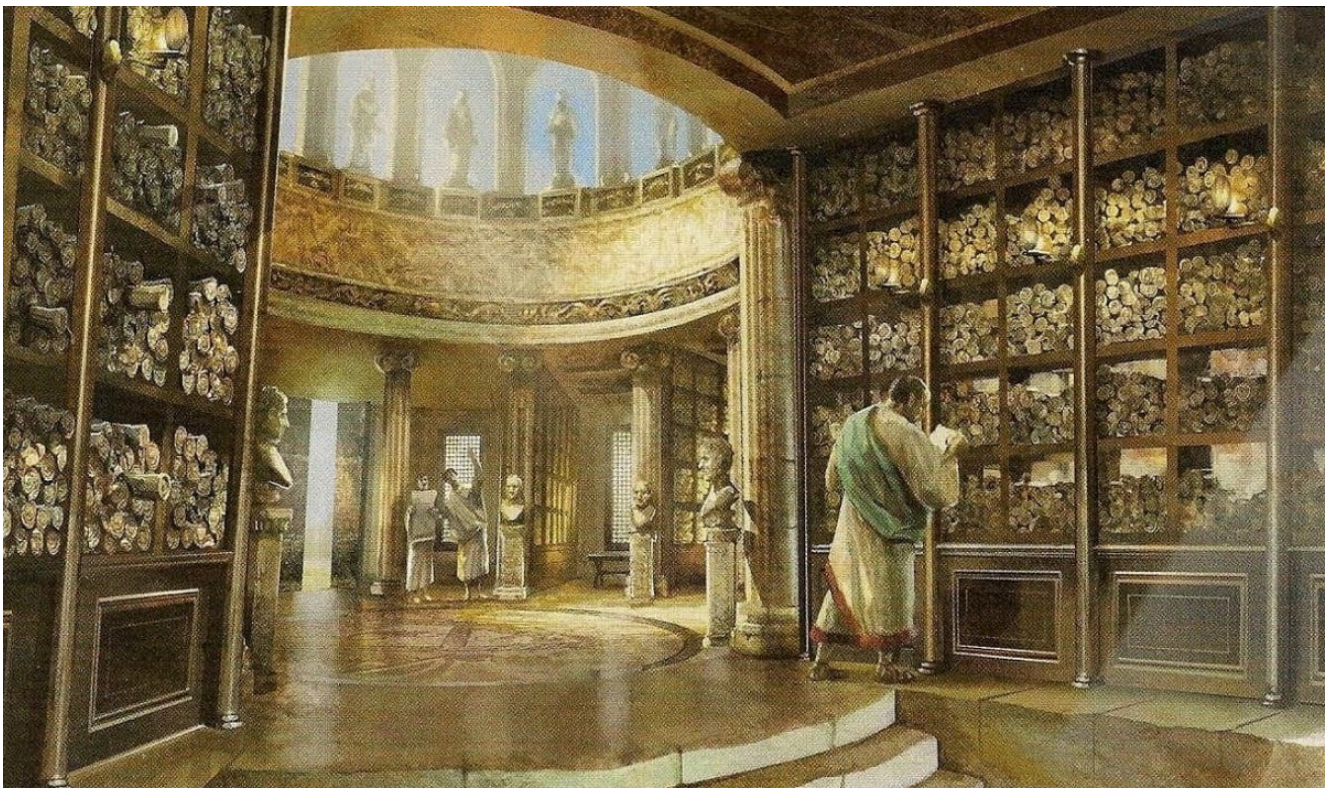
The Libary of Alexandria

by Justin Wong (March 2021)



Phineas Harriott was one of the most learned scholars of his age, though this was not considered an accomplishment. The contemporary era was not known as an age of great scholarship. In this period, most have it in their minds that we are living in an age of greatness, a second wave of enlightenment, as more people are entering into places of higher learning. Doors were opened where previously they had been closed. Nearly half of children born entered into academia, attaining bachelor's degrees, through the act of dumbing down the curriculum, the standard of education fell. The only criteria needed seemed to be the ability to breathe. This was what Phineas thought, he felt somewhat out of place on the campus, where none of his colleagues, other lecturers in his field of study, and the humanities in general seemed to possess his thirst for

knowledge, his love of learning, the desire for wisdom.

Most modern scholarship inspired a kind of mediocrity, the lowering of standards, asked little from teachers and students, and there wasn't this sense that after three years of study and colossal student debt, that his pupils exited the University as different people, being put through the purgatorial fires and purified, where they were free to live their lives in the fresh perspective provided for them by the pillar of truth known as the University.

Phineas was known as being a learned man, the definition of an eccentric scholar and somewhat contrary to the view that students wouldn't be unable to grapple with the old stale syllabus in which he taught, his lectures were popular. He had his followers, his admirers. Then there was his life as a scholar, the books he wrote on philosophy and language, and other curious theories as to the study of literature. There was a legend that went around the campus that he had read every volume of the humanities section in the library of the University, and a good deal of many of the other sections. He also had the ability to read works in other languages, French, Greek, and Latin, and along with this, he had a vast library in his house, a place where he was surrounded by books. It was clear to see that he was obsessed with words. This was the significance of reading to him, it was a lens through which time further illuminated the world. Of all of the books that he published, a number of them were about books and libraries, bibliophiles, bibliomania -that glorious obsession, where the cosmos could be circumnavigated from a chair, a place one could be in motion whilst remaining static. The more he came to know, the more ignorant of the world he seemed to himself.

He was working on a book of a subject that had enthralled him, that captivated his mind for what must have been decades, from his youth, when he was an upstart bookworm, working his way through the shelves of his local library to

now, a professor, with a dozen or so volumes that he had written. This was the Library of Alexandria, a central place of learning in the ancient world, housing some 400,000 scrolls, a considerable vat of knowledge, it being the still point of scholarship, the place where the rich tapestry of east and west came together as one. Although the thing that fascinated him more than anything was all of the works that were destroyed due to the decline of that institution. Many works of classical scholarship have become lost or survive in fragments.

The library was said to have been built in 295 B.C, under the Ptolemaic ruler, Ptolemy 2nd and was said to be destroyed under Roman rule, in around the time of 260 A.D. This was not due to the much touted though inaccurate belief that a fire burned it to the ground, reducing this hotbed of knowledge to ash in a moment of fate. Rather the building was destroyed not in acts of nature or accidents, but rather through philistinism. The Roman rulers at the time period, were said to have grown disinterested in knowledge, in learning, scholarship. Contained within this is a grain of truth, although there were other competing places of learning around the Mediterranean, and in Alexandria itself. To be a member of Moussein—the Museum which the library in the city's royal quarter was in—one did not need to be a great scholar in the period of its decline, but rather, be well connected, endowed with money or athletic ability.

Phineas saw in the decline of the library, many parallels with the destruction of scholarship in his day, the decaying of standards, the cronyism, advancement not being based on one's intellectual achievements. The tendency of many of his contemporaries, the people who he worked alongside to indulge in crack-pot theories, all-manner of intellectual fads and fashions, with the substance of their works lost in questionable critiques. Although such is the irony of the society that we live in, a world post the printing press,

where it is less labourious to create copies of works, to find hundreds of clones in numerous libraries across the world. Most of the scholarship made in our day and age will last till the ends of the earth, and won't be abandoned and squandered, as in the heights of attainment of the past.

What fascinated Phineas the most about this, Alexandria, its manifold manuscripts, many of them abandoned, sold off, or destroyed when the city was sacked by a foreign horde, was that many works became extinct in the process. A great deal of ancient texts that survive, were handed down in fragmentary form. We are given a part instead of the whole. This is true of the works of Sappho, Aristotle's poetics, the plays of Aristophanes, where 11 out of an estimated 40 plays remain. Many of the works from Longinus and Lucan, to Pliny the Elder and Protagoras are lost. Their texts, lost to us—unknowable; a rich and unmeasurable history, dead. There is of course the possibility that many of these manuscripts will become unearthed through archeology, through a resurrection of the past, a rebirth of that which has become lost in dust. Although many more written works will never again see the light of day, its wisdom ephemeral, suffering the fate of being known simply for a season. Most people would have put this aside, where the scholarship, the highest attainment of learning will remain a mystery. There was thus nothing one could do about it. Phineas pondered on this, the doing nothing. The more he read, he doubted this assertion. He believed that perhaps something could be done.

In the world of genetics, one is a combination of one's ancestors. The sequence of DNA in a human is a culmination of a long line of forebears. One's Father's and Mother's, that branch out through the ages. Although this scientific notion of genealogy, a living and breathing history

of thousands of years, in a single specimen is true in a biological sense. We tend to think of this as a peculiarly modern phenomenon, something that came about in the last 100 years, although there existed a rudimentary understanding of biology, of genetics, the seed having a strong likeness with its forebears. In 1865–1866, Gregor Mendel wrote his theory of genetic inheritance, he did this through the study of peas. In these studies many of the notions we have about genetics found itself in the popular consciousness, with two separate characteristics, inherited from each parent, where there is a dominant and recessive gene. These studies of Mendel weren't fascinating simply to the scientist, but they spilled over into other areas of enquiry, the humanities. Around twenty or so years after the publication of Mendel's work, Nietzsche wrote his seminal work, an attempt to debunk traditional Western morality by way of relativism. The title was striking, having the word 'Genealogy' in it. There was an underlying assumption that morality was handed down from generation to generation, in much the same way as blue eyes and particularity of ear lobes. Nietzsche attempted to show morality was nothing other than a trick, a way of the weak and powerless to guilt trip the rich into helping as opposed to exploiting them. Perhaps in Nietzsche's view of moral gene theory, the weak and the strong are alleles, either dominant or recessive. The dominant allele will be on show, depending on the conditions of the culture. In the ancient world, the allele of the strong will be on show, in the Christian world the allele of the weak will be visible.

Phineas pondered on this for days, believing this thinking, the one of genetics providing a key to understanding the world could be applicable when it applied to uncovering the riddle of the Library of Alexandria, its unearthed treasures, lost, and never to see the light of day again. As was previously mentioned, this topic was of a particular interest to him, consuming his mind for extended periods of his life. He believed if he could find a method of thinking,

he could unlock one of the great mysteries in the world of letters. His life, whatever little free time he managed to have in his day, was focused on this seemingly mystifying endeavor. He rose in the morning, drove to work, taught the lessons required of him, marked papers. In between these routine duties, he managed spend some hours in the library, or at home taking notes, trying to come up with a key to make known the presence of unwitnessed works. Scrolls that were burnt, torn, or defiled by the hand of time.

He believed one of the things that seems to be obvious, a thing he picked up from years of reading was that books come out of other books. Just like a person can't help but be a culmination of genes of ancestors, a text can't help but contain the sum of its influences, its intellectual parentage if you will. This in some sense is demonstrable, in the nineteenth and twentieth century, Freud seemed to wear his influences, from mythology—from the ancient Greeks—on his sleeve, creating Oedipal and Elektra complexes. Narcissism was gleaned from tales of Ovid. Although works can more subtly show their influences, not mentioning or wishing to mention the secret inspiration that lies behind the invented work. In Herman Melville's Moby Dick, that proto-modernist masterwork, he owes the influence of his work a great deal to Milton and the Bible. The tragic imagination of Shakespeare is clearly at work, the presence of man wrestling with dark, otherworldly forces. The Biblical imagery, the leviathan—the sea beast—a creature that God made on the fourth day, being a manifestation of the devil, the adversary of man, is the source around which the epic revolves.

He believed he could trace the genealogy of all of these influences, and when he comes across an anomaly, a strange influence from a source that seem to be non-existent, he will then surmise that it is caused by a literary missing link, an extinct presence with no surviving remnants. He believed no works were wholly original, that the contemplation

of the works of others forms the basis of artistic vision, a communion with the mighty dead, a piece of them which survives beyond the dust. Although he had knowledge of the key figures whose works were said to have disappeared, leaving holes in our cultural history.

He believed that he had a good basis in trying to discern the contents of the lost works, and although they were now gone, this wasn't always so, many of them were once available to the scholar, the philosopher, and the poet. If the contents of these works don't exist as primary sources, then they exist in the works of those that came after, swallowed up by later composers, those who saw in their forebears' work the basis for their own ideas. This of course would be troublesome; the more Phineas thought about it, he thought it would be near impossible. The best he could do was find strange inconsistencies with surviving works of late antiquity, impossible anomalies, gigantic leaps in imagination that were at best inexplicable, where there was no reason why this in turn should be so. There not being a natural progression of one generation to a next.

This was a huge undertaking, a gargantuan project, such that he spent some five years in an attempt to uncover; in between his life as lecturer, academic duties, and a meagre social life; this riddle of riddles. Perhaps if the library of Alexandria survived as it was during its peak, the golden age of classical scholarship, the history of the world may have been altered. The knowledge stumbled upon in the middle and modern ages, could have been a repetition of prior discoveries. Things known now could have been known then.

Pouring over the works of late antiquity, he found that some of the works of some Romans, Julius Occitan, and Lucius Octavius, were strange, as were the works of Byzantine writers, Philip the elder and Heliophilos. Julius Occitan, and Lucius Octavius were both philosophers who wrote in the style of Cicero, true to their Roman roots. Although there was a

trace of mysticism to them, something that reminded Phineas of Neo-Platonism though wasn't this, it being something far more modern, inexplicable. He believed that this influence was likely the result of the influence of Agrippina the younger. The works of Agrippina the younger lost in the library of Alexandria seemed like it would form the foundation of Julius and Lucius' work, seeing as Agrippina the younger's lost works were said to contain a diverse range of learning, from Mathematics and speculation of pagan Gods. It was likely these two Romans read the work in Alexandria, although this wasn't the only place in which they could read these works. One could make copies of texts in Alexandria, and from there they were taken all over Europe.

Philip the Elder and Heliophiles were poets, the former wrote epigrams, the latter, odes. Seeing as they were contemporaries, their styles show a likeness with one another. There is an obvious influence of ancient Greece in their work, Pindar in particular, the Homeric hymns, as well as the presence of Catullus, of Horace. This could be a result of the time in which they lived, the classical world being Christianized, the substance of Biblical verse freely on display. Although the rhythm, the complexity of the structure seemed somewhat Pindaric, although another Pindar-, the lost works. These latter-day Greeks had in their verses, the essence of that which was lost in desecrated odes, which was like seeing a dead friend in the face of his son. There was a remnant, an indistinguishable aspect, the work of the older could be discerned through the work of the younger, though not grasped and seen in the purity of its own invention.

There was no one Phineas felt he could talk to, no one near to him at least. There was another man, an elderly scholar, someone retired who he communicated with from time to time. They formed a natural affinity to one another, with intellects of comparable capaciousness, and interests in the same things, the text, the library, the dissemination of

knowledge through writers. It was always going to be risky doing what he did—coming up with a theory that could be characterized as guess work. A speculation. Perhaps he believed that in venturing into this endeavor he was spending too much time amongst books, within libraries. That his imagination had brushed aside his reasoning mind, where others looked on him as being idiosyncratic and obsessive, engaged in pseudo-scholarship in spending hours alone by himself. He sent his work to Geoffrey Burke, an emeritus professor of Humanities with a similar sensibility to his, who had the similar goal of trying to see the links that bind together all literature, from the imaginative to the philosophical, from the scientific to the theological. They had in fact spent evenings on the phone discussing these matters, the library of Alexandria, the contents of lost masterpieces, the fresh perspectives that could be learned from ill-fated thought.

Phineas sent Geoffrey the manuscript with his theories, his leaps in imagination.

Geoffrey, although appreciative of much of the work that Phineas put into it, found the work to be reliant too much on speculation:

> *Dear Phineas,*
>
> *I am glad you are putting your time and learning into this endeavor, something I remember discussing with you in much detail. Although I applaud the structure of your book, the methodology employed, although you simply are missing something else, the mysteriousness in their works. How did Homer come about? What about Heraclitus? Or Socrates? These remain mysteries. Perhaps there is a kind of inspiration that is not found wholly in texts. Your work is an attempt to demystify, though the mystery still remains. Your work reminds me of someone who is trying to understand the creation of the world by purely naturalistic means. If living creatures were created by*

the first single-celled organism, then how did the first single celled organism come about? Your book's theory if it is true, how does it explain the first literature, one of pure invention?

Yours Truthfully,

Geoffrey

He thought about what his friend wrote, perhaps his view was disheartening to accept. He spent years on the project. Although perhaps one thing could be saved from the work, something completely different from his original idea, a kind of dialectic between the author's imagination and their literary Father's. The notion of the great library at Alexandria, the puzzle of intellectualism would be reduced to its own chapter.

In Mendel's theory of genes, the change of genes from one generation to the next, suggests something else. In a period before, one human beings are unknowing of, was creation. The mystery as to the beginning of things. Man is like the books he writes, a creation that keeps creating, from a transcendent first cause, and an inexplicable insight that appears in flashes throughout time. This explains why the Library of Alexandria was dedicated to the nine goddesses of inspiration. The experience of beauty precedes creation, providing the artist and thinker with imagination so as to invent. A transcendence grasped from an unknowable realm, a conduit to a place of pure truth, of the divine in stasis.

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Justin Wong is originally from Wembley, though at the moment is based in the West Midlands. He has been passionate about the English language and Literature since a young age. Previously, he lived in China working as an English teacher. His novel *Millie's Dream* is available here.

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