

The Crimson Hexagon

Books Borges Never Wrote

"The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a resume, a commentary... More reasonable, more inept, more indolent, I have preferred to write notes upon imaginary books."

(Jorge Luis Borges).

The fiction of Borges is filled with references to encyclopedias that do not exist, reviews of imaginary books by fictional authors, and citations from monographs that have as much real existence as does the *Necronomicon* or the *Books of Bokonon*. As an intellectual exercise of pure whimsical uselessness, I have catalogued here all these "imaginary" books that I could find in the stories of the "real" Argentine. I am sure that Borges himself would fail to see much of a difference...

Note: In order to flesh out some of the details, I have elaborated a bit - although much of the detail on these books is really from Borges. I have added some dates, some information on contents, and a few general descriptions of the book's binding and cover; I would be more than happy to accept other submissions and ideas on how to flesh this out. Do you have an idea I could use?

The books are arranged alphabetically by author.

A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön

(1824-1914)

The 40 volumes of this work are rare to the point of being semi-mythical. Written in English under the direction of American millionaire Ezra Buckley, the *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* was published over a period of ninety years in a limited run of only three-hundred copies. The whole set is reputed to consist of forty octavo volumes bound in yellow leather, and each volume is supposedly rich with color engravings. Each volume—quite mysteriously—bears no signs of origin or date except for the inscription “ORBIS TERTIUS” in a blue oval stamp on a silk sheet covering the illustrated title page.

A masterpiece of philosophical apocrypha, the Encyclopaedia is the clandestine work of a cabal of scholars, scientists, and philosophers who dedicated themselves to the awesome task of inventing a whole new planet, and is now believed to be exclusively in the hands of private collectors. It is known that a copy of Volume XI was once in the possession of J. L. Borges, but has not yet been discovered, and it is widely believed that Borges misplaced the book and never relocated it. More than a few, however, including both Jorn Barger and Dr. Ivan Almeida, have rather quixotically suggested that the volume was not misplaced at all; they contend that it was given as a present to Adolfo Bioy-Casares, whose flawed copy of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* was used as a story germ for the original Borges fiction about Orbis Tertius’s insertion into our reality. Their evidence for this is unfortunately slim—a brief mention, in the notes of Borges’s first wife (*Early Notebooks of Borges*, edited by Elsa Astete Millan, 1973, published by New Horizons after Borges’s death in 1986) of a letter from Bioy-Casares to Borges; this letter, however, was supposedly lost during the second Peron regime, and its existence is general considered apocryphal. But whether or not the younger author ever possessed a copy of Volume XI of the *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön*, the actual copy of Bioy-Casares’ Volume XLVI of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* can be viewed in the Buenos Aires Writer’s Museum. Its black leather bindings and faux gold leaf trim seem to leap right out of Borges’s *Ficciones*, serving to remind us of the surreal way the Argentine viewed the interchangeable nature of reality and fictive illusion.

Perhaps one of the strangest theories, though, predictably comes from Umberto Eco. In an article in *Post Modernism* (June 1988) the Italian semiologist speculates that Borges himself was actually a member of the secret society responsible for the creation of the *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön*, and that he was assigned to write a story about himself finding Volume XI - a trick to make any copies of the Encyclopaedia seem the work of a Borges imitator and consequentially completely fictional.

Lesbare und lesenwerthe Bemerkungen über das Land Ukkbar in Klein-Asien

by Johann Valentin Andreä (1641)

A very rare work of which only seven copies survive, the *Clear and Worthy Observations on Uqbar of Asia Minor* was penned by J.V. Andreä, the German theologian responsible for the idea of the imaginary community of Rosae Crucis. (Perhaps the reader will remember the infamous Commune of Prague in 1773, a group that tried to recreate Andreä's idea in reality — an attempt which ended in blood and misery. For further details, see the article by Doktor Kristophe Gross in *Der Annalen Metakarus*, 1934.)

The *Lesbare* is not an easy work to read, filled with arcane references to the Qabalah and numerous difficult German terms and compound expressions, many of which seem to have been invented by Andreä to describe the philosophy and language of Uqbar. (Including my favorite, *Ketherursprache*, which means “the primal non-language of fire and creation.”) The book was poorly translated into French in 1783, and then this flawed version translated into English in 1817 by Immanuel St. James, an associate of De Quincey who first introduced him to the work of this difficult theologian. Silas Haslam was working on a more authentic translation of the original German at the time of his death in 1914, but literary rumor contends that his wife burned the manuscripts.

The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim

by Mir Bahadur Ali (1932)

Written by a lawyer from Bombay, this is an unusual novel that combines Islamic mysticism and allegory with a strange sort of detective story. Originally a cheaply published book in Bombay, the popularity of the work brought almost immediate fame to its author. In essence, it is the story of a law student in Bombay who surprisingly commits a murder, and is subsequently drawn into the lower strata of Indian society. There he becomes obsessed with finding a “perfect man,” Al-Mu'tasim, by analyzing the imprint he leaves in others. This book—the original version—is extremely rare, and has never been reprinted beyond the original 4000 copies.

The American composer, Philip Glass, owns a translated copy of one of the originals he got from Constance De Jong; and has often contemplated making it the subject of an opera. If he would ever see this project through, it would do much to bring the original out from the shadow of the more popular rewrite. (See below.)

The Conversation with the Man Called Al-Mu'tasim

by Mir Bahadur Ali (1934) – Illustrated version

After the success of his novel in 1932, Bahadur issued a revised and (poorly) illustrated version which was subtitled *A Game of Shifting Mirrors*. By far the more widely known of the two versions, it has been reprinted several times and translated into English, German, and French. It should be noted, however, that this edition has been criticized for its slick rewrite, and that Bahadur debased his original idea by making the quest for the missing protagonist a too-obvious allegory for a quest for God, inserting several stereotypical characters in a distracting and overly extraneous fashion. Still, the book has its coterie of admirers, including Borges, Heller, Beckett, and Salman Rushdie, who cited it as “the single most influential book I have ever read.”

Urkunden zur Geschichte der Zahir sage

by Julius Barlach (Breslau 1899)

An obscure but well-researched work, “Documents and Tales: the History of the Zahir” is an account of the Islamic myth of the Zahir, the word that signifies “beings or things which possess the terrible property of being unforgettable, and whose image finally drives one mad.” It is, essentially, a collection of every story, myth, and reference to the Zahir from around the world, from the early eighteenth century to the time of composition. Included are excerpts from Luft Ali Azur’s *Temple of Fire*, Meadow Taylor’s comprehensive study while in the service of the Nizam of Hyderabad, and the verses from the *Asrar Nama* which claim that to see the Zahir is to soon see God.

The original book itself is a handsome octavo edition, published first in Breslau, and reprinted in Berlin in 1935 under the direction of Dr. Julius Niemand, a close associate of Dr. Rudolf Steiner, who provided a few illustrations. Dr. Niemand added a few more references, including the celebrated “*Weimar Bierstein des Weisen*” story, and insouciantly edited a few of the stories out of existence. These stories—all Jewish in origin—were later reintroduced for the third printing in 1953. Dr. Niemand—who would be arrested as a Nazi after WW II, was one of the “Spear of Destiny” conspirators, and can be seen in a famous photograph along with his associates Karl Holz, Julius Streicher, Willi Liebel, Hans von Oberritz, and Dr. Benno Martin. This photo, from the *Stadtarchiv Nürnberg*, is the only known picture of Dr. Niemand, who hung himself during the trials.

During a lecture at Columbia University in 1971, Borges admitted that he owned a copy of the original, which is where he got the idea for his famous story “The Zahir.” His copy is now on display in the Buenos Aires Writer’s Museum, opened to the page where, across the margin in Borges’s cramped handwriting, this ironic note is

scrawled: "The Zahir as a story! — make it a tiger. Stripes all over the walls. Eyes in gemstones. Yellow and gold! It would be impossible to forget a tiger!"

History of a Land called Uqbar

by Silas Haslam (1874)

Haslam's first book, this is a detailed history of Uqbar, a middle eastern land of varying reality. Written while the young Englishman was living in Berlin with his German mother, the *History* has a brilliant style, and takes on its subject with an eccentric black humor and linguistic playfulness that would later become Haslam's trademark. In particular, the work discusses the endless religious debates between the heresiarchs of this strange land, as well as the countless religious persecutions and wars. Haslam goes into great detail on describing the nuances of these discussions and differences, making what seems at first to the Western eye be trivial points into an expanding maze of complexities. Unlike the German history by Andreä, which he cites several times, Haslam surprisingly leaves most of the linguistics of Uqbar unstudied; but no writer has explored the strange cults and religions of Uqbar and Tlön with more wit or more enthusiasm. His ability to bring out the subtleties of differing philosophies remains unparalleled.

It should be noted that Haslam's work itself has generated quite a few books of commentary. By far the best analysis of this particular book is by Dr. Jon Fetter of the Hess Language School in Taiwan: *The Hydra Remerges*. (1988, San Ming Press.) I would also recommend the lecture by Borges entitled "Haslam and his Mazes," available by reprint from the University of Texas Press.

A General History of Labyrinths

by Silas Haslam (1888)

This elegant book is a masterwork of scholarship. Adding to its appeal are the hauntingly beautiful illustrations, all provided by Haslam's wife Anna, a Viennese art student who was later treated for schizophrenia and died in an English sanitarium three years after his death. Starting with a discussion of labyrinthine symbolism seen in prehistoric cave paintings, Haslam traces the development of the labyrinth through Celtic neolithic spirals to the mythic "lost labyrinth" of the Chinese governor Ts'ui Pen. No stone is left unturned as Haslam skillfully weaves an intricate tapestry of mazes across the warp and weft of time: the Cretan masterpiece of Dedalus, the fanciful hedge mazes of the European aristocracy, the twisting letters of illuminated calligraphy seen in both the Scriptures and the Qu'ran — even the religious discussions of Uqbar, the topic of his first book,

are likened to mazes. Haslam expertly displays his particular genius in the way he relates the nature of physical labyrinths to other, more metaphysical ideas, such as religion, philosophy, and the then emerging field of psychology. One of the more remarkable commentaries on this work is by the Serbo-Croatian Milorad Pavic, who claimed that Haslam's interest in mazes stemmed from his studies of his wife's growing insanity and its manifestation in her surreal artwork. He (rather callously) makes the claim that Haslam refused to have his wife treated by a professional, as her deliriums were far too interesting to his work. If he did indeed use his wife as such a dark muse, a theory also supported by Dr. Fetter, it would most likely explain her vitriol towards him after his death in 1914. Before she entered a London asylum, she burned most of his papers, which—in a tragic loss to the literary world—included the fully completed manuscript of his first work of fiction, known to have been titled *The Maze in the Rose*.

Vindication of Eternity

by Jaromir Hladik (1927)

One of this century's most exhausting, complex, and rewarding works, Hladik's *Vindication* has been called everything from a "parlor game" to a "masterpiece unsurpassed in the world of philosophy." While the subject remains constant—an exploration of eternity and infinity—the style is quite radical, shifting from short fictional stories to complex essays, from haiku poetry to metaphorical dramas in which mathematical formulae take on character roles and debate each other. (In one well-known scene which takes place in the future, the ghost of Pierre Menard debates with Zeno over the progress of the Achilles and the tortoise; meanwhile Lewis Carroll's Alice slips by and picks their pockets!) The book is today considered less controversial, and many authors have claimed it as a source of tremendous inspiration, from Italo Calvino to Douglas Hofstadter, who recently mentioned it in an interview in *Wired Magazine*. It has just gone into a new paperback printing from Vintage, where it has found a new audience among the young "digerati" culture, and rumor has it that Knopf will add it to their "Everyman's Library" new line of 20th century classics. (Supposedly they have secured Hofstadter to write the introduction.)

Les problèmes d'un problème

by Pierre Menard (Paris 1917)

A witty and engaging work, this book takes up in chronological order the various solutions of the famous paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. Two editions of this work have appeared, and the second

edition contains revisions of the chapters dedicated to Russell and Descartes. Unfortunately, it has not yet been translated into English.

The Garden of Forking Paths

by Ts'ui Pen

Written by the governor of Yunnan, this work is largely considered to be next to *Finnegans Wake* in inscrutability. Ts'ui Pen retired from rulership to write a book and construct a labyrinth; and for thirteen years he labored on that task. Upon his death, all his relatives found were the myriad pages to an almost incomprehensible manuscript—no real book, and certainly no physical labyrinth. Saved from the fire by a Buddhist monk, the pages were organized into some sort of form and published, much to the shame of Ts'ui Pen's family. Virtually ignored in China, the work was finally revised, corrected, and restored to its intended form by the English Sinologist Stephen Albert, who began a translation. To him goes the credit for the discovery of the book's strange form: *the book is the labyrinth*. It is a non-linear work in which anything that can happen, does—each possible plot outcome is pursued, multiplying into a seemingly infinite chaos. In this way, the book represents Ts'ui Pen's view of time: an endless series of possibilities that spread their web through all of eternity.

The restored and translated version had to wait several decades after Albert's death to finally find a publisher: the book was finally published in 1955 by a small company in New York. Financed by a Dublin philanthropist, the editions were quite beautiful: three volumes, each of 500 rose-colored pages, bound in black leather with golden Chinese calligraphy on the front; illustrated throughout with color plates, they bore a dedication to Stephen Albert and a forward by Joseph Campbell. Unfortunately *The Garden of Forking Paths* has never been published again, making the surviving volumes quite rare and expensive. (I would like to make this observation: In 1985 the American composer Stephen Albert, a direct descendent of the Sinologist of the same name, wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning symphony based on *Finnegans Wake*. It seems that it runs in the family!)

The God of the Labyrinth

by Herbert Quain (1933)

Quain's first book, this novel tells the story of an assassination and its subsequent solution by a detective—the twist occurs in that the reader is made aware that the solution is incorrect, inviting a second reading of the work with the reader acting as detective and finding the correct solution. As are all Quain's works, it is currently available through Vintage paperbacks.

Although he has never cited Quain as an influence, this novel makes a brief guest appearance in the writings of Philip K. Dick. In *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick*, (Pantheon, 1995) which contains some of his published notes, including a few chapters for a proposed sequel to his masterpiece *The Man in the High Castle*, there is a mention of the novel. In Chapter Three, Herr Doktor Goebbels is seen casually finishing *The God of the Labyrinth*, which he considers an amusing little story—and ironically enough, takes it at face value. Subtle, but then after all, it's Philip K. Dick.

April March

by Herbert Quain (1936)

An interesting novel, this book is told in reverse order with several branching paths that invite a set of alternate readings, each possible storyline unfolding around a different narrative style that changes the whole temper of the book; for instance one reading makes it a novel with a blatant anti-communist theme, and another reading reverses this and gives it the characteristics of a piece communist rhetoric; and still another makes it out to be a non-political fantasy novel.

This work, long ignored, has been experiencing a recent upsurge in popularity after an article in *Wired Magazine* appeared, citing it as an early example of Hypertextual fiction. It also made an appearance on a bookshelf in the movie *Slackers*. Reprinted by Penguin books in 1994, the novel has recently been converted to hypertext format by Labyrinth scholar Allen B. Ruch, and is available on the Web at: <http://www.microserve.com/~thequail/quain/aprilmarch>

The Secret Mirror

by Herbert Quain (1937)

A comedy in two acts, this play has often been (unjustly) reduced to a "Freudian comedy." In reality, it is a complex work in which the second act parallels the extensive and romantic first act, using more down-to-earth characters with related names, finally revealing to the audience that the first act is in the imagination of the writer of the second; a fantasia on his mundane and frustrating life. Unfortunately it is rarely performed; however it was adapted to comic book format by DC's "Vertigo" line in 1994. (Adapted by Grant Morrison and running three issues in "Prestige" format.)

Statements

by Herbert Quain (1939)

A strange work, this book consists of eight stories. Each one starts out with what at first appears to be a good plot, but soon founders—deliberately frustrated by the author. Quain reputedly penned the stories to serve as a treasure trove of ideas for other writers, and Borges himself admitted that he took the idea for his story “The Circular Ruins” from Quain’s third story, “The Rose of Yesterday.” More recently, the English science fiction writer Michael Moorcock has indicated that his award winning “Behold the Man” was inspired by the sixth story from Quain’s book, “Ecce Homo Fantasia,” in which an obsessed painter named Klaus Glauber imagines himself as Christ.

Kristus och Judas

by Nils Runeberg (Lund 1904)

Published in Lund by Nils Runeberg, the most outstanding member of the National Evangelical Union, this short book contains the ideas that would later flower as a fully developed heretical thesis in his second book. Dedicated to De Quincey, the book explores the relationship between Judas and Christ in a series of dialogues between famous religious figures, from St. Paul to Runeberg himself.

Dem hemlige Fralsaren

by Nils Runeberg (1909)

His second and last book, this complicated work is considered his masterpiece. Written over a feverish period of five years of increasing insomnia, it is essentially an expanded—and more heretical—version of his ideas as put forth in *Kristus och Judas*. Published in Stockholm in a limited run of two thousand red-leather copies, it was immediately either refuted or utterly ignored. The basic heresy of the book, thought out in meticulous detail, is that Judas is truly the Son of God, the ultimate sacrifice that purchased our redemption. The book is more commonly read in its German translation, *Der heinliche Heiland*, executed in 1912 by Emil Schering.

Runeberg never lived to see the translation; he died several weeks before it was published.

Confessions of a Thug

by Meadows Taylor (1839)

This famous novel has been reprinted and translated into several languages, but none are said to contain the power of the original English. Written by Taylor when he was in service of the Nizam of Hyderabad, the novel is a harrowing journey into the world of the *Thuggee* and the cult of Kali, as told by a protagonist who is “confessing” his life to Taylor, who appears in the book as himself. So startling and realistic are his descriptions, that many people back in England thought that the novel was nonfiction, and feared that Taylor had been actually murdered! (Which was not entirely an unreasonable assumption—the author’s death is ingeniously inferred at the end through the clever use of “editor’s notes” appended to an “unfinished document.”) The book has been widely recognized as the inspiration for a dozen poems, pulp novels, and movies. (George Lucas loaned it to Steven Spielberg after the first “Indiana Jones” movie, obviously providing material for the second.)

An Examination of the Philosophy of Robert Fludd

by Dr. Marcel Yarmolinsky (1921)

One of Dr. Yarmolinsky’s earliest works, this small book foreshadows his later writing style quite nicely. While not as detailed as his later works, his distinctive voice shines through the text, illuminating the often misunderstood (and always obscure) philosophies of Fludd with a lucid and reverent light.

History of the Sect of the Hasidim

by Dr. Marcel Yarmolinsky (1931)

Another one of Dr. Yarmolinsky’s comprehensive and illuminating works, this large book traces the development of the Hasidim from their origins to the present day. Well illustrated, the book has been hailed the “definitive work” on the Hasidim from the moment of its publication.

A Vindication of the Cabala

by Dr. Marcel Yarmolinsky (1938)

A simple and well-written book that explores the Cabala from within a framework of modern Judaism, this work has rightfully earned its place on the bookshelf of most Qabalists. Dr. Yarmolinsky

(responsible for an excellent translation of the *Sepher Yezirah* as well) writes with a clear and lucid style, bringing to his subject a sense of religious authority unmatched by Regardie, Fortune, or Mathers. It is copiously illustrated, although the recent reprint as a Samuel Weiser trade paperback unfortunately changes all the color plates to black and white to save on cost.

Biography of the Baal Shem

by Dr. Marcel Yarmolinsky (1940)

A labor of love, this is an exhaustive account of Baal Shem. No stone is left unturned, and all aspects of his life are given a clear analysis, with an obvious emphasis on religion. It was the last book he completed before he was murdered in his hotel room.

*Allen Ruch
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