Actio 2.3

Alexandria

The Great Library,
Center of Learning,
Home of the Muses,
Place of the Scholar...
Me.

I sit here, surrounded by tombs,
The brittle, fragile graves of other scholars.
This location of learning,
This temple of thought,
This creation of kings,
Is the witness of countless closed chapters.
Each scroll is a dream once dreamt,
A song once sung.
Tied to them are tags which help them
Stand out from among all their fellows.

I sit in the presence of thousands,
Hundreds of thousands.
Their silent eyes watch me as I work.
I am known to them,
As they are known to me.
I will one day join them
As a member of this great and growing body
Made up of scholars long gone:
Dead libraries, each one.
But until my final breath falls from my lips,
And the doorway of death stands gaping before me,
I will be numbered among those others.
I am still alive…
A living library.

My memory resembles my home,
This Ptolemaic Mouseoin Academy,
This Museum,  
Houses me in life  
As it will house me in death.  
For I am a scholar,  
Offered food and bed if I but live and work  
Surrounded by the pages of dead sages.  
Poets, kings, wise men, and foolish,  
They crafted their tombstones as they wrote their words,  
And this is something to always remember…  
The thoughts I give to others will haunt my legacy forever.

My body will decay,  
My bones will turn to dust,  
But my spirit, my soul, my memory,  
Will live on forever among my brothers.  
Even should this wondrous space,  
This physical creation of human hands,  
One day fall before the wrath of the gods…  
I shall never truly be gone.  
Words are like magic  
And are as close to the heavens as mortal man may climb  
While still wrapped in flesh.  
I am mortal,  
As all men are,

But I can be immortal through my transcribing of thoughts and wisdoms.  
That is the grace given us,  
We scholars of these great temples,  
By The Muses themselves.  
They inspire us to spread our words like nets to catch the ear,  
Like spears to pierce the mind,  
Like whispers to entice the seeking.

The rooms which house the great scrolls of the learned dead  
Are not ranked randomly, as though mass graves were dug and filled.  
They were arranged and are known by great men:  
Zenodotus,  
Callimachus,  
Aristophanes.  
Each name a testimony to knowledge and the power of memory.  
Each name a reminder that tomorrow will bring new thoughts.  
Each name an embodiment of attempted organization,  
Here in this place where such men are gatekeepers.
I may see little of the world beyond these walls,
The growing, twisting snarl of streets and stores.
But here, within the confines of my confinement
I am content to be what I have become:
   A scholar of the library.
   A scribe of the past.
   A partaker of tomorrow's creation.
And so while I remain within these beautifully Grecian walls,
   Standing on ancient Egyptian soil,
   And administered by distant Roman hands...
   I am home.

Background

This poem is written as free verse, and is a style which I greatly enjoy using. It lets me focus less on trying to make things rhyme and more on getting the right feel across. In working on this piece, I was inspired by several articles which I had read on the Alexandrian library and the temple which housed it. One of the articles, in particular, caught and held my interest. The author, Ole Olesen-Bagneux, has written a very pointed piece which focuses on reworking our understanding of how that very famous library actually operated. I was especially drawn to his point that “death and written text was considered to be closely connected in Greek antiquity” (4). He goes on to say that “the written testimonies of a person...were viewed as the true tomb of the person leaving them behind” (4). Scholars were, therefore, considered either living or dead libraries, which meant those of that group “regarded a library as an enormous graveyard, containing the true sepulchral monuments of the writers now dead” (5).

The unnamed scholar in this poem is unnamed for a reason. The original idea for this great library came, supposedly, from Alexander himself, after he had viewed Ashurbanipal's library in Nineveh (Phillips 2), but it was the Ptolemies, his successors, who saw the plan through to completion. They were incredibly determined to have a truly magnificent library, as is clear from the methods used, to obtain “the best, most original, most authoritative copies” (Phillips 4). If books were borrowed by the library, scribes would make copies, and then the copies would be returned, instead of the originals (Phillips 4). The poetic version of a scholar which I have created is meant to represent one of the many who never rose to be a Zenodotus or Callimachus or Aristophanes. He is there because “the Ptolemies offered scholars free board, lodging, servants, tax exemptions, and handsome salaries -- for life” (Phillips 3). He is well aware that his life is now going to be lived within the walls of the academy, and that he is surrounded by the words of countless men, both great and mediocre, who wrote down their thoughts while they lived.

I decided to focus on a nameless one because they are so often forgotten by history. And they are forgotten for a reason...it is nearly impossible to remember them in a truly accurate way, from a historical standpoint. There is so little primary source material relating to them, that they disappear as soon as they are gone. It is for that reason it is easiest to recall them using
literature as the medium. The great men of history did great things: it’s why they are remembered. But the little men, the ones who aren’t even noted in history’s footnotes, are what enabled those who were greater than them to reach those heights. And personally, I think that deserves to be honored.

And so, I wrote a poem dedicated to the many scholars and scribes who lived and worked within the walls of the Great Library. It was their world, in the same way that a shop is the world of the merchant, or a ship is the world to its captain. They kept the institution which we still recall going for as long as it did. There are a few places above where I have had to include some creative embellishment, but this is normal when taking a historical situation and adjusting it to fit into a literary style.
Works Cited

Olesen-Bagneux, Ole. "The Memory Library: How the Library in Hellenistic Alexandria Worked."

