

*Gilles Lapouge*

## BOOKS IN FLAMES

The flames of Alexandria continue to rage. After twenty centuries, they still dazzle us, as though the *Mouseion* were the only massacred library. One would believe that Julius Caesar, Theophilus of Antioch and Omar (the three pyromaniacs, the pagan, the Christian and the Moslem) had had no predecessors or imitators. But the race of incendiaries is as numerous as the waves of the sea. It is monotonous, it is indestructible, it is equal to that of the ants. It was born at the same time as the first Babylonian tablets. In 1988, it continues its work. All over the world and in all times, the incendiaries were there with their torches. They burned parchments, wood or clay tablets, leather manuscripts, papyrus or folios. The same warriors who profaned temples set fire to incunabula. The same ones who slaughtered the Aztecs threw their firebrands into the collection of codices. What is it, this unleashed fury of prince and priest, judge and soldier against these small monuments of clay or paper, against these sepulchres in which the dead say that they have lived and loved, suffered and hoped?

We could write a universal history by following the trails of ashes, from the irates who burned the Cretan tablets twelve

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

centuries before Christ up to the Brazilian military of 1964 who tore *Le Rouge et le noir* to pieces because it was a Marxist work!

Like all history, that of libraries dramatizes the fight between the builders and the destroyers, the men of Being and the men of death. The same determination pushed the first to invent parchment, paper, printing, to write encyclopedias, and the second to abolish the marks of what had been. "To each collapse of proofs," says René Clair, "the poet responds with a salvo to the future." That may be restated as "To each murder of a library the calligraphers respond by cutting their reeds, and while the braziers glow they mix their inks, sharpen their stylus, smooth their goose quills and recopy what is destined to oblivion. They give tomorrow a chance. Thanks to them, the peregrinations of men will be something more than a drift of clouds."

Similar dates mark the times of societies and times of libraries: 1453, 1492, 1517—do these dates announce the taking of Constantinople, the conquest of Santo Domingo, Luther's revolt, or do they announce the bonfires of books?

Girolamo Savonarola brought the reign of morality to Florence. His delight was to build "bonfires of vanities." On February 7, 1497, he offered the Florentines his own kind of carnival by ordering an enormous bonfire. Women were ecstatic. They threw their fine dresses, their perfumes and their jewels into the flames. Artists sacrificed their "immoral paintings." Improper books went into the fire.

One year later, on May 23, 1498 Savonarola was hanged. His corpse was taken to the pyre in the same piazza where manuscripts had burned. His body became a book, a little ember. In 1948 a French weekly, *Action*, opened an inquiry. "Should Kafka be burned?" Kafka had already burned himself. He had torn a promise from his friend Max Brod to destroy all his papers. The ones that escaped Kafka's fire were *The Trial*, *The Castle* and *America*.

Mathias Corvin ruled Hungary from 1458 to 1490. He assembled 50,000 volumes in the "Corvina". The court of Ofen was a nest of copyists. Corvin sent his buyers all over the Levant searching for manuscripts. He created the first press in 1471. In 1526 the library was burned by the Turks.

The Irish monks were the “madmen of God.” They were enamoured of books. They brought the art of calligraphy to an unequalled point of perfection. In the 9th and 10th centuries the Vikings brought order to all this bric-a-brac, through fire. The Irish monks took their codices elsewhere. St. Columba founded a monastery at Luxeuil and filled it with books. The English bishop Benoit made six trips to Rome carrying rare samples.

Assyrians had a passion for science. Ashurbanipal (883-859 B.C.) accumulated thousands of tablets in Nineveh. The Medes conquered Niniveh in 612 B.C. Everything was burned. Caesar put the Mouseion to flames. However, he respected libraries. Since he had suppressed the greatest library in the world, he intended to construct the most beautiful, in Rome, but he died. Gaius Asinius Pollio continued the project. The first public library was erected in Rome in 39 B.C. Augustus added two other monuments, the Palatine and the Octavian. Both disappeared, one in 80 A.D., the other in 191 A.D. Domitian had the Palatine rebuilt and installed another library on the Capitoline. Trajan created the Ulpia around 100 A.D. In the fourth century A.D. Rome had twenty-eight libraries.

The great invasions were not favorable to reading. Bonfires of books lit up the West, but some unreasonable people risked their lives to defeat death. They suspected that by protecting books they authorized memory and the future. Sidonius Apollinaris speaks of collections that escaped the Barbarians in southern Europe. In the region of Nîmes, the prefect of the Gauls, Tonantius Ferreolus, hoarded up books in his Villa Prusania. Isidore of Seville had a vast library.

St. Jerome’s beloved library in Cæsarea was destroyed by the Arabs in 637, after the conquest of Palestine.

In Byzantium in the fourth century, Constantine the Great asked Greek savants to set up a basic library containing both profane and Christian literature. The building burned in 475. It was restored. The libraries survived as well as they could during the turgid career of Byzantium. Constantinople still concealed many books when the Turks took the city in 1453. All were destroyed.

The Arabs took care of the Greek manuscripts. Haroun al Raschid and his son al Mamoun created vast collections in Badgad.

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That of the Fatimides in Cairo contained 100,000 books. The Turks ravaged it in 1068.

Rich Greek manuscripts were collected in Cordoba at the time of the Omeyyades. In the eleventh century the Omeyyades disappeared. The books, also. Another series was indicated at Samarkand. The Mongols burned it.

In 1550 the library at Oxford was pillaged by the representatives of Edward VI.

The wars of religion left not one book unscathed. The Peasant War of 1525 ravaged the libraries. In Thuringia sixty-six monasteries, full of books, were given over to flames. The library of Fleury that in the 10th century counted 5,000 works was burned by the Calvinists in 1562. In the same year, that of Cluny perished.

## THE WAR OF THE BOOK

A war of the book was carried on between Alexandria and Pergamos. Attalus I founded a library which was developed under Eumenes II. They say that Eumenes II was able to entice the librarian of Alexandria from the Ptolemys and that he was treated royally. Poor man! Eumenes II was terribly afraid. He feared that his librarian would be stolen from him. As a precaution, he put him in prison.

It is claimed that at the beginning of the second century the king of Egypt forbade the exportation of papyri to Pergamos. If this is true, the king of Egypt must still be biting his fingernails in eternity, because the people of Pergamos replied by inventing a new material for writing: animal skins. Properly treated, these became parchment (the word comes from *pergamineum*). Sheep, goats and calves were massacred. Their skins were transformed into letters and syllables. This is an important date in the history of books, just as important as some others: that of the invention of paper, printing and especially that which allowed the passage from the primitive roll to the form of a notebook, called codex. Parchment supplanted papyrus.

Parchment had the advantage of being scraped without damage. It could be used again by erasing the first text and replacing it with another. And so the palimpsest was born.

## EVERY LIBRARY IS A PALIMPSEST

The palimpsest is fascinating, and is not any writing a palimpsest? Under the visible text there are other texts, abolished by the scraper or by the passing of time or by new ways of reading, that continue their lives in limbo, delivering their inexpressible truths in sign language.

Dr. Lacan sees the unconscious as the erased part of the palimpsest. Similar to almost obliterated writing, the unconscious is undecipherable; nevertheless, it speaks. And yet, if we have optical instruments, oblique light or some secret ray, psychoanalysis for example, then the faded and mute word is reanimated and makes a very loud noise. With this example, we suggest that there are many kinds of palimpsests and even natural ones.

The papyrus rolls are fragile. Their life expectancy does not go beyond a few centuries because humidity and insects make fragments of them. Many Greek and Roman libraries formed collections of still-born palimpsests: the original text became illegible through the years and what remained of the rolls was thus ready to receive another text. Unfortunately, copyists did not have the time to finish or even begin their task. They died, they were also in fragments, they were not able to bring out the unfinished texts in the empty spaces of the rolls.

Egyptian books had more luck. The dry sand protected the papyri, and the papyri had another advantage. They were in the hands of the dead. Egypt associated writing with the corpse, which was not a bad idea, since literature was intended to go beyond the frontiers of death, to make those who would live hear the whispering of those who had lived. The Egyptian tombs, which the Pharaohs of Egypt did not skimp on, form libraries of shadows, of death and of the after-life.

In the last centuries before Christ, the association of the book and death was still more intimate. Shrouds were made with leaves of papyrus glued together and coated with plaster.

The Assyrians produced other palimpsests. Since they had enormous stocks of clay tablets, and clay breaks, they used the books that had been pillaged for foundations of roadbeds or even for the floors of their houses. The road, the house, became

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monumental palimpsests on which perhaps snatches of what was once written can be read. Can we read roads? Or decode floors?

In the Middle Ages, the feudal lords of Northern Europe cut up, washed and re-used books in the form of account books. The registers of the Hanseatic League carry the watermark of drowned poems.

According to Svend Dahl, at the time of a royal marriage in Copenhagen in 1634 parchment manuscripts were torn up to make cartridges for fireworks.

In 18th-century Brazil, in the state of Minas Gerais, old books were used to make rockets for a popular festival. A dozen years ago a supply of these rockets, partially burned, was found. They were scores of baroque music lost to memory. The vestiges were decoded by specialists. Musicians played fragments of this music that had escaped disaster. Those who heard it found it beautiful.

In his preface to Jonathan Swift's book *The Great Mystery or the Art of the Wardrobe*, Dominique-Gilbert Laporte says that in 18th-century England toilet seats were made that offered to the view the edges of bound volumes in *trompe-oeil*. How can we not see in these *chaises-perçées* a sort of palimpsest whose original text is ceaselessly covered over by new, incomprehensible and ephemeral scribbling? This raises another question: is not a book simply a remains, almost a detective's clue to the past, like the letter from a lover or a criminal, the grave of a murdered man, the trace of lipstick on a man's shirt, a cigarette stub in an ashtray? That sends us back to the watershed of death: the book, libraries like gigantic depositories in which the past eternally stirs.

Some generals of Antiquity used the crania of their slaves as parchment. They had a message carved on the previously-shaved scalp of the messenger and sent the man toward a besieged city, toward another general or toward an isolated post. On his arrival, the slave's head was again shaved, because his hair had grown back. The message became legible. A new message could be superimposed on the first one, which had become an almost illegible scar, and the messenger took the response back to his master. A palimpsest slave. Some crania no doubt told of the Peloponnesian War, as Thucydides did.

So that the written world, even turned aside from its destiny,

pursued an enigmatic career: it enveloped the dead, it bestowed on the excremental function unhoped-for cultural dignity, it participated in the conduct of wars. Even stricken to death, torn up and burned, even broken or finely-chopped, the book did not die. It underwent fantastic survivals. No matter if it had been erased or scraped, a new text would come to take its place, whether the new text was written with a goose quill or traced by the oozing from corpses or formed by the mason's hammer.

Let us keep in mind the relationship of the book with death. The great libraries have the nobility of the necropolis. The *Bibliothèque National* is the finest cemetery in Paris. Everything allies the two institutions. The works of yesterday, similar to small sarcophagi, rest in peaceful meditation on interminable shelves, and although chrysanthemums are somewhat rare in the *Bibliothèque National*, readers move about with muffled steps. They do not talk, they murmur, they leaf through their octavos with the caution of a cat. It will be said that these delicate manners are explainable. It is fitting to observe the solitude and serenity of one's neighbors. But this explanation is trite and practical. I, myself, prefer to read of this discretion in the wavering light of a miraculously suspended death, held in respect, precisely, by the book. The library is a sacred monument just as a church or cemetery is, a place where life and death communicate, make inquiries and recognize each other, far from the illusory passing of seasons. When I enter a library I cross a mysterious barrier. I have abandoned profane territory to bathe myself in sacred waters.

Jean de Léry witnessed the siege of Sancerre in 1573. He saw men and women eat rats and strips of leather, but such practices were commonplace at that time. When Henri IV laid siege to Paris in 1590 people fed on bread composed of bones from the cemetery of the Innocents, and elsewhere horse manure was eaten: it was delicious. Jean de Léry adds another and rarer fact—he came upon unfortunate people tearing up and consuming old parchments. One of the great scholars of the Middle Ages received the name of *Pierre le mangeur*.

Jesus did not write anything. He tried to once, but God's wind was on its guard, and the writing immediately became a palimpsest. The Gospel reports this miracle. Jesus traced some

letters in the desert dust. Unfortunately, before the disciples had time to decode the message, a breeze came up and erased it. It remained an absolute palimpsest: the manuscript was effaced as it was written, and no other writing came to cover the dispersed text. How could it have been otherwise? How could the word of God shrink to the point of being enclosed in the letters of the alphabet however numerous were those letters and their combinations? The opposite of any book, this bit of virgin sand on which lies the trace of nothing can enclose the boundlessness of the divine word.

Tolstoy was dying. He was tired of his wife, of his children, of his horses, of everything, in fact. He told himself that at the age of 80 it was urgent to enjoy life a little. On October 28, 1910 at the age of 82 he left Yasnaya Polyana. He fled, but chose the wrong season. It was winter, and the train was glacial.

The old writer had a violent fever. He was forced to interrupt his journey at the station of Astapovo. The station master gave him his own room. Members of the family hastened there. The little station swarmed with officials and journalists. A camp was improvised in the courtyard.

Tolstoy began to die. He heard the noise of the railroad cars, the hissing of the pistons while a desperate Anna Karenina in Moscow threw herself on the rails, in the snow. Tolstoy profited in his agony to note his last thoughts. From morning to night, he wrote on his sheet with his hand. Tolstoy's work will never be completed. The words written with his fingertips on the white linen will be missing. No writer will ever write his complete work, even Borges, though he claimed to believe the contrary, knew that the finest library is only the ruin and sketch of an unfulfilled desire.

At night, Alexander the Great put his sword and the *Iliad* beneath his pillow. Nero set fire to Rome because he had read the description of the burning of Troy in the *Iliad*.

Neither Pythagoras nor Socrates nor Buddha left the slightest written word. But on their bare tablets, on their mute parchments heaps of commentaries have been piled, thousands and millions of sentences, so that the missing letters have become a prodigious interlacing of letters, an interminable palimpsest, boundless and labyrinthine, without the first text, the unwritten text, ever having been either covered over or revealed.



On his deathbed Balzac asked for treatment by Dr. Bianchon, a character in one of his books.

King Boabdil, the last Arab prince of Granada, was told that his capital had just fallen. He burned the message that informed him of it. As a precaution, he had the messenger killed.

During the *Ancien Régime* the names of illegitimate persons were written backwards in the Registrar General's records.

## THE MERITS OF FIRE

Twelve or thirteen centuries before Christ, Crete was ravaged by brigands. They vented their fury on temples. The temples contained libraries. Fire would purify all that nonsense.

It was the fire that was beaten. It worked against its own purpose. It built instead of tearing down; it printed instead of destroying. The tablets in orderly ranks in the temples were made of soft clay, and the fire missed its mark. The flames baked the clay instead of exterminating it. They hardened the alphabets. They made of these ephemeral graphics texts that were able to defy time. We may assume that other barbarians had similar disappointments. Perhaps in wanting to reduce the codices or parchments to nothing they snatched them from the meanderings of time and found a little corner for them in perpetuity.

The destruction of books, or their burning, have other small merits. They cause the advancement of technical progress and literature at the same time. In 391 Theodosius I, emperor of Byzantium, ordered that all pagan temples be closed. Byzantium forgot hieroglyphic writing and was condemned to a more modern one.

In China at the end of the third century B.C. the emperor took a dislike to books. He decided to eliminate them. When his reign was over, and people began to write books again, they had recourse to a new material, silk, on which they could write with a piece of bamboo or a camel hair brush with an ink called indian ink made of soot and glue mixed together.

Works on silk were luxurious but also expensive, so that a century later Ts'ai Luen decided to invent paper. And since the

Chinese are as shrewd as can be they kept the secret of paper to themselves. They had it exclusively for several centuries.

Fortunately, in the 8th century a group of Chinese paper manufacturers was captured by the Arabs. The mystery was uncovered. The Arabs wanted to protect the secret too, but they held their tongues less well than the Chinese, so that paper arrived in Europe around the 11th century.

Jorge Luis Borges spoke of this emperor Che Huang-ti (259-210 B.C.) who shut his country up behind the Great Wall, burned all the books in 213 B.C. and boasted that in his reign everything had its correct name.<sup>1</sup> "Perhaps," says Borges, "the emperor and his sages believed that immortality is intrinsic to us and that corruption cannot enter into a closed world."

Borges's text is short and brilliant but gives few details. Moreover, it is approximative. For Borges, the Great Wall was built by the emperor Che Huang-ti alone. Now, Che Huang-ti contented himself with completing the work of his predecessors who, at the time of the Warring States, circa 300 B.C., had erected fortifications on Chinese borders that were intended to contain the nomads of the northwest. Che Huang-ti had unified China. It was logical that he would also unite the various sections of the Wall.

Such facts held no interest for Borges. The Argentinian wanted only to extract from history the elements necessary to support his reflections on time and eternity. This is why he often used China, whose obscure past formed a mine of parables. However, just a glance, even musing, at the circumstances that surrounded the great *auto-da-fe* of 213 B.C., far from overturning Borges's theses reinforced and enriched them.

Che Huang-ti succeeded to the Chou dynasty which itself replaced the Chang dynasty around 1100 B.C. and lasted 866 years. Now, the kings of this Chou dynasty already distrusted books. Long before Che Huang-ti the sovereigns kept their eye on writers. They condemned those who modified characters or kitchen implements.

<sup>1</sup> Che Huang-ti was first the king of Ts'in, with the name of Cheng, one of the Warring States, a rough country, rich in metals and near the barbarians of the northwest. In 221 B.C. he extended his power to all the States, created China and adopted the name of the Che Huang-ti, Huang-ti being translated as emperor. The *Encyclopaedia Universalis* suggests another spelling: Shi Huangdi.

The Chou dynasty had its excuses. It itself succeeded to dynasties that were so ancient that their history is equivocal and legendary. But these legends could cause fear. The non-existent dynasty of the Hia especially had left distressing souvenirs. The Hia loved disorder, change, in other words, time. They are ranked in the family of Heraclitus, whereas the Chou and particularly the Ts'in (Che Huang-ti) were looking for the immobility dear to Parmenides. The Hia organized anarchy; they fomented chaos. They loved to turn customs, manners and even the ordinance of creation upside down. The wife of King Koei, a certain Mei-hin, had a subterranean room built that was so vast that she could celebrate nocturnal festivals in plain day. Another king, Chao-Hao, entitled the hymn of his reign *The Abyss*.

Perhaps when Che Huang-ti took power he kept in mind the excesses and reversals of the Hia. In addition, he had a strong Utopian for advisor, a man resolved to manage the empire so that the future would not differ from the past, so that each day would be as the day before and the day after at the same time.

This man, Li Sseu, prime minister from 214 to 208 B.C., standardized China. He standardized weights, currency and writing on the entire continent. He pointed out to his master that anarchy prospers thanks to books. In his opinion writers are perverse: while pretending to celebrate the past they do the opposite. They model the present, upset it and clear the road by which the future creeps in.

Li Sseu wrote, "Your Majesty has a unified empire. You have distinguished the black from the white and firmly established your supremacy. However, the independent schools unite to criticize the legal codes and ordinances... Your servant suggests that all the books in the imperial archives be burned, with the exception of the 'Memoirs of Ts'in'. All those who possess the 'Canon of Poems', the 'Canon of History' and the discourses of the one hundred philosophers, take them to the local governors. Those who talk among themselves of the 'Canon of Poems' or the 'Canon of History' will be executed and their bodies exposed in the market place. Whoever in referring to the past criticizes the present will be killed along with all the members of his family... Those who, thirty days after the promulgation of the decree have not destroyed

their books will be branded and sent to labor on the Wall. The books that must not be destroyed are those on medicine, pharmacy, divination by tortoise shell and yarrow, agriculture and arboriculture. Persons desiring to continue their studies will have civil servants as professors...”

Enclosed within its Great Wall, purged of its books, China could then devote itself to its only pleasure: it contemplated its own immobility. Another initiative of Che Huang-ti completed the arsenal with which he was endowed to block time, put history to death and assure the repose of things: he gave the order to make sacrifices to the mountains, rivers, plains, sea, land and stars, in short, to all the permanent things, to all the constant figures, to copying and monotony, to everything that escaped change, surprises and ruptures that plotted the suffering of men. The dream of Huang-ti may perhaps be put this way: to go from the reign of *History*, in constant movement, dying and being reborn, to that of *Geography*, that is constant and over which change and death slide—especially when that geography is protected from history by a Great Wall. Che Huang-ti took another precaution: in 219 B.C. he formed an expedition to look for the Island of the Immortals. Perhaps he secretly hoped that China itself was that island?

Roger Caillois, who was interested in this subject, said that for twelve years the abominable orders to destroy books came from the imperial residence of Hien-Yang, but it is uncertain if these orders came from the emperor in person. Che Huang-ti was so afraid of death, of life, that nothing was known of where he reigned from, and since his residence counted two hundred and seventy palaces all connected with each other, the advisor who could verify the origin of the decree must have been very shrewd. In any case, the official who revealed the presence of the emperor would have been executed.

Another reading says that no one had the right to let Che Huang-ti know that he was ill. (When Maxim Gorki was dying, the masters of the Kremlin had a special edition of *Pravda* printed, just for Gorki, in which no information was given on the health of the writer—an exquisite delicacy, but somewhat comical, when we know that Gorki was probably poisoned by the same people who took such great pains not to cause him anxiety).

Let us return to Che Huang-ti. If no one dared to tell him he was ill, it would have been even more of a sacrilege to tell him he was dead or dying. Therefore we can ask ourselves if Che Huang-ti was not immortal. How could he have been dead if he himself, who after all was the first to be concerned, was kept ignorant of his own decease? The death of Che Huang-ti takes on a tinge of unreality. It shimmers on the fabric of eternity, like watered silk.

The day on which Che Huang-ti, in spite of everything, was stricken by apparent death, his entourage made efforts to keep it a secret. They continued to serve him food in the carriage that took his remains to the tomb.

This tomb had been prepared for Lin-t'ong, in Chensi. He had the same mania of immortality. He had constructed underground a kingdom similar to the royal kingdom but more perfected, since it was impervious to the ravages of time. It was paved with bronze. Rivers of mercury represented the Yellow River, the Blue River... The sea was also made of mercury. Lamps provided a steady and eternal light, the kingdom in a mirror, and the lamps were fed with a special oil that never ran out. Vegetation was cut out of jade, which is unfading, animals in gold and silver that did not suffer from time. The emperor of the *immutable* finally reposed in the midnight of his desire.

This Chinese emperor, creator of the ephemeral dynasty of the T'sin, far from detesting books, honored them and exalted them. He calculated that books, far more than battles or revolutions, are the great spirits of time: they assure metamorphoses, accomplishments and renewals. He knew that the word history and the word library are synonymous.

When the Soviet poet Ossip Mandelstam was persecuted by Stalin and assigned to live in Voronej, Nadejda, his wife, was furious. She screamed against Stalin, who detested poets. Mandelstam tried to calm her. With his soft voice, he explained to Nadejda that she was mistaken. He said that Stalin was very sensitive to poetry and even that he was undoubtedly the only man in the world who took poetry seriously. Mandelstam was hardly mistaken. Some years later Stalin took poetry even more seriously. He sent Mandelstam to Siberia and to death.

Che Huang-ti resembled Stalin. He took libraries seriously. It is

a frequent characteristic in this country of old written culture that is China. Under some emperors, when an epidemic or a natural calamity ravaged the empire, the ministers knew splendid means for taking care of the scourge. They fulminated a decree to modify the system of musical notation, the pitch of the notes and the rivers went back into their beds and the plague disappeared.

Fifty years before the Spaniards landed in Mexico, the emperor Itzcoatl, on the advice of his minister Tlacalal, decided to burn the annals of the Aztecs, to suppress all traces of the past: truth, myths, legends or traditions.

Historians comment on this profanation. Itzcoatl wanted to eradicate the memory of the time when Mexico was a country of poor nomads. He intended to face the future without being embarrassed by the snares of the past. In this sense, the burning of the Aztec books obeyed a will that was exactly contrary to that of the Chinese conflagration. It was hardly a matter of destroying memory so as to give birth to the future, to favour change. All revolutionaries yield to such temptations. Peter the Great repealed the old Russian calendar. In France, the revolutionaries of 1789 invented a new division of the year. All that is commonplace and obligatory: for a new era to appear, time must first be rid of all the crumbs of the past.

However, the conduct of the Aztec emperor is more complicated, and we quickly see that in reality, on some points, he proceeded in the same way as Che Huang-ti. We have seen that the Chinese emperor, at the same time as he burned the books, imprisoned his country within the Great Wall. In his desire for eternity, he replaced time with space. He made nature an unchangeable geometry, a Utopian space, forever purged of the miasmas of the future.

Itzcoatl also associated another, more enigmatic decision with the destruction of the annals. Rather than erect a Great Wall around his property, he constructed a vast zoological garden in the heart of Mexico City at Oaxtepec. To ensure the permanence of things, their eternity, he thus chose an original way: Che Huang-ti killed time by converting it into space; Itzcoatl replaced history with zoology. And animals have no history.

It is suggested that the Aztec took the same paths as the Chinese

emperor. To choose the simultaneous in place of the successive, to stop up the breaches through which time flows, he created a catalogue in the form of his animals and plants, an intangible taximony purged of history (clearly the naturalists of that time, even Mexican, were closer to Linnaeus than Darwin, that is, they neglected that dimension of duration in nature which would only be revealed much later, with Buffon and the expedition of the *Beagle*).

Homer said that the gods spun misfortunes so that man would have subjects for stories and poems. I choose to believe the contrary: men write poems to furnish the gods with the ideas of events, massacres or luck.

An Englishman was walking in an isolated region of China. He caught cold, he sneezed. An apothecary prescribed infusions of tortoise shell and the shoulder-blades of a deer, known as dragon bones. It is true that these bones and shell were unusual: they showed notches, interlaced geometries. They were traces of dragon claws. The Englishman swallowed the potion and he no longer sneezed. But since he had some of the elements of the medicine left, he carefully examined them. He realized that the designs on them were not made by the gods or by dragons but by ancient man, whose memory had been lost. He had just discovered the primitive writing of China and a fabulous library. Another version has it that the Englishman had nothing to do with this discovery. The discoverer of the library was the Yellow River that overflowed at the end of the 19th century so that the earth cracked and exposed the dragon bones and tortoise shell.

What is certain is that the authorities believed a treasure had been found. They seized the shells and bones from all the apothecaries, which led, amusingly enough, to a deterioration in the health of the peasants. Everyone coughed, but the game was worth the candle, and the erudite set to work to decipher the vanished writing and collate the stock that had not already become infusions. Thus we see a buried writing and library emerge, and a civilization, that of the dynasty of the Chang-Yi (or Shang) in the region of Anyang (today Ngan-yang) in north-east Henan.

None the less, the library was mutilated, since a large part of the archives had been reduced to powder. This had been consumed by

the peasants for a long time, because it was during the Song era (960-1279) that the medical virtues of the “dragon bones” were remarked and exploited. For centuries China was treated and healed with its own culture, with old books. It drank its own memory. Texts perhaps as great as the *Iliad* were used to treat the colds and malaria of illiterate peasants.

This library is the rarest in the world. It has known three phases: in primitive times it brought together the prescriptions of the soothsayers; beginning with the Song, around 1000 A.D., it cured fevers; today it is mostly among the remains in cemeteries. The Egyptians had found their masters. They papered their coffins with books. The Chinese set their most venerable books in order in the putrefaction of bodies that, one day, had been treated with dragon-writing.

Iceland did not eat its memory; it made clothes out of it. In the 10th century, Vikings discovered this snowy, melancholy and solitary island. A gang of criminals who had no doubt committed murder in Denmark or Norway established a civilization in this lost land. Poetry followed. In a few centuries the descendants of the adventurers built a literary monument which hardly has an equivalent in history, unless we evoke what took place in the Greece of Pericles or in the Germany of romanticism. These incomparable romances or poems that are the sagas or eddas were written on lark, rough parchment made from the skins of sheep or calves.

Time went by. Iceland suffered. Volcanoes exploded all the time. The animals used up what little pasturage the island provided. A little later, when the “lesser glacial age” broke loose Iceland no longer knew how it would heat itself. The puny forests that had taken root on that basalt land were devastated by the frozen inhabitants. The Icelanders became troglodites and went underground. Even so, the cold killed. In the 17th century there were no more than 50,000 inhabitants.

Copenhagen decided on a project to “close” Iceland and repatriate the 50,000 specters who persisted in living. But they did not count on the specters, who preferred to die in their holes. They burned their last splinters of wood to warm themselves, after which they had an idea. Why not use the libraries as clothing? A



phantasmagorical used-clothes market was organized. Coats, jackets, shoes and pants were made with the skins of sheep and calves. The ostentatious library wandered around on the backs of old women and covered infants in their cradles. For once instead of being reduced to ashes books provided warmth.

A high Danish official, Arni Magnusson, Icelandic in origin, measured the disaster. He arranged for the king of Denmark to give him the mission to safeguard the books. He spent ten years on the island. Every house was visited. He tore the strips of parchment off the backs of the inhabitants and sent these relics back to Copenhagen. The treasure had been saved. It is true that some pieces disappeared. Others were torn or ruined. Some verses were effaced through perspiration or wear, but the collection of Arni Magnusson, gathered in Copenhagen, was evidence of what had been.

Some years later, in 1728, a fire ravaged Magnusson's library. The parchments were in ashes, but some manuscripts escaped the flames.

In his novel *Les Langues de la terre* Serge Koster tells us that in England the booksellers called the big folios "tombstones." He asks, "Are libraries the museums or the cemeteries of our conversations?" He makes no difference between the book and man. With regard to the Nazi bonfires he says, "Where books are burned the burning of men will follow."

## LIBRARIES OF DUST

Not all libraries suffer a violent death. Some die naturally or through the neglect of their custodians.

The Middle Ages passed its time recopying venerable manuscripts and did not know what it was copying. We doubt that the splendid medieval manuscripts were meant to be read. They represented a material good rather than a spiritual one. Charlemagne sold books to distribute alms to the poor.

An army of monks in the *scriptoria* of the monasteries wore out their eyes on parchments. They paid practically no attention to the texts they transcribed. What they wanted was to suffer, weep and

almost lose their eyesight. They held that copying a manuscript was a penance and that they would gain Heaven thanks to their pains. If they made an error, they did not suffer for the disfiguring of a text but for the increase of their time in purgatory. They made exhausting calculations to know how many pages or letters they had to copy so that their punishment would be reduced to some millions of years. Their work was so arid that they invented a little devil, the demon Titivillus, who made a specialty of teasing them so that they would blunder. They could thus blame their own mistakes on the malignancy of the Devil.

The book was such a precious treasure that it became customary to imprison it. It was attached with heavy iron chains, and we hear of "chained books" (*libri catenati*). Moreover, in the libraries the books were ranged with their backs to the wall, which explains the little care given to the binding and their bad condition. In the 17th century there was a small revolution: books were arranged as we still do now, the backs in full view and the page edges against the wall.

There was a profusion of monks in the West, but what strange monks. They did not much prize culture. In the 13th century in Murbach, monks did not know how to read. A little later, Boccaccio visited the library of Monte Cassino. He saw such abandon there that he could not hold back his tears.

In the 13th century Cardinal Humbert de Romans lamented: "Just as with saints' bones, relics preserved with such reverence in silk and enclosed in gold and silver, it is reprehensible to see books that contain so much holiness receive so little care."

In 1662 the Viennese court wanted to restore the palace library. They went to Hamburg to find an erudite historian, Peter Lambach, and they named him librarian. Peter Lambach arrived in Vienna. He did not enter a library but layers of dust under which perhaps works were resting. He had to work an entire year to save the books.

Ten years ago I spent some days in a municipal library in a village in northern Brazil for research on the forest of the north-east. I entered the domain of sleeping books. An American student, along with indifferent custodians, kept me company. In spite of his youth, the student seemed as old and as sad as the

buildings and the dusty books he was consulting.

I had some books brought to me. I read them as well as I could in a dim light and in spite of the musty odor that filled the large room. There was a faint noise which I identified as insects chewing away on book bindings or papers on the shelves. Termites or ants or coleoptera or I do not know what, were doing the same work as the young-old American and I. They also were consulting the books; they swallowed them slowly, systematically, and sometimes the volume that the custodian placed on the table was half gnawed. When I opened it, a cloud of dust arose, and I could not decipher the misty letters that throughout the centuries had formed these shadowy pages.

#### THE IMAGINARY LIBRARY OF IGUAÇU

I believe that I was told this story, but I am not sure. Several years ago a man well-versed in letters lived in Brazil, at Iguaçú, near waterfalls as vast and beautiful as Niagara. This man read all the books he could get and collected them.

One of his favorite authors was the French writer, M.B., all of whose works he had, bound artistically and displayed in a case in his living room. Since M.B. is a generous writer the collection evolved with a marvelous rapidity. The bookcase received two volumes a year—three, when the harvest was good.

Unfortunately, great collectors are mad. B. did his best to write at top speed, day and night, but in vain. He was, just the same, left behind by the man of Iguaçú. He lost ground and the literate man at the edge of the waterfall wasted away. He lacked nourishment. His life was dreary. He watched for the mail from France, and no books from B.! He paced his library. He had to face the evidence: there was a scarcity of B.

He had to make a decision. Since B. was lazy it was necessary to take over. The man of Iguaçú bought a stock of blank books, gave them B.-like titles and had them bound. With some sadness, the collector admitted that these books had not yet been written by M.B. but, he added, "You never can tell." And he called for a little patience.

*Books in Flames*

The library of Iguaçú came back to life. It put on weight. The books to come from B. multiplied, it was a miracle. They climbed along the walls. They invaded the house.

The system invented by this starved man is ingenious, elegant and has a future. Its merits are various: it fills the demand of an insatiable mind; it economizes the strength of the writer who no longer has to spend sleepless nights at his desk so that his product will increase.

It whispers another lesson that we have already touched on concerning Tolstoy's death and the writing of Jesus: let B. struggle as he may, he will never write his complete works. It exists, but in only one edition, down there, in the delirious living room of Iguaçú. We will never know anything about these complete works except the superficial, apparent and illusory part, the works that M.B. actually wrote, in this dreaming library he will always be lacking, this library in limbo that a strange, exalted and insatiable man made in Iguaçú and that the author himself does not know he wrote.

Gilles Lapouge  
*(Paris)*