

**Punctum Books**  
**Dead Letter Office**

---

Chapter Title: INTRODUCTION Labyrinths of Imagined Literature  
Chapter Author(s): Ed Simon

Book Title: The Anthology of Babel  
Book Editor(s): Ed Simon  
Published by: Punctum Books, Dead Letter Office. (2020)  
Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.2353922.3>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.



*Punctum Books, Dead Letter Office* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Anthology of Babel*

# Labyrinths of Imagined Literature

*Ed Simon*

Sir Thomas Browne possessed veritable shelves of non-existent books.<sup>1</sup> The sadly under-read seventeenth-century prose master oft sat in his Norwich garden and contemplated that infinitely long syllabus which does not exist in our universe. That list includes the epic that Ovid, exiled to the Black Sea's shores by Caesar Augustus, wrote in the indigenous "Getick Language," which is as lost to history as the Roman's poem. Or the letter written to Cicero by his brother, in which the latter described the "State and Manners of the Britains of that Age." Of course there is the ancient Persian king Mithridates' treatise on dream interpretation, and even more stunningly the Stoic philosopher Seneca's lost epistles to Saint Paul.

Not only were these books unavailable to Browne, but the "Antiquities, Pictures and Rarities of several kinds, scarce or never seen by any man now living" were similarly inaccessible, for the simple fact that all of them were the products of the physician's mind. Browne's conceptual Renaissance *Wunderkammer*, his "Wonder cabinet," included paintings of an ancient

---

1 An excellent contemporary treatment of the author is Hugh Aldersey-Williams's *In Search of Sir Thomas Browne: The Life and Afterlife of the Seventeenth Century's Most Inquiring Mind* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2015).

submarine, a battle scene of Tamerlane fighting in the moonlight, and artifacts like a “neat Crucifix made out of the cross Bone of a Frogs Head.”<sup>2</sup> Such fantastic wonders are recorded in his remarkable 1684 pamphlet *Musaeum Clausum, or Bibliotheca Abscondita* (that is roughly the *Closed Museum*, or the *Hidden Library*), which scholar Claire Preston has admirably described as being both “playful and melancholy,” a testament to Browne’s “feelings about the unavailability of precious intellectual treasure.”<sup>3</sup>

An admiring Herman Melville once accurately described Browne as a “crack’d archangel,” and it’s easy to see why that old sailor, with his love of ephemera and scholarly debris, had an affection for the Restoration author, whose interests ranged through literature, religion, and nascent anthropology.<sup>4</sup> In his 1643 *Religio Medici*, Browne explicated his humane, tolerant, and most of all curious worldview, writing that “We carry with us the wonders, we seek without us: There is all *Africa*, and her prodigies in us.”<sup>5</sup> Not just Africa, but the entire world as well, the enormity of those catalogues and compendiums collected in his era of wonder where cracked Anglo-Saxon pots and bits of shells shared space with incunabula and parrot feathers to attest to the sheer glowing, transcendent enchantment of everything.

And as *Musaeum Clausum* demonstrates, not just the entire world, but all of the imagined universes as well. For ours is a creation so over-stuffed with wonder, where “every man is a *Microcosm*, and carries the whole world about him” that we also hold

2 Thomas Browne, *Musaeum Clausum, or Bibliotheca Abscondita* (London, 1684).

3 Claire Preston, “Lost Libraries,” *The Public Domain Review*, February 20, 2012, <https://publicdomainreview.org/2012/02/20/lost-libraries/>.

4 Ed Simon, “*Religio Medici and Urne-Buriall*, by Sir Thomas Browne. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt and Ramie Targoff,” *This Rough Magic: A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval & Renaissance Literature*, December 2013, <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/simon%20review.html>.

5 Thomas Browne, *The Major Works: Religio Medici, Hydrotophia, The Garden of Cyprus, A Letter to a Friend, and Christian Morals*, ed. C.A. Patrides (New York: Penguin Classics, 1977), 78.

within our souls not just that which is, but that which could ever be. Which is why despite the sheer exuberance of his prose in works like *Religio Medici* or in *Hydriotaphia*, or *Urne Burial*, his melancholic masterpiece concerning the consideration of death, it is rather that strange little pamphlet *Bibliotheca Abscondita* which most fully holds my heart, for it's there that his mind joyfully enumerates epics unwritten and tomes unpenning, having journeyed to that undiscovered library and returned with intimations of possibility. Browne was a cosmonaut in what I call "imagined literature," that is fiction which produces fictions that are in turn fictions, or less tautologically, the practice and method of interpreting books which never were.

There aren't as many modern Brownes as there should be; those who gather a bouquet of non-existent verse, a bushel of imagined novels. I've tried to correct that with this compendium that I have named *The Anthology of Babel*. Having first planned this project during the final days of my PhD program, it is perhaps congruent with the disciplinary uncertainties which seem to plague my profession, for *The Anthology of Babel* is the first edited collection of academic articles which provide literary analysis of completely fictitious primary texts,<sup>6</sup> its title evoking Browne's dutiful student the Argentine master of the imaginary book review, Jorge Luis Borges. A master of brevity and parsimony, with an preternaturally wide-ranging intellect that encompassed everything from kabbalah and Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse to the gaucho stories of his youth, he was perhaps too energetic to commit to ever penning a door stopper like so many of his magical realist colleagues, and so rather he wrote in his seminal 1963 collection *Labyrinths* that "To write vast books is a laborious nonsense, much better is to offer a summary as if those books actually existed."<sup>7</sup>

6 In 1971, Stanislaw Lem published a volume of literary criticism of fictitious primary texts, which was translated under the title *A Perfect Vacuum*, trans. Michael Kandel (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

7 Jorge Luis Borges, "Foreword" to *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking, 1988), 67.

Borges's idea is attractive, a means of exploring ideas in a free-wheeling, playful manner that's not indebted to anything as dreary as reality. True to that ethos, during the course of his career Borges penned book reviews of completely invented texts, such as of the Indian detective story "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" or exegesis of the nihilistic treatises of the Danish theologian Nils Runeberg.<sup>8</sup> Authors had drafted fictional books to quote, review, and analyze before Borges, but the Argentinian provided a gloss of footnotes, paratext, and connections between imagined books which gave his stories an unsurpassed scholarly verisimilitude.

Long before I conceived of *The Anthology of Babel* I became obsessed with Borges's strange concept, as if I were a fevered character out of one of his *Ficciones*. Easy to assume that the project was incubated out of resentments surrounding the sometimes mind-numbing scholarly monotony that is graduate school, with its oral comprehensives, proposals, grants, and innumerable revisions, the project simply being a joke about journal articles and conference presentations. Such an assumption is easy to make, but wrong. I've been drawn to *The Anthology of Babel* ever since reading Borges in high school, feeling like the narrator in his story "The Aleph" who longs to see that singularity where "all space was [...] actual and undiminished," understanding the infinite and eternal potential of imagined literature as an Aleph of sorts.<sup>9</sup>

So then, if there is any guiding spirit, any muse or daemon to serve as both inspiration and mascot to *The Anthology of Babel*, it is both Browne and Borges. With *The Anthology of Babel* both my contributors and I hopefully try to honor our anomalous innovators, the whimsical Englishman Browne, and his attentive reader Borges. Having fallen in love with literary theory, it is easy to grow tired of some of the strictures surrounding the form. Rather, I choose a different direction in that garden of

---

8 Both available in Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking, 1988).

9 *Ibid.*, 284.

forking paths, turning down the less explored corridors of our literary labyrinth, hoping to create a new type of scholarly writing which holds to the abiding belief that criticism and theory are their own branch of creative writing, and never is this more clear, pure, or true than when the texts under consideration are themselves completely invented.

Listings of fictitious books go back much farther than Browne. More than a century before *Bibliotheca Abscondita*, and the French novelist François Rabelais provided long lists of invented volumes in his *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, with titles like *Bishops' Antidotes for Aphrodisiacs*, *The Clownishness of Little Priests*, and my favorite, *Folk Dances for Heretics*.<sup>10</sup> But if Rabelais's playful example has echoed in his Latinate ancestors like Umberto Eco with his fictitious Aristotelian treatise on comedy in *The Name of the Rose* or Italo Calvino's visceral descriptions in *Invisible Cities*, than a certain latent Puritanism among Anglophone readers has pushed similar games to the literary periphery.<sup>11</sup>

In Britain and America, such "imagined literature" is associated more with genre fiction; for readers of a certain disposition, such as myself, the horror writer H.P. Lovecraft's mysterious grimoire *The Necronomicon* provides a gateway to considering language's particular power, where a book can be so influential that it doesn't actual have to even be real to have an effect on our world.<sup>12</sup> But while English speakers are seemingly fine with such encyclopedic listings and quoting of imagined literature in weird fiction authors like Lovecraft, or in the science fiction of an Isaac Asimov or a Frank Herbert, Borges's contention about the pragmatism of reviewing books that you wished were real

---

10 François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. M.A. Screech (New York: Penguin, 2006).

11 Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Waver (New York: Harcourt, 1980); Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (Turin: Einaudi, 1972).

12 H.P. Lovecraft, *The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft*, ed. Leslie S. Klinger (New York: Annotated Books, 2014), 11.

seems to violate some Anglo-American sense of decorum, of seriousness.

Thus those who risked playfulness, who dreamt of books unavailable in any archive, provided the inspiration for *The Anthology of Babel*, and there are other forerunners from Rohan Kriwaczek's ingenious *An Incomplete History of the Art of Funerary Violin* to the lush Darwinian Victorianisms of Dougal Dixon's post-Anthropocene zoological bestiary *After Man*, but ours is the first gathering of scholarly articles by actual academics reading texts of imaginary books, published by a peer-reviewed scholarly press, providing biographical criticism of unreal authors while charting the course of literary movements which never happened.<sup>13</sup>

Again, none of this was done in cheeky bad faith, as a David Lodge-style parody of academic language's worst excesses thrown as a volley by a grad student grown tired of a scholarly culture emphasizing specialization in inverse relationship to the dwindling number of actual professorial jobs. Nor is *The Anthology of Babel* some kind of trenchant satire of "fake news," of an era where expertise can be subverted with a meme and rigor with a tweet. However my intentions for this project have been read, there must have been a spirit of benevolent anarchism which moved the organizers of the Northeastern Modern Language Association to accept a call-for-papers submission for panels at their annual convention which requested "academic-style works of literary theory and criticism which take as their primary texts completely fictional novels, stories, movements, authors, and films [...] [including] the lost Arthurian play of Shakespeare... the epic American poetry of Enoch Champion, and the 1975 Afro-futurist Blaxploitation biblical film *Akhenaton*," none of which are real of course.

In a seminar room at the Baltimore Marriot overlooking the tired Inner Harbor waterfront on a spring morning in 2017,

---

13 Rohan Kriwaczek, *An Incomplete History of the Art of Funerary Violin* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2006); Dougal Dixon, *After Man: A Zoology of the Future* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

three colleagues and myself presented what was to the best of my knowledge a first in the annals of these sorts of conferences — a panel devoted entirely to the close reading and deep analysis of authors unborn and books unwritten. One colleague remarked to me that a panel titled “The Fine Art of Commenting on Books That Don’t Exist” was the sort of thing that would further embolden those “committed to cutting funding for the humanities.” Certainly the response from some in the audience indicated that the panel seemed to them like arcane, weird, metaphysical naval-gazing, while others saw the baroque sentences and invented references in our papers as a parodic attack on an ever-beleaguered academy, a Sokalesque satire of Judith Butler language and all of the affectations associated with “post-modern theory.”<sup>14</sup>

That’s not how I read the project, at least not entirely, nor do I imagine that is how my publishers at punctum books read the nature of what is an admittedly unusual project. *The Anthology of Babel* is not meant to be satirical, yet we often confuse the playful for its more acerbic cousin. And as concerns that which is playful, I’m very serious. As Preston writes of *Bibliotheca Abscondita*, Browne’s pamphlet isn’t just a spoof of “learned curiosity,” where he revels in the “absurdity of some of his own items and is obviously trying for comic effect with certain ones,” but where such play was also “reparation and restoration of truth [...] a wistful evocation of what might have existed” in collections like those at ancient Alexandria. “Imagined literature” is a way of probing the metaphysics of this strange thing that we call fiction, this use of invented language which is comprehensible and yet where reality does not literally support the representation. Fiction is a lie which reveals the truth, to paraphrase Pablo Picasso. A form that already deals in illusion, artifice, and trickery, how much more true to fiction if the very author herself is imagined, the very book, or poem, or play a similar wisp of the fleeting imagination?

---

14 Consult *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2000) by the editors of *Lingua Franca*.



We've always had a strained relationship to the scandal of fictionality anyhow, our earliest novelists like Daniel Defoe pretended that stories like *Robinson Crusoe* were actually factual accounts, lest readers be overly shocked by ingesting invented narratives.<sup>15</sup> How much more scandalous would a brazenly, unabashed, and open celebration of completely imagined libraries be? What we present is such a brazen, unabashed, open celebration of that quantum field which is literature, containing intimations of all that has ever been written and the infinitely larger category of all that ever could be written. In *The Anthology of Babel* there are the inky fingerprints from those authors living in parallel universes perpendicular to ours, such as Reed Johnson's brilliant essay which explores the anonymous dissidents in Soviet gulags who composed *The Rainberg Variations* not by applying pen to paper but by cutting letters out of the bureaucratic paper work which condemned them; imagined literature as erasure, existing in the very spaces between words. Or Kathleen McLoone's erudite readings of Middle English meter in the medieval *Romance of the Minotaur* which places songs of Crete's beast in the mouths of British bards. And Ryan Marnane's consideration of the archive of author Heidi B. Morton, a massive, digressive, rhizomatic collection of the ephemera of her life from bills to library records.

Across twenty scholarly articles *The Anthology of Babel* spans the sensual Milipian "body-loving philosophers" of ancient Greece as explored by Stephen David Engel to the post-human, Martian future of Elon Musk's colonial descendants in Bruce Krajewski's concluding paper. Real figures from Ernest Hemingway to Jane Austin flit throughout the narrative of the anthology, but the focus of every essay is not the real, but the fake. It is written for those who see more wonder in dreaming than utility in wakefulness, understanding that fiction is always a parallel universe of sorts, and it is in imagining these counter-histories,

---

15 Consult Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) for more on early modern fictionality.

these alternative narratives of literature that we can fully plumb the depths of this weird thing called language. As scholar Eamonn Peters told me in an interview for *Berfrois* conducted in 2017, “Imagined literature exists in the infinite space between the letters of recorded literature, between its very words. Imagined literature fills the gaps between these letters, waiting to be birthed in our world.” Dr. Peters, of course, is completely an invention of my own mind. His being not real doesn’t make his contention any less true — which is precisely the point.

## Bibliography

- Aldersey-Williams, Hugh. *In Search of Sir Thomas Browne: The Life and Afterlife of the Seventeenth Century's Most Inquiring Mind*. New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2015.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. New York: Viking, 1988.
- Browne, Thomas. *Musaeum Clausum, or Bibliotheca Abscondita*. London, 1684.
- . *The Major Works: Religio Medici, Hydrotophia, The Garden of Cyprus, A Letter to a Friend, and Christian Morals*. Edited by C.A. Patrides. New York: Penguin Classics, 1977.
- Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. Translated by William Weaver. Turin: Einaudi, 1972.
- Dixon, Douglas. *After Man: A Zoology of the Future*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. Translated by William Weaver. New York: Harcourt, 1980.
- Editors of *Lingua Franca*. *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy*. Lincoln: Bison Books, 2000.
- Kriwaczek, Rohan. *An Incomplete History of the Art of Funerary Violin*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2006.
- Lem, Stanislaw. *A Perfect Vacuum*. Translated by Michael Kandel. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Lovecraft, H.P. *The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft*. Edited by Leslie S. Klinger. New York: Annotated Books, 2014.
- McKeon, Michael. *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- Preston, Claire. "Lost Libraries," *The Public Domain Review*, February 20, 2012. <https://publicdomainreview.org/2012/02/20/lost-libraries/>.
- Rabelais, François. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Translated by M.A. Screech. New York: Penguin, 2006.
- Simon, Ed. "Religio Medici and Urne-Buriall, by Sir Thomas Browne. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt and Ramie Targoff." *This Rough Magic: A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online*

*Journal Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval & Renaissance Literature*, December 2013. <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/simon%2oreview.html>.

