foreshortened shape: indicated by a title that would henceforth name it, attributed to a figure from whose life it would now be said to spring, identified by an estimated number of lines that would establish its proper length, its text, finally, drastically reduced, *pars pro toto*, to the words of its *incipit*. The works registered in the *Pinakes* thus became, by necessity, what they had until then never been: figures, ciphers, mere names of themselves. Such was the price each work paid for its admission to that miniature archive within the Ptolemaic archive: it would be remembered only in being dismembered, placed in the history of letters in being extracted from the fabric of its production and summoned, as the emblem of itself, for future use. For the Alexandrian "Tables" were not a repetition of the past, but their summary recapitulation,⁶⁶ and, like the Library itself, the *Pinakes* conserved what went before them to the very degree that they destroyed it. Only in this form did the past of writing, contracted into the discontinuous continuity of the index, become at last "citable in all its moments."⁶⁷

Fakes and Cheats

The *Pinakes* represented, in a characteristically abbreviated fashion, the complex relation to history that defined the very institution of the Library of Alexandria. Before being recorded on the "Tables" of the Alexandrian catalogue, the works gathered in the Ptolemaic collection had already, in many cases, suffered certain alterations; in its own "museum," past writing had acquired a new form, and within the walls of the Library the tradition of letters was already reproduced, refigured, and, at the limit, radically rewritten. For the archive in which "the writings of all peoples" were collected, ordered, and conserved was also the one in which those very writings, more or less perceptibly, more or less dramatically, were amended, distorted, and, in the most extreme cases, falsified. The era of the first textual scholarship, criticism, and bibliography was also, as Richard Bentley once recalled with severity, the age of innumerable, incorrigible, "Clumsie Cheats."⁶⁸

1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 1–2. On the *Pinakes* and *al-Fihrist*, see El-Abbadi, *The Life and Fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria*, p. 102.

66. On the concept of recapitulation, see Giorgio Agamben, *Il tempo che resta: Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000), pp. 74–76.

67. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, vol. 1, pt. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 694.

68. Wagner, ed., *Bentley's Dissertations*, p. 79.

The “Cheats” of Alexandria were many, and of different types. Certain distortions in the Ptolemaic editions of texts were the inevitable and unintentional results of the principles that defined the organization of the collection. John Philoponus recounts that the very effort to classify and identify works allowed them to be mistaken for others; the homonymy of authors and the titles, he tells us, often led the librarians astray, as when they ascribed a number of works to Aristotle that the Stagirite himself never composed.⁶⁹ The causes of the falsification of texts, however, were often less benign. Olympidorus, Elias, and Ammonius all stress the profit that could be made at Alexandria from the forgery of works.⁷⁰ The acquisitive ambition of the Library inevitably inspired the avarice of the forger, for it produced and sustained a market for any works apparently penned by the great authors of classical antiquity. This, Ammonius suggests, in contrast to Philoponus, was the real reason for the erroneous Alexandrian attribution of works to Aristotle. His commentary to the *Categories* presents the matter as common knowledge:

It is said that Philadelphus, wanting to make a collection of all Aristotle’s works, as well as all works in general, gave great encouragement to anyone who would bring him books by the philosopher. Some, wanting the money from the monarch, therefore attributed Aristotle’s name to the writings of others.⁷¹

Modern scholars, in a similar vein, have noted that it is surely no accident that the large pseudo-Platonic corpus also emerges precisely at the time of the Library.⁷² The prestige of the Alexandrian collection was at stake, and the Ptolemies could not forego the possibility of any advance over their rivals. “It was when the Attalids and the Ptolemies were in competition over their own libraries,” Galen explains,

that the recklessness [or “thoughtlessness,” *ῥαϊδουργία*] of forging books and titles began. For there were those who, to increase the price of their books, attached the names of great authors to them and then sold them to the nobility.⁷³

Galen elsewhere suggests that this thoughtless accumulation of books at Alexandria was the result of competition with the Library of Pergamon;⁷⁴ Olympidorus, by contrast, cites the “king of Lebanon” as the great rival of the Ptolemies.⁷⁵ Yet although the classical sources differ in their specifications of the

69. Philoponus, *In Categ.* (CIAG xiii, 1), p. 7, cited in Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 2, p. 482, n. 151, ii.

70. Olymp., *Proleg.* (CIAG xii, 1), p. 13; Philop. *In Categ.* (CIAG xiii, 1), p. 7; Elias, *In Categ.* (GIAG xviii, 1), p. 128, cited in Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 2, pp. 481–82, n. 151.

71. Ammonius, *In Arist. Categ.* (Venice, 1546), 10.

72. Alfred Gudeman, “Literary Frauds Among the Greeks,” in *Classical Studies in Honour of Henry Drisler* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1894), pp. 52–74, 62.

73. Galen, *Corpus medicorum Graecorum*, IX, 1, p. 57 (= Kühn XV, 109) (Greek text in Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 2, p. 481, n. 150, ii.).

74. Galen, *CMGV*, 9, 1, pp. 54–5 (=Kühn XV, p. 105).

75. Olymp., *Proleg.* (CIAG xii, 1), p. 13. (in Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, II, 481–2, n. 151, i.)

cause of the Alexandrian acquisitiveness, they concur in identifying its effects: by virtue of the very structure of its institution, they make clear, the Library of Alexandria facilitated the falsification of the tradition it aimed to conserve.

The destructive force of the Museum was so clear to those who lived at the time and in the aftermath of the Library that Galen, in a striking assertion, was able to locate the very origins of forgery and faulty attribution as such in the archives of Alexandria and its rival at Pergamon: "Before the monarchs of Alexandria and Pergamon began competing in their own collections of ancient books," he writes, in decisive terms, "no work had ever been falsely attributed" (πρὶν γὰρ ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ τε καὶ Περγάμῳ γενέσθαι βασιλεῖς ἐπὶ κτήσει παλαιῶν βιβλίων φιλοτιμηθέντας, οὐδέπω ψευδῶς ἐπεγέραπτο σύγγραμμα).⁷⁶ Scholars have long treated Galen's claim as a simple error: "Which assertion," Bentley comments, "taken strictly and without a candid allowance, is strictly false";⁷⁷ in the most important modern work on the Museum, Ptolemaic Alexandria, P. M. Fraser limits himself to noting that Galen's remark is "wrong."⁷⁸ It is doubtless true that examples are not lacking of pseudepigraphy and contested attributions long before Alexandria: debates over authorship and its falsification are as old as Greek literature itself, and the definition of the Homeric corpus, the first in the tradition, is already the subject of a clear difference of opinion between Herodotus and Pindar.⁷⁹ It is difficult to imagine that Galen, whose own work took the form of textual commentary achieved through careful comparison between editions of the Hippocratic text, was simply ignorant of the notable history of forgery in the classical world. His words are perhaps mistaken if they are understood too literally. They define less the particular place and time of the invention of falsification than the structural conditions of its occurrence. These conditions, Galen makes clear, are none other than those of the archive itself: works may be falsified only when they are copied, and their transcription and reproduction constitute the sole occasions for their forgery. The Library made it possible to betray the past in the very gesture by which it aimed to remain faithful to it, and—with the most implacable inevitability—it exposed its own texts to the chance of being ruined the moment it acquired them.

The Conflagration

In the history of the Alexandrian Library, every break with the past, every rupture in the transmission of texts, anticipates the final catastrophe of tradition that already in the ancient world invariably accompanied any account of the Ptolemaic

76. *Commen in Hipp. De Nat. Homin.* i 44 (CMG, IX, 1, p. 55=Kühn XV, 105).

77. Wagner, ed., *Bentley's Dissertations*, p. 82.

78. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 1, p. 325.

79. Bentley (Wagner, ed., *Bentley's Dissertations*, p. 82) remarks that Herodotus denies that "Cypria" is Homer's (II, c. 117), whereas Pindar claims it is (fr. 189). On literary forgery in classical Greece and the ancient world more generally, see Wolfgang Speyer, *Die literarische Fälschung im heidnischen und christlichen Altertum: Ein Versuch ihrer Deutung, Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft, Erste Ableitung, Zweiter Teil* (Munich: Beck, 1971); Eduard Stemplinger, *Das Plagiat in der griechischen Literatur* (Leipzig-Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1912, rpt. Zürich: G. O. Olms, 1990); Hermann Peter, *Wahrheit und Kunst:*

institution: the fire that, in one stroke, consumed the monument to classical learning. It is, of course, this “disaster” that Gibbon is reluctant even to name in the body of his *History* and that he relegates instead to a footnote, where he remarks in passing, with a tone of apodictic and emphatic certainty: “The *old* library of the Ptolemies was *totally* consumed in Caesar’s Alexandrian war.”⁸⁰ And yet in the history of this archive, in which tradition and its loss can rarely be told apart, even the tale of final destruction is difficult to establish with any certainty; there is reason to believe that it, too, may well be something of a falsification, itself the perfect example of the breach of tradition the archive both sought to remedy and exacerbated.

Caesar relates in a passage of Cicero’s *Bellum Civile* how he intervened in an Egyptian political struggle in 47/48 A.D., siding with Cleopatra against her younger brother, Ptolemy XIII. Once in Africa, he soon found himself, we read, in a difficult position: at land his troops had no access to drinking water, and at sea his ships were outnumbered. He presents his strategic solution to the problem, in the third person, with great pride:

The battle was fought out with such violence as is the case when one side sees in it a speedy victory, the other that its only salvation depended on it. But Caesar retained the upper hand, and set fire to all those ships and to those that lay in the dockyards; for with his small fleet he could not hope to safeguard so wide an area. He then immediately landed his troops on the island of Pharos.⁸¹

In the *Pharsalia*, Lucan, a contemporary, offers a fuller account of the fire: “it did not fall upon the ships only,” he writes, “but spread into the other quarters of the city. . . . The buildings close to the sea caught fire; the wind leant force to the powers of disaster; the flames . . . ran over the roofs like meteors through the sky.”⁸² Seneca, who died in 65 A.D., reports (basing himself on a text of Livy’s now lost to us) that the rolls of the archive could not be saved: “forty thousand of the books of Alexandria,” he tells us, “burned” (*quadrigenta milia librorum Alexandriae arserunt*).⁸³ At the end of the first century, Plutarch writes of the same event and identifies it as the immediate cause of the destruction of the Library itself: “When the enemy tried to cut off his [Caesar’s] fleet,” he writes, “he was forced to repel the danger by using fire, and this spread from the dockyards and destroyed the great library [ὁ καὶ τὴν μεγάλην

Geschichtsschreibung und Plagiat im Klassischen Altertum (Leipzig and Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1911); Kurt von Fritz, ed., *Pseudepigrapha I: Pseudepigrapha, Lettres de Platon, Littérature pseudépigraphique juive, Entretiens Hardt 18* (Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 1972); and Norbert Brox, *Falsche Verfasserangaben: Zur Erklärung der frühchristlichen Pseudepigraphie* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1975 [Stuttgarter Bibelstudien, 79]).

80. Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 9, ch. 51. Gibbon’s italics.

81. Cicero, *Bellum Civile*, III, 111.

82. Lucan, *Pharsalia*, X, 440ff; 486–505.

83. Seneca, *De Animi tranquillitate*, IX, 5. There is some debate as to the numerical figure itself, as the manuscript reads *quadraginta* (forty thousand), but later sources, such as Orosius, imply that it was perhaps originally *quadringenta* (four hundred thousand). See Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 2, p. 484, n. 224.

βιβλιοθήκην ἐκ τῶν νεωρίων ἐπινερόμενον διέφθειρε].”⁸⁴ The account of the fire is repeated, its consequences rendered even greater, among later sources: in the second century Aulus Gellius thus reports that almost “seven hundred thousand rolls burned in the sack of the city in our first war in Alexandria”;⁸⁵ Dio Cassius, in the third century, writes that the fire “reduced to ashes . . . the storehouses of grain and of books [τάς ἀποθήκας καὶ τοῦ σίτου καὶ τῶν βιβλίων]”;⁸⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus refers in the fourth century to “the burning down of a priceless library of seven hundred thousand books during the Alexandrian war”;⁸⁷ and Orosius in the fifth century speaks of the burning of “four hundred thousand books.”⁸⁸ From the “burning of forty thousand books” to the fire in the “storehouses,” the destruction of the “great Library” and its entire collection of “seven hundred thousand books,” the tale of the disaster of the archive is not only echoed, but retold and amplified in its gravity.

If one examines the sources carefully, however, a number of questions remain. Many witnesses of the period discuss the war as well as the fire, yet refrain from even mentioning the destruction of the Library: in his history of Rome, Florus thus recalls Caesar’s use of fire, but not its effects on the Museum,⁸⁹ and in Appian of Alexandria’s own *Civil Wars* we read of the “various battles around the palace” but nothing of flames that destroyed the archive.⁹⁰ Such silence about the annihilation of the greatest library of the ancient world is, at the very least, curious. It has been noted, moreover, that Seneca, Dio, Gellius, and Orosius, who do discuss the effects of the fire on the collection, speak of the burning not of the Library but simply its “rolls”;⁹¹ and it has also been pointed out that the destruction of the collection’s “storehouses” (ἀποθήκαι) does not necessarily imply that of the archive itself.⁹² It seems a fair supposition that the integral destruction of the Ptolemaic collection would have meant the end of Alexandrian scholarship; but the tradition of textual criticism in the Museum continued well after the time of the civil war, and the contributions of later scholars (such as Didymus, Tryphon, and Theon) are such that Fraser has written that “it would be wrong to attribute to the fire any decisive importance in the history of Alexandrian scholarship.”⁹³ Strabo’s invaluable description of the “men of learning” in the Ptolemaic center is, in its own way, itself a powerful testament to the absence of any catastrophe in 47/48: it reflects a visit to the Museum that took place less than a quarter of a century after the battle between Caesar and

84. Plutarch, *Caes.* 49.

85. Aulus Gellius, *Noct. Att.*, VII, 17, 3.

86. Dio Cass., 42, 38, 2.

87. Amm. Marc. XXII, 16, 13.

88. Oros., VI, 15, 31–32.

89. Luc. Ann. Florus, *Epitome bellorum omnium annorum*, II, 13.

90. Appian of Alexandria, *Ἐμφυλίων*, II, 13, 90.

91. Canfora, *La biblioteca scomparsa*, p. 147. Plutarch, Canfora notes, is alone in his assertion that it is the “great library” itself that is consumed.

92. On the history of reflection on the Alexandrian ἀποθήκαι, their precise location, and their relation to the Library itself, see Canfora, *La biblioteca scomparsa*, pp. 140–41.

93. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 1, p. 335.

Ptolemy XIII, and it makes no mention of any loss recently suffered by the Alexandrian center.

Many modern scholars have for these reasons been led to a conclusion that, at first glance, could not be more surprising: the Library, it has been suggested, did not burn. Alongside those classicists (from Gibbon to Mommsen, Susemihl, and El-Abbadi) who maintain that the archive was utterly destroyed in the fire of the civil war, there is by now a substantial tradition of scholars (from Ritschl to Parthey, Pasquali, and Canfora) who deny that the Library could have been seriously affected by the flames from the harbor.⁹⁴ In a discrete, pointed, and altogether exemplary article, Bertrand Hemmerdinger furnishes powerful evidence for the survival of the Library well beyond Caesar's mythical flames.⁹⁵ The literary evidence for its afterlife, he recalls, is strong: Strabo remains silent about the fire in his report on the Museum twenty-two years after the war; Suetonius, born ca. 69 A.D., bears witness to the existence of the *Alexandriae Musio* under the reign of Claudius (41–54 A.D.);⁹⁶ and *Suda* makes references to a member of the Museum in the time of Theodosius I, who died in 395.⁹⁷ Hemmerdinger also cites the publication in 1948 of a nonliterary document of singular weight, an Oxyrhynchus papyrus recording the sale of a boat on March 31, 173 A.D. It is addressed to none other than a certain "Valerius Diodorus, vice-Librarian, member of the Museum" (Οὐαλερίῳ Διοδώρῳ, γενομένῳ ὑπομνηματογράφῳ, ἀπὸ Μουσείου, καὶ ὡς χρηματίζεις).⁹⁸ Any number of events, Hemmerdinger notes, could have ultimately caused the destruction of the Alexandrian Library: given that the reign of Theodosius marked the beginning of the exposure of the city to vandalism, the possibilities are many. The only one to be excluded, on both documentary and literary bases, is that of the great "disaster" that is too well known to be "recapitulated," "the involuntary flame that was kindled by Caesar in his own defense."⁹⁹

One might be tempted to suggest that, had there not been a fire to consume the Library, one would have had to be invented: What fate, after all, could await the universal archive other than its destruction? Real or imagined, the conflagration remains the supreme emblem of the Alexandrian archive itself, which sheltered the works of the past in exposing them to disaster, constituting and conserving its history in threatening it with its own destruction. For the very life of the Library, like that of the fire, was to nourish itself on what it consumed, to allow writing to live in outliving itself,

94. See Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; Theodor Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Weidman, 1854–56); Susemihl, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur in der Alexandrinerzeit*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1891–92); El-Abbadi, *The Life and Fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria*; cf., for the opposing view, Friedrich Ritschl, *Die alexandrinischen Bibliotheken*; Parthey, *Das alexandrinische Museum*; Pasquali, "Biblioteca"; Canfora, *La biblioteca scomparsa*.

95. Bertrand Hemmerdinger, "Que César n'a pas brûlé la bibliothèque d'Alexandre," *Bollettino dei classici* 3, no. 6 (1985), pp. 76–77.

96. Suetonius, *Claudius*, 42, 5.

97. See Suidas, "Θέων."

98. Hemmerdinger, p. 76 (the papyrus in question, published by Sir Harold Idris Bell, is *P. Merton* 19). Hemmerdinger also notes that this "Diodorus" is discussed in another Oxyrhynchus papyrus, *P. Oxy.* 2192.

99. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Womersely, vol. 5–6, p. 285.

bearing witness, in this way, to the catastrophe of the past in the present, the destruction of a tradition grown as “totally, eternally transient”¹⁰⁰ as nature itself.

Philology

The Library of Alexandria, in any case, did not vanish without a trace. It left behind it the art both invented and perfected within the walls of the Museum, which was, many centuries later, to lay claim to the title of the master discipline of the humanities as a whole. Philology is, in every sense, the final legacy of the Ptolemaic archive. This is so not only in that it was in Alexandria that the term “philologist” (φιλόλογος), alongside “critic” (κριτικός) and “grammarian” (γραμματικός), first acquired a technical sense that approaches that of its modern equivalent,¹⁰¹ nor only in that it was the “men of learning” of the Museum who created, developed, and refined so many of the techniques of *emendatio* and *coniectura* that would one day be central to the critical activities of the Humanists and, still later, to the constitution of the modern academic scholarly disciplines of literature in the wake of the scientific methods of Lachmann and Bédier.¹⁰² The Alexandrian inheritance of criticism runs deeper. For philology, before constituting a means of inquiry or even a discipline unto itself, delimits the space of a singular experience of which the Library is, even today, perhaps the most powerful figure: the experience of history as catastrophe.

Philology, which today occupies a position among the historical disciplines that is often spectral at best, knows only one concept of the past, and that is a past that is essentially suspect, distorted, and, in the final analysis, corrupt. There could be no philology were tradition not broken, no field of textual interpretation, criticism, and study were the transmission of texts not already obscure, altered, and interrupted: the immediacy and transparency of understanding would forbid the constitution of a discipline of the study of the language of the past. Philology nourishes itself on the erosion of history; it erects itself over the grave of that which it recovers, dwelling, with necrophilic enthusiasm, on everything in its past that has grown opaque and can no longer present itself as it once was. Hence the assiduity with which criticism, since its emergence in Alexandria, dedicates itself to the identification and definition of the forms of textual corruption. For the falsification that the philologist takes it upon himself to identify is the very cipher of a past that is no longer itself. It is significant that the technical lexicon of which the critic makes use is above all one of fraud: from the

100. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, vol. 2, pt. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 204.

101. On the semantic history of the terms φιλωλογός, φιλολογία, and φιλολογεῖν, see Gabriel R.F.M. Nuchelmans, *Studien über φιλωλογός, φιλολογία, und φιλολογεῖν* (Nijmegen: N. V. Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1950); Heinrich Kuch, *FILOLOGOS: Untersuchungen eines Wortes von seinem ersten Auftreten in der Tradition bis zur ersten überlieferten lexikalischen Festlegung*, *Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin: Schriften der Sektion für Altertumswissenschaft*, vol. 48 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1965); and Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, pp. 156–160.

102. See Sebastiano Timpanaro, *Genesi del metodo di Lachmann* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1963); cf. the “critical history” of the subject by Bernard Cerquiglini, *L'éloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

general rubrics of “faulty attribution” (ψευδεπίγραφα) and “plagiarism” (κλοπή or λογοκλοπία), to the many forms of “interpolation,” “contamination,” and “unconscious borrowings,” to “illegitimacies” (νόθος, a *terminus technicus* for a counterfeit work, means literally “bastard,” in distinction to γνήσιος, “legitimately born”), and all manner of textual “inauthenticities,” both certain (ἄθετεῖν, ὀθετεῖν, ὀβελίζειν, κατ-αψεύδεσθαι) and suspected (ὑποπτεύειν, ἀντιλέγειν, ἀναφέρειν, φέρειν, ἐπισφάλλειν, ἀμφιδοξεῖν, ἀμφιβάλλεσθαι).¹⁰³ If the philologist is indeed, as Anthony Grafton has suggested, “entangled with the forger like Laocoon and his serpents,”¹⁰⁴ then it is because he can vindicate the past as his object to the very degree to which he can demonstrate its “monstrosity”; he may speak of the tradition that precedes him only in exposing its corruption.

The past that a philologist seeks to restore, therefore, is one that is lost from the outset. The very protocols of textual criticism assure that it could not be otherwise. Any edition has as its condition of legitimacy that the text it presents, if it has not yet appeared in print, be hitherto inaccessible and yet in need of publication; it must consist of a work that only a break in the transmission of texts has until then concealed. If the critical edition is but the latest in a series, it must, by contrast, presuppose that all preceding ones be, more or less, for one reason or another, inadequate; a new edition, as the scholar and the publisher know well, is justified only as long as it takes the place not of the text itself, but of its most recent distortion. The apparatus of the critical edition takes the faults of its predecessor as its own point of departure; its very edifice is constructed on the destruction of the one that went before it, without which it would itself be nothing. Despite the role that it has often been assigned and that it has itself at times adopted, philology is thus in no sense the handmaiden of tradition and the guarantor of an unbroken patrimony, whether linguistic, cultural, or national: it cannot assure the continuity of a history except by breaking it. Not without reason has criticism been defined precisely as “the mortification of works”:¹⁰⁵ philology may speak of its subject matter only once it has registered its very loss, and it can give itself its object only on condition of having destroyed it first.

Considering the origins of literary scholarship in Alexandria, Nietzsche, reflecting on the discipline that had once been his, made the following remark, which he placed, with a number of other notes of 1875, under the unmistakably ironic heading “We Philologists”: “Reverence for classical antiquity . . . is an enormous example of quixoticism; and that is philology at its best. . . .” “One imitates something that is purely chimerical,” Nietzsche wrote, “and one chases after a wonderland that never existed” (*Man ahmt etwas rein Chimärisches nach, und läuft einer Wunderwelt hinterdrein, die*

103. See Speyer, *Die literarische Fälschung im heidnischen und christlichen Altertum*; Stemplinger, *Das Plagiat in der griechischen Literatur*; Peter, *Wahrheit und Kunst*; von Fritz, ed., *Pseudepigrapha I*; Brox, *Falsche Verfasserangaben*; and, for a useful overview, Mario Untersteiner, *Problemi di filologia filosofica*, ed. L. Sichirullo and M. Venturi Ferriolo (Milan: Cisalpino-La Goliardica, 1980), pp. 109–37.

104. Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 6.

105. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 357.

nie existiert hat).¹⁰⁶ No words could better characterize the singular object of philological activity, whose absence and evanescence must be secured to be studied at all. The history that moves the scholar to his insensate passion is precisely the one that would not exist without him, a “wonderland” (*Wunderwelt*) that must in each case be summoned anew by the efforts of historical and critical construction. It is difficult not to hear the tone of disdain that here accompanies the identification of this search for a world “that never existed,” which becomes quite explicit only a few sentences later, as Nietzsche specifies that the essential “quixoticism” of philology dooms it to an “imitation” (*Nachahmung*) that can produce nothing: “a culture that chases after that of the Greeks,” we read, “can adopt customs, thoughts, and so forth through imitation, but it cannot *engender* anything [*sie kann nichts erzeugen*].”¹⁰⁷ The philosopher’s condemnation of the “fantastical” philologist is clear, and in the end Nietzsche’s remark is not altogether unlike that of the Pigeon who, “in a tone of the deepest contempt,” demands explanations from that other traveler in wonderland, Alice, for her obstinate attachment to make-believe: “‘Well! What are you?’ said the Pigeon. ‘I can see you’re trying to invent something!’”¹⁰⁸

Here, however, Nietzsche seems to misinterpret his own insight. For the pursuit of the chimerical, by definition, cannot be a matter of “imitation”: where the original is a world “that never existed,” there is nothing to copy, and the philosopher’s denunciations of the sterility of reproduction touch the philologist as little as the Pigeon’s exclamations halt Alice on her voyage through wonderland. Rejecting the false alternative of a choice between the noble but unattainable origin and the base but facile simulacrum, the good philologist follows the principle once expressed by Karl Kraus in the maxim that “origin is the goal” (*Ursprung ist das Ziel*), conscious at all times that the “origin” is not the presupposition of his work but its sole and final product. He is not the dutiful scribe who records what has been said but the critic who “reads what was never written” and who knows, like Alice, that he has “invented” not only something but everything, leaping into the past that never was just as the fearless little girl pops down the rabbithole “without once considering how in the world she was to get out again.”¹⁰⁹ For only in such a leap does historical scholarship establish a relation to the past that is neither forgetful nor conservative, neither simply oblivious nor merely restorative. And only in such a leap does philology, saving the past in destroying it, succeed in the task that the archivists of Alexandria left as their legacy to criticism: not to “increase the burden of the treasures piled upon the back of humanity,” but to “shake them off,” so that they may fall at last into its own hands.¹¹⁰

106. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Wir Philologen” 7[1], in *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. 8 (Berlin: De Gruyter-Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, p. 121).

107. Ibid. Italics in original.

108. Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, ed. Roger Lancelyn-Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 48.

109. Ibid., p. 10.

110. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, vol. 2, pt. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 478.