
Lost Libraries: A Lesson for the Notion of World Literature

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Abstract: Literature, with its diverse and broad spectrum of platform, medium, and delivery, has long been an indicator of a civilization's culture. How the literature of various cultures was either preserved, lost, or shared has shaped the modern conception of World Literature. Libraries have been central to the collection, preservation, and access to literature throughout time, and their dependence on political and/or religious leadership has shaped the notion of "world literature" in fundamental ways. To increase awareness of marginalized literature and to broaden the understanding of World Literature is to seek out and share the lessons learned by librarians who all too frequently lost their libraries.

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Of all man's instruments, the most wondrous, no doubt, is the book. The other instruments are extensions of his body. The microscope, the telescope, are extensions of his sight; the telephone is the extension of his voice; then we have the plow and the sword, extensions of the arm. But the book is something else altogether: the book is an extension of memory and imagination.

—Jorge Luis Borges

Our souls persist only through language.

—Fernando Báez

Literature, with its diverse and broad spectrum of platform, medium, and delivery, has long been an indicator of a civilization's culture. How the literature of various cultures was either

preserved, lost, or shared has shaped the modern conception of World Literature. Libraries have been central to the collection, preservation, and access to literature throughout time, and their dependence on political and/or religious leadership has shaped the notion of “world literature” in fundamental ways. To increase awareness of marginalized literature and to broaden the understanding of World Literature is to seek out and share the lessons learned by librarians who all too frequently lost their libraries.

Concomitantly, the material on which literature was written played a significant role in the permanence of literature around the world. Stone, and in some instances fired clay, by nature of those mediums’ hardness and durability have survived for millennia. Papyrus scrolls, bones, bamboo, wood, shells, vellum pages and, perhaps most notably, paper can disintegrate when exposed to extreme heat or humidity; those mediums also more easily fall victim to natural disasters such as floods, and they are silent but potent victims in that most damaging of man-made disaster, war.

Finally, the loci and languages of literature in the world have had an impact on the notion of “world literature” throughout time. Sometimes these factors were not so much intentionally disregarded as they were unknown or geographically, linguistically and/or ideologically unknowable at certain points in time. In other situations, we can regrettably see instances where prejudice, religious fervor, and/or political expedience dictated a limited perspective on the notion of world literature.

An examination of ancient to early modern libraries in history has much to reveal when it comes to the notion of World Literature before our modern conception of “world literature.” The impact that governments or religious/ideological fervor have had on library holdings—or, conversely, the destruction of library holdings—illuminates the inequitable literary frameworks used in Eurocentric knowledge systems. The invisibility of texts from other cultures will be diminished if libraries are supported in bringing texts to a broader readership.

Ancient (Library) History

Writing is central to the notion of literature in a literate society. In the Western tradition, school children learn that Mesopotamia was the birthplace of civilization. Fundamental to its designation as the cradle of civilization was the ability to write. Many historians now agree that writing emerged independently in other parts of the globe, namely China and the ancient Mayan civilization of modern Mexico and Central America, at roughly the same time. The concentration of people in these geographical regions fostered technological innovations, including writing. It has been suggested that writing sprouted from merchants’ need to track their sales or trades. Currency came into being, and scribes became a new professional class of society as people who were able to document transactions between two or more parties. From noting the exchange of goods or services, with the passage of time writing grew to include governmental or religious

documentation, ways of communicating beliefs, and a method to share lists of observations. Ultimately, writing included histories and literature, in short, the way cultures defined themselves.

In all these disparate locations, central to the development of writing was the gathering of relatively large numbers of people into cities. The trajectory from agricultural settlement to an urban population with a literate subgroup then often spawned nation-states which sometimes grew into empires. It is this last category of civilization that sponsored libraries with increasingly varied forms of literature (Wright 56).

The growth of the scope of written information in Sumer circa 3000 BC corresponded with scribes' specializations into distinct areas of writing. Such specializations included topics ranging from applied mathematics to astronomy, from prophesy to scientific observation. Temples began to establish formal writing programs to ensure the continuity of skills in the religious traditions they espoused. Storing and maintaining collections of written materials became increasingly important. Clay, the soil of the Fertile Crescent, provided the material on which many things were written in this era. Malleable and easy to write upon when damp, this clay hardened to a rock-like consistency when dried. Those clay tablets' response to fires from war only made them harder and more difficult to destroy—but not impossible to destroy, as historical evidence indicates. Intentionally smashed tablets have been found, and estimates have been made that as many as 100,000 tablets from this region and in this time period may have been destroyed through military conflict (Báez 22).

Hammurabi (reigned 1792-1750 BC), the Babylonian king famous for his legal code, looted archives of each new conquest and returned those items to his palace library. Although the Babylonians that Hammurabi ruled spoke a different language, they preserved the Sumerian religious texts, “not unlike the veneration that more recent cultures have ascribed to the Bible, Koran, or Torah” (Wright 53). The Babylonians even went so far as to implement a dual language standard, where the vernacular language was used by the general populace, and Sumerian—that destroyed civilization—was used for preserving ancient holy truths (Moorhouse 68-74).

The code Hammurabi established was intended to promote unity and contained this language with respect to the destruction of ancient tablets, “If a man buys a field, garden, or house from a soldier, fisherman, or leaseholder, his tablet will be smashed, and he will lose his property” (Báez 27). The link between written documents and accounting is clear here. The palace library housed Hammurabi's legal code along with thousands of literary, mathematical, astronomical, and historical texts. Interlinear translations first appear from this time period, as do the first manuals for learning the Sumerian language. Like so many libraries in the course of history, this one was razed by Hammurabi's successor, Sennacherib.

Sennacherib's grandson, Ashurbanipal, founded one of the most famous libraries of the period in Nineveh. He ordered his scribe to collect all written materials with the decree, “No one shall withhold tablets from you, and if you see any tablets and ritual texts about which I have not written to you, and they are suitable for my palace, select them, collect them and send them to me” (Wright 54). He collected everything he could find from his empire, which extended from

the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. These materials included hymns, poems, proverbs, fables, omens, horoscopes, incantations, prayers, and drug recipes (Wiegand and Davis 27). The clay tablets in the library of Ashurbanipal were collected, arranged, and maintained by a staff that was multilingual and had graduated from a school for scribes before assuming multi-year apprenticeships in advance of being accepted into the role as “Keeper of Tablets” (Harris 21). This library might be considered one of the first to hold materials considered to be world literature, though of course, the “world” was not what we would think of it today. In 1842, British archeologists excavated the ruins of the library, removing over 20,000 whole tablets and thousands of additional fragments. The tablets contained copies of Hammurabi’s code and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* among other literary works (Báez 28).

“I have united the entire world for the first time.” So declared Qin Shi Huang as he consolidated power over the Chinese Empire in 213 BC (66). Taking advice from one of his counselors, he ordered the destruction of every book in the kingdom that defended a return to the past. Soldiers destroyed the old royal library whose works were written upon bamboo, wood, bone, and sometimes tortoiseshells (68). The destroyed library had been a treasure trove of early Confucian and Taoist texts known as the Heavenly Archives. This library’s most famous curator was Lao-Tzu, who, having written the *Tao Te Ching*, shared a similar concept when he proposed, “Eliminate the wise, exile the geniuses, and that will be more useful to the people;” he also wrote, “suppress all study, and nothing will happen” (19). The new emperor then created a new library, with an arrangement that mirrored the hierarchy of the state. This pattern persisted, with successive emperors summarily destroying their predecessor’s libraries. Empires in the Near East and Far East fostered the collection and creation of various forms of literature that were then gathered into libraries, and learning grew—until empires fell, and with them, libraries. With the fall of libraries, so often went the collection of—and notion of—world literature.

The most famous library in the ancient world was arguably that of Alexandria, Egypt, which began roughly during this time period. Unlike the example above, the library at Alexandria was open to the public (70). Also, unlike the libraries above, Alexandria took as its acquisition policy the collection and, notably, the preservation of all written materials from the known world. In establishing the library and its collection, Ptolemy I, a Greek general of Alexander’s army who had been as far East as India with him and awarded Alexandria for his loyalty, created a library that sought to hold materials from all of Alexander the Great’s Empire: from Macedonia to Egypt and from Greece to parts of Western India. At the time that Ptolemy I declared an interest in creating a huge library, Alexandria was a new city, and its library was minor compared to Athens. To attract scholars and intellectuals, Ptolemy I offered huge, tax-free salaries to poets, writers, and scientists to live in the imperial palace there (71). Ptolemy I’s advisor Demetrius Phalereus, a scholar and writer exiled from Athens due to a change in political leadership there, knew the value of collecting universally as a means of providing a distinct advantage over any possible rival. The library held volumes on all topics and employed translators who worked to make copies of complete works in Greek.

According to Galen of Pergamum, no expense was spared in augmenting the collection of books at Alexandria. Ptolemy I asked Athens to send official papyrus copies of works by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides for copying. The Athenians obliged, but for their good faith they were sent only the copies in return. It is believed that 79 official works by Aeschylus were kept, 120 by Sophocles, and 99 official works by Euripides were kept now at Alexandria (Báez 46). Holding classics from a different relatively distant country was meant to indicate Alexandria's validity as a political powerhouse and cement its place in history.

The intellectuals appointed by Ptolemy I to serve as keepers of the books at Alexandria (and who also served as tutors to the royal children) forged new classification schemes. Chief among these proto-librarians was Callimachus, who is credited with writing the 120-scroll *Pinakes*, or *Tables of Persons Eminent in Every Branch of Learning Together with a List of their Writings* (Casson 39). This catalog was perhaps most notable for the fact that it separated works according to literary style (poetry, rhetoric, history, etc.), then further divided works alphabetically by author. Each author then received a short biographical sketch in an effort to differentiate authors known by the same name. Finally, this list contained titles for each work along with the first words and the number of lines each work contained (Staikos et al. 67-68). The catalog is noteworthy for at least two reasons. First, its medium—the scroll—mirrored that in which most of the library holdings were manifest. No longer were the ancient libraries maintaining shelves or containers of clay tablets: now those shelves held papyrus scrolls which were easier to move and arrange, though arguably less impervious to weather and/or manmade destruction. Second, but no less noteworthy, was that Callimachus's *Pinakes* (while only capturing only a portion of the collection under his care) presented information about each item in the library in a way that ensured that access to the holdings at Alexandria's library was easier than ever before.

Easier access would have been crucial, as the size of the collection at Alexandria exploded. While there is not one document to prove the size of the collection at the Library of Alexandria, some believe that by the time of Ptolemy I's death, the collection included 200,000 scrolls, and by the time Julius Caesar came to Alexandria in 47 BC, the library collection size had grown to be 700,000 books (Wright 71). The sheer size dwarfed any other library in the world and continued to hold the designation of the world's largest library for another thousand years. Regrettably, its demise was as sure as the empire that fostered it. While the method and year of its ultimate demise are lost in the fog of time, its fate ultimately mirrored that of its empire. It crumbled, and with it, the notion of a collection that contained "world literature."

Libraries at the dawn of the Roman Empire were often attached or adjacent to temples or within a complex of buildings aimed at a very small portion of the population. Julius Caesar chose Marcus Terentius Varro as the director of the library he intended to build. Varro, an author of note himself, wrote a work lost to history called *On Libraries* which was among the first to posit that books were cultural artifacts (Báez 78), not merely words on pages meant to entertain or inform but more meaningful entities reflecting a civilization's values, history, and dreams. Unfortunately, Julius Caesar was murdered before that library could be established. This regime change, like

others, ensured that the predecessor's library would never be built.

There were other libraries in the Roman Empire, however, and they were notable for the fact that they came out of temples and into the heart of Roman culture at the public bath. There, libraries were used by all Roman citizens—men and women, young and old, rich and poor, not totally unlike the modern ideal of public libraries. The large number of public baths and their location within urban locations held smaller library collections. Their patronage, arguably, dictated that the collection focus be narrower than what was seen in the official libraries of an empire. A census in 350 showed that there were 28 public libraries in Rome (Báez 78). Not one of them survived the fall of the empire.

Religious Libraries in Medieval History

With the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity throughout the West from the 4th century AD onward, libraries' functions reverted from a government or public focus to a religious one. The ancient libraries with their thousands upon thousands of scrolls faded from existence (or disappeared in clouds of smoke), replaced by monastic and/or cathedral libraries with at most several hundred items in their collections. A lack of tolerance for what grew to become known as "pagan" literature flourished at this time, meaning those pagan works increasingly vanished. In the review of the development of the concept of world literature, the scope dramatically narrowed. Fernando Báez, in his excellent work *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books: From Ancient Sumer to Modern Iraq*, writes of this time in history, "There came a moment when not a single library existed in Europe" (296). Scholars used to call this period the Dark Ages, not without reason.

The advancement that is made in the next thousand years with respect to world literature held in libraries is what it is written on: the papyrus scroll at this point in time was replaced with first vellum, then parchment-paged books with stiff covers (Hessel and Peiss 9). Certain monks worked in scriptoria at these monasteries, transcribing—not creating—written works that were deemed acceptable to own. There is evidence that these monastic libraries had written inventories or rudimentary catalogs of their holdings, though the vastly restrictive size of these collections would arguably not have made them quite as valuable as they had been in the lost and, as has been shown, larger libraries of antiquity.

In addition to the limited scope in terms of the collection, these monastic libraries were also closed to anyone outside the religious community though, notably, there is evidence that monasteries lent materials to each other, which allowed copyists to expand local holdings (35). Developing a network of inter-library lending was not insignificant and ushering in codex-style library holdings was in its way revolutionary; yet it is fair to say that the notion of World Literature in this time period shrank in Europe to an increasingly tight focus.

Paper: Literature and Libraries

While the size and scope of monastic libraries did not experience significant growth in the early medieval era, an exchange of books between West and East did happen toward the end of this time period. The Crusades, as horrible and outrageous as they were in terms of religious and moral turpitude, fostered the spread of books from one culture to another. Travelogues, such as Marco Polo's book detailing his time in the Far East, were wildly popular. This wealth and expansion of knowledge fed the growth of an increasingly inquisitive public, which in turn served as a foundation for the return of secular libraries, most notably in Spain. The largest of these, in Cordova, had a catalog of holdings according to the historian Ibn al-Abar that filled 44 volumes, or a collection of between 400,000 and 600,000 titles (Battles 65). The so-called House of Wisdom in Cairo is said to have held 1.6 million books, collected under the order of caliph al-Hakin (Thompson 348-350). While monastic libraries were restricted to clerical use, Islamic libraries were more publicly oriented and much broader in collection contents. In this 11th-century library in Cairo, "books were brought from the libraries [...] and the public was admitted. Scholars studied [...] books in all sciences and literatures. [...] Al-Hakim permitted admittance to everyone, without distinction of rank, who wished to read or consult any of the books" (357).

The growth of a curious and increasingly literate public coincided with an increase in the use of paper, and vice versa. Paper was first created a thousand years before we saw it for the first time in Spain. Indeed, paper first appeared in China in the 2nd century BC; by the 4th century AD it was commonly used there (Dover 42). The transmission of paper from the Far East to the Middle East remains unclear, but the Silk Road seems almost an obvious route for paper to have traveled from East to West, from China to the heart of Islam and into Christian countries. First mentioned in Europe in the late 9th to the early 10th century, paper by the middle of the 10th century must have been relatively available there, as we see the lexicographer Ibn Hani al-Andalusi gave students paper onto which to transcribe books from his own personal library (Bloom 87).

A study of book history and libraries from this era necessarily takes an Islamic focus. The reason is as old as the collection of information in any society on earth: the fall of the previous empire saw the exile—but notably not the execution—of that empire's intellectuals. Those individuals ultimately found themselves and their books in Persia, which ordered the translation of those books from Greek to Persian. When the Arabs conquered Persia, they took over the libraries and again translated the works from classical antiquity into Arabic, ensuring their survival and place within world literature (Wright 97). Indeed, Islamic libraries at their height were where Greek, Hindu, and Persian books were all collected and maintained (96). The over 500 years of Islamic dominance in the world at this time preserved and expanded the notion of world literature while similarly advancing book technology.

The birth of the university in relation to the growth of popular literacy seems natural to our modern (and educated) minds, but in fact, the concept of a university was revolutionary in Europe in terms of literacy. First an outgrowth of monastic study where writing had been "an

instrument of divine power, a secret accessible only to holy men” (Wright 108), universities increasingly fostered secular reading and writing. While only a small portion of the population attended universities in their earliest days, the number of men seeking a secular education grew, and with them, the general population’s literacy grew. Writing done by a broader public meant that “they started to experience the first rumblings of social and political transformations that would reverberate for centuries” (108). The increasingly literate society in Europe started questioning the feudal system that had so long dominated European hierarchical structures.

The availability of paper exploded at this time, bringing the cost of both writing and reading to a level where an even larger percentage of the public could more actively participate in each. Paul Dover, in his informative book on the impact paper had on early modern Europe, states that paper “allows one to project oneself virtually across vast distances. . . . [serving to] root the writer to his desk [. . .] and to unmoor him from his current locale, connecting him with people and places many miles away” (38). The lightness and thinness of paper allowed for books to be more manageably sized and, relatively speaking, more affordably priced. By the early 15th century, books were being mass-produced in Europe, no longer solely via monastic scribes but by private-sector workshops, “capable of turning out hundreds of books at a time” (Wright 110). This relative explosion in the availability of books meant that personal libraries grew alongside university libraries, and literacy continued to increase.

The Printing Press

Getting to the point where Europe adopted a moveable-type printing press took centuries. First extant in China in the middle of the 11th century, it did not gain the prestige or near-universal adoption there that it did in Europe several centuries later due to the nature of languages in the Far East (Brokaw et al. xviii). The same can be said for the reason why such a press did not catch hold in the Islamic world. There are four reasons that often present themselves to explain why printed books were not readily adopted in the Islamic world: first, there was opposition to book production happening any way except via handwriting; second, there was a vested interest in the scribal profession; third, the mass production of books via printing presses could have been threatening to the intellectual authority of the learned class; and fourth, the complexity of the Arabic script would have made setting up a printing press exorbitantly expensive (Bellingradt et al. 269). The intricacies of Arabic and the written languages of the Far East did not coalesce with the nature of a moveable-type printing press, unlike the Roman alphabet of Western languages. This clearly had an impact on the awareness of the Western population of works from eastern cultures, promulgating a Eurocentric notion of World Literature.

Yet the world was shrinking. Translations offered access to books from other cultures and fostered a greater exchange of ideas from West to East and East to West. University libraries held an infinitely larger collection of world literature than monastic libraries did by nature of

their secular versus religious foci, and the increasingly literate public sought more and more varied things to read. All of these things happened at a time when Europe's first printing presses came into being. Johannes Gutenberg's press was purchased and used to fill public demand for information, and it was followed in remarkably quick succession by presses in other parts of Europe. All of these earliest printing presses were publishing works in languages using the Roman alphabet. It follows that personal, public, and university libraries proportionately held works in these Western languages. The advent of the moveable-type printing press in Europe led to a dramatic increase in reading material but also reinforced a Western bias by virtue of the languages in which the machines operated. We see this dichotomy in the writing of Polydore Vergil, who wrote about the impact of the printing press on the preservation of literature, "Books in all disciplines have poured out to us so profusely from this invention that no work can possibly remain wanting to anyone, however needy. Note too that this invention has freed most authors, Greek as well as Latin, from any threat of extinction" (Dover 50). This statement is Eurocentric at first blush, though translations throughout history to this point had seen works from non-Western cultures translated into Greek and Latin, though not, obviously, comprehensively. The notion that works from antiquity once again gained a wider readership is not without value insofar as it demonstrates a breadth in terms of historical literature available to readers. Still, there is a European/Greco-Roman bias in the concept of world literature in the books from this time.

The first European book printed in Arabic was published in 1514 in Italy and printed for export to Syria (Bellingradt et al. 268). Printing presses were businesses, and printed materials were in demand. Italy's historical connection to the Arabic world remained somewhat active, as trade between the two continued in this era. Italy's trade with European countries also persisted. Italy was also the home of Marco Polo, whose travelogue, written in Franco-Venetian, remains known as an early bridge between East and West. At the same time and not dissimilarly, Italy and Spain, with their historical ties to the Islamic world remained portals for the Arabian intellectual heritage to creep into Europe (Wright 97).

But it would be wrong to not point out a prejudice evident in the European mindset at this time. The oldest remaining printed material of Gutenberg's is his "Admonition to Christendom against the Turks," is an example of a mass-produced item intended to meet the public demand for information from the East (Dover 157). The scope of history reminds us that a largely-Christian Europe at this time had only fairly recently freed itself of Muslim occupation (if we choose to use language reflecting a common religious stance in Europe at the time); in some ways, the Crusades did not end but lingered in the literary works—and in the libraries—in early modern Europe.

Similarly, literature from the Far East did not gain any significant foothold in European universities, libraries, or thought. We could speculate on reasons for this, but there is not a documented rationale that this author has been able to unearth. There was travel between the Far East and the West, and certainly an exchange of ideas, but the literary histories from the rich cultures of the Far East do not appear in lists of library holdings in Europe from the early modern period.

The literary works found in the New World were similarly disregarded if not outright destroyed. When the Spanish arrived in Mexico, they found libraries full of over a thousand years of manuscripts on a wide variety of topics. Bishop Diego de Landa ordered the burning of every bark-clothed book based on religious fervor and a feeling of superiority (Wright 57). This destruction of a culture's history in favor of a new one and the abject rejection of a more comprehensive view of world literature was precisely what we saw in Qin Shi Huang's empire, and Sennacherib's and countless others not documented here. It was, regrettably, nothing new.

What we do see arising in European libraries in early modern history are more thorough catalogs and richer classification schemes. The libraries that created these organizational devices were national in scope. National libraries best answered the need to collect books on a large scale and were able to do so. Primary among these is what became known as the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, the national library of France, which asserted the "right of deposit" in 1537, receiving by mandate one copy of each book printed in France (Hessel and Peiss 122). This approach was solipsistic, but the availability of affordable paper and the use of the printing press meant that the number of books being published exclusively in France was staggering. By 1622 when its first catalog was printed it contained 6,000 titles, divided into two groups, manuscript and print, and divided once again by language. Roughly fifty years later, this collection was re-classified into 23 categories. This need to organize books into distinct categories or hierarchies coincided with the Enlightenment and explosion of knowledge across all fields and disciplines (including literature). Organization of anything is an attempt to bring order to chaos, and libraries can be seen as attempting to do the same with the intended goal of offering increased access to the information seeker. Unfortunately, any classification scheme carries with it a bias, even if unintentional.

The difference between the destruction of libraries and the ordering of them is significant, however. The point in destroying libraries is to intimidate, demoralize, enhance historical oblivion, diminish resistance, and cultivate doubt (Báez 16). Books and libraries are destroyed by parties who cling to a rigid view of the world. The ideal library classification schemes, by contrast, attempt to encompass no single ideology or absolute reality. The perfect library's organization would only assert control over the vast variety and history of ideas and cultural realities to improve access to all people, to foster a greater understanding and a more perfect conceptualization of world literature. While there is no perfection in life—only the striving toward it—it is only by working collaboratively and internationally in the adoption or creation of library classification schemes and materials that libraries of today could possibly capture the richness of world literature.

Learning from History or Repeating It

Examining the dynamics of literary circulation and its impact on the idea of World Literature in the pre-modern world necessarily involves an examination of the role libraries played, since

libraries throughout time have held not merely physical documents but the cultural identities of the societies they serve. Libraries of the late-medieval and early modern time periods were often governmental or religious entities, and their collections were indicative of a religion's or ruler's power or prestige. Often the libraries of predecessors, whether religious or political, were destroyed with new libraries replacing them. Occasionally, those new libraries translated older works or even adopted the language of those older works as a second, more formal language.

The personnel involved in the maintenance, access, and circulation of those ancient to early modern libraries were sometimes political appointees or were sometimes affiliated with certain religions. Oftentimes their names and histories have been lost in the mists of time. Whoever they were, they cataloged the resources in their care, and decided if or how those materials were used, and by whom. By that measure, we can call those people librarians: they were the information mediators of the collections they oversaw. Whether they were political appointees or members of a religious sect or order, these librarians played a huge role in the preservation and ordering of their collections and the creation—through those collections—of the concept of World Literature.

The cultural dynamics as empires or religions grew or diminished had a direct impact on librarians and the libraries they sought to preserve. Those dynamics sometimes included shifting power hierarchies, linguistic changes, and/or a change in religious ideologies—all of which influenced the way in which librarians performed their jobs, which concomitantly impacted the libraries they served, and the formation of the concept of World Literature. Books—or the libraries that held them—preserve the cultural identity of a person or community. As Báez wrote in his book-length essay on the destruction of books, “The book is an institution of memory for consecration and permanence, and for that reason should be studied as a key element in society's cultural patrimony [...] books are not destroyed as physical objects but as links to memory” (12).

History is rife with examples of the destruction of books and libraries. This article has taken a historical perspective on the waxing and waning development of world literature through the lens of libraries and librarians; the lessons can be extrapolated to modern times. The damage done to strengthening a more broadly defined notion of World Literature largely falls at the feet of conflict and/or empire building. Just as in history, when new empires or new rulers arise today, they often seek to destroy the memory—the books and libraries—of their predecessors.

Sadly, the world is not becoming increasingly peaceful: Báez notes that between 1480 and 1499 there were roughly nine major battles, while between 1900 and 1940 there were 892 (284). At the same time (and possibly not coincidentally), the world has become less and less of an expansive globe with unreachable or, at the very least, exceptionally remote corners. The world's adoption of various electronic technologies means that we can gain exposure to more information from more societies than ever before in our history. Some countries or their leadership seek to build bridges, working toward sharing their society's literary works while others seek to destroy those connections. Until and unless the world can find a way toward peaceful coexistence, this librarian fears there will always be a less than comprehensive understanding of world literature, and we will all be lesser human beings for it.

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