

BORGES AND THE UNIVERSE OF CULTURE



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Some five years ago, when Mike Gonzalez, Ana López and I were beginning work on what is about to be the Routledge *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Latin American and Caribbean Cultures*, we invited a noted scholar of the circum-Caribbean to join us as a consultant editor. He eventually accepted the invitation, but his first response was dismissive: why would he want to be involved in a “Borgesian encyclopedia”? This—coming from a social scientist—was obviously intended as a cutting remark, in which “Borgesian” was synonymous with “nonsensical” or “useless.” Though as a Borges scholar I do not share this assumption, I think it is worth reflecting now on the ways in which the world of Borges and that of the encyclopedia interact.

I suppose we have Michel Foucault to thank for the notion that that relation must necessarily be marked by nonsense, by the opposite of Cartesian order and sense. When he quotes the famous sentence about a perhaps apocryphal passage from a Chinese encyclopedia from Borges’s “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins,” it is clearly with the assumption that Borges was crucial to his reflection on modes of classification because Borges radically destabilizes these ideas, thereby making his critical reflection on the Enlighten-

ment project of the “encyclopédistes” -and their many modern progeny--possible. In that famous sentence, Borges writes:

Esas ambigüedades, redundancias y deficiencias recuerdan las que el doctor Franz Kuhn atribuye a cierta enciclopedia china que se titula *Emporio celestial de conocimientos benévolos*. En sus remotas páginas está escrito que los animales se dividen en (a) pertenecientes al Emperador, (b) embalsamados, (c) amaestrados, (d) lechones, (e) sirenas, (f) fabulosos, (g) perros sueltos, (h) incluidos en esta clasificación, (i) que se agitan como locos, (j) innumerables, (k) dibujados con un pincel finísimo de pelo de camello, (l) etcétera, (m) que acaban de romper el jarrón, (n) que de lejos parecen moscas. (708)

It is in this context that a “Borgesian encyclopedia” presents itself as an absurdity, since Borges would seem to be undermining the possibility of orderly classification.

But of course Borges was fascinated by encyclopedias, dictionaries, manuals and literary histories, and his list of favorite books includes such titles as Fritz Mauthner’s dictionary of philosophy, Newman and Kasner’s introduction to mathematics, Liddell Hart’s history of the first world war ... and the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. As I have shown elsewhere, Borges retained an astonishing amount of information from his reading of the encyclopedia, and it is as important in his formation as a writer as the *Oxford English Dictionary* was for Auden or Plutarch for Shakespeare, if not more so.

Borges’s imagination was singularly taken by the design of the encyclopedia, as evidenced above all in the great 1940 story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” -which begins with the discovery of an article that has been added to one copy (or perhaps a few copies) of a plagiarized 1917 version of the tenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “una reimpresión literal, pero también morosa, de la *Encyclopaedia Britannica* de 1902” (431). This is a remark that shows an intimate knowledge of the history of the British encyclopedia, since the tenth edition was something of a mishmash -a 1902 reprinting of the 24 volumes of the 1875-1889 ninth edition plus eleven supplemental volumes, which the eleventh edition of 1910 replaced in authority. And in the second part of the story, the discovery of an isolated vol-

ume, the eleventh (surely in homage to the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), is a decisive moment in the plot:

Me puse a hojearlo y sentí un vértigo asombrado y ligero que no describiré, porque ésta no es la historia de mis emociones sino de Uqbar y Tlön y Orbis Tertius. En una noche del Islam que se llama la Noche de las Noches se abren de par en par las secretas puertas del cielo y es más dulce el agua en los cántaros; si esas puertas se abrieran, no sentiría lo que en esa tarde sentí. El libro estaba redactado en inglés y lo integraban 1001 páginas. En el amarillo lomo de cuero leí estas curiosas palabras que la falsa carátula repetía: *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön. Vol. XI. Hlaer to Jangr*. No había indicación de fecha ni de lugar. En la primera página y en una hoja de papel de seda que cubría una de las láminas en colores había estampado un óvalo azul con esta inscripción: *Orbis Tertius*. Hacía dos años que yo había descubierto en un tomo de cierta enciclopedia pirática una somera descripción de un falso país; ahora me deparaba el azar algo más precioso y más arduo. Ahora tenía en las manos un vasto fragmento metódico de la historia de un planeta desconocido, con sus arquitectura y sus barajas, con el pavor de sus mitologías y el rumor de sus lenguas, con sus emperadores y sus mares, con sus minerales y sus pájaros y sus peces, con su álgebra y su fuego, con su controversia teológica y metafísica. Todo ello articulado, coherente, sin visible propósito doctrinal o tono paródico. (434)

If in what remains of the story we hear a lot more about the languages and metaphysics of Tlön than about its emperors or seas or birds, that is because the author has chosen not to reproduce the encyclopedia--or even a small bit of it--but to summarize, analyze and argue with it. As Borges says in the preface to *Ficciones*:

Desvarío laborioso y empobrecedor el de componer vastos libros; el de explayar en quinientas páginas una idea cuya perfecta exposición oral cabe en pocos minutos. Mejor procedimiento es simular que esos libros ya existen y ofrecer un resumen, un comentario. Así procedió Carlyle en *Sartor Resartus*; así Butler en *The Fair Haven*; obras que tienen la imperfección de ser libros también, no menos tautológicos que los otros. Más razonable, más inepto, más haragán, he preferido la escritura de notas sobre libros imaginarios. Éstas con

Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius, y el Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain.
(429)

The adjectives that Borges applies to himself near the end of this quotation-- reasonable, inept, lazy--suggest (by contamination) that reasonableness is a vice, a moral failing--or at best a sign of awkwardness and lack of skill.

Of course I must confess that this was not my first incursion into Borgesian encyclopedias. When I first met Mike Gonzalez, in Albuquerque in 1985, I was working on an annotated index to Borges's works (or at least to that portion of those works that had appeared in book form up to that point). Mike's reaction was not unlike that of our consultant editor years later -such a thing was impossible. I was happy to send Mike a year later the finished project, *The Literary Universe of Jorge Luis Borges*, published by Greenwood Press in 1986. This work was joined by Evi Fishburn and Psiche Hughes's *A Dictionary of Borges*, published by Duckworth in London in 1990, and later by *Borges, una enciclopedia* that I wrote (by e-mail) with Nicolás Helft and Gastón Gallo, published in 1999 by Editorial Norma in Buenos Aires.

As a group, these works have put into sharp relief that the great majority of Borges's erudite references -considered suspect for decades- are legitimate, that -to paraphrase Gertrude Stein- there is a there there. Though the Chinese encyclopedia -and Menard's *Quijote*, and the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön*- have thus far escaped detection by our little army of bookworms, there is no doubt that most of the references in Borges's works lead somewhere, and often in quite unexpected directions.

One of the entries in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that surely caught Borges's attention was the unsigned article on the encyclopedia (9:369-82). It traces the history of the word from the Greeks and Romans through Diderot and the founders of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and also tells the history of compilations of knowledge from Plutarch to Isidore of Seville to Antonio Zara, bishop of Petina in Istria (though these works were not called encyclopedias, a word that was not used in a book title until the sixteenth century). According to this entry, the first use of the word in English was by Sir Thomas Elyot: "In an oratour is required to be a

heape of all manner of lernyng: whiche of some is called the worlde of science, of other the circle of doctrine, which is in one worde of greke Encyclopedia" (9:369); it was not used in the title of a book until 1541. By 1630 Johann Heinrich Alsted defined encyclopedia as a book that "treats of everything that can be learned by man in this life"; his (erroneous) etymology, but one which was to circulate for some time, derived "cyclopaedia" from the idea of "instruction of a circle" (an image that Borges glosses in "La esfera de Pascal").

The author or authors of the anonymous entry then argue: "In a more restricted sense, encyclopaedia means a system or classification of the various branches of knowledge, a subject on which many books have been published" (9:370). They establish a working distinction between "encyclopedia" and "dictionary" as that between "subject books" vs. "word books" (9:370). The remainder of their entry discusses encyclopedias of the sort that is exemplified by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* itself (or our Routledge encyclopedia): usually alphabetical in organization, gathering together in a series of entries what is known about the universe (or about some portion of it, in more restricted works), with cross-references and indexes to facilitate the tracing of paths from one entry to another. Yet they also take pleasure in describing the ways in which encyclopedias -including the great French encyclopedia and the *Britannica*- harbor idiosyncrasies all their own, the product of the seemingly methodical design.

Thus, for instance, Alsted's 1630 encyclopedia includes a section called "paedutica" (games) which includes a Latin poem on chess (9:372), and a section "quodlibetica" (miscellaneous arts), including "paradoxologia, the arts of explaining paradoxes; dipnosophistica, the art of philosophizing while feasting; cyclognomica, the art of conversing well with de quobis scibili; tabacologia, the nature, use and abuse of tobacco" and so forth (9:372). In the French encyclopedia: "Arts and trades are placed under natural history, superstition and magic under sciences de Dieu, and orthography and heraldry under logic" (9:376). And of that work--known as the great treasurehouse of the Enlightenment, but revealed here to be rather chaotic, hurried and flawed in its execution- they say the following: "It has been called chaos, nothingness, the Tower of Babel, a work of

disorder and destruction, the gospel of Satan and even the ruins of Palmyra" (9:377).

They quote a Dr. Gleig, one of the editors of the *Britannica* in 1800, as saying: "The French *Encyclopédie* had been accused, and justly accused, of having disseminated far and wide the seeds of anarchy and atheism. If the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* shall in any degree counteract the tendency of that pestiferous work, even these two volumes will not be wholly unworthy of your Majesty's attention" (9:378). The French and British encyclopedias, then, unlike the *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön*, have clear doctrinal intentions; far from being mere collections of information, they are works of propaganda, making a case for a way of looking at the universe. And yet, the authors of the entry assert the tedium, the perfect regularity, the precision of their ideal of an encyclopedic work: "The permanent value of encyclopaedias depends on the proportion of exact and precise facts they contain and on their systematic regularity" (9:377). The architectural motifs here -proportion, exactness, systematic regularity- imply an Olympian distance and perfection, whereas the interest of the eleventh edition resides largely in the very personal nature of the contributions, the vividness of the writing, the presence of irony and of humor. In fact, in the "Editorial Introduction" at the beginning of the first volume of the eleventh edition, the editor (Hugh Chisholm) writes:

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* itself has no side or party, it attempts to give representation to all parties, sects and sides. In a work indeed which deals with opinion and controversy at all, it is manifestly impossible for criticism to be colourless, its value as a source of authoritative exposition would be very different from what it is if individual contributors were not able to state their views fully and fearlessly. (1:xxi)

The same introduction explains that the signed articles must needs be personal statements, not impersonal inventories of facts.

For an example, let us return to the Chinese encyclopedias. The eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in its article on Chinese literature (a subsection of the article on China) says the following about a Chinese encyclopedia, the *T'u Shu Chi Ch'êng*, which

sounds a good bit like the encyclopedia mentioned in the essay on John Wilkins. The *Britannica* explains, in an article written by Herbert Allen Giles, known to students of Borges for his *History of Chinese Literature*:

Intended to embrace all departments of knowledge, its contents were distributed over six leading categories, which for want of better equivalents may be roughly rendered by (1) Heaven, (2) Earth, (3) Man, (4) Arts and Sciences, (5) Philosophy and (6) Political Science. These were subdivided into thirty-two classes; and in the voluminous index which accompanies the work a further attempt was made to bring the searches into still closer touch with the individual items treated. Thus, the category Heaven is subdivided into four classes, namely--again, for want of better terms--(a) The Sky and its Manifestations, (b) The Seasons, (c) Astronomy and Mathematics and (d) Natural Phenomena. Under these classes come the individual items; and here it is that the foreign student is often at a loss. For instance, class *a* includes Earth, in its cosmogonic sense, as the mother of mankind; Heaven, in its original sense of God; the Dual Principle in nature; the Sun, Moon and Stars; Wind; Clouds; Rainbow; Thunder and Lightning; Rain; Fire, &c. But Earth is itself a geographical category, and all strange phenomena related to many of the items under class *a* are recorded under class *d*. Category No. 6, marked as Political Science, contains such classes as Ceremonial, Music and Administration of justice, alongside of Handicrafts, making it essential to study the arrangement carefully before it is possible to consult the work with ease. Such preliminary trouble is, however, well repaid, the amount of information given on any particular subject being practically coextensive with what is known about that subject. (6:231)

This is perhaps "exact and precise" in the facts that it provides about the Chinese work, and "systematic" and "regular" in its design, yet it also opens an abyss for the reader: if he or she does not carefully "study the arrangement" of the work before trying to use it, it will seem like a crazy quilt, something quite without rhyme or reason. The reflection on the reader of the encyclopedia in Giles's article is echoed by Borges in "Tlön," in the quotation I read earlier: Borges says first that this is not the story of his emotions, then goes

on to describe in detail the feelings that swept him up as he perused the eleventh volume of the *First Encyclopaedia*.

In the introduction to our encyclopedia, we quote an inscription that is poured in cement in a circular design next to the clock at the center of the campus of the University of São Paulo: "NO UNIVERSO DA CULTURA O CENTRO ESTA EM TODA PARTE." For the author of the inscription, the old centers have not held; the center of the universe of culture can as well be São Paulo or Buenos Aires as Rome or Paris or London. But the inscription is also a knowing quotation, yet a further variation on the phrase that Borges traces from Xenophanes to Pascal, which in its canonical medieval form (as expressed, for instance, by Alanus de Insulis or Alain de Lille) reads: "Dios es una esfera inteligible, cuyo centro está en todas partes y la circunferencia en ninguna" (636). (Borges does not quote a slight variant on this formula, still with God as its object, that was penned in colonial Mexico City by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in her famous reply to "Sor Filotea," the drag name of the bishop of Puebla: "Todas las cosas salen de Dios, que es el centro a un tiempo y la circunferencia de donde salen y donde paran todas las líneas criadas" [4: 450].) The essay ends with Borges's observations on Pascal's version of this image: "La naturaleza es una esfera infinita, cuyo centro está en todas partes y la circunferencia en ninguna" (638); he remarks that in the critical edition of Pascal's *Pensées*, the manuscript should that instead of "esfera infinita" Pascal had originally written "sphere effroyable," nature (not God) being a "frightening" sphere without center or edge. Borges comments famously: "Quizá la historia universal es la historia de la diversa entonación de algunas metáforas" (638). The word that was crossed out or repressed signals for Borges the modernity of Pascal's thought, the sense of being castaway in a hostile universe.

The author of the inscription in São Paulo wanted to add yet another intonation to the metaphor. Moved perhaps by "dependency theory," which was critical of the relations between center and periphery -in the cultural as well as in the economic sphere- he or she wrote triumphantly: in the universe of culture the center can be anywhere. That is, the center can be here: just over the hill from the

Butantã Institute with its poisonous snakes waiting to be milked, near the special collections that house the papers of Mário de Andrade and of Pagu, close to the Center for Japanese Culture in Brazil and the literature department founded by Antonio Candido, near the museum that houses paintings by Modigliani and Tarsila do Amaral. There is something slightly defensive in the insistence that there is a here here, rhetorically very different from Borges's self-deprecating reference to himself as a "mere South American." And yet it is true, though perhaps the truth of the observation has been obscured by stereotypes, by complexes of superiority and inferiority, and by the sheer difficulty of knowing enough about the networks of meaning that matter in Quito, in Cuzco, in Kingston, in Mexico City, in Havana, in Port of Spain, in Port au Prince, in Brasília.

We hope that our encyclopedia -thanks above all to the hundreds of contributors and consultants who have worked on it over the last five years- will make it more fully possible to understand these centers of the cultural universe, of the decentered and ever more fluid universe that we all inhabit.

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