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Where We're Going to Start Again: Archives and the Apocalypse

“So destruction and creation are the only two alternatives for the universe.”¹

This boiled-down summation of the world's apocalyptic myths comes near the beginning of librarian and library-historian Fernando Baez's work *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books*, shortly after a description of the all-too-real tragedy of the destruction of Iraq's library in 2003. A discussion of the hypothetical ways in which the world might end may seem at first an odd introduction to a book intended as a factual history of cultural tragedies. Floods have not yet wiped out the entirety of civilization, nor, to the best of our knowledge, are any gods planning to descend and extinguish out the human race in a rain of fire, and the possibility that either of these things are going happen in the immediate future seems marginal at best.

Then again, those who guard the memory of human civilization – or, to put it less glamorously, archivists – are always taught to be on guard against the marginally possible. “Disaster planning” is a key component of archival management; the National Library of Australia's disaster plan, to provide one example, offers instructions on how to handle risks to their collections ranging from mold and insect infestation all the way up to fire, flood, and bomb damage.² Worst-case-scenario thinking is the rule of the profession. Archivists know in their bones that a carelessly handled book will eventually crumble into dust, and a nitrate print kept outside of its cold storage vault may well burst into flames and take its surroundings with it. In

1 Baez, Fernando. *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books*. New York: Atlas & Co (2004), 7

2 “Disaster Actions,” National Library of Australia. Web. Accessed 5/9/2012, <http://www.nla.gov.au/collection-disaster-plan/disaster-actions>

their attempts to take every possible precaution, well-funded archives often come to resemble sets from Cold War movies. The Norwegian National Library stores a significant portion of its most valuable contents in a bunker just under the Arctic Circle, and the building that has become the Library of Congress' National Audio-Visual Conservation Center was originally built to serve as a federal currency reserve and continuation of government center against the possibility of a nuclear attack. In short, the archivist's mission is to believe at all times that destruction is just around the corner, and fight it off with both hands. Fernando Baez starts his book with a discussion of the apocalypse because he believes that book-destroyers “act under the pressure of apocalyptic myths;”³ that may well be true, but if so, that pressure clearly acts even more powerfully on archivists such as Baez themselves.

Memory institutions have their own foundational myths, with their own apocalyptic flavor. The most prominent is the story of the Library of Alexandria, the ill-fated ancient institution that, in the words of Jon Thiem, has come over the years “to symbolize the memory of humankind.”⁴ Very little is known for a fact about the library itself, but its legend is composed of two salient points: one, it was an enormously ambitious endeavor to capture in its entirety the knowledge possessed by the ancient world, an idealized archive that served as an inspiration for centuries of collecting institutions to follow; and, two, and perhaps more importantly, it was dramatically destroyed. “Nothing in the library's history,” writes Robert S. Bagnell, “has inflamed the imagination so much as its destruction.”⁵ It doesn't really matter that numerous scholars have called the facts of that destruction into question, or pointed out that “an unburned

3 Baez, 18

4 Thiem, Jon. “The Great Library of Alexandria Burnt: Towards the History of a Symbol.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1979): 520

5 Bagnall, Robert S. “Alexandria, Library of Dreams.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 146 (2002): 356

building full of decaying books would not have made a particle's worth of difference"⁶ in the long view of history. The image of Alexandria's library burning retains an unshakeable hold on the cultural imagination, as Daniel Heller-Roazen points out:

One might be tempted to suggest that, had there not been a fire to consume the library, one would have had to be invented. What fate, after all, could await the universal archive other than its destruction? Real or imagined, the conflagration remains the supreme emblem of the Alexandrian archive itself, which sheltered the works of the past in exposing them to disaster, constituting and conserving its history in threatening it with its own destruction. For the very life of the Library, like that of the fire, was to nourish itself on what it consumed, to allow writing to live in outliving itself, bearing witness, in this way, to the catastrophe of the past in the present, the destruction of a tradition grown as 'totally, eternally transient' as nature itself.⁷

If destruction and recreation are the only two conceptual alternatives for the universe, then Heller-Roazen suggests that they are also the only two alternatives for the archive.

Archivists collect works of cultural memory in order to make them more easily accessible and to preserve them for the future. However, the act of collecting is also the act of “exposing them to disaster,” the very kind of disaster that archivists so fervently plan against – that one act of anti-archival violence at the hands of Caesar, Omar or the patriarch Theophilus that can so easily wipe out enormous amounts of cultural heritage, made vulnerable by their concentration, in one blow. In the Alexandrian myth, the identity of the arsonist is largely irrelevant; what matters is the image of the fire. And yet this apocalypse of the archive does not dissuade archivists from pursuing the ideal of the Alexandrian library. On the contrary, Bagnall claims that “every one of our great contemporary libraries owes something”⁸ to that first doomed attempt at a universal repository of memory.

6 Ibid, 359

7 Heller-Roazen, Daniel. “Tradition's Destruction: On the Library of Alexandria.” *The MIT Press*, 100 (Spring, 2002): 150-151

8 Bagnall, 361

Derrida, in his “Archive Fever,” famously links the compulsion to archive with Freud's idea of the death drive: “right on what permits and encourages archiving, we will never find anything other than what exposes to destruction.”⁹ Derrida's essay, as Carolyn Steedman has pointed out, has much more to do with human psychology than with the actual physical facts of the archive,¹⁰ and yet the connection between the dream of the archive and its destruction is clearly too strong to dismiss. As Thiem has painstakingly detailed, those who have loved books throughout Western history return again and again to the idea of Alexandria burning, like literate moths to a literal flame. A surprising number even celebrate the destruction. In one example, Thiem cites nineteenth-century Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt, whose view was that “destruction also brings certain advantages such as the 'unfulfilled longing' which impels us to reverence those fragments of the past that we have.”¹¹ In other words, the awareness of destruction is necessary to create the urge to preserve what remains from future destruction.

Is it melodramatic to describe the story of Alexandria as a mythological memory apocalypse? Thiem has translated medieval scholar Richard de Bury's description of the event as a “hapless holocaust” where “the devouring flames consumed so many thousands of innocents,” and “the unsparing ashes turned into stinking fire so many shrines of eternal truth.”¹² Such imagery would not seem out of place in either a religious apocalypse myth or a science-fictional potboiler, and, indeed, Thiem goes on to use twentieth-century dystopian novels to “establish the conclusion that contemporary literati sympathize with the medieval view of book destruction.”¹³ Thiem means only that both sets of intellectuals view book destruction as bad, but the comparison can and should be drawn that both see it as not merely as an evil, but an evil

9 Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1996), 14

10 Steedman, Carolyn. "Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust." *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 4 (2001): 1159

11 Thiem, 515

12 Ibid, 511-512

13 Ibid, 525

of apocalyptic proportions.

In his study of fictional representations of the apocalypse, James Berger has made the claim that

apocalypse and trauma are congruent ideas, for both refer to shatterings of existing structures of identity and language, and both effect their own erasures from memory and must be reconstructed by means of their traces, remains, survivors and ghosts: their symptoms. Post-apocalyptic representations are simultaneously symptoms of historical traumas and attempts to work through them.¹⁴

If the Library of Alexandria is the founding archival trauma, then it should be no surprise that it expresses itself in an apocalyptic mindset – but the link between archives and apocalypse is not a simple straight line from mythological to imagined book-burnings. If trauma and apocalypse effect the erasure of memory, here embodied in the destruction of the memory institution, then what is it that makes up those “traces, remains, survivors and ghosts” except a new embodiment of cultural memory – a new archive? Here we see another iteration of Jacob Burckhardt's “unfulfilled longing” for the erased past that necessitates the creation of an institution to treasure the remnants. If apocalypse is the destined end of the archive, then it's also the beginning.

No contemporary work better embodies this cyclical idea of the apocalyptic archive than Walter M. Miller's 1959 *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Miller's novel follows the efforts of a group of monks known as the Order of the Blessed Leibowitz to maintain a memory archive in an America that has fallen into savagery after a nuclear war. The book begins in what seems to be a recreation of the post-Alexandrian “Dark Ages” populated by monks, monsters, wanderers and barbarians, but Miller soon provides us with the relevant backstory: in the aftermath of the bombs, “remnants of mankind had torn other remnants limb from limb, killing rulers, scientists,

¹⁴ Berger, James. *After the End: Representations of Post-apocalypse*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1999): 19

leaders, technicians, teachers, and whatever persons the leaders of the maddened mob said deserved death for having helped make the Earth what it had become.”¹⁵ Books and documents were burned indiscriminately along with their owners in this process of “Simplification” and explicit, deliberate erasure of learning and memory. The Blessed (and eventually sainted) Leibowitz fought against this mass destruction by gaining permission to found a religious order whose purpose “was to preserve human history for the great-great-great-grandchildren of the children of the simpletons who wanted it destroyed;”¹⁶ eventually he was martyred for his troubles, thus further binding the marriage of preservation and religion. By the time Miller's story begins, all that remains of the “vast store of human knowledge” are the smuggled books and copied texts that comprise the Order of the Blessed Leibowitz's Memorabilia.

The story meanders its way through the reconstruction of human history, with the assistance of the Memorabilia, along a path that looks remarkably familiar. The medieval era is succeeded by a Renaissance, a time of great learning turned to potentially barbaric ends; this in turn is followed by a blossoming into something very much resembling Walter Miller's own 1950's society – which promptly proceeds to declare its own Cold War, launch its own nuclear bombs, and destroy itself all over again. However, the monks of the Order of the Blessed Leibowitz have determined to learn from their mistakes. This time, rather than limiting their efforts to salvaging remnants from the ruins, they copy the entire contents of the Memorabilia onto microfilm (a relatively state-of-the-art archival technology in Walter Miller's time) and send it off with a collection of missionary monks into outer space, first to a colony that humanity has already established on Alpha Centauri, and from there – well, the sky is the limit. “Wherever Man goes,” the abbot tells his trusty space monks, “you and your successors will go. And with

15 Miller, Walter M. *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Bantam: New York (1959), 59

16 Ibid, 60

you, the records and remembrances of four thousand years and more.”¹⁷

Miller imagines an archive that literally rises, Phoenix-like, out of the ashes of a cyclical destruction of history. As Lee Ji Hyun has pointed out, “the archives are not only the form that the life-preserving tendency of Eros takes but a result and symptom of the apocalypse as well.”¹⁸ Lee goes on to characterize the entire history of the Blessed Order of St. Leibowitz within the novel as a kind of process of trauma therapy, as irrational and indiscriminate as the wanton knowledge destruction of the Simplification. While I must vehemently disagree with his characterization of the act of preservation for the future as an irrational act, it is certainly true that the project of the archive in Miller's novel cannot be disentangled from its apocalyptic roots.

Without the first apocalypse, Leibowitz's Memorabilia would be nothing but a relatively random collection of fragmentary information – but with the destruction of the greater archive of human knowledge, the smaller takes on a vastly increased significance. However implausible it may seem that every single book in the world was destroyed by the Simplification and that absolutely *nothing* remains of civilization except for the remnants preserved by the monks, the conceit allows the Leibowitzian monastery to embody the archival myth. The Memorabilia may not be a “comprehensive library embracing all knowledge”¹⁹ of the ages before the apocalypse, but it does hold all that remains afterwards, becoming the Alexandria of its time. And, as in Heller-Roazen's characterization of the myth of Alexandria, the Leibowitzian archive contains the seeds of its own destruction, realized when proto-scientists use the information the archive contains to recreate the tools of mass destruction.

Miller's text does hold out the hope that the archive might also represent a kind of

17 Ibid, 269

18 Lee, Ji Hyun. “(An)Archiving after the Apocalypse: The Death Drive, Representation, and the Rise and Fall and Rise of Civilization in Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.” *Strategies of Critique: A Graduate Journal of Social and Political Thought*. 1, no. 2 (2010): 3

19 Bagnall, 361

salvation. At one point, the abbot of the monastery confronts a scientific scholar who has been attempting to propose an alternate reading of the *Memorabilia* that would allow for the possibility that humanity was never destroyed by nuclear war. “Why do you wish to discredit the past, even to dehumanizing the last civilization?” the abbot demands. “So that you need not learn from their mistakes?”²⁰ The implication is that if users learn to access the archive for its intended use as a repository of cultural memory, rather than as a simple dispenser of scientific facts, it might someday be possible to break the cycle of destruction. The text therefore allows for the possibility of retaining the ideal of the archive, even as it demonstrates through the repetition of apocalypse that the ideal remains for now unreachable. Destruction is not inevitable; the fault lies not in the archive, but in the human beings who have not yet learned to value it properly, whether they be the raging mob of the Simplification or the memory-blind scientists of the second nuclear war.

An appreciation of memory, then, is fetishized to the point where it becomes an opportunity for religious redemption, and the archival project a duty and a mark of faith. The long and complex relationship between religion and archiving is a project far beyond the scope of this paper, but it's worth pointing out that the notion of apocalypse itself has always been associated with religion, and the term we use is a Christian one. Baez characterizes early destruction myths as “an essential trait of the gods, who are creators and destroyers at the same time;” the Christian apocalypse is “a cataclysm that will reveal the truth of things and salvage lost purity.”²¹ When the bomb drops at the end of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, a priest in full knowledge of the event as a human catastrophe delivers the news with the phrase “Lucifer is

20 Miller, 217

21 Baez, 7-8

fallen.”²² The choice of 'Lucifer' as a code is significant in more than one respect. It refers, of course, to the devil, the bringer of evil to mankind, but the devil has more than one name. This particular one means “light-bearer.”²³

Here, again, we see the symbolic transformation of unfathomable loss into the birth of a new source of knowledge, which parallels the new archive emerging from the devastation of the old. If the “purity” of the apocalypse burns away everything unnecessary, then the fragments that remain become all the more precious and all the more fetishized, because they are the “truth” that survives into the new era. Miller's monks preserve everything they can find, in an indiscriminate archiving effort that Derek Thiess has described as an effort to “invert history” and reclaim the image of the Church as a humanistic and benevolent force in the preservation of cultural memory.²⁴ However, given the nature of the Christian view of the apocalypse, it may not be a stretch to say that Miller's monks eschew censorship because the apocalypse has already acted for them as a kind of providential weeding-out of the impure.

The 2010 film *The Book of Eli* repeats many of Miller's themes, while placing a more obviously divine thumb on the scales of preservation. *The Book of Eli* follows the owner of the world's last Bible as he wanders through a post-apocalyptic wasteland, with the eventual goal of bringing the book to a place where it can be preserved and protected. As in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, the viewer eventually learns that a nuclear war triggered a mass episode of book-destruction, with the Bible becoming a particular target. Thirty years down the line, most of the new generation born after the bomb's detonation have never learned to read, and regard books as objects of mysterious and almost mystical significance. Eventually, Eli – guided by mysterious

22 Miller, 254.

23 Tellingly, even Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's thoroughly science-based speculative novel about the aftermath of a meteor hitting the earth goes by the title *Lucifer's Hammer*.

24 Thiess, Derek J. *Miller's Milieu, or the Cultural Moments of Late Humanism: Science and Religion in the Golden Age of Science Fiction*. Diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2008. ProQuest, UMI Dissertation Publishing (2011): 91

intuition – makes his way to an archive on Alcatraz Island, where a kindly librarian tells him that “this is where we're going to start again. [...] We're going to teach people about the world they lost.” While Eli's titular book has by this point been stolen by the villain, Eli is able to recite the contents from memory, and a copy is added to the archive. The end of the film finally reveals that Eli has been blind all along, that his Bible is written in Braille (which the villain is unable to read), and that his extraordinary abilities to survive the dangers of post-apocalyptic society were apparently granted to him by God.

However, no matter how much *The Book of Eli* demonstrates a divine hand at play in the process of post-apocalyptic archiving, much of the plot remains wrapped up in guarding the book not from the dangers (physical or metaphysical) of the apocalypse itself, but from the threat presented by other human beings. By the time Eli's story takes place, the book-burnings have apparently ended; the villain of the film seeks to use the book, not to destroy it. The archive that Eli reaches at the end, on the other hand, is isolated, guarded, completely inaccessible to anyone except a privileged few. The archivists do plan to “teach people” about their cultural memory, but these teachings are apparently scheduled to take place at some vague future date. The fact that Eli chooses to bring his memory of the Bible to the archive, rather than sharing his knowledge with the people he meets along the way, is justified by the cackling mania of the villain: his goal is to use the symbolic power of the book inappropriately to conquer a citizenship who have not yet re-learned the value of their cultural heritage, and he is depicted as destroying the other books he comes across that fail to serve his particular purpose. Similarly, in Miller's book, the raging mob of the Simplification provides the most powerful impetus to archive; later, the Leibowitzian order's doubts about inappropriate usage by scientists is a factor in their decision to keep the Memorabilia in their isolated monastery rather than moving it to a more accessible location. The key activity for the monks is protection and preservation, and “preserve

it they would if the darkness in the world lasted ten more centuries, or even ten thousand years.”²⁵

Non-archivists, these stories suggests, cannot be trusted with their own cultural memory. If it's given into their hands, they may turn on it at any point, or use it for inappropriate ends. For the time being – however long the 'time being' may stretch out – preservation is safer.²⁶ Once again, for a useful lens through which to view this archival trope, we can turn back to the Alexandrian myth and its Roman-Muslim-Christian book-burning villains. Thiem points out that “the appeal of the legend owes much to the status of the three alleged perpetrators of the deed;” the blame certainly does shift based on the political agenda of the one telling the story, but nevertheless, there is always somebody to blame. In his study of book-destruction, Baez offers several alternate hypotheses about the library's disappearance, including one in which the blame can be put simply to negligence and lack of financial support.²⁷ Needless to say, this undramatic explanation has not picked up much press.

It's important to note, however, that despite the ambiguous nature of the Alexandrian culprits, deliberate cultural destruction is anything but a myth. As Sanga Zgonjanin points out in her discussion of attacks on libraries and archives in war, “the destruction of cultural property and of libraries in particular is as old as the concept of culture.”²⁸ Baez has coined the term “bibliocaust” for such destruction, characterizing it as “the intent to induce historical amnesia that facilitates control of an individual or a society.”²⁹

25 Miller, 62

26 When discussing Rousseau's views on the burning of the Library of Alexandria, Thiem mentions that he 'disapproves of “compilers of works who have indiscreetly broken down the door of science and let into their sanctuary a populace worthy of approaching it.” Perhaps Rousseau's views on preservation versus access are closer to our own than we'd like to imagine.

27 Baez, 54

28 Zgonjanin, Sanja. "The Prosecution of War Crimes for the Destruction of Libraries and Archives during Times of Armed Conflict." *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 40, no. 2 (2005): 128

29 Baez, 12

The imagined bibliocausts in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and *The Book of Eli* seem to be triggered by the same kind of desire for historical amnesia, but without the possibility of control. The achievements of the previous society led only to misery and suffering, and therefore, the thinking goes, it is necessary to destroy the memory of it so that such a society can never rise again. This self-directed attempt at “historical amnesia” is a clear embodiment of Derrida's description of the death drive: “it not only incites forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory [...] but also commands the radical effacement, in truth the eradication, of that which can never be reduced to mneme or anamnesis, the archive.”³⁰ If this desire for annihilation is inherent in the construction of the archive, as Derrida claims, then the transformation of all of humanity – the undifferentiated “mob” – into the enemies of books that must be thwarted becomes an safe expression of this desire. Archivists, after all, are a part of humanity too.

Another recent novel of the post-apocalyptic archive, Pearl North's *Libyrrinth*, makes a similar point by engaging directly with historical bibliocausts. In *Libyrrinth*, a society of dedicated archivists called Libyrrarians defends a library-fortress against a culture of book-destroyers, known as to themselves as “people of the Song” and to the librarians as “Eradicants.” When captured by Eradicants, the Libyrrarian Haly attempts to use a copy of *The Diary of Anne Frank* to convince one of her captors of the value of the written word, reading the story out to him secretly at night in the hopes that he will become so engaged in the story that he will recognize the importance of preserving literature. After hearing of the attacks against Jews and the destruction of their culture, the Eradicant's immediate question for Haly springs directly out of his own experience: “Were the Jews literate, and the others people of the Song? Was that why they were persecuted?”³¹

30 Derrida, 11

31 North, Pearl. *Libyrrinth*. New York: Tor (2009), 167

The Eradicant's assumption, while factually inaccurate, reminds the reader of the direct link between malicious bibliocaust and genocide – a link that was clearly demonstrated at the time that Anne Frank was writing her diary. The Nazi destruction of cultural heritage is considered to be one of the greatest cultural disasters of the twentieth century. Baez includes the mass burning of Jewish books by the Nazis in Berlin, 1933 on his list of “Ten Worst Moments in the History of Books,”³² and Zgonjanin claims that “the world had never before seen such destruction of cultural property as during World War II.”³³ In short, the Nazis are perhaps the most obviously villainous group of book-burners in history, with the clear goal of destroying not just the physical bodies of their targets, but the memory of their cultural existence as well. When North draws the connection between the Eradicants and the Nazis, she makes it extremely clear how horrific the audience is meant to find the acts of the Eradicants – but the end of *Libyrinth* reveals that the Eradicants and the Libyrarians spring from the same culture, and Haly's ultimate destiny is to reunite the warring factions. Again, the “death-drive” is channeled into the image of a book-destroying enemy, but, at heart, the enemy and the archivist are the same. The apocalyptic struggle between Libyrarians and Eradicants, or Leibowitzian monks and Simpletons, thus becomes an externalized representation of the paradox of the archive itself, in which the image of inevitable destruction creates the motivation for preservation.

This apocalyptic paradox is so deeply embedded in the culture of the archive that when the Mississippi Public Broadcasting Corporation sat down and asked themselves how best to convince children of the importance of libraries, the first thing they came up with was apparently “Apocalypse.” *Tomes and Talismans*, a 1986 educational television series meant to instruct children in the proper use of the library, takes as its framing device a destructive alien attack on

32 Baez, 282

33 Zgonjanin, 135

Earth that leads the human population to abandon the planet. The only human being left behind is the librarian Ms. Bookhart, who is in charge of constructing a “storage vault of human learning: the last Earth Library,” compiled for the benefit of “those who may return.” In an act of bibliophilic heroism, she gives up her chance to evacuate because she has to hunt down a missing book. When friendly aliens called 'Users' (in an unsubtle archival in-joke) arrive on the planet Earth, Ms. Bookhart teaches them how to access the library, and they eventually defeat the aliens known as 'Wipers' using the power of stored knowledge and the Dewey Decimal System. Finally, after a triumphant celebration of “research, sources and conclusions,” humans can at last return to reclaim the Earth.

Like every other representation of the post-apocalyptic archive, *Tomes and Talismans* provides an external book-destroying force in the figure of the Wipers, whose very name seems to refer to traumatic memory erasure. Despite being described as aliens, the Wipers look exactly like human beings. They speak like humans, too, although several of them have strong “back-country” accents. The only explicit difference between 'Wipers', 'Users' and humans is that the Wipers revel in wanton destruction for its own sake – we learn in the first episode that their “favorite pastime” is the “disruption of all communication and data technology” – while the Users (and humans) value knowledge and treat information with respect. Of course, this may be partially put down to the Mississippi Public Broadcasting budget, which clearly didn't stretch to pay for a make-up artist or elaborate prostheses. Nonetheless, the lack of any cues to code the aliens as visually 'Other' suggests that the makers of the series did not truly envision them as anything besides human representatives of “the stereotype of the savage book destroyer”³⁴ that Baez describes in his introduction as the popular perception of the greatest threat to books. Meanwhile, the heroic “Users” are so indistinct from humanity that one of them eventually

34 Baez, 18

becomes a romantic interest for Ms. Bookhart, and the User children are clearly meant to be role models for the show's intended elementary-school audience. After the librarian-guided victory against the Wipers at the end of the series, one of the Users explain to a mentor that “the weapon was no secret, but just what you had always told us to use. The power of our minds – knowledge.”

The heavy-handed message of the show as a whole is that children should appreciate the library because information can be used as a tool with which to solve problems – but the choice of storylines demonstrates that the library is relevant specifically because it is endangered. The Wiper threat directs itself explicitly against knowledge and communication, and Ms. Bookhart's library is created because of the Wiper threat. Again and again, the existence of knowledge generates its own apocalyptic menace, which in turn regenerates the archive, which in turn regenerates civilization. The last title frame of *Tomes and Talismans* reads “THE BEGINNING.” The cycle, it seems, is about to start all over again.

And so we return once again to “destruction and creation,” the only two alternatives for the universe, and for the archive. Derrida and the death-drive, Lucifer the light-bringer, the fires of the book-destroyers and the dream of Alexandria all come together to form the founding cyclical myth of the archive – but now that I've come this far, I'd like to repeat an earlier question: is all this, perhaps, just a little too melodramatic? Those of us who work in the archives, who handle the disintegrating piles of paper and the vinegar-smelling films and suspect that before the archive can be burned down it's more likely to grind to a standstill for lack of funding, know that the entire concept of the memory institution is not anywhere near as exciting and perilous as science fiction authors and Freudian philosophers make it sound. In her response to Derrida, Carolyn Steedman has eloquently described her own version of the glamorless *mal d'archive*: “archives hold no origins, and origins are not what historians search for in them.

Rather, they hold everything *in medias res*, the account caught halfway through, most of it missing.”³⁵ And, as if this lack of beginning were not enough, “while there is closure in historical writing, and historians do bring their arguments and books to a conclusion, there is no End – cannot be an End, for we are still in it, the great slow-moving Everything.”³⁶ While of course there are moments like Fernando Baez's “Ten Worst” list – the occasional burning of Alexandria or bombing of Iraq – the vast majority of repositories of cultural memory don't end with anything like such a bang. They collect and collect and collect, and run out of space, and run out of money, and invest in measures to prevent deterioration, and do their best to keep up with that “great, slow-moving Everything.”

So it is, perhaps, this very endlessness – this lack of drama, this slow, dusty, unglamorous version of archive fever – that makes the myth of the apocalypse so important to the archival mindset. Historians can “bring their arguments and books to a conclusion,” but what kind of closure is there for the archivist? History will go on, and the archive must continue collecting it. It's simply impossible to imagine the amount of shelving and the amount of funding that could contain a true library of Alexandria, left uninterrupted to naturally grow from 300 BCE until the present. And yet the archivist's mission is, if possible, to do exactly that. The imagined apocalypse provides a clean death for history. It's an inarguable end followed by the kind of clear historical beginning that, as Steedman has pointed out, never really exists. If the ideal archive grows to the point where it becomes completely unsustainable, then the Alexandrian dream of the all-encompassing memory institution has to be abandoned – but conceptually, that never needs to happen if the idea of the apocalypse intervenes. And then after the apocalypse come Leibowitz, Eli, the Libyrarians and Ms. Bookhart, the archival heroes that let us start over

35 Steedman, 1175

36 Ibid, 1177

again.

The repositories of human memory have a host of enemies. In their hearts, archivists understand that time is the worst of them, but the battle against entropy is a long, depressing fight, and one that we're destined to lose. It's no wonder that archivists find themselves so compelled by Alexandria burning. In a paradoxical way, it's the image that gives us hope.

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