

Two Book Thieves

1.

Some books are bound in tooled leather and jewels. Some books have been bound in human skin. Some books, such as Virgil's Aeneid or Holy Scripture, are used as oracles in the practice of "bibliomancy": open the book at random, plunge the finger down blindly. Some books, such as the Noble Qur'an, are used to create talismans and spells against possession by evil spirits. Oaths were once sworn upon bibles. Such books may be described as fetishes in the strict sense that some measure of life and power is attributed to their physical presence. These fetishized books are precious; they are treasure, and like treasures they often go into hoards whose collectors may or may not decide to make them available for viewing and admiration by non-proprietors.

To these collections, many of which have been formed within or transferred to the great libraries of the world, we owe, to begin with, the preservation of many works of art that might not otherwise have survived. With the right credentials we can visit the rare-book rooms of these libraries or these private collections and handle precious books. The experience leaves a vivid impression. Most people have felt themselves in a field of power when in the presence of an illuminated manuscript or a book that Poe handled or Coleridge marked up. Precious books, like paintings or architecture, allow us to witness and feel the work that went into making them and connect us with the makers and the users. They are status items for consumers of the authentic, no question, but they are still nodes of valuable experience for anyone, nodes around which images, ideas, and actions can crystallize.

One action they suggest, alas, is theft. All libraries are plagued by book thieves, and most of the time it is the intellectual content that the thief wants, more than the physical envelope; but some libraries, especially the older ones founded by princes or rich men, the ones that contain collections of precious books or are no more than such collections, attract thieves because the books are precious. Of course money-value as a motive is not absent; if a thief can successfully fence a stolen item, he can realize a high price. The Girolamini Library in Naples, a baroque foundation with important holdings, recently lost 3,000 of them to its director, Marino Massimo De Caro, who moved the stolen books and boxes into a storage unit, and began to sell them on the international book market. De Caro, who is doing time and may do more, was in it for the money. More

interesting, and my subject in this essay, are the thieves who steal books to form collections they could never have hoped to afford with their own means, and in particular two such characters: the Florentine Count Guglielmo Libri-Carrucci and the American Stephen Carrie Blumberg. Their thefts of carefully guarded precious books often involved heroic measures requiring great connoisseurship, technical knowledge, ingenuity, courage, and advanced skills in imposture and burglary.

2.

Stephen Blumberg never sold one of the 23,000 or more books that he stole from 268 libraries in 45 states and two provinces of Canada over the course of at least 22 years. The FBI found them carefully shelved and catalogued in a house in Ottumwa, Iowa, undamaged except for library bookplates and embossings removed or flattened out by tongue (Blumberg was “the book-licker”) and, in a few cases, replaced by false bookplates or library stamps. He did not, like Edward Forbes Smiley, an expert in antique maps, cut valuable maps out of books with an X-acto knife; or, like Farhad Hakimzadeh, a wealthy book collector and former director of the Iran Heritage Foundation, take a scalpel to books in the British Library to extract pages with no bearing on the cultural heritage of Iran (one was an engraving of a map by Hans Holbein, valued at nearly \$50,000) [Caccioto and Richardson articles (xerox)]. Stephen Blumberg loved and respected the books and papers he had stolen and knew exactly where each had come from.

Enjoying an income of \$72,000 a year (in 1970s dollars), Blumberg was able to buy and equip the Ottumwa house and bankroll his extensive travels around North America. He was, besides, beyond frugal in his manner of living. Nicholas Basbanes describes the moment when Blumberg felt the need to change his clothes, which he had been wearing for a long time, by climbing inside a Goodwill donations box, finding shirt and trousers in his size, and emerging outfitted anew (Bas. 485). Basbanes, who offers a rounded portrait of Blumberg in his *A Gentle Madness*, does not comment directly on Blumberg’s motives for his thefts, but he quotes him extensively and describes the nature of the “Blumberg Collection” and how it was built.

It was his accomplice, Kenneth Rhodes, who turned state’s evidence and described Blumberg’s methods in detail at the 1990 trial, leading to his old friend’s conviction and sentencing to nearly six years of federal time. Careful research, technical ingenuity, actual burglary, and impersonation were all skills in which he was advanced. Rice University Libraries in Houston, an early target, was a relatively easy one. It had, at the time of Blumberg’s visits, no alarm system in its libraries. To get in, Blumberg had only to identify himself as a visiting scholar. He went in with a

single-edge razor blade, sandpaper, glue, and a few other small tools such as dental picks, and of course his tongue. He'd begin by licking off the card pocket and the library sticker, then sand off any stamps printed on the edges of the pages, locate and fish out electromagnetic security strips inserted into the book's spines, slice out any blank pages embossed with the library seal, and finally glue in a new bookplate or print a new stamp from a different library. (He once, when caught, had hurriedly to eat a rubber stamp he had brought along for this purpose.) Back at the motel, he often pencilled in a used-bookseller's code and price, to make it seem he had purchased the book.

Blumberg was an accomplished housebreaker, though most often the houses he raided for artefacts were untenanted. He would "comb the obits" in the local newspapers and find records of deaths where there were no apparent legatees; then he would visit those houses and inherit their mantels and door-furniture (Basbanes, 484). These skills of breaking and entering he was able to apply to libraries. Where security systems were in place, for instance, Blumberg might open the wall in some other part of the library and go in through the ductwork (he benefited here from being small and agile). In some libraries the rare-book collection was fenced in with wire that left a gap at top or bottom, and he would squeeze through that. He became an expert locksmith in the course of his travels, so that when he encountered locks on collections, he would break into the library after hours (or simply stay after closing), pick the lock on the librarian's office, locate the key rings, find the key that opened the room containing the items he meant to acquire, and leave to have it copied. The following night he would repeat the process, slipping the original key back on the ring while keeping the copy and using it. In libraries where the rare books were kept on a floor where the elevator would not ordinarily stop, he learned and put into practice methods for stopping it (still at night) and holding it while he loaded it up (Bas 471-2). Or he would climb up the elevator shaft and once nearly got crushed when someone set the elevator in motion (Bas 480). If he couldn't get books out through the library, he dropped them out of windows.

He was not often able to pass himself off as the sort of scholar librarians entrust their rarities to until in 1980 he found a faculty photo-ID on the circulation desk of the University of Minnesota. It belonged to a professor of psychology, Matthew McGue. He promptly went to California and took out a driver's license in that name, and also altered McGue's card so that it bore his own photograph. For the next eight years, till Blumberg was caught at the University of California Riverside, "Professor McGue" visited libraries around the country, where he applied for reading privileges in the special collections and built his own.

An idea of his motivation may be derived from an account of what he stole. With a few exceptions, Steven Blumberg stole Americana, especially books and papers relating to the settlement of the United States, with special attention to the Mid-West, where he was from, and the Far West. Blumberg began by stealing books about nineteenth century antiques and architectural fittings such as stained glass, mantelpieces, and door-knobs, and other period hardware, in order to know how collectible they were and to guide his “obit” burglaries. Some of these artefacts he later sold or traded, but the Ottumwa house was packed with them. Blumberg’s interest in Victorian America began in the 60s and accelerated to the point, in 1969, that his father ceased to destroy the things Stephen brought home and instead threw him and them out, setting him up in an apartment, which he began to furnish. He was visited there in 1972 by a reporter from the St. Paul Pioneer Press, who wrote a piece entitled “The Victorian World of Steve Blumberg,” echoed some months later by “The World of Stephen Blumberg” in *Preservation*, a national quarterly published by the national Trust for Historic Preservation (Bas 501).

“World” is an interesting word here. Stephen Blumberg would not have been alone in feeling that the modern world was not providing a coherent or nourishing situation in the era of the Vietnam war and the abandonment of inner cities. The decades between the end of the Civil War and the outbreak of the first World War still offer many conservatives a nostalgic vision of what America should be. The artefacts of that world were all around Blumberg, no longer valued by anyone else, so he took them. At first he hoped to create an enlarged Victorian world in a derelict mansion he purchased on Elliot Avenue in St. Paul, in 1978. He hoped to make it a showcase but ran afoul of building codes and zoning restrictions (Basb 505). His resentment at being so thwarted was a factor that energized his much more aggressive library raiding thereafter. The loss of Elliot Avenue could be described as a crisis of election: Blumberg fully accepted the book-thief’s calling thereafter. He never again attempted a world — the Ottumwa house was a warehouse — but from the fact of his never selling any books, of treating them as a collection, it is clear that their value to him was not how much he could get for them.

These were also the years in which Americans were reading J. R. R. Tolkien and finding far more moral purpose in Middle Earth than in their own country. Fabulist writers, including the science-fiction/fantasy community who developed hundreds of imitations of Tolkien, know something about world-building, especially the building of premodern worlds. They would recognize the impulse that led Stephen Blumberg to rescue objects of virtú from an adverse and oblivious environment, to build a Victorian world within and against that world; some might claim him as a

“Steampunk” collector. The writer and encyclopedist John Clute has developed some terms that are helpful here. In times when the world is felt to be “thinning,” that is, reduced to an impoverished level of experience by the “passing away of a higher and more intense reality” (*The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, p. 942, col. 1), it becomes necessary to erect what he calls “polders” (772, col. 2): “enclaves of toughened reality, demarcated by boundaries from the surrounding world.... A polder, in other words, is an *active* microcosm, armed against the potential wrongness of that which surrounds it, an anachronism *consciously* opposed to wrong time.” Stephen Blumberg’s books were precious to him, I submit, as a testimony to an age when the United States was heroic and it was possible to live more fully. Together with the bits of houses he amassed the books composed a sort of polder against the America of urban decay and “urban renewal.”

I am suggesting that history sets up situations in which particular impulses are repressed and others in which they are expressed, even encouraged. Our other book thief, Count Guglielmo Libri-Carrucci dalla Sommaia, “Count Libri,” could hardly have stolen as many manuscripts, books, and autographs as he did at any other time in European history. Libri — the name means “books” in Italian, and as many have noted, *nomen est omen* — came of age in post-Napoleonic Italy. He entered into positions of power and eminence in France following the July Revolution of 1830 and was forced to flee France by the Revolution of 1848. Before he came to Paris he was a brilliant young mathematician, professor at Pisa when he was just 20. In between the revolutions he stole and sold thousands upon thousands of rare and beautiful books, manuscripts, and autograph sheets. After he fled to London, he stole no more and became an antiquarian bookdealer. When he died in 1865, back in Florence, he left his widow many books but little cash.

3.

Libri began collecting fine editions at 12, in 1814, and three years later he was cataloguing all the books in the Libri household. Soon thereafter he began buying and selling Aldines, books printed by the early Venetian printer Aldus Manutius (MRM 61). The first documented thefts date from 1825, when at 23 he was appointed librarian at the Georgofili Academy in Florence. Libri had just come back from Paris and had brought them some books. Over the course of the next year volumes went missing, some 300 of them, as his successor claimed in 1826. Libri bluffed and blustered and finally told his mother which books to return (MRM 62-3).

The holdings of the Georgofili were poorly maintained and sketchily catalogued. Libraries in such condition naturally attract predators, including, or perhaps especially, members of their own

staffs. The state of libraries generally left much to be desired, and nowhere was this more true than the libraries of post-Revolutionary France. During the 1790s France was attacked on all sides and had to raise money quickly in order to arm itself. One source of income was the holdings of ecclesiastical institutions, especially monasteries, which were expropriated wholesale. Books and manuscripts slated for sale were dumped in quantities on the provincial public libraries, which could not afford the staff to care for them nor even to register more than a few of them (Norman, 5-6). Later, following Napoleon's conquests in Italy, Egypt, and elsewhere, looted artworks and artifacts poured back into France, including large numbers of Italian manuscripts. These mainly were deposited in the libraries of the capital, where they received hardly better treatment than the items in the provinces. Libri, who as a historian of science visited many of these libraries and vigorously criticized their stewardship of the riches they held, describes time and time again coming across heaps of valuable manuscripts stacked in corners or crammed together on nearly inaccessible upper shelves:

In the issue for July of 1841 [of the *Journal des Savants*] was printed the first of Libri's famous articles of the unknown treasures to be found in provincial libraries, eighteen of which he had visited officially. He gave an enthusiastic account of some of the choicest items to be found in each, with explanations of their importance. The whole was anything but flattering to the libraries or to the men of learning whose lack of interest seemed to him to forbode a dire fate for the manuscripts: the wrapping counters of grocery shops. If he exaggerated the danger, he still cannot be blamed for a concern over beautiful specimens of monastic writing lying in corners covered with undisturbed dust of years. (McC, 19)

It may seem odd to hear of these official visits by a book thief, but here again Libri had taken advantage of an opportunity opened for him by the circumstances of the day and by his being the right man in the right place at the right time. In 1834 François Guizot, then minister of public instruction and later the foreign minister and de facto prime minister — the most powerful man in the July Monarchy of Louis Philippe, and the minister most closely identified with that régime at the time of the Revolution of 1848 — had founded the *Comité chargé de diriger les recherches et la publication de documents inédits*. Later, in 1837, he and the writer Prosper Mérimée founded the *Comité historique des monuments écrits* (N xvii). Following the example of patriotic intellectuals in post-Napoleonic Germany, who looked to establish a German national identity and culture by bringing to light cultural artifacts and publishing texts hitherto only available in manuscript, Guizot, trained as a historian, “endeavoured to embed the new regime in the continuity of national history, in order to strengthen its legitimacy. In his opinion, history could be a powerful force of social cohesion and

sustain a need for national pride by illustrating the importance of France's past" (<http://www.guizot.com/en/politics/heritage-policy/>; see also N 27-8).

Libri had become known to Guizot first when, in the winter of 1824-5, he made his first trip to Paris. His errand was to get his father out of jail. Count Giorgio Libri, a highly unstable and combative man, was serving a life-sentence in the Conciergerie for swindling and forgery; his son, with the assistance of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, had petitioned for his release and traveled to advance his cause, successfully (McC 11-12, MRM 21-3, 39-41). Libri's reputation as a mathematical prodigy had preceded him; he had written a study of number theory that had caught the attention of Christian Gauss and Augustin Cauchy (<http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/Biographies/Libri.html>). On his arrival in Paris he was presented to the Académie des Sciences by Alexander von Humboldt (N20), as a result of which he was received in intellectual circles and so met Guizot. Then, in July, 1830, when Libri had once more traveled to Paris, this time to put some distance between himself and the Georgofili affair, and to consult the Mazarine Library's manuscript holdings by Leonardo Da Vinci, the revolution broke out that brought Louis Philippe and Guizot to power. Libri fought on the barricades and so earned Guizot's lifetime loyalty. He returned briefly to Florence, where in 1831 he was compromised in a botched uprising and returned to France, stopping at Carpentras, where he spent more time with the collection (MRM 81-2).

He arrived in Paris penniless but provided with charm, energy, social rank, and many connections in the cultural and intellectual world. In short order he became a French citizen, a member of the Académie des Sciences, a salaried professor at the Sorbonne, a salaried lecturer (later professor) at the Collège de France, chevalier of the Legion of Honor (N xvi-xvii), and paid contributor to the *Journal des Savants* (N32). He also published his greatest scholarly monument, the *Histoire des sciences mathématiques en Italie* in four volumes between 1838 and 1841.

In the course of these volumes and in other writings Libri frequently expressed distress at the condition of manuscripts in the libraries of Italy and France, particularly the Bibliothèque Royale (MRM 170), where he was hoping for an appointment as Keeper of Manuscripts. In 1836, in recognition of his deep knowledge of the manuscript tradition and of matters such as bindings and palaeography, he had been named to a second committee with the mission of preserving historical works, and in 1841 Guizot's successor at the Ministry of Public Instruction appointed him to head a team of inspectors deputed to catalogue the holdings of provincial libraries, in order to compile a "union" catalog. Libri created the protocols for these inspections and himself visited some eighteen

libraries over the next few years; indeed, he had begun these visits even before his official appointment and had spent so much time at Troyes that he was able to publish a report on that library almost at once (N 41). Accounts by the librarians there have him climbing tall ladders to get at the manuscripts shelved high above the books, of ordering in his dinner and staying part or all of the night.

It was at Troyes that the character of Libri originated as an inspector behaving as a grand seigneur, wrapped in a huge cloak, carrying a stiletto, claiming that as a refugee from Tuscany he might need this to defend himself against the *Carbonari*. (N 41-2)

In Paris, where he was a frequent guest at fashionable salons, Libri would often bring along some rare and beautiful item to show his fellow-guests. Libri by this time was known as a formidable connoisseur, less well as an active bookdealer; between 1835 and 1846 he held nine auction sales, never revealing his identity as the seller (N 28). In 1842 he brought with him to a salon a Pentateuch dating to the 6th or early 7th century. Prosper Mérimée, a close friend, exclaimed that he remembered having seen that book, even sketched some of its miniatures, in the library at Tours, but Libri corrected him. The Tours Pentateuch, he said, had been a copy of this one, which had been made in Italy (McC 22-3: Munby, “Earl/Thief,” 177-8).

Mérimée took his word for it, but in that same year word was already spreading that some of the material Libri was collecting and selling had been stolen. He was accused of taking uncatalogued items from the very libraries he was inspecting and whose conditions he so vigorously denounced, in particular from Carpentras, which he had now visited several times. The library at Carpentras as Libri found it would have offered much low-hanging fruit: it was “one of the most poorly organized in France, with a rudimentary catalogue that omitted all manuscripts, duplicate books, and acquisitions of the last half-century” (N 42). Its elderly librarian took far more interest in his own scholarly pursuits than in the drudgery of stewardship. Libri was said to have stolen 1,738 autograph pages from the papers of the 17th century astronomer Peiresc (N 44). Then in 1844, as these rumors were being circulated in Paris by his enemies, he secured a ministerial reference that allowed him to travel back to Florence for the first time since his flight, to do research at the Medici archives. A member of the staff noticed Libri stuffing papers in his pockets, and word got back to Paris (N 45). In December of 1845 the prefect of the Parisian police received a letter accusing Libri of stealing, from libraries in the south of France, materials worth between 300,000 and 400,000 francs (N 45). But with Guizot as his friend he was still pretty much untouchable. He must nevertheless have sensed that time was running out, for just as the letter of denunciation was being delivered, Libri was

negotiating to sell all his manuscripts to the British Museum (Munby, "Earl/Thief," 1778, Maccioni art. 36).

He chose that institution for several reasons. It was already the depository of a great wealth of manuscript material. The Keeper of Printed Books was an Italian, Antonio Panizzi, who like Libri had been exiled from Italy, in his case Modena, for political subversion (Mac. art, 36). They had become friends after meeting in Paris in the 1830s (Mac. art, 37). And there was no treaty between England and France at that time mandating the return of stolen property. Panizzi brought the Keeper of Manuscripts, Frederic Madden, to Paris to see the collection, and Madden instantly realized its value, particularly that of the Tours Pentateuch and the *Hours of Lorenzo de' Medici*. But purchases on that scale required special funds from the Treasury, which refused to meet Libri's price, while Libri refused to divide his collection and sell a part at a lower price. As negotiations were faltering, Libri was contacted by John Holmes, an assistant in Madden's department, who in November of 1846 put him in touch with the Earl of Ashburnham, a wealthy collector (Munby, "Earl/Thief," 181). In March of 1847 the transaction was completed. Libri received eight thousand pounds, and the Earl sixteen cases of manuscripts, in all 1,923 items (Munby, "Earl/Thief," 183-4). Later that year Libri held another auction and raked in another 100,000 francs (N 55); meanwhile Guizot became in fact what he had hitherto been virtually, France's prime minister.

But the game was nearly up for both of them. Louis Philippe's monarchy and Guizot's ministry had become increasingly unpopular, and socialism proved an ideology capable of organizing the demands of the swelling industrial working class. In February of 1848 the prosecutor Boucly received a second letter of denunciation against Libri, and Boucly's report made its way to Guizot's desk. Libri, summoned to explain, was able to reassure his old friend, and the report was set aside. It was found days later by revolutionaries breaking into Guizot's office and handed over to one of Libri's bitterest enemies, now a minister in the provisional government (N 60-61). Louis Philippe fled to England; so did Guizot; and so, a few days later, did Libri, after shipping out eighteen more crates of books and papers, which he had packed at speed, burning or sending to friends quantities of incriminating paper. (MR&M 235-6). He stopped by the Sorbonne to collect his salary before leaving and traveled in the company of Guizot's daughters, who pretended to be English. When they arrived, Panizzi greeted them.

In March the French investigation into the *affaire Libri* began with the search of Libri's premises and the several other places where he had stashed the books and papers he had not been able to ship. On the 19th the report by Boucly that had been found in Guizot's office was printed in

the government newspaper, *Le Moniteur Universel* (N. 64-5) and was reported on in *Times* of London as a “curious document.” What came after — the prosecution, Libri’s unrelentingly technical and long-winded obfuscations in defense of himself from London, the host of pamphlets written by friends and printed at his expense, the eventual sentencing of him *in absentia* to ten years hard labor, the negligible impact this had on his reputation or social standing in England, where he continued to buy and sell books, above all the heroic efforts over thirty years of Léopold Delisle, keeper of manuscripts and later head of the *Bibliothèque nationale* (formerly *royale*) to create a watertight case against Libri in the interests of getting the Ashburnham material back to France — is a fascinating story too long to rehearse in this place. In the end Delisle did secure most of the material, by purchase, and kept it in Paris to the outrage of the provincial librarians from whom it had been stolen. Two questions remain for us more relevant to the topic of dangers faced by libraries: what did Libri steal and how was he able to get away with it?

According to an inventory drawn up by Henri Bordier for the French government in 1848, the thefts included “six codices from the fifth century, six from the sixth century, five from the seventh century, four from the eighth century,” — we’re not up to the Carolingian Renaissance yet! — “fifty-one from the ninth century, twelve from the tenth century, fifteen from the eleventh century, and two from the twelfth century” (N 51). The indictment mentions a manuscript of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* that Libri stole from Carpentras, sent to Italy to be rebound and given a false Italian provenance, forged changes in the wording to make it seem a variant version, and sold in London. In addition he stole

- ❖ 150 manuscripts and autographs from the Mazarine library
- ❖ the Aldine *Galaeomyomachia*, also from the Mazarine (MRM 208)
- ❖ nineteen Italian manuscripts from Troyes.
- ❖ six ditto from Grenoble
- ❖ many books from Montpellier, leaving worthless books in their place to fool the librarians
- ❖ much of the correspondence of several monarchs and all of Henri IV’s from the Institut de France
- ❖ 66 manuscript sheets by Leonardo da Vinci (N 86) from the Institut de France
- ❖ Leonardo’s *Codice Atlantico*, stolen from the Archivio Mediceo (MRM 68) and
- ❖ Leonardo’s *Codex on the Flight of Birds* from the Institut de France (N 127-8)
- ❖ 343 autograph letters by Peiresc, from Carpentras

- ❖ an Aldine Theocritus, also from Carpentras
- ❖ an Aldine *Book of the Courtier* by Castiglione, again from Carpentras (MRM 203, 205).
- ❖ the entire Napoleonic archive (MRM 207, “acquired in Lyon”)
- ❖ the richly illuminated *Hours of Lorenzo de’ Medici* (N 86).

The importance and value of these items was not unknown; there were other connoisseurs and collectors of manuscripts and Aldines than Libri, although he was one of the first to see value in autograph materials such as letters. As the nature of what he was putting up for auction became known, many people were asking how Libri had managed to acquire such treasures on a professor’s salary. In reality he had three professor’s salaries, since besides the Sorbonne and the Collège de France the University of Pisa was still paying him an emeritus salary for his one year of teaching mathematics there, and of course he had been realizing profits from his sales all his life. But even with that income, and living a relatively frugal life, he would not have had the funds to buy, as he claimed, this sort of material on the open market. How was he able to continue stealing for the best part of twenty years?

To begin with, Libri knew more than anyone else about old books and manuscripts: how to establish (and therefore how to erase or alter) signs of provenance. He knew every method that could be used to erase a library stamp, remove an embossment, rebind a book, insert a blank page in the place of one he extracted. He knew where to get the right vintage of paper for such a blank (the ministry of foreign affairs — Guizot’s ministry — kept a quantity of unused paper in its basement). He knew whom to employ for book-washing, forgery, and binding, and what chemical agents to use to remove unwanted marks. He could judge age by binding and calligraphy and how to forge those same calligraphies; which one to use, for example, to alter words in the Carpentras Dante. And he was good at covering his tracks by sometimes returning books, by refusing his library-committee salary when his actions were called into question, by detailing the shortcomings in the libraries’ catalogues, and by publishing endless technical arguments in his own defense. He could claim, and frequently did, to be suffering from political persecution as an exiled Italian liberal, an enemy of the Jesuits, a friend of Guizot’s. And then there was the very general confusion about the whole matter of legal ownership. Auctioneers, collectors, even libraries and museums did not often check provenance, and few items came accompanied with an invoice or a catalogue description. Much of what Libri stole from libraries had been recently acquired by them through expropriation, from ecclesiastical foundations after the Revolution, or from Italy by Napoleon.

Libri was a Tuscan nobleman from an old family and an intellectual with a European reputation. Many doors opened to him on these accounts. He was able to use shared class or culture to establish a presumption of trustworthiness, so that librarians were willing to leave him alone, sometimes overnight, with their collections. Of course he also, after 1841, had a government position as inspector of libraries who could order librarians to send him their rarest items. And, the most obvious factor, he was protected by the most important man in the régime, Guizot.

3.

So now we have these two men, Steven Blumberg and Guglielmo Libri-Carrucci, both the most important book thieves of their respective day (a title that Blumberg strove for, so actively competing with James Shinn, the acknowledged record-holder before his time, that he kept a list of Shinn's thefts in a notebook (Bas 484-5) and knew exactly when he had passed him). Both were activated by the historical situation they were born into, Blumberg by the decay of the American city, or the myth of it, and Libri by the upheavals in traditions caused by the Napoleonic régime in Tuscany and the reactionary Hapsburg takeover that followed; still more by the subsequent July Revolution in France. In either case the history acted upon a complex psychological situation that I have not gone into, but hereditary madness has been diagnosed in both, for what such a diagnosis is worth. Maybe all advanced opportunists are driven by something they don't fully understand, but neither Libri nor Blumberg ever showed a speck of real self-knowledge or remorse.

Both did some harm; less, perhaps, than the word "thief" might suggest. Blumberg took valuable books out of circulation for a while, but they were so rarely wanted for scholarship that in many cases their loss was never missed, and more than one university librarian had to rely on Blumberg himself to identify the books he had pilfered from them. His records were impeccable. Libri by contrast put the valuable materials he stole into circulation by selling them. In the end neither man did much damage to the books or impaired their value to scholarship. Both rendered libraries a valuable service, though of course not an intentional one, by illuminating their shortcomings in cataloguing and protecting their holdings. Perhaps not as many American libraries holding irreplaceable collections will now leave a gap below those collections' enclosure wide enough to admit a lithe and motivated thief.

Libri for his part did quite a lot of good. Like Blumberg he greatly increased awareness of deficiencies of libraries and of the book-thief's art. He gave an impetus to the collection of

autographs (Munby, Keynes, 21; Norman 3) and of documents of purely archival, not esthetic, importance, (MRM 124). He advanced the recognition of the esthetic value of bindings (Norman, 3). He advanced the practice of bibliographic descriptions and annotations. And in the scientific world where he had first made his name he advanced the culture of evidence by citing, one of the first ever to do so, primary sources from manuscript and autograph documents, many of which were in his possession because he had stolen them. He was able, in the course of scholarly debates with his many rivals, to clinch his case by the use of such sources, a practice now of course standard.

Libri was a fully participating, highly connected member of the social and intellectual world of his day, and Blumberg a lone wolf who could only get access to what he stole as an impostor or a burglar; both in varying degrees traded on trust and violated it. Here is John L. Sharpe III, academic librarian at Duke University, on Blumberg's predation:

What I felt more than anything else was that we in libraries have to operate on a trust system every time we bring a book to someone's table. This is what I think is so sinister about the whole thing. This man chose to debase that, to debase that commodity that is so essential in gathering information in an open institution. And I think he betrayed everything that we try to represent in making information available as freely and uninhibitedly as possible (quoted in Basbanes, 511)

If no one condemned Libri in terms so moralistic, no librarian of his day was so clear of blame that he could afford to; and of course while he held his official position Libri had been in a position to compel trust. Perhaps more profoundly, the view of books, particularly old books, manuscripts, and autographs, as commodities delivering information had not occurred to most librarians and scholars in Libri's day. Sharpe's use of the word "commodity" may make us think of how profoundly Blumberg saw books as commodities fetishized not by their cash value as by their value to him in reinforcing the bulwarks of his private Victorian world. Libri's view was more complicated. Titles and social pretensions require funds to maintain them, and so does the collecting of books which also support such pretensions by revealing the connoisseur's eye, but there is little doubt that Libri took a fine pleasure from owning so much beauty and a coarser one from showing it off. Many of the items he took had been confiscated and warehoused in the public libraries of France as commodities to be sold in order to raise money for France's military needs; some of them had been taken from Italian collections by Napoleon's armies as commodities to shed glory on France. If these priceless and irreplaceable documents are now available for study, the credit may due at least in part to the book thieves who moved them, unwittingly, into safer hands, as Boccaccio did when, visiting the monastery of Monte Cassino, he found classical manuscripts so negligently kept and

even vandalized for talisman-making that he stole several to save them. We may owe our texts of Tacitus to his pilfering (Basb 75-6).