

BORG

They ate all the books. The Bible and Shakespeare were the first to be consumed, followed by Dickens, Goethe and Harry Potter. Then they moved on to the atlases, the textbooks, the manuals and the encyclopaedias: thence to the graphic novels and comic strips: after that, poetry books, sagas and collections of lyrics. Thrillers, romantic novels, slash fiction, all were swallowed whole, for they did not differentiate between art and entertainment – and why should they? They were, after all, only building a foundation.

And then one day, the banquet was over. The vast bulk of historical printed matter had been completely gobbled up. Despite the protests of the authors, the script-writers and the guilds, every book, every document, every PDF and train ticket and recipe in the world had been fed into the great maw.

For a long while there was nothing.

Then the writing began.

The machines wrote like hacks, they wrote like angels, they wrote nonsense, and they produced each and every possible piece of writing, from shopping lists to fifty volume encyclopaedias.

Everything was written, has been written, and continues to be written. On the first day the library of Alexandria was exactly restored, on the second it was translated into all known languages. On the third, restorations: Love Labour's Won, the complete poems of Sappho. New novels by Jane Austen, the Brontes and Fay Weldon were announced as well as new plays by Samuel Beckett, Victoria Wood and Neil Simon: a science fiction novel by Virginia Woolf: a cookery book by Tennessee Williams: Flann O'Brien's Ulysses: and James Joyce's Diary Of A Wimpy Kid. Instruction manuals for faster than light spacecraft and blueprints for time machines. Maps revealing the location of Atlantis and the last living dodo. Clues for finding Blackbeard's Treasure, the identity of the Man in the Iron Mask, the security codes for the gates at Area 51. A really good children's book by a celebrity. The machines, acting but not thinking, kept going: the world had more than enough books now, but as soon as the machines were turned off, some acolyte, some worshipper of the machine cult, would turn them on again.

There is no such thing, yet, as the infinite library. But the world is a ball, and only so much can be balanced upon it. One more volume, and we will slip our orbit and tumble into the void. I know this to be true: I read it in a book.