Myths of the Universal Library:
From Alexandria to the Postmodern Age

Jon Thiem

The Universal Electronic Library is a sphere whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere.

–James Pitcher, *A Chrestomathy for Universal Librarians (2039)*

. . . an Aleph is one of the points in space that contains all other points . . . the microcosm of the alchemists and Kabbalists . . . *the multum in parvo*.

–Jorge Luis Borges "The Aleph" (1949)

I

The Universal Electronic Library, commonly called the Universal Library and referred to by librarians as the UL, came on line twenty years ago, in 2039. Since then several gigabytes of data have been generated about this marvel of information technology. A comprehensive subject search of this data, stored in the UL itself, has revealed an area of inquiry that has been widely neglected: the Universal Library as myth. What follows is a summary of a more extensive study of this topic, to be published by Penn State Electronic Press in 2060. The methodological basis of the longer study derives from a subdiscipline of comparative mythology known as bibliomythography. The paper at hand has two parts: the first interprets the UL as a postmodern version of the ancient Library of

Alexandria; the second part presents an annotated list of a half dozen groups or sects for which the UL has mythological significance.

As the origins and recent history of the UL are well known, they need not be dwelt on in detail here. Any UL user can readily find large amounts of data on the complex technical, contractual, and managerial aspects of the library, not to mention over a thousand articles and e-books on its revolutionary social and intellectual implications. Suffice it to say that the rise of the electronic journal (e-journal) in the last two decades of the second millennium (1980-2000 CE) spearheaded the development of a universal electronic database for libraries. The late 1980's witnessed the widespread use of e-mail, electronic bulletin boards, CD-ROM bibliographies, and the first e-journals. The practice of preprinting articles became legion, and the resulting proliferation and dissemination of knowledge made for remarkable breakthroughs in all areas of learning. More than anything else, the swift communication and universal access offered first by the Internet and then NREN underscored the usefulness of having a universal database, one that unified and transcended all regional and specialized databases. By the year 2006, in a truly millennial development, an international commission agreed on a timetable for: the creation of the UL; the integration of all academic, research and library databases; and the putting on line of all learned and academic journals, past and present, worldwide. The books of all academic and national libraries were also to be scanned and converted to e-books. In 2039, in the very infancy of the postmodern millennium, the UL came on line.

To gain an historical perspective on the UL as myth, it is helpful to examine its great precursor, the Alexandrian Library, the only library of the ancient world with pretensions to universality. The universality of the Alexandrian Library, that is, the widespread perception of its all-inclusiveness, led people to regard it as a symbol or as a mythical object; that, in turn, may have instigated its destruction. In the last twenty years there have emerged similar kinds of mythical thinking about the UL.

The ancient Library of Alexandria in Egypt, founded by Ptolemy Philadelphus (d. 246 BCE) in the 3rd century BCE and completely destroyed by fire some time in the first millennium CE, probably

held half a million papyrus rolls (see Thiem 1979). The claim for its universality stems from its unprecedented size–the largest library in antiquity–and from its accessibility, due to its location in one of the great intellectual centers of an empire that united much of Europe, Asia, and North Africa. The ancient myth of the Septuagint highlights the comprehensiveness of the library and its potential for disseminating knowledge. According to the myth (see Thiem 1982), Ptolemy Philadelphus wanted to acquire the sacred writings of a small esoteric religion. This wish resulted in the collection and translation into Greek of the Hebrew scriptures. The myth, based on a kernel of truth (for the Septuagint translation does exist), suggests that the Alexandrian Library represented a monumental project to bring together in one place all of the writings of the ancient world and put them into a language all scholars might read.

The mythical aura surrounding universal libraries owes a great deal to the alephic principle, of which they can be an embodiment. This principle derives from the workings of an aleph, a peculiar object described in a report by the blind librarian Jorge Luis Borges (d. 1988) who is not to be confused with the blind fourteeth century librarian Jorge de Burgos (see Abbé Vallet). According to Borges, an aleph is a point containing all other points (see *Borges: A Reader* 154-163 and Anon., "Borges, Dante etc.") Apparently much smaller than the crystal displays of our PC's and aleph is a tiny crystalline sphere in which all things in the universe can be seen at once, without seeming smaller in size and without overlapping. Borges must have hallucinated this manifestly impossible object. Even so, an aleph does have its metaphoric uses.

The alephic principle defines a condition wherein a maximum of inclusiveness coincides with a maximum of intelligibility or accessibility. As is well known, every project of all-inclusiveness, of universal enumeration, harbors within it the virus of chaos, or irretrievability. Thus comprehensiveness can lead to incomprehension. It is the pathological dimension of inclusiveness that the alephic principle reverses.

Though in the modern era the Alexandrian Library became a symbol of the curse of too much learning, in other ages it inspired wonder and veneration, for it seemed to combine all-inclusiveness with vastly increased access to the writings it held (cf. Boccaccio's

reaction, cited Thiem 1982, 231). It embodied, in short, the alephic principle.

Yet the extraordinary accumulations of knowledge that occurred in the Modern Era (1450-1950) were perceived by many intellectuals as chaotic and inaccessible rather than alephic. This attitude promoted another kind of mythic thinking. From the late Renaissance on, many literati seized on the Alexandrian Library as a symbol of the proliferation of useless, indigestible learning that resulted from the new technology of typography (see Thiem 1979). When the ancient library became a symbol of the vanity of learning, literati–among them Sir Thomas Browne, Rousseau, Étienne Cabot, Jakob Burckhardt and Shaw–began to approve of its destruction. Sébastian Mercier in his futurological novel *L'An 2440* (1772) depicts a utopia where the rulers, following Omar, burn virtually all of the books. The time traveler is ushered into the Royal Library, a colossal building that contains only a small cabinet of books. (What an uncanny anticipation of those small display cases in the lobbies of today's major libraries showing a few remaining examples of the bound periodical!) Perhaps the most brilliant execration of the monstrous library is Borges pessimistic fable "The Library of Babel." Borges and others seemed to suggest that the vastness and complexity of the modern megalibrary made it as labyrinthine as the world it was meant to explain. By late in the last century the wealth of knowledge had indeed become an embarrassment of riches. So much had been written that no specialist could possibly live long enough to read all of the relevant publications in his or her specialty.

The powerful alephic properties of the UL turned this situation around. The late modern crisis of knowledge dissolved. Although the UL is the most comprehensive collection of knowledge that ever existed, instantaneous access to this knowledge in combination with sophisticated word-subject-title search tools, Universal Abstracts, and electronic reading programs has restored focus and intelligibility to the intellectual enterprise.

To be sure, many skeptics and critics from the late modern era to our own day have deplored the proliferation of nonsense due to the inadequate screening procedures in most e-journals. The new democracy of electronic publishing, the decline of responsible editing, and the barbarization of langwidge continue to promt outcries of

intellectual anarchi. Predictions of a deluge of repetitive, half baked, fraudulent, and counterfeit learning have proven true. Despite, however, the pathologies endemic to accelerating inclusiveness, the new searching and abstracting tools have more than counteracted the tendency to intellectual chaos. True, the UL gives you everything there is, but it also gives you the means to find exactly what you need. The UL has indeed transformed the researcher's computer screen into something like Borges' fabulous aleph.

One last dimension of the Alexandrian Library relevant to our age still needs to be discussed: its vulnerability to destruction. As with the Alexandrian Library, the universal character of the UL makes it an inviting target. For many people the goal of all-inclusiveness has had the effect of turning a library into a symbol of cultural memory. Others have come to regard the universal library as a microcosm, which is as much a mythical entity as Borges' aleph. Once mythologized, any human construction is easily demonized. And a microcosm offers an easier target than the world at large. Moreover, people who think in terms of myths and metanarratives usually believe that the destruction of the microcosm will somehow precipitate the end of the larger world it represents. In fact, the destruction of the books by Christians in the 4th to 6th centuries CE helped bring to an end the classical world.

Be that as it may, the concentration of books at Alexandria or the interconnectedness of the UL creates a degree of vulnerability. Fire in the first instance, a computer virus in the second, can take a tremendous toll. How fortunate we are that today elaborate technological defenses against computer viruses make the second eventuality seem very remote indeed.

Much less fortunate, the Alexandrian Library! Nothing better illustrates a universal library's potential for becoming the lightening rod of mythical thinking than the accounts of the destruction at Alexandria. The fact that the annals of history offer us three different accounts of its burning–from each of which, except the last, the library must have risen phoenix-like from its own ashes–is in itself astonishing. The accounts of the last two burnings attribute them to mythical thinking and religious bigotry. The penultimate burning, circa 390 CE, was approved by the Christian Emperor Theodosius at the instigation of Bishop Theophilus who wanted to rid the world

of secular learning and pagan idolatry. The first conflagration, on the other hand, was ordered by the Muslim Caliph Omar around 642 CE. Here we have a fascinating confrontation between the universal library and the universal book. In Gibbon's account, when John the Grammarian asked to be given the library, the Caliph Omar replied, "If these writings of the Greeks agree with the book of God [i.e., the Koran], they are useless and need not be preserved; if they disagree, they are pernicious and ought to be destroyed" (vol. 5, 453 in Bury's edition). Thus did the great Library of Alexandria meet its final end.

At first glance these tragic accounts, these archaic religious passions seem of little relevance to the UL with its limitless data banks, its far-reaching, intricate nervous system. Yet even as these words are entered into the processor, esoteric groups are meeting to discuss the mythical and metaphysical meanings of the UL. For some of these groups the UL is the hopeful symbol of yet another New Age. For others, it epitomizes the decadence of the postmodern condition. Other groups, such as the notorious Luddites, have demonized the UL and seek its destruction. Many sects endeavor to use the UL's vast network to propagate, confirm or actualize their own mythical beliefs. Most groups operate in a lawful way. But some cults, seeking to introduce viruses or unauthorized simulacra into the UL, induce their members to infiltrate the ranks of programmers and data processors employed by the UL and tens of thousands of e-journals. Like its precursor in Alexandria, the UL is not only an enormous repository of information about every known mythology, it too has become the impossible object of mythological devotion and execration.

II

The following annotated listing of a half dozen or so of these groups is intended to help librarians, researchers, and general readers orient themselves in the arcane world of UL cults. The focus is on groups whose beliefs are of special mythographical interest. Information is often sketchy. Some groups have not been heard from in years and may no longer exist, if they ever did. A more

extensive inventory will be found in my forthcoming e-book, *The Myth of the Universal Library.*

Anonymists

Anonymists hold that the Author of the Universe created the world, but then deliberately withheld His or Her name. Human authors should emulate the divine model: all publications in the UL should be made anonymous. These sectarians revere the Middle Ages, the heyday of anonymous and pseudonymous authorship. They attribute the particular excellence and brevity of the limerick to its anonymous character.

Anonymism arose among a small group of 20th-century authors who were appalled by the graphomania of their time. Everyone wanted to become, or be called, a writer. No one wanted to be considered a mere reader. As publication surged readership declined. Only a fraction of what is published finds readers.

Anonymous publication, say the Anonymists, would quickly reduce graphomania and the publication inflation endemic to e-journals. Most people write for reasons of vanity and self-aggrandizement. Take away bylines and only true writers will continue to make submissions. With nothing left to do former authors will take up reading again.

True, little of what appears in the UL is ever read by a human reader, as opposed to electronic readers, e-compactors (which librarians call trash compactors), or e-skimmers. most writers and scholars, however, seem content with hiring electronic readers to read their work. (See the Palmquist/Trembath study, as well as Foskin, "A Beckettian Approach to the Identity Problems of Electronic Readers.")

Anonymism is one of the many cults whose fanciful solutions address serious issues often neglected by the technocrats in library administration.

Apocryphers aka Apos

Like Anonymists, Apos denigrate the idea of individual authorship. They believe that all authors are avatars of Universal Author

and that the UL is Her or His Instrument for creating the Universal Text, which will eventually replace the world.

Most Apo activities are illegal. According to the late second millennium scholar Calvinus, Apos belong to a subversive group called the Organization for the Electronic Production of Homogenized Literary Works (OEPHLW), founded by the translator Hermes Marana (fl. 1980), aka Saint Hermes the Trickster. This group engages in infiltration, plagiarism, and pseudoepigraphy. Using sophisticated stylistics programs, Apos generate endless pastiches, which they then attribute to real authors, and pseudo-translations or pseudo-editions of invented authors, such as Christabel LaMotte, Andrew Marbot, and Kilgore Trout.

The purpose of these tactics is to bring about the "death of the author" in the figurative sense. In a world of counterfeit publications, authentic works will soon be hard to distinguish from fakes, and we cannot count on e-journal editors to do the sorting out. Soon authorship will be replaced by an uncontrolled intertextuality, the first phase in the complete "textualization" of the world under the auspices of the UL.

Borgesians (pronounced boar-hey-zians)

This group venerates the life and works of the blind librarian Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1988). Borgesians believe that the UL is the penultimate stage in the creation of the Total Library (TL). The TL will come on line after the expansion of the UL's computer technology to embrace the systematic production of all possible books and articles. Computers will then generate endless permutations and combinations of all the letters of the alphabet (see *Borges: A Reader*, "The Total Library"). In the TL ninety-nine percent of all data may be little more than nonsensical combinations of letters. But Borgesians claim that one of the nearly infinite number of displays will eventually unlock the secrets of the TL and bestow total knowledge.

A gnostic offshoot of the Borgesians, called Babelers, avers that when the TL comes on line, all the possibilities of language will be exhausted. At that time the Logos, aka the Gnosis or the word of words, will be freed and will return to the Pleroma, the realm of

light beyond. The cosmos and its microcosmic mirror, the TL, will then perish forever.

What Borgesians and Babelers fail to realize is that without any effort on their part the UL is inexorably approaching the condition of the Total Library.

Luddites aka Luddies

Often portrayed in the media as intellectual terrorists or emotionally-disturbed hackers and nerds, Luddites are in fact revolutionary millennialists whose main goal is the destruction of the UL and a return to the "golden age" of bound books and periodicals. Their name seems to be derived from both the 19th century workers group, Luddites, who destroyed machines and the late twentieth century mythical librarian Ludmilla, who is known as the "Last Reader."

Luddites vilify the UL as the instrument and emblem of technocracy, late consumer capitalism, and postmodern decadence. Luddite hackers may have developed a computer virus called Deconstructo that is named after a twentieth century comic book villain or, with less likelihood, after a trendy movement of the 1980s called Deconstructionism. Its destructive powers, like those of its namesake, are probably more mythical than real.

Biblios, members of a subgroup, are book worshippers. They deplore the fact that librarians, in betrayal of their name, do all they can to get rid of books and book learning. They say UL technocrats have made libraries "user friendly" but hostile to book readers. Most of all Biblios resent the deportation of library books and bound journals to special ranches where bibliophagic cattle, genetically engineered by McDonald's, turn them into hamburger meat. Biblios fail to appreciate the irony that millions of novels and billions of journal pages, mostly unread, are now eagerly devoured by a large, avid public.

Nousers (sometimes spelled Newsers)

Nousers are New Agers who regard the interconnectivity of the UL network as the electronic basis for the Nousphere (from the Greek *nous*, mind), the synergistic union of all mental states in a

transpersonal cosmic consciousness. That the UL came on line at the dawn of the third millennium–the Third Age, the Age of Aquarius–is of great importance to Nousers. (Cf. Pitcher's aphorism at the head of this paper.)

Refusers

A utopian sect whose members vow never to use the UL, Refusers have affinities with Luddites and Biblios, but do not engage in sabotage. Their patron saint and martyr is Professor Mary T. O'Buck, aka St. Mary of Dallas. In 2046, the U.S. Supreme Court in a landmark decision ruled that the University of Texas at Dallas had legitimate grounds for revoking the tenure of Professor O'Buck and dismissing her, when she refused to instruct her graduate students in the uses of the UL.

Unlike Biblios with their mystical cult of the book, Refusers reject the UL on more rational grounds. They assert that:

a. The integrity of language and humane learning have been seriously undermined by electronic journalism.
b. The transformations wrought by the UL have greatly increased the pace of change in human life, rendering it intolerably hectic and superficial, without creating a more responsible or humane society.
c. Books are a more permanent, discriminating, and secure way of storing knowledge than the UL, which is more likely to be destroyed than the total of book libraries scattered around the globe.

Professor O'Buck, a distinguished scholar and beloved teacher, coined the Refuser motto: "I may not know where I am going, but I do know that I won't get there any faster."

Users for Alpha aka Ufas

Originally a group of programmers and engineers addicted to science fiction, Ufas share the mystical conviction that the construction of an alephic display screen for the UL is technically feasible. Such a screen would display all of the data in the UL without confusion and without overlapping.

A subgroup, Users for Omega (Ufos) works at developing the hardware for a High Definition Omega Universal Screen (HIDEOUS).

POSTSCRIPT–OCTOBER 16, 2059

As this paper was being transmitted to my e-journal editor, there appeared on the bulletin board a message of cataclysmic importance. By now the whole world knows of the near complete erasure of the UL data bases. Luddites have claimed responsibility for this wanton act of destruction.

Federal investigators are looking closely at the activities of the Molesworth Institute, for the destruction took place on the hundredth anniversary of this venerable institution. Experts have determined that the viral culprit, Deconstructo?, was a computer retrovirus of the endogenic type. It was a covert constituent of the earliest e-journal programs. Silently spreading for over 7 decades, the virus was designed to begin deconstructing on this particular anniversary.

What all this means for the future of the UL is unclear. The extent to which e-journal and e-press files were saved is undetermined. Most experts have played down the extent of absolute loss. How long it will take to rebuild the UL is also unclear. What is certain, however, is that the permanence and reliability of the UL have been challenged. The return of the reader may be imminent.

One of the most astonishing, most atrocious results of this electronic conflagration has been the widespread euphoria it has produced, not only in the general public but also among serial librarians, intellectuals, and writers. From the perspective of the Alexandrian destruction, may we surmise that the end of the UL offers us a temporary respite from the oppressive burden of learning, of human cultural memory? The puzzling joy which so many involuntarily feel in the wake of this catastrophe has the sharp taste of genuine liberation.

Meanwhile, this great destruction does serve to confirm the value of bibliomythography. For if we believe their claims, it was a myth-driven cult that succeeded in destroying the Alexandrian Library of the Postmodern Age.

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