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BORGES OUR CONTEMPORARY[2]

Abstract

Borges is an exemplary Argentine writer and also a great cosmopolitan belonging to the whole world. He dismissed narrow-minded nationalism and wrote with a free spirit that embraced the world without artificial divisions. Michel Foucault misread Borges's invented "Chinese encyclopedia" as a symbol of the absolute Other, but Borges never saw China as an alien culture. Encyclopedia is a conceptual metaphor Borges used to describe the ambitious and heroic human effort at regulating and classifying all knowledge and things in the world, even though that effort eventually necessarily fails. Like the other failed classification systems in the West, that "Chinese encyclopedia" is part of the courageous human effort Borges described in several of his works. Instead of being obsessed with cultural differences, Borges put emphasis on affinities that would lead to a better and more peaceful future for humanity. Given the tension, conflict and regional wars we see in our world today, Borges's advice to focus on our affinities and points of contact with all other human beings is particularly important.

Keywords: Argentine, cosmopolitan, Chinese encyclopedia, world language, differences, affinities.

BORGES NUESTRO CONTEMPORÁNEO

Resumen

Borges es un escritor argentino ejemplar y también un gran cosmopolita que pertenece al mundo entero. Rechazó el nacionalismo de mentalidad estrecha y escribió con un espíritu libre que abarcaba el mundo sin divisiones artificiales. Michel Foucault interpretó erróneamente la "enciclopedia china" inventada por Borges como un símbolo del Otro absoluto, pero Borges nunca vio a China como una cultura ajena. La enciclopedia es una metáfora conceptual que Borges utilizó para describir el ambicioso y heroico esfuerzo humano por regular y clasificar todo el conocimiento y las cosas del mundo, aunque ese esfuerzo inevitablemente fracasa. Al igual que otros sistemas de clasificación fallidos en Occidente, esa «enciclopedia china» forma parte del valiente esfuerzo humano que Borges describió en varias de sus obras. En lugar de

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obsesionarse con las diferencias culturales, Borges puso énfasis en las afinidades que podrían llevar a un futuro mejor y más pacífico para la humanidad. Dada la tensión, el conflicto y las guerras regionales que vemos en nuestro mundo hoy, el consejo de Borges de centrarse en nuestras afinidades y puntos de contacto con todos los seres humanos es particularmente importante para el mundo actual.

Palabras clave: argentino, cosmopolita, enciclopedia china, lengua mundial, diferencias, afinidades.

1. Borges: an Argentine and/or a cosmopolitan writer?

Jorge Luis Borges is without question a writer of world literature status, well known globally far beyond his native Argentine and South American cultural environment. At the same time, he is of course a great writer from Argentina and South America, with specific characteristics of his old *criollo* lineage. Argentine and South American critics tend to put a special emphasis on his Argentine roots and even his national character, while critics and scholars who approach Borges from the outside would claim him as a cosmopolitan, a writer belonging to the world with universal significance. Hernán Díaz puts the two sides of Borges as the opposition between history and eternity, history being grounded in the reality of Argentine social and political life, while eternity being abstract ideas out of the concrete materiality of the local mooring, "if eternity is an abstraction, history is material; if eternity is universal, history is particular; if eternity is a smooth, unmarked continuum, history is nothing but notches," and these opposites, says Díaz, are "the extremes between which Borges seems to be trapped" (Díaz 2012: viii). In Borges's writings one can find support to either of the two positions. "The confluence of the universal and the historical is not," as Díaz remarks, "an accidental detail in Borges's literature. It is one of its defining traits and one of its driving forces from the very beginning" (Díaz 2012: xiv). Borges is a writer not to be easily categorized and put in a pigeonhole of critical convenience.

Indeed, we can see Borges himself encouraging his readers and critics to understand his works from the perspective not of an either/or dichotomy, but of a both/and complementarity, and his non-committal position to local and historical conditions made him the target of "the diffuse nationalist rhetoric of the first Perón regime (1946-1955)," as John King observes (King 1993: xi). "His stories were seen as elitist evasions from the 'real', his heterodox views on foreign influences were interpreted as *extranjerizante* (foreign-loving, at the expense of the nation)" (King 1993: xii). In the radicalized 1960s, Borges was not simplistically rejected by the young students and critics gathering around their literary magazine *Contorno*, but the major influence at the time on the literary and cultural scene in Argentina was Jean-Paul Sartre and his idea of *littérature*

engagée, and under such circumstances, Borges was found lacking in the real value of great literature, "his essays, his poetry and his prose were mere *divertissements,* not appropriate to the serious tasks facing young people" (King 1993: xii). Paradoxically, however, Borges was being catapulted into sudden fame, though not without some skeptic debunkers, because, as King observes:

> After all, fashionable French structuralists and poststructuralists from Foucault to Genette to Todorov were all quoting him and he was a campus attraction throughout the United States. Film directors paid homage to him, philosophers played with his paradoxes. To a certain extent critics in Argentina followed these modern readings for, as Sarlo points out, Borges's writings seemed to reflect or anticipate current critical concerns to do with intertextuality, the referential illusion or the "death of the author" (King 1993: xiii).

That is to say, it was precisely the abstract, the conceptual, the philosophical reflections and paradoxes in Borges's writings, what Díaz calls his "eternity" as distinct from "history" or the reality of Argentine society, that captivated French thinkers like Michel Foucault and their American admirers and followers, and that subsequently made Borges not just an Argentine writer, but a writer of global fame and influence. In Borges criticism, therefore, there has always been a tension between the two sides or opposites in Borges's writings, and how to reconcile the two is a serious challenge.

But what did Borges himself have to say about his own writings? Did he put more emphasis on "history" or on "eternity"? Or is that an impertinent question to ask about this somewhat unique or enigmatic writer? Let us now turn to one of Borges's own statements, his preface to *The Book of Sands*, and listen to his own view of his writings:

> I do not write for a selected minority, which means nothing to me, nor for that adulated platonic entity known as "The Masses." Both abstractions, so dear to the demagogue, I disbelieve in. I write for myself and for my friends, and I write to ease the passing of time (Borges 1973: 2).

Here we have a typically Borgesian statement that clearly rejects the dichotomy of the selected few and the faceless "masses," and yet it does not clearly commit him to "history" or to "eternity," the local or the universal, either. Writing for oneself and one's friends does not necessarily detach one from the local and historical reality, but Borges intensely asserts his free spirit and individual disposition, and for Borges as a world literature figure, it is certainly the free and imaginative engagement with the world, with its many dimensions and mysteries, and his erudite, deeply philosophical, and also deliberately confusing paradoxes, symbolic expressions, intriguing metaphors, and the mixture of the real and the fictional that are best known and appeal to most readers.

In her careful reading and detailed analysis of some of Borges's poems and major prose works, Beatriz Sarlo first points out the universal appeal Borges has in the world. "Far from the climate which conditions the reading of his work in Argentina, and firmly established within Western literature," says Sarlo, "Borges has almost lost his nationality: he is stronger than Argentine literature itself, more powerful than the cultural tradition to which he belongs" (Sarlo 1993: 1). Borges is rarely thought of as an Argentine writer as would Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart be considered an Austrian musician. Reading Borges as a universal and world literature figure is aesthetically totally justifiable, says Sarlo, but that would necessarily lose his specific connections with the Argentine tradition and the historical context. Sarlo, however, offers a way to reconcile the two sides or opposites by acknowledging the universal appeal of Borges to the world outside a specific South American context and at the same time presenting the South American, and more specifically Argentine, culture as in itself inclusive, universal, and cosmopolitan. In that sense, then, the more Argentine and national a writer is, the more universal that writer would become. Borges emerges as an exemplary writer in precisely that sense. "In short, there is no writer in Argentine literature more Argentine than Borges," Sarlo declares in a brilliant gesture of ingeniously conceived reconciliation. "In his work this national cultural tone is not expressed in the representation of things, but rather in his exploration of how great literature can be written in a culturally marginal nation" (Sarlo 1993: 3). The point here is that "great literature" can be produced "in a culturally marginal nation" like Argentina, and such literature was not obsessed with the "representation of things," i.e., the concrete reality of local life, and that constitutes the core of the "national cultural tone" of Argentine literature. As a South American, and more specifically an Argentine writer, Borges was located not in the Western centers of literary and cultural activities like Paris, London, or New York, but he was deeply connected with the major European literary and cultural traditions. This in-between location provided Borges with his special strength and insights and made him a cosmopolitan writer.

Indeed, with his open and free spirit, Borges had a strong aversion to narrow-minded nationalism that insisted on limiting Argentine literature to some local colors and local subject matters of *gauchesco* poetry. In his essay specifically addressing this issue, Borges rejected the idea that "Argentine poetry should abound in differential Argentine traits and Argentine local color," which he dismissed as "a mistake" (Borges 1964c: 180). He shows the absurdity of restricting a writer's freedom to choose subject matters by arguing that Racine was no less French because "he cultivated Greek and Roman themes," nor Shakespeare less English because he wrote *Hamlet*, a Danish story, or *Macbeth*, a Scottish one (Borges 1964c: 180-81). He was conscious of the in-between position of an Argentine or South American writer but considered that marginal or non-hegemonic position a particular advantage because, says Borges, not only "our tradition is all of Western culture," but "we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the

inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have." As inheritors of the European tradition but located outside of Europe, Borges claims that "we can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences" (Borges 1964c: 184). Finally, Borges clearly asserts the importance of the free and cosmopolitan spirit beyond nationalist restrictions when he says that "we should feel that our patrimony is the universe; we should essay all themes, and we cannot limit ourselves to purely Argentine subjects in order to be Argentine" (Borges 1964c: 185). In other words, the in-betweenness gives an Argentine writer a global perspective wider and more discerning than a European writer may have. The literary world for Borges is limitless, truly of the world beyond the local and the national. "Placed on the limits between cultures, between literary genres, between languages," as Sarlo observes, "Borges is the writer of the *orillas,* a marginal in the centre, a cosmopolitan on the edge" (Sarlo 1993: 6). As a writer on the edge between cultures, Borges occupies a unique position to negotiate and reconcile differences of all kinds, and to promote what we may call cross-cultural affinities that bring all humanity together.

2. Encyclopedia: Foucault's misreading

Humanity is the idea that often comes to mind in reading Borges, though the idea is not exactly popular in this postmodern and posthuman age. Differences are emphasized in various scholarly discourses, and particularly cultural differences between the South and the North, the East and the West. John King mentions Michel Foucault as "a sophisticated reader of Borges, as witness introduction to The *Order of Things*" (King 1993: xiv), but that "sophisticated" reading is a glaring example of the tendency to see cultures, in this case Chinese and European, as totally opposite, different, and incompatible, which, as we shall see, is completely different from the way Borges understood China and the world. At the beginning of *The Order of Things*, Foucault told his readers that it was a passage from Borges's writings that gave him the idea of writing that book, a passage allegedly quoted from a "certain Chinese encyclopedia," in which there is this most curious and ridiculous way of classifying animals:

> animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies (Foucault 1973: xv).

This incredibly strange and illogical way of classifying animals, and for that matter of classifying anything imaginable, made Foucault laugh at the absurdity of this "Chinese encyclopedia," at its crazy classification system that makes no sense whatsoever. Reflecting on his own laughter, however, Foucault had a feeling of uneasiness and even distress in facing a completely alien and fundamentally different way of thinking, a classification system that challenges the Western way of reasoning and threatens to "collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other," casting a spell, an "exotic charm of another system of thought," while showing "the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*" (Foucault 1973: xv). In this strange passage, China appears to be the opposite to the West, what Foucault calls a "heterotopia," the inconceivable space impossible to describe in language, "a ceremonial space, overburdened with complex figures, with tangled paths, strange places, secret passages, and unexpected communications. There would appear to be," Foucault goes on to add, "at the other extremity of the earth we inhabit, a culture entirely devoted to the ordering of space, but one that does not distribute the multiplicity of existing things into any of the categories that make it possible for us to name, speak, and think" (Foucault 1973: xix). Looking at such an incomprehensible passage from the "Chinese encyclopedia," Foucault found in Borges's writings the confirmation of his idea of cultures as distinctive systems with unique and specific *epistemes*, and China and Europe thus stand worlds apart in a strictly dichotomous relation.

Foucault was reading Borges, however, in total disregard for what Borges said in the text. Foucault's purpose was to set up cultures as self-contained systems and he made China the strange "heterotopia," a symbol of difference and of an illogical and incomprehensible "Other." Foucault's China, however, as I argued many years ago, is nothing but a "myth of the Other" (see Zhang 1988: 108-31). If Foucault took the "Chinese encyclopedia" in Borges's writing to represent a totally alien way of thinking, Borges was reading Chinese literature in English or German translation to establish a kind of "personal catalog," which, instead of Sinology in the usual disciplinary sense, as Rosario Hubert argues, is "a deliberate construction of a cosmopolitan writer in the periphery" (Hubert 2015: 89). Between 1937 and 1942 when there was little access to Chinese literature and no real China studies in Argentina, Borges published "surprisingly numerous reviews of Chinese literature" in *El Hogar*, *Sur* and the newspaper *La Nación* as "a meta-literary exercise of world literature," "a fiction of global circulation of national literatures" (Hubert 2015: 83). These reviews, says Hubert, testify to "the personal Chinese catalog that will nourish Borges's own literature in the form of themes, quotes and original references of an apparently peripheral literature to the Argentinean cultural field, but central in Borges's literary cartography" (Hubert 2015: 89). In other words, Chinese literature was for Borges part of world literature, and not at all alien and incompatible. Therefore, the illogical classification of animals in that "Chinese encyclopedia" Foucault

found totally strange and alien is neither "Chinese" nor alien for Borges. In fact, encyclopedia, the organization and classification of human knowledge in an orderly form, is a conceptual metaphor Borges often used to represent the human effort to put order onto the uncontrollable variety and multiplicity of things in the universe, and such conceptual metaphors in Borges's writings have a historical background in the European cultural and literary tradition.

That strange passage from a "certain Chinese encyclopedia" comes from Borges's essay on John Wilkins, a 17th-century English scholar and bishop of Chester, whose mind, as Borges describes, was full of "happy curiosities," including "the possibility and the principles of a world language" (Borges 1964a: 101). In the 17th century, quite a few philosophers and theologians were actively searching for the perfect universal language, or recovery of the "primitive" or the first language created by God and spoken in the Garden of Eden before the fall of man and the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel. They believed that recovery of the first Adamic language would be a way to go back to the ideal condition of paradise with important social and political implications. At that time, based on Jesuit missionaries' positive reports about China, the idea that Chinese might be such a perfect language was proposed and discussed by several scholars, including, among others, Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), John Webb (1611-1672), and John Wilkins (1614-1672). As Umberto Eco points out, in his *De christiana expeditione apud Sinas* (1615), the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci reported from China back to Europe that the Chinese written scripts were "readily understood not just by the Chinese, but also by the Japanese, the Koreans, the Cochin-Chinese and the Formosans," and this "was a discovery that would initiate the search for a *real character* from Bacon onwards" (Eco 1997: 158). This certainly stimulated the European imagination of Chinese as possibly the Adamic language spoken in the prelapsarian Garden of Eden.

In 1668, John Webb wrote one of the earliest Western treatises on the Chinese language—*An Historical Essay Endeavoring a Probability That the Language Of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language*, in which he tried to "advance the DISCOVERY of that GOLDEN-MINE of Learning, which from all ANTIQUITY hath lain concealed in the PRIMITIVE TONGUE" (Webb 1668: ii). He argued with assurance that "*China* was after the Flood first planted either by *Noah* himself, or some of the sons of *Sem*, before they remove to *Shinaar*" (Webb 1668: 31-32), and that "it may with much probability be asserted, *That the Language of the Empire of CHINA, is, the PRIMITIVE Tongue, which was common to the whole World before the Flood*" (Webb 1668: 44). Without knowing a word of Chinese but dependent on materials available at the time, Webb's praise and idealization of China reflected even better the general 17th-century European concept of China, and he used that idealized image of China to obliquely criticize the social and political conditions of Restoration England. As Rachel Ramsey argues, Webb's *Essay* "demonstrates how

China served as an effective means for political conservatives wishing to launch a mediated critique in the face of the erosion of their hopes for the restored monarchy"; and even more significantly, it "suggests that China's influence on European conceptions of history, government, and patronage in the seventeenth century is more complex and nuanced than even most sinologists have recognized" (Ramsey 2001: 503). In John Wilkins's works, there is the same idea of the pursuit of a perfect language, and Borges's discussion of Wilkins must be understood in that 17th-century background. What China was for 17th-century Europe was very different from what Foucault described in *The Order of Things*. "Thanks to Marco Polo's colorful descriptions in his *Travels* of the Mongol court in the later part of the fourteenth century," as Timothy Brook argues, "China held a powerful place in the popular imagination. Europeans thought of it as a place of power and wealth beyond any known scale." The idea of finding the route to China thus propelled the European exploration and navigation, and that may explain why Christopher Columbus brought with him a copy of Marco Polo's *Travels* on his exploration journey to Asia, trying to reach China and even further east. As Brook declares with confidence in his excellent book on global history: "The quest to get to China was a relentless force that did much to shape the history of the seventeenth century, not just within Europe and China, but in most of the places in between" (Brook 2009: 19).

In his essay on Wilkins, Borges argues that the idea of a precise and perfect language based on a strictly logical system of numbers or symbols originated from Cartesian rationalism in the 17th century, in other words, from the Western philosophical tradition and its effort to classify and organize all things in the universe. Such efforts to find a perfect language and classification system, however, turned out to be arbitrary and futile, and it was precisely the "ambiguities, redundancies, and deficiencies" in Wilkins's system that reminded Borges of similar absurdities "attributed by Dr. Franz Kuhn to a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*" (Borges 1964a: 103). Franz Kuhn was a German Sinologist whose translations of classical Chinese novels Borges read and reviewed when he served as editor of foreign literature for the cultural magazine *El Hogar* in the late 1930s and the early 1940s, but the *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* is non-existent except in Borges's essay. In fact, Borges often mixed real names and titles with fictional ones in his writings, and he also broke the generic boundaries of scholarly essays and imaginative creative writing. In Borges's essay, therefore, the absurdities of that "Chinese encyclopedia" were not presented as evidence of an incomprehensibly alien mode of thinking, since he mentioned in the same breath "the arbitrariness of Wilkins, of the unknown (or apocryphal) Chinese encyclopedist, and of the Bibliographical Institute of Brussels," who all tried in vain to sort out things in the universe and exhaustively register "the words, the definitions, the etymologies, the synonymies of God's secret dictionary" (Borges 1964a: 104). On the 17th-century background of European pursuit of the perfect language, then, we may understand that

Borges put the "Chinese encyclopedia" together with European ones as part of the human pursuit of the first language that might, in the imagination of 17th-century European thinkers, bring back the prelapsarian happiness and perfection.

In his book on the search for the perfect language, Umberto Eco mentions some peculiar but ineffective systems such as Kircher's *Novum inventum* (1660), in which Kircher designed a list of 54 categories that was "notably incongruous," not so very different from the strange "Chinese encyclopedia" in Borges's essay. Eco writes:

> it included divine entities, angelic and heavenly, elements, human beings, animals, vegetables, minerals, the dignities and other abstract concepts deriving from the Lullian *Ars*, things to drink, clothes, weights, numbers, hours, cities, food, family, actions such as seeing or giving, adjectives, adverbs, months of the year (Eco 1997: 205).

As Eco points out, Kircher's "incongruous classification" had a precedent in Gaspar Schott's *Aftificium* (1653), in which things are arbitrarily divided into 44 classes, again, not so different from the "Chinese encyclopedia" Borges described, and Schott's system "was just as impracticable as all of the others" (Eco 1997: 206). This sort of incongruity and absurdity "did not escape Jorge Luis Borges," says Eco, "he was instantly struck by the lack of a logical order in the categorical divisions (he discusses explicitly the subdivisions of stones), and this inspired his invention of the Chinese classification which Foucault posed at the head of his *The Order of Things*" (Eco 1997: 207). That is to say, what Foucault took to be the illogical "Chinese encyclopedia" is Borges's "invention," but an invention inspired by his reading of many failed European classification systems. "Borges's conclusion was that there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural," says Eco. "At the end of our panorama of philosophical languages, we shall see that, in the end, even Leibnitz was forced to acknowledge this bitter conclusion" (Eco 1997: 208). The Chinese classification failed to make sense, just as the European systems failed from Schott and Kircher to Wilkins. In my view, however, Borges might not see this inevitable failure as merely bitter or depressing, for he always admires the courageous, albeit provisional and often thwarted, human effort to penetrate the divine scheme of the universe, and the "Chinese encyclopedia" represents just part of that futile yet heroic attempt at probing "God's secret dictionary." All human attempts at exhaustively classifying things under the sun may turn out to be futile, but for Borges, the effort itself is meaningful and worthwhile, showing the resilience and perseverance of the human endeavor.

Indeed, the "Chinese encyclopedia" reappears in one of Borges' longest and most diffuse stories, "The Congress," in which the narrator recalls how he "reverently fondled the silky volumes of a certain Chinese encyclopedia whose finely brushed characters seemed to me more mysterious than the spots on a leopard's skin" (Borges 1973a: 37). In

this story, Borges makes sure that the fictitious volumes of the Chinese encyclopedia are not different in kind from other real European encyclopedias in the Congress's reference library, for these Chinese volumes are put side by side with such well-known encyclopedias as the English Britannica, the French Larousse and the German Brockhaus. The juxtaposition of fictitious and real encyclopedias, "the intervention of the imaginary in the 'real' world," as Donald Shaw argues, serves as "an extended and complex foreshadowing device preparing us for the end of the story" (Shaw 1992: 32). What happens to encyclopedias thus becomes remarkably meaningful in Borges' works. Like the essay on Wilkins, "The Congress" also depicts the ambitious human effort to organize everything under the sun and to create order out of chaos, but it ends with the burning of all the books in the library, including that Chinese encyclopedia, thus showing the failure of such an effort. This reminds us of another Borges story about China with universal implications, "The Wall and the Books," in which he reflected on the First Emperor of China, Shih Huang Ti, who notoriously ordered the erection of the earliest Great Wall of China and decreed the burning of books to erase the past before him in the 3rd century BCE. The two operations, one of construction and the other of destruction, may be interpreted in several ways, Borges argues, and perhaps the First Emperor "walled his empire because he knew that it was perishable, and destroyed the books because he understood that they were sacred books, in other words, books that teach what the entire universe or the mind of every man teaches." The material stony wall will eventually crumble, Borges seems to suggest, but the spiritual and intellectual ideas in sacred books cannot be destroyed by fire and will survive, even though the material books and libraries can be destroyed: "Perhaps the burning of the libraries and the erection of the wall are operations which in some secret way cancel each other" (Borges 1964d: 188).

Indeed, encyclopedia often appears in Borges' works as a conceptual metaphor for the intellectual power to create a systematic and ideal world in language amidst the labyrinth of the universe, and the inclusion of the Chinese encyclopedia with the other European encyclopedias is Borges's way of indicating the heroic, even though ultimately failed, human effort at probing God's secret, not just in the West, but also in the East. Artificial language systems arise from the human desire to impose order on the chaotic or labyrinthine universe, and encyclopedia as Borges' favorite metaphor represents the paramount form of such orderly marshalling of things. In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," another story showing Borges' fantastic flight of imagination, Uqbar, the strange land of ideal objects, exists nowhere except in the pages of an encyclopedia, and more specifically, in Volume XLVI of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, which is, according to the narrator, "a literal but delinquent reprint of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1902" (Borges 1964b: 3). Yet the article on Uqbar is not to be found in the normal copy of that book, either, for it exists only in the copy Bioy Casares acquired "at some sale or other," which miraculously has four extra pages containing that article (Borges 1964b: 4). In other words, that

encyclopedia exists only in Borges' fictional world to which he has, however, lent some credibility in a playful fashion by mentioning the real *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and Bioy Casares, the name of a real person and a friend of his. Mirror and library are also Borges' favorite metaphors to symbolize the human will to impose order unto the multidimensional world, whose complexities and intricacies always lie beyond human control and human understanding. Encyclopedia is yet another of Borges's favorite metaphor to emphasize the same tension between the will to know and the infinitude of the unknown in the universe. If we understand Borges's literary universe, his conceptual metaphors and their background in European literary and cultural history, we will be able to see that Foucault's reading of Borges's invented fictional "Chinese encyclopedia" is nothing but a misreading.

3. Beyond differences

The problem of Foucault's misreading is not just taking Borges's text and his conceptual metaphors out of their context in history, but producing bad consequences that bear on the present and even the future. We are now living in a world with many conflicts and even regional wars, and the gap between the East and the West seems to be increasingly widening. To see China as the absolute opposite to the West serves to widen that gap and strengthen the myth of the Other with dangerous geopolitical implications. Under such circumstances, Borges's cosmopolitan vision for the world offers particularly valuable and important insights for the current time. Unlike Foucault, Borges did not see China as the absolute Other. Although blind at an early age, Borges' inner vision is, Tiresias-like, expansive to see the whole world, including what Foucault describes as the "other extremity of the earth." For Borges, China is anything but alien. Though he never had the opportunity to go to China, Borges read many Chinese books in translation, held China in a special place in his literary imagination, and even figuratively identified himself as a Chinese. In his poem "The Keeper of the Books," as Borges recalls, he even assumes an imaginary Chinese identity: "I was trying to be as Chinese as a good student of Arthur Waley should be" (Borges 1973b: 86). China and the Chinese often feature in the core of his literary oeuvres with rich symbolic meanings, and this may have to do with Borges' understanding of his own complicated relationship with Europe as an Argentine writer deeply imbedded in European culture and yet not a European; and for Borges, perhaps China as a non-European and non-hegemonic tradition might play the role of a counterbalance vis-à-vis the hegemonic European culture. Talks about cultural differences or diversity may look theoretically sophisticated and politically progressive or even radical, but their practical consequences are often unexpectedly negative and

damaging. "Against all forms of fanaticism, Borges's work offers the ideal of tolerance," as Beatriz Sarlo argues. "This feature has not always been identified with sufficient emphasis, perhaps because we left-wing Latin American intellectuals have been too slow to recognize it in fictions which deal with questions about order in the world" (Sarlo 1993: 5). The political implication is rather clear when she speaks of the "order in the world," and the point is made most emphatically by Borges himself when he says:

> We love over-emphasizing our little differences, our hatreds, and that is wrong. If humanity is to be saved, we must focus on our affinities, the points of contact with all other human beings; by all means we must avoid accentuating our differences. (Borges 1984: 12)

These words are so relevant to our world today that we may feel that Borges is speaking to us and addressing issues of our time; and we may do well to listen to these words that contain distilled experience and wisdom despite their seeming simpleness. We may claim Borges as our contemporary, a great cosmopolitan writer and thinker living among us today.

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