

Introduction

At the Origins of the Encyclopedic Dream

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Encyclopedism has a history that cannot be reduced to that of sciences and bodies of knowledge. Retracing this history leads to a discovery of how human societies have, in different historical moments, organized the corpus of their knowledge, inscribed it on material mediums, and provided for its organization and transmission. Encyclopedism is that moment when a culture reflects on itself, its memory, and its outer limits.

The texts brought together here seek to shed light on certain aspects of the cultural history of the Greco-Roman world, particularly the forms taken by the project of gathering together all the areas of knowledge and all the books that perpetuate them; a reflection on the articulation of the disciplines and the foundations of knowledge; and the political and intellectual project of the universal library, so well embodied in the institution founded by the Ptolemies in Alexandria.¹

The encyclopedism of the ancient world is not manifested in the attempt to produce a book of books that would gather together the totality of human knowledge to preserve it from the shipwrecks of history. It assumes other forms and involves different actors, different places.

A first avenue would introduce us to several emblematic figures, each embodying a unique approach to the quest for or mastery of universal knowledge: thus, the archaic poet inspired by the omniscient Muses; the Sophist who visited the classical Greek cities and was sure to have a ready answer for everything, by virtue of the arts of speech and memory; the philosopher-scholar who, like Plato, embarked upon the quest for truth via the mastery of dialectic and a form of writing that mimicked oral dia-

logue, or who, like Aristotle and his disciples, pursued investigations organized according to the twofold division of the disciplines and the regions of being; the Ptolemies who wanted to appropriate the entire written memory of the Greek and barbarian world, and to create the largest library of civilized Earth in their Alexandrian palace; the learned man and the scholar who worked in the libraries under royal patronage and attempted, not without difficulty, to manage the infinite accumulation of books and create the tools for exploiting this archived knowledge; finally, the Hellenistic philosopher who reflected on the links between science and wisdom and on the ideal intellectual training.

A second approach would lead us to several exemplary places. The first are Miletus and Ionia in the sixth and early fifth centuries B.C., where we see the birth of new intellectual projects that lie between science and philosophy: the physics, geometry and astronomy of Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, and the *Periegesis* and *Genealogies* in which Hecataeus assembled and organized all of the information then accessible to him on geographical space and the Greek accounts of the past. Another decisive step was Aristotle's school in Athens, his collective organization of intellectual work and scientific research, linked in particular to the existence of a collection of books. This path steers us yet again to Alexandria in the third century B.C., to its universal library that would have housed close to 500,000 rolls of papyrus, according to some sources: all of culture gathered together in the form of its written traces, opening up new intellectual spaces of cataloguing, edition, research and exegesis.

A third road through ancient culture takes us through a number of disciplinary fields (the natural sciences, medicine, astronomy, geography, mathematics), revealing their structural evolution over time, the epistemological models they bring to bear, the definitions of their identities, their methods and their goals. We could thus observe the dynamics of these scientific and intellectual traditions, the ways in which they are organized in a corpus, in which they recapitulate their stores of knowledge in the form of treatises that preserve the accumulation of observations, demonstrations, and interpretations.

The contributions gathered here follow and freely interweave these different problematic threads, by proposing a reflection on

some of the forms taken by the project of totalizing knowledge in Antiquity. This endeavor raises a number of questions that lie at the heart of the history of encyclopedism.

The first question concerns the links between the totalization of knowledge and power: the political and economic power of the Hellenistic kings who, in Alexandria and in Pergamum, invested considerable resources in creating large libraries and in mobilizing a group of scholars and writers to use these libraries. What did the attempt to reunite all of human culture (*paideia*) in one and the same place, in the analogical form of all the books ever written, signify for Ptolemy I and Ptolemy II Philadelphus? What was the significance of creating a locus of memory where Hellenism and the “barbarian wisdoms” would come together? What was the meaning of a universal library? With what concepts, what images, can such a project be conceived?

A universal library has perhaps before anything else an intellectual architecture: this leads to a questioning of the forms and limits of a reflection on “encyclopedism” in the ancient world. What divisions and what connections should be projected onto knowledge? How should the archipelago of disciplines and sciences be mapped? Should one proceed by simply juxtaposing fields of knowledge? Should these be organized according to epistemological criteria, according to their axiomatic foundations, or even according to the procedures for producing and validating knowledge? What models are brought into play in order to carry out these classifications? A hierarchy of all knowledge? Or a necessary sequence that would permit the student to follow an intellectual and spiritual itinerary, to move up by degrees and, completing the “circle of disciplines,” to achieve an ideal education?

But encyclopedism cannot be reduced to simply collecting all the forms of knowledge in the world. It implies transmitting and communicating them in forms that produce specific intellectual effects, and it is therefore necessary to reflect on the mediums and instruments of totalization: treatises, collections, commentaries, glossaries, maps, syntaxes. Each of these forms deploys its own rules for collecting, unifying, and ordering knowledge.

A twofold avenue of research is thus opened. First there is a reflection on the status of writing as an instrument for producing

and conserving knowledge, as well as on the doubts and concerns that question this status and that lead to the Sceptical challenge arising out of the very accumulation of divergent and irreconcilable theses, models, and statements. Then, a typology of learned and literary practices that make it possible to collect knowledge and to produce (or not) a totality through the accumulation of partial and local data.

By “learned practices,” we mean a series of concrete gestures that are also intellectual operations: reading, writing, commenting, editing, extracting information from books and reorganizing it into systems that recontextualize it, create new ways of reading and new patterns of association, and decline semantic fields and collections of objects from the natural world. A large library is a place of mobilization – of the world, of books, knowledge, of texts. It is also a place for mobilizing the information, facts, and observations that will generate new ideas and new knowledge. The practices of scholarly reading and writing thus resemble “navigations” across different spaces (the catalogue, dictionary, geographical map, naturalist classification) that make it possible for objects of knowledge (measures, observations, words, factual information, citations) to be circulated and transformed through successive levels of reorganization and assemblage. The addition of partial data thus produces specific forms of totality (all the places and peoples of the civilized world, all the curiosities of nature, all the stars of the sky, all the words of the Greek language, etc.).

A final question: is the totalization of knowledge an effect, an object or a project? Does it reside in the epistemological framework that gives the various fields of knowledge of a given culture their articulation? Is it constructed through the patient and meticulous work of erudition that traces its unpredictable paths through the labyrinth of books, elaborating, through the processes of compilation and ordering, areas of local and circumscribed mastery? Or must we seek it in the activity of the intellect that, having long threaded its way through the rolls of papyrus, attains a synthetic vision by virtue of that particular discipline of memory and thought that leads from reading to abstraction?

*Translated from the French by Janine Alexandra Treves,
with Jennifer Curtiss Gage.*

Notes

1. These texts were presented and discussed at a one day conference of the research network "Les Mondes lettrés" (Centre Louis-Gernet, CNRS) on "Les Formes de totalisation du savoir dans l'Antiquité," on 14 January 1997, in the context of the series of meetings on Encyclopedism organized by the Bibliothèque nationale de France. We greatly thank Roland Schaer and Thierry Grillet (Direction du Développement culturel de la Bibliothèque nationale de France) who made it possible for us to organize this seminar.