Báez and Book-Burning

I have just been reading Fernando Báez's *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books*. Báez is, among other things, the head of the Venezuelan National Library, but his scholarship has been centered on the Library of Alexandria. He is a brilliant writer, and—since I can tell—Alfred Macadam is providing a brilliant translation. *A Universal History* is a lovely book, and it fills an ironic vacancy in the history of letters. But it is also an aggravating book, one that demands a discussion it does not itself provide.

The issue of *text loss* is very dear to me, in part because I have spent a few too many hours introducing young people to ancient and classical literature. In this role, I always feel like a collaborator in millenia-old censorship. To read the Greek philosophers today means, at the outset, to read Plato and Aristotle. Coleridge, I think it was, even proposed to divide all approaches to knowledge between those two ancient schools, as if there was no one else in town. This approach is a sad acceptance of the academies' long campaigns against the works of their competition. The Cynics, the Skeptics, the Epicureans, the Stoics—we have almost none of their writing left. And so we teach the beautiful words of the book-burners, and only then, if we have time, we mention the fragments of the opposition happened to survive the fire.

Plato's *Republic* is a very explicit and eloquent call for censorship. If a counter-argument existed in the contemporary literature, an Hellenic *Areopagitica,* it was probably something like Epicurus' book *The Canon*. And it is an unsurprising tragedy that we still have the former, but no trace of the latter.

Of course, perhaps *The Canon* was worthless. Perhaps, as Neil Steinberg suggests, everything was lost was literary junk. Perhaps book destruction is a process of attrition, sifting out the dross. These sentiments help assuage our conscience—as readers and teachers--for tolerating this winner-take-all version of literature. The great gift of Báez's work is to rip away these false comforts, and make us face the staggering dimensions of what we have lost. Moreover, Báez confronts us with the fact that books have been destroyed, in large part, not by random attrition or even an anti-intellectual populism, but by the organized efforts of cultural elites.

Báez writes in the litanic style that I associate with certain other Latin American authors—Galeano, Borges, even Neruda. He catalogs a endless series of tragedies, and he does so almost entirely without comment. Frustratingly, this follows on an introduction that makes it very clear Báez could have been brilliantly narrated his funeral march for books. That he does not play Virgil to the reader's Dante is possibly a function of time: the book feels rushed, and Báez suggests that his own experiences of the US-overseen devastation of the Iraqi libraries compelled him to go to press faster than he might have otherwise.

And so *A Universal History* tactically resembles certain other litanies of destruction. I am thinking of the old UK newspaper *Green Anarchist,* or the NOI's propaganda piece, *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews,* or (less esoterically) the *Declaration of Independence.* In some circumstances, authors believe that the most damning indictment is a bare litany of the facts, with little or no commentary.

And maybe that is a very pure and noble goal. But the choices Báez makes in presenting his case are too curious to avoid comment. Most immediately, I think, the reader is quickly confronted by an oddity in Báez's understanding of destroying books. He interprets these losses as cultural crimes (even if only crimes of negligence) aimed at a physical target. And he explains them in terms of apocalyptic thought: destroying books is an effort to destroy memory; to destroy and re-make the world. In this analysis, Báez is quite aware that books are both metonyms for texts and are, in many historical circumstances, the actual instrument of

those texts: exogenous memories. To destroy the only remaining copy of the *Ksitigarbha* is to destroy the *Ksitigarbha* forever: it is both a symbolic and a semantic deletion. But Báez consistently remarks on symbolic bibliocausties that have no *semantic* impact whatsoever.

That a few fundamentalists have burned copies of *Harry Potter* may be distasteful or offensive; it may even be a warning sign of a rising censoriousness. But there are 6 million other copies in circulation, which will probably ensure, for a time at least, that the *Harry Potter* text is not lost to human knowledge. Meanwhile, there is a continuous attrition of actual texts, especially marginal texts: ephemera; pulp magazines; pornography; manuscripts; letters; ledgers; marginalia; packaging; advertisements. These are huge cultural losses, even if they are not felt to be so at the moment: a text extinguished can never be replaced. Báez does not seem to make this distinction between text and book at all: for the purposes of his catalog, any act of destroying a book seems almost equivalent in desecration. He discusses the fictional destruction of fictional books such as the *Necronomicon,* and the destruction of manuscripts by their own authors, in quite the same tone as he discusses focused efforts to eradicate a text for ideological reasons. Most surprisingly, Báez laments that compact disks can store so much data that "when someone destroys a disk containing that kind of information, he or she destroys an entire library."

Now, I'm sure this is meant as a challenge to our assumptions about the scope of the field. It expands the discussion in a counter-intuitive way, a great tactic of social historians like Fernan Braudel and Sidney Homer. In much the same tone, we might begin to discuss to the benefits of wind mills, and then point out that nearly all wind power, historically, has been used to winnow grain, dry laundry, or move ships. This is quite true, and even insightful, and yet it may well try the patience of someone whose interest is advocating for wind turbines. Similarly, if we approach Báez's project from a desire to conserve endangered texts—a process which at this point probably means digitizing them—it is a bit maddening to hear him suggest an equivalence between a unique papyrus fragment in Cairo and a digital file of *The Da Vinci Code* on someone's Kindle.

I'm sure Báez doesn't think of those items as equivalent, either. But he seems to treat digitization as merely a venue for even faster book-destruction. This leaves it to us to pursue a very provocative line of reasoning that he hints at a few times, and which is implied heavily by the entire weight of the volume. And it is this: while books are destroyed everywhere, *libraries* destroy texts.

Over and over, the pattern established in *A Universal History* is that rare books are consolidated into libraries—at Babylon or Alexandria or Berlin or in private collections. The prestige of these libraries obviates the need for those books to exist elsewhere. For instance, I do not need a copy of the *Umdat al-Salik,* because if I should need to refer to it, there's probably one at UVM, and there's certainly one in the Library of Congress. And so libraries become not only points of access for a text, they soon become the *only* point of access for certain texts. At the same time, they become increasingly attractive cultural targets in the event of warfare or other disturbance. And eventually they are burned. To a very impressive degree, Báez catalogs the fact that book-destroyers do not have to go to great pains to *collect* the books they want to destroy. That work has been done for them, in advance.

Some of the most poignant passages in the book are from Iraqi librarians facing the nearly total devastation of their collections, in the land that first invented writing. Lamenting the loss of the ancient books in the Mustansiriya University, one of the men Báez interviewed said "Someday someone will burn the Library of Congress, you know, but they won't lose anything like what's been destroyed here." The claim is doubly shocking, but I am only interested in the first half. Of course, of course, someday the Library of Congress will be burned. It was burned down, after all, as recently as 1814. As Rumsfeld said of the Iraqi

looting: "stuff happens." And already, a vast number of the texts at the LoC are either unreadable or lost in the stacks.

And yet, for the first time in history, it is possible to fireproof the texts themselves, even if the books get burned. We can put the *Umdat al-Salik* on dozens of servers all around the world for less money than it would cost to ship a physical copy of the thing through inter-library loan. This project is already well underway, with sites like the Gutenberg Project or Perseus, though in general their formatting issues are daunting. But the principle of this redundancy has been tested on thousands of little memes ranging from political cartoons to sex tapes to pirated music: once it is on the internet, it is nearly impossible to delete it. Project Gutenberg, for instance, has 38 mirror sites and allows anyone to freely download all the texts they currently store. (Which means, of course, that anyone who has done so can re-upload them onto their own servers.) This is what today's censors have to contend with, should they want to eliminate any of those 30,000 texts from the world.

The British Library has an amazing collection of bookbindings, which they prominently advertise as a tourist attraction. It is conceivable that in a few decades, that will be the primary role of archival libraries: preserving rare books as *physical* artifacts, the way we preserve paintings or furniture. But readers and scholars interested in the *texts* will not need to enter those museums of bookbinding. And culture warriors bent on destroying the texts will have a much, much, harder job than they have ever had.

I don't know if Báez, who is a great lover of libraries, would approve of this analysis. And even if he did, perhaps is much too optimistic. But we seem to be in a moment of enormous possibility. Báez relates that King Vishtaspa ordered two copies of the *Avesta* to be made: one stored in Sasbigan and one in Persepolis. This must have been a huge task—Pliny the Elder suggests that the original *Avesta* was upwards of two million verses. It didn't work. Alexander burned the archives in Persepolis and the copy in Sasbigan seems to have been lost, perhaps earlier. But today, we can effortlessly put the *Avesta* on dozens of servers, all over the world, and ensure that, Hydra-like, it becomes even more redundant the moment it comes under attack.

Perhaps the end of library-burning will also be the end of libraries.