

essentially all modern biology. She takes up the key arguments and reduces them to sets of clear statements that can be assessed in a straightforward manner. This is applied philosophy at its best.

Though Richards is sympathetic toward modern evolutionary science, she never proselytizes. The exposition identifies all weaknesses and ambiguities in the philosophical stands she favors as well as in those she rebuts. But her rebuttals are devastating. To begin with, she pays scrupulous attention to what the belligerents actually say, and the results sometimes surprise even the author. She writes, "If you follow up in detail any of the claims about what opponents [of one position in the controversy] are supposed to have said . . . you may be quite startled by the extent of misquoting, quoting out of context, looking for the worst

interpretation of what is said, and flagrant misrepresentation that goes on."

Largely, though, she concentrates on the logical validity of the complaints against Darwinism in general and sociobiology in particular. Not surprisingly, a central chapter addresses the common assertion that a radical Darwinian, materialist view of the world (and hence of human origins and behavior) requires the conclusion that there is no such thing as objective moral truth. The corollary is, of course, that some form of spirit or deity is needed if we are to have any moral universals at all. Richards's persuasive refutation of this claim should give comfort not only to biologists but to honest religionists as well. This book is a course that everyone with an opinion about Darwinism ought to take.

—PAUL R. GROSS

## ARTS & LETTERS

### *LIBRARIES IN THE ANCIENT WORLD.*

By Lionel Casson. Yale Univ. Press.  
192 pp. \$22.95

The royal librarian to Ashurbanipal, the monarch who ruled Assyria from 668 to 627 B.C., apparently had a theft problem. A clay tablet dug up in Nineveh in the 1800s bears this inscription: "Your lordship is without equal, Ashur, King of the Gods! Whoever removes [the tablet] . . . may Ashur and Ninlil, angered and grim, cast him

down, erase his name, his seed, in the land."

Ashurbanipal maintained a library because he could read and write cuneiform, a rare skill among rulers of the ancient Near East. His collection has come down to us with such homely details of its bibliographic housekeeping still intact because it had the great good fortune of being engraved on clay tablets. These, as Casson points out in his short and elegant history of the early growth of libraries, are vastly more likely to survive than papyrus, because fire only makes them more durable: "When a conqueror set a Mesopotamian palace ablaze, he helped ensure the survival of any clay tablets in it."

This drama of preservation and destruction echoes through Casson's account of the gradual development of modern library practices. A classics professor emeritus at New York University and the author of many accessible accounts of ancient culture, Casson tracks that development through references in contemporary accounts, artistic depictions of people reading, and other such hints. The collections themselves, of course, have mostly vanished.

But the outlines of the story are clear. Near Eastern libraries such as Ashurbanipal's were the first to assign titles to their



*Scholars read papyrus scrolls in a hall of the library in Alexandria, Egypt.*

texts for easy reference and to create something we can recognize as a catalogue. Greece, where literacy was far more widespread, saw the first signs of an economy of book (that is to say, scroll) distribution, which allowed individuals such as Aristotle to amass private collections of high repute. Ancient Egypt probably had libraries—but with the contents on papyrus.

The great library at Alexandria, the first to be both truly comprehensive and open to a large scholarly public, was also the first to practice alphabetization and to have a complete shelf list, the famed *Pinakes* that listed and described every work of Greek literature. The *Pinakes* perished along with the rest of the library in the still mysterious catastrophe that ended its existence. (Weighing in on this longstanding conundrum, Casson says the library was probably burned not by Julius Caesar but by the forces of the Roman emperor Aurelian as they put down a rebellion around A.D. 270.)

Casson's story continues through Rome, which contributed the innovation of non-scholarly public libraries for leisure reading, and up to the rise of Christianity, which helped spread use of the parchment codex (the ancient equivalent of a book)—probably because it was free of the scroll's cultural and religious associations. Throughout, the tale is told in upbeat tones. But its feel is bittersweet, a story of progress in the preservation of human knowledge set against a backdrop of constant loss.

—AMY SCHWARTZ

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#### DOUBLE FOLD:

##### *Libraries and the Assault on Paper.*

By Nicholson Baker. Random House.  
384 pp. \$25.95

Baker, best known as a novelist, has a new obsession. Previous obsessions have included John Updike (*U and I*) and sex (*Vox*, *The Fermata*). *Vox*, of course, is the *Moby Dick* of phone-sex narratives, the book Monica gave Bill so that he'd get the idea; *The Fermata*, duller but longer, is no one's idea of a gift. What's got Baker heated up these days is, of all things, the misbehavior of the nation's librarians. No, not *that* kind of misbehavior, but rather the librarians' complicity in a decades-long conspiracy to rid themselves of a good portion of the stuff that so complicates their lives: those space-hungry books, newspapers, and periodicals.

In *Double Fold* (the term refers to a way of testing the durability of a page), Baker argues, with a master rhetorician's tricks and a clever lawyer's selective regard for facts, that our great research libraries, led by the Library of Congress, have betrayed the cultural heritage they were supposed to guard. And what is the implement of their treason? The microfilm camera. The libraries have transferred to film—brutally and imperfectly, in Baker's version—the contents of hundreds of thousands of books and newspapers and destroyed the originals in the process, or discarded them subsequently, on the grounds that they were no longer required. (The destructive procedures he rails against, by the way, are no longer the preservation standard.) The justification for the filming was the inexorable workings of chemistry: The acidic content of paper produced in America throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries has doomed it to inevitable darkening and weakening.

What's in dispute is just how weak, and therefore how useless, the printed materials will eventually become. Baker challenges the scientific evidence that persuaded the librarians, though he cannot dismiss what is plain to anyone who has ever left a newspaper too long in the light, or even in the dark. Baker discredits the microfilming process too, but how hard is that? Who in his right mind has a good word to say about using microfilm, which ranks as a form of torture with economy-class air travel or reading *The Fermata*?

There's no denying Baker's charge that we're the poorer for having destroyed the original copies of books and newspapers that represent—often uniquely—aspects of the nation's historical temperament; the microfilm versions are no adequate replacement but a mere grim expedient. Of course, we're a lot poorer for the loss of most of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles too, but life goes on. The world's a destructive place, and to pretend otherwise, to insist, as Baker is disposed to insist, that we save every scrap of original printed matter—book, magazine, flier, inscribed Post-It—because you never know what the future may decide was significant about the past, is to be blind not just to economics but to reality.

So is half the truth better than none? Not when the result is a deceptive half-truth. What's shameful about *Double Fold* is its systematic dis-