

Lecture Notes in Morphogenesis

Series Editor: Alessandro Sarti

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Riccardo Panattoni *Editors*

# Plasticity and Discontinuity

Morphogenesis Beyond Structure



Springer

# Lecture Notes in Morphogenesis

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Editors

# Plasticity and Discontinuity

Morphogenesis Beyond Structure

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# Chapter 1

## EX NIHILO



**Federico Leoni**

**Abstract** This chapter explores the philosophical and ontological implications behind Jorge Luis Borges' famous "Chinese encyclopaedia," which also inspired Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*. I propose reading this seemingly absurd classification not as a mere logical paradox, but as a clue to a radically different way of understanding the world—one not grounded in stable and shared orders, but in gestures, traits, and emergent differences that produce fleeting yet meaningful singularities. This "ichnological" vision suggests a universe made not of stable beings, but of traces and gestures, aligning thought with performativity and magic rather than structure and identity. Through references to Borges, Foucault, Descartes, the Bible, and Sino-Japanese linguistics (particularly the role of classifiers), I develop a theory of the trace, in which being is not foundational but produced—an emergence rather than an origin. The essay culminates in a reinterpretation of the Western notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, not as a metaphysical foundation, but as a symptom of the distorted and unresolved experience of pure singularity.

### 1.1 China is Close

China is not so far, we used to say. And yet China is far away and has remained so, in philosophy. Jorge Luis Borges, in a famous short essay, portrayed a mythical and fable-like China, which is however not as crazy and imaginary than Borges would have us believe, and is necessary now more than ever for a new metaphysics. By focusing a little more closely on some of its more suggestive aspects, we could perhaps learn a few lessons from it.

*The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*, the title of Borges' short essay, references an obscure German scholar, Franz Kuhn, whose work apparently mentions an even more obscure and, in any case, unspecified Chinese encyclopaedia. This encyclopaedia attempts to classify animals under the following categories: "(a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling

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pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in the present classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones; k) those drawn with a very fine camel's-hair brush, (l) etcetera, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that at a distance look like flies" [2, p. 126].

## 1.2 An Attempt to Neutralise the Chinese Encyclopaedia

Over the twentieth century, Borges' essay enjoyed an illustrious philosophical legacy. As is well-known, Michel Foucault took his cue from it at the beginning of his vast study published as *The Order of Things*. In the introduction to this book, Foucault describes the Chinese encyclopaedia as the "birthplace" of his enquiry. And what he finds, in the "laughter that shakes us when we read it", is something that could equally shake, he says, "our thousand-year practice of the Same and the Other" [7, XV].

He specifies that what that laughter unsettles is the consistency of the space in which those bizarrely classified animals are expected to coexist. The madness or strangeness of the classification does not, in fact, lie in the individual categories. Trained animals exist, as do animals painted with a camelhair brush. Mermaids also exist, at least if we establish that existing includes being present in certain texts, in a certain imagery, and so on. Nor is it true that the madness or strangeness of this classification lies in the paradox of the "others" or "those that are included in the present classification", which Foucault dismisses somewhat quickly as referring to "well-known paradoxes" [7, p. XVII]. It lies, on the contrary, as Foucault repeats in various ways, in the absence of a "common space" in which those beings might live together. In the case of the Chinese encyclopaedia, this space of cohabitation seems to be reduced to the "simple sequence of letters of the alphabet" (Ibid. p. XVI) that indicate the various categories.

This sense of estrangement is Foucault's starting point for his enquiry. It is impossible for us to conceive the universe that the Chinese encyclopaedia displays to us, and thus the use we must make of this impossibility will necessarily be self-critical, autobiographical and auto-genealogical. The Chinese encyclopaedia appears to make us face a "limit which is our own" (Ibid. p. XV). Might not we, who find our own way of classifying beings so familiar, be in turn be strange or exotic, prisoners of the false evidence provided by our own equally fanciful criteria, blinded by an obviousness that we should instead put into question? What Foucault prefigures is, put briefly, an entirely negative programme. It seems to be a matter of using parentheses, and suspending the course of our habitual mode of constituting the world. There are echoes of old Husserl in Foucault's gesture. Even more so, echoes of old Kant. What is the a priori of this judgement of ours on the world, of this habit we have of subdividing the universe according to one system of identities and differences, rather than using other systems of identities and differences?

### 1.3 A Note on Sino-Japanese Classifiers

Could we, instead, make an affirmative use of the Chinese encyclopaedia? Could we adopt it, searching for its spirit if not its letter, and learn something from its madness? Could we go so far as to imagine that what seems like madness to our reason is simply a different reason, and to which our reason could easily appear to be a particular kind of madness?

Scholars have pored over the few traces Borges offers of his encyclopaedia. Borges says he drew on the writings of a certain Franz Kuhn, as mentioned above, an English translator of Chinese texts who is now virtually unknown. Some have pursued this line of research [4, pp. 103–115], arriving at Kuhn's writings and the Chinese encyclopaedias he must have consulted. These encyclopaedias actually did exist, and actually were based on criteria that the Western mind truly finds bizarre.

We might also add a broader linguistic consideration thanks to this work that has been done on Borges Chinese sources. The encyclopaedic criteria we find so bizarre are rooted in a circumstance linked to how the Chinese language functions, as does Japanese; or perhaps to a way of life that is best expressed by how those languages function, and which not by chance surfaces in the encyclopaedias written in those languages.

There are in fact particles in those languages, called classifiers, which are used whenever it is necessary to give a number to a certain object or a certain quantity of objects [10]. They serve to make explicit in advance a kind of broader category, to which those objects we are about to speak belong. Imagine, for example, saying: one umbrella, three guns. Or: one plate, six sheets of paper. We would not use the numeral, “one”, “three” or “six” without adding a classifier, that is, a particle that makes it clear that what we are numbering, however, is a long and narrow thing, in the case of the umbrella, or a flat and thin thing, in the case of the plate and the sheet. It is as if we were never dealing with the same “one”; as if it were one thing to say that we are dealing with a single but long and narrow object, and another to say that we are dealing with a single but flat and thin object.

Even more peculiar is the list of things that share the same classifier. One of them, used for flat and thin things, applies to plates, sheets of paper, photos, rafts and garments. Another, used for long and narrow things, applies to rivers, roads, ties, bottles, trains, umbrellas and films. There are many others, dozens of them, and they all function in the same way, all referring to sets of objects that Europeans would never put together. Doesn't the world that opens up before us seem to come straight out of Borges? Wouldn't we tend to put ties and garments together, and in another sphere bring together means of transport, for example rafts and trains? And wouldn't we tend to avoid putting together films and ties, or plates and photos?

## 1.4 The Magical World

A path opens up to us. We immediately understand that it all depends on the trait we want to highlight from time to time, on which trait concerns us most at a given moment or in a certain context. The decisive thing, in short, is the magic moment when a trait is identified. Then the whole classification follows.

The word magic is far from being merely suggestive. It denotes an act or event that does not abide by the laws of the ordinary world, and yet leads to effects on the ordinary world. The top hat was empty, and a rabbit sprang out of it. Now that the rabbit has leapt out, that rabbit is part of the world, and the world has become a world in which rabbits can pop out of a hat, at least if the hat in question is a top hat. The old world did not contain the possibility of that given event, but that given event, once it has happened, becomes part of a new world. And in the new world this event is part of its ordinary functioning, i.e. its possibilities and the chance those possibilities have of realisation.

Let us return, then, to the question of the trait, and the magical moment in which a certain trait comes to light, with its set of possibilities and realisations of those possibilities, both of which, as we will gradually understand, are made possible by the emergence of the trait. It's as if the trait made a certain possibility possible, or introduced a certain power into the world, and also the eventual actualisation of that possibility, the eventual realisation of that power. Flat and thin things, says the Chinese encyclopaedia. Or long and narrow things. Or things painted with very fine brushes, says the Chinese encyclopaedia. Or things that look like flies from a distance. Who knows, maybe it would be interesting, for some purpose we cannot imagine, to wander through the vast world gathering all the things that look like flies from a distance, and resolutely distinguishing them from all those that do not.

After all, how on earth can we be so sure that the decisive trait is the one whereby certain animals lay eggs while others give birth to offspring that bypass the egg, unless we consider the placenta to be a completely internal egg, soft rather than hard, portable rather than layable? Is it not based on having chosen some other trait, that we then chose viviparity as another relevant trait, making viviparity/not viviparity an indispensable distinction? This infinite regress allows anyone to say that there are good reasons for saying what he is saying, but those good reasons that precede our current way of saying actually come after our current way of saying, and our current way of saying brings them to light and arranges them upstream, much more than they could give a foundation to our current way of saying by arranging it in downstream.

## 1.5 Holding the Trait

In this sense, the decisive moment is the one, and only the one in which a certain trait takes on prominence, and as a consequence of it taking on prominence, a more general thing also takes on prominence, a category corresponding to that trait; for

example, all things that from a distance look like flies. Once again as a consequence of this, a certain particular thing or a certain series of particular things are drawn into the orbit of that general thing, becoming its representatives. The trait, thus, is neither a particular nor a universal, but a power that draws a line through a certain field by relating the two emerging regions, that draws a line through the world by subdividing it into certain universals and the particulars of those certain universals, which precisely for this common origin will remain related.

If every journey begins by leaving home, we can now understand quite clearly what we must take leave of, if we are to learn to think in accordance with the indications of Borges' encyclopaedia. Under (a) we find animals that belong to the emperor. Under (b), therefore, we should find animals that do not belong to the emperor, but to someone else. At that point, letter (c) should indicate a division within the previous ones, for instance the empress, or the court dignitaries. What happens, in short, in a Western encyclopaedia, is that from time to time we choose a trait that for some reason interests us, for example the animals belonging to the emperor, then we elevate that trait to our point of view on the set of all animals, and begin to form an initial set of animals that possess this trait, only to discover that a second set has been produced, including the animals that do not possess this trait.

A Western encyclopaedia holds the trait steady, long enough for this series of reasonings and implications to unfold. A Chinese encyclopaedia, it seems, functions in a very different way. It evokes a kind of magical world, which continually invents new categories and thus newly categorised individuals, if we were to express it in cognitive terms. A world that continually invents new possibilities and therefore new actualisations of those possibilities, if we were to express the same thing in so-called ontological terms. But we shall see that referring to ontology does not do justice to the Chinese encyclopaedia and the world it announces, and that the more ontology becomes thin, the less being there is, and the thinner the difference becomes between being and thinking, between ontology and gnoseology, between things and what we say about them. Are we really facing the animals of the encyclopaedia frontally, like in a zoo? Or are we part of the zoo, and therefore not in front of the encyclopaedia, but inside it?

## 1.6 A Digression on the Negative

We might actually note that within our occidental encyclopaedia, having isolated a given trait, the animals that possess it are in fact first and foremost imagined as animals that are deprived of it, and then receive it somehow positively, but also contingently.

The price to be paid for this positivity, deep down, is to deal with a certain fundamental negativity. The trait in question may belong to them or not; after all, this is the sense in which we speak of possession or property. I do not own my hand, to speak properly, while I own the umbrella I hold with my hand. That is to say, I do not possess something I am one with, I only possess something that I could lose, and

which precisely for this reason I can, under certain conditions, possess. In reality, the set of animals lacking that trait is the set that guides the classification, even if this set seems to manifest itself only secondarily, while the set of animals possessing the trait, even though it seems to manifest itself firstly, depends on the other. What is produced, in other words, as a result of this desire to hold the trait steady, is an aprioristic privilege assigned to the negation of the trait, to the deprivation of the trait, which becomes the paradoxical condition of possibility of the affirmation of the trait or the possession of the trait.

At any rate, at this point we repeat the same operation on the second set, the one with animals lacking the trait of belonging to the emperor. If those animals do not belong to the emperor, might they perhaps belong to the empress? In short, as we were saying earlier, we Westerners, we Porphyrians hold that trait steady. We think that the trait is objective, and that the trait is stable. We think that the trait is independent of our whims, that it belongs to being, and that any trait, if we hold it steady and follow it from one level to the next, from one branch to the next, will take us as far as the safe haven that is being, as far as that genus of all genera, that genus so general that it is not even a genus. We think that it is possible to exhaust the universe, precisely because we hold that trait steady; we think that by proceeding from one trait to the next we can arrive at something that doesn't depend on any trait, something that is completely devoid of traits. This is what ensues from our desire or our need to hold the trait steady, and this is the true root of the Western encyclopaedia. The root of the Western encyclopaedia, in other words, is not being, but the will for there to be being. And as we have already seen, the even truer root of this true root is nothingness, the negation of being; it is the vision of being as something that arises in a scenario in which it is imagined to be absent.

## 1.7 The Porphyrian Tree

This result is what is known in the West as the Porphyrian tree, since it was Porphyry who first theorised it in his *Isagoge*.

“Porphyry,” writes Umberto Eco, “conceived a single tree of substances, whereas one can assume that Aristotle would have been more flexible in imagining many more trees, perhaps complementary to each other, and depending on the type of problem involving definitions he had to solve” [6, p. 342].

Be this as it may, when commenting on Aristotle's *Categories*, and only indirectly on the *Prior Analytics*, Porphyry drew up a single tree of substances, and we are the grandchildren of this decision. As soon as we glance at an encyclopaedia that speaks of animals, we immediately think that not only the set of animals that belong to the emperor is a subset of animals, but that animals are also a subset of something larger, for example that of living beings, which also includes for example plants. Then we think that living beings are also a subset of something even broader, for instance the set of beings that simply have the property of being, or rather being in general, that simply is in general.

Umberto Eco observed with his usual irony that Porphyry “apparently intended, we do not know how sincerely, to leave aside the question of whether genera and species exist in themselves or are mere conceptions of the mind” (Ibid., p. 341). Porphyry, put briefly, doesn’t seem to be particularly interested in whether beings structure themselves according to the dictates of the tree or whether our categories proceed by negations and bifurcations. The fact remains that in an initial direction, the tree will lead us to postulate, concerning both things and concepts, the existence of gradually more sizeable branches, up to the enormous trunk representing the being that unites all beings in their pure and simple being of beings. But the tree also moves in the opposite direction, and in the opposite direction will therefore lead us to postulate that the branches perpetually becoming thinner, and ultimately fray into a vast array of twigs consisting of a single, increasingly specific attribute. Animals that belong to the emperor, but only if that emperor who is dressed in dark green and is considered on a Monday morning. Beings, individual substances, things in their singularity, will consist, in general, in a kind of geometric place, which can be circumscribed by following a certain number of divisions of the trunk, along a line that moves between the extremely general being and the extremely particular attribute, and stopping somewhere along the tree, at a certain intermediate node.

But this geometric place is clearly unstable to the utmost degree. To remain there is ultimately impossible. This is the price to be paid for wanting to hold the trait steady. The tree will trace out a twofold movement, more than a twofold direction. This twofold movement will shoot simultaneously towards the summit and towards the root, towards the absolute universality of being and towards the absolute particularity of beings. Every singularity will be divided and sent back with a sort of hasty ferocity towards those opposite extremes. They alone will seem endowed with some truth or consistency. Singularity will somehow be liquidated, nothing more than the intersection between a being that is always a little wider than singularity, and a specification that is always a little narrower. And even of that broader being and that narrower specification, we will have to say that they are in fact nothing more than an intersection between an even broader region, tending towards totality, and an even narrower specification, tending towards the imperceptible. Ultimately, there will be nothing left of singularity. The geometric place that should belong to it will always be irreparably empty.

## 1.8 On Momentary Substances

The Chinese encyclopaedia proceeds differently. After identifying the animals belonging to the emperor, the encyclopaedist immediately loses all interest in examining other animals from the point of view of belonging to anyone whatsoever. There is a magnificent discontinuity in his outlook. He jumps to an entirely different category, for example embalmed animals. And then he jumps again. Animals that are trained, suckling pigs, and so on.

The encyclopaedist, in other words, changes the trait at each division. Indeed, he seems to shun the very principle of division, of a division between having that trait and not having that trait, between belonging to the emperor and not belonging to the emperor. The encyclopaedist enunciates a set of animals having that trait, and because he changes trait immediately afterwards, immediately moving on to something else, he never lets us find, alongside the animals that have that trait, those that do not. We find other animals having a different trait, if anything, a completely different trait that was not mentioned previously. The result is that the Chinese encyclopaedia only ever puts positive sets in front of us, never negative sets. It speaks of a universe that is full, oblivious of lack, because it is through and through unstable and fluctuating; it is so lacking that it completely disregards the possibility of solidifying any possible lack within appropriate boxes. Lack is everywhere, so lack is lacking everywhere. What is there is there every time, everything that is there, everything that cannot not be there.

Let us read Borges' encyclopaedia in more detail, however. Animals that belong to the emperor, animals that look like flies from a distance. It is not that there are only differences, with no genre. It is not that there are only species, lacking some broader category, situated behind them or above them. It is not that there is no subdivision, simply because there is no lack, because there is no negation. We find animals that belong to the emperor, or animals that look like flies from a distance. It is as though, each time, some division was operating, but that division was momentary. We might try to re-read in this way the categories we have already mentioned so many times: animals, but which belong to the emperor. Or else: animals, but which look like flies from a distance. True, we immediately move on to something else, meaning that the branch on which we are now situated does not, so to speak, have time to generate a negative ramification: animals, but which do not belong to the emperor; animals, but which from a distance do not look like flies. And yet, it is equally true that a kind of internal ramification is produced, something like a doubling instead of a division, an incipient bifurcation that does not become a splitting but remains on the verge of being produced. This is the meaning of the "but" that we have tried to introduce to make this aspect explicit.

Put differently, it is as if a particularity had produced its own generality, but that generality lasted only the time of its particularity. As if it was not at all a more general past, to the point of presenting itself as absolute. As if that briefly surfacing generality did not manage to offer a solid ground within which to carve out different species, further species, and negative species, in particular. Rather, we have an instable area that simultaneously generates its substance and its accident, its matter and its form, and then erases itself. And the game begins again, elsewhere. Are we dealing with a universe with no common space, to use Foucault's expression? Yes and no. This is a universe in which there are common spaces, but only momentary ones. It is a universe in which a certain trait emerges, traces a brief common space, traces a space of its own, but a space that is all that there is, all that it is possible to trace. It is a universe of events that simultaneously delineate the being of that entity, and the entity of that being, and immediately disappear. Immediately, or better said, almost immediately. Not without having traced, as we were saying, the substance of that accident and

the accident of that substance, the matter of that form and the form of that matter. Not without that event being distributed on the twofold and momentary plane of a quasi-accident and a quasi-substance. This gives rise, so to speak, to momentary substances and momentary accidents, or to accident-substances that seem to emerge from nothingness only to plummet back into nothingness.

## 1.9 The Phantasm of *Ex Nihilo*

Perhaps the strange idea of the creation *ex nihilo* of things and the universe, which periodically emerges in Western culture, obsessed as it is with the root of the Porfirian tree and its promise of consistency, has to do precisely with the need to think about the singularity of these accident-substances that are so radically devoid of history and projection, so able to elude any form of memory and desire.

We might recall, for example, the creation that the biblical god enacted against the background of a chaos close to non-being: “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep” [11, 1]. (Or, we might think of the re-creation of the universe and every substance contained within it, which the Cartesian god enacts “almost at every instant” to produce what we perceive as the continuity of the universe, along with the persistence of every single substance, including our own [5, pp.48–49], [8].

What does this phantasm of creation *ex nihilo* speak of? Why does it return so constantly in Western culture? Perhaps the phantasm stems from the need to express, within the language and sensibility of Greek-Jewish-Christian culture, that scandalous vision or experience that is the “Chinese” vision or experience of singularity. And yet, that vision or experience of singularity comes to us in a version, that of the creation *ex nihilo*, which is both deformed and traumatic. Deformed, because it is filtered through the wrong words, words that could not have been abandoned, probably. Traumatic, because only a kind of excess seems to allow this unlocalizable, almost in formulable vision to shake the Porfirian tree out of its tragic immobility.

The fact remains that this vision and this experience reach us. They reach us precisely in the deformed form of the *ex nihilo*, I would almost say in the symptomatic form of the *ex nihilo*. And to those who know how to listen to it, it speaks solely of discontinuity. In its own way, it sweeps away the illusion of the matter of a universe believed to be given since the dawn of time, of the uninterrupted continuity of a causality believed to run along a one single line of time always homogeneous to itself. It sweeps away the illusion of a common space. Yet it does not speak of the simple absence of common space. It speaks, if anything, of a momentariness of the common, an occasionality of time, an eventuality of space. Here we must proceed quickly, and roughly. The West imagines a creation *ex nihilo* of things and objects as we know them, of certain combinations of matters and forms that are actually well known to us. It does not imagine that, underneath this initial semantic layer, the image of *ex nihilo* hides a second one, far more vertiginous. This second layer speaks of the creation of both matter and form, of their simultaneous creation by

a third element, which as far as he is concerned is neither matter nor form, a third element that we might call gesture.

It is clear, furthermore, that creation *ex nihilo*, both in its Hebrew-Christian version and in its Christian-Cartesian version, is only in partially a creation out of nothing, since it is also a creation enacted in a kind of wasteland, or based on the gesture that extracts matters and forms and things and events from that wasteland. This gesture, in both cases, is attributed to God, as if to signify the foreignness or privilege of the gesture with respect to nothingness, and to discard that nothingness into a subordinate dimension, so that the nothingness will at most be a mirror of the gesture, an inverted figure of it. Thus, if we pay attention to the theology that most radically enquires into the question of nothingness, it is never a question of believing in nothingness, or assuming that nothingness is the ultimate truth of being [9]. Rather, it is always a matter of deciphering nothingness; and upon patient and unprejudiced consideration, nothingness reveals itself to be an anamorphosis of God, a parody of his gesture of creation.

## 1.10 The Groupist

A short story by Jorge Luis Borges, written with Adolfo Bioy Casares many years after *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*, is soberly and allusively entitled *The Groupist* [3].

The character who gives the story its title received this nickname because he dedicated his life, we are told, to investigating the banal yet enigmatic problem of how groups, groupings of people or associations of individuals are formed.

Mankind, the Groupist explains, is composed of an infinite number of groups, societies and associations. These are mostly secret societies, he declares. He adds no more, but it is fairly clear that these societies are kept secret not so much from those who are unaware of their existence, but from their own members. What we discover as we keep reading the story confirms this hypothesis. The members do not know they are part of them; they are unaware of the moment at which they are included in them as well as the moment at which are expelled from them. They are unconscious societies, we might say, not secret ones. Rather than being kept secret to the uninitiated, they are as secret to the uninitiated as they are to the initiated.

Borges and Bioy Casares' bizarre hypothesis takes shape along the story. It even becomes clearer when we understand what kind of groups and associations the Groupist is talking about. Some groups are more durable, he says. For example, the one made up of individuals who have a Catalan name, or a name beginning with a certain letter, for example the letter G. Other groups are more transitory, for example the one that brings together all those who at this moment, in Brazil or Africa, are smelling the flower of a jasmine. We might add, even if Borges and Bioy do not dwell on this possibility, which is in any case entirely part of their discourse, that the groups we are talking about partially overlap with other groups, or branch off, subdividing into other groups, and then merging, then disjoining again but along other

lines of differentiation. For example, among those currently suffering a coughing attack, some are also wearing slippers. The two groups converge, at least briefly, for as long as the cough lasts and until the slippers give way to shoes, or the idea of walking barefoot on the front lawn. The smallest gesture, the Groupist concludes, such as lighting or extinguishing a match, for example, tears us away from one group and instantly transports us to another.

## 1.11 On the Secrecy of Secret Societies

We were saying that the Groupist's hypothesis becomes clearer when we understand which groups we are talking about; that is, groups that are so to speak accidental, that have nothing to do with a decision to belong to them, or the identification that certain individuals may have with a leader or a Sunday activity, a certain type of clothing or a particular cultural belief. But we are immediately disquieted, if we try to get our bearings. Borges and Bioy Casares are basically suggesting to us that every identification works like the kind indicated by the Groupist and that every identification is in a sense accidental. It is never an individual who decides to identify with any trait. If anything, the identification with any trait is what produces the subsequent individuation of that individual. The individual does not identify his or herself, if anything we should say that they are identified, or that they are in the process of identification.

In other words, it is not me who identifies with my dad and chooses as significant that trait of his which is having a moustache, and which in fact I too, decades later, have. Me, who? Is it not precisely a question of explaining the "I", much more than presupposing it? Is the "I" not a product of the identification, much more than a substratum of it? It's always the Westerner who stubbornly opposes the teaching of the Chinese encyclopaedia, always the Westerner who puts being first and the process after, and pretends that he can derive the process from being, with a sleight of hand that takes the place of what should instead be the outrageous courage of magic, deriving of being from process, the assumption that the process is not the proceeding of something but that if anything it is the something that proceeds from the process. The decisive element, in other words, is the emergence of the moustache as a relevant trait, or rather, absolutely relevant. That is to say, relevant not for me who is not yet me, nor for my father who is not yet the father of that "I" that is being constituted, but relevant in itself, relevant without any premise guaranteeing its relevance, relevant on the basis of nothing other than what its very emergence will have made legible in the world, following its emergence.

As we have already said, the secret and the magic of this process entirely consist in the operation of the trait. They consist in its sudden emergence to the eyes of someone who grasps that trait—without being the correlative individual of that trait and without knowing that he or she is the individual who is grasping that trait, but rather becoming it—and at the same time without the individual or the group from

which that individual is said to have grasped that trait being for him or her a reference individual or group, since they become one in that same movement.

## 1.12 The Tactical Nature of Space

A kind of secret plot underlies the Groupist's bizarre list of examples. The first example is based on names. This is the example that suggests a universe with the greatest stability. Catalan names, or names beginning with a certain letter. Membership in this group lasts a lifetime, one would say. But it would be easy to make it crumble down, as Borges did so many times in his stories having a similar subject. What happens if the bearer of a certain name is given a new nickname, after an unexpected encounter with a girl who falls in love with him and renames him, as every lover renames their beloved?

At the other extreme of the Groupist's examples, we find the case of maximum instability, the example of the match. This example is based on a gesture, something that seems destined to be transient by definition. But even this ephemeral gesture could be broken down into smaller and smaller atoms. How do I light the match? By rubbing it from right to left or from left to right? Here are two distinct groups into which I can briefly enter, groups that could of course be further multiplied. At the lowest limit of this series we could identify, using what in mathematics would be called a passage to the limit, the minimum atom of the construction of a group, the simplest unit through which a more or less stable membership in a set is constructed, the irreducible element that sustains a perhaps very short-lived holder of a certain categorisation. Borges and Bioy Casares use a very precise word to indicate this minimal atom, which eludes the idea of substance, the idea of accident, the idea of gesture that already has something too subjective, the idea of event that always risks suggesting something too factual. What they call this minimal unity, it just so happens, is a trait.

## 1.13 Trait and Threshold

We should think of this trait as a threshold. The trait is a portal through which we pass, like an event that, once immersed in it, makes us no longer the same as we were before we crossed it.

This is what the Chinese encyclopaedia leaves at the margins of our previous reflection, and what we now find at the centre of the story. It is never I who performs a certain gesture; it is never a certain object that runs into a certain event; it is never a given event that crosses a given threshold. It is always the trait that pierces me, it is always the event that awaits another at the opening, it is always the threshold that crosses things, dividing their matter according to new geometries. Put differently, the groups are what passes through me, and not individuals through groups. It is the sets

that cut through things by detecting the features that agree with their trait, and leave on the ground the *disjecta membra* that other traits and concatenations will gather in their orbit.

What is absolute, in other words, is the trait through which subjects, things of the world and matter of the universe pass, and what is relative are the subjects, things and matter, which receive a sort of imprint that creates a kinship between them, tactically, as long as they do not pass through other traits, receiving other imprints and entering into other kinships. A whole system of momentary kinships, a whole web of elective affinities is traced with each event. A whole network of negotiations is arranged from each occasion to the next, not only among human beings, as the Groupist would have it, but between humans and animals, animals and plants, humans and minerals and so on, to put it in the words of an encyclopaedia that is now too old, Porphyrian and Aristotelian, certainly inadequate and in need of new formulas. Relative, moreover, does not mean inexistent or inconsistent; it means, if anything, consequent, produced in a kind of immediate filiation, emerging through the movement of an instantaneous phase shift. The trait is one with the quantity of connections it establishes, a quantity that is, so to speak, not extensive since it cannot be compared with something else or something external, but purely intensive, destined to grow or diminish with itself and within itself, and always engaged in stretching out and innervating something other, or rather something that is a kind of non-other of it, a sort of overturned mask of its empty face.

## 1.14 God, and the Gesture

Let us return to the Chinese encyclopaedia. What governs the universe of this anti-Porphyrian encyclopaedia is not being, and it is not even exactly nothingness. It is the trait, or the gesture of tracing.

What we thus call a gesture, or the gesture of tracing, is that which raises a certain trait to a point of view on animals. What we thus call a gesture, or the gesture of tracing, is that which calls a certain trait to our attention, or to someone else's attention, or to the attention of anything in the universe. Being painted with fine camelhair brushes. Getting madly agitated. Resembling flies from a distance. Lighting a match. Smelling a jasmine flower.

Some might say that something also lies in the background of the emergence of that trait, and that it is not out of nothingness that the category of the animal that gets madly agitated emerges, but from the broader category of animals that just get agitated, or from the even broader category of animals that simply live. Step by step, the Porphyrian desire for consistency comes back into the picture, as does the hope that the tree has a trunk and roots. But is it not clear that even this gradually more general category, this gradually more universal matter, responds to a trait that we have wished to identify, or a characteristic that we have elevated to a point of view over the multitude of beings? If we were to say that all beings have been moulded from clay or have been drawn out of chaos, would not this clay and this chaos also

be an image, a deformed mirror, a sort of reversed hypostasis of that gesture of ours in progress, of that action of ours in movement?

That hypostasis, in other words, can be individuated each time because it responds to a certain form of attention. It is the latter's objectivation. Its materialisation, its substantiation. Thus, we can regress towards an increasingly original matter, or rather we can cultivate the illusion of regressing towards an increasingly original matter, which is the same as saying towards an increasingly general space. But it will not in the least be a question of increasingly original matters. If anything, it will be a question of increasingly different matters, because they correspond to traits that are always different. In other words, what the West has conceived as nothingness is an inverted mirror of what it has conceived as god, as we mentioned above. But now we must now go one step further, and say that what the West has conceived as god is what the Chinese encyclopaedia, avoiding substantiating or subjectifying or hypostatizing, has conceived as a gesture, as the gesture of tracing, as the tracing structure of every gesture and, to tell the truth, of every human and non-human event. The formula of *ex nihilo* is the symptom, we might say, that within Greek-Jewish-Christian ontology attempts to express—deforming it, displacing it and misrepresenting it—the need to replace ontology with a general theory and a general practice of traits or tracing. *Ex nihilo* indicates, in its own way, a path that goes from ontology to what we might call an ichnology. We might indeed call ichnology an experience of the world as the site of traces, the site of the operativity of traces.

### 1.15 The Importance of the Letter h

We can now grasp the full importance, which cannot be dismissed as a “well-known logical paradox”, in Foucault's words [7, p. XVII] of letter (h) of the Chinese encyclopaedia, that reads “included in the present classification”, as well as letter (l), which dryly and comically reads “etcetera”.

This is a kind of momentary slap in the face, and that is all it could be. Because it concerns something that cannot be focused on, but only shown marginally, observed as it were out of the corner of one's eye. The Chinese encyclopaedia is not a device that allows us to look out over a certain landscape, with respect to which we would be the spectators. There is no bird's-eye view, no separate point of view. Porphyry's tree is what allows for a bird's-eye view, or deludes us into believing that this is possible, or brings to life the kind of observer who gives the value of reason to that particular madness which from within appears entirely rational.

In the Chinese encyclopaedia “there is no common space”, as Foucault said in his own way. He uses also others words. No common “site”, no common “ground”. This refrain should never be forgotten; on the contrary, it should be put to use on every possible occasion. In the Chinese encyclopaedia, at a closer look, there is one and only one space each time, and that space is always the space generated by a single gesture in action. Looking like flies, or being embalmed, or belonging to the emperor, are each raised to become a decisive trait or a point of view on the universe.

More generally, we could say that each gesture that is at work is a gesture of someone who becomes the great encyclopaedist of the universe. Someone opens their mouth and says: “animals are divided into”. And each time, surely enough, in the world, in the universe, there is someone who says something, there is something makes gestures. One way or another, that gesture isolates a certain trait, raising it to a point of observation, making it the cornerstone of its construction of the world, making it a lever on which it can exert his force.

Each time, that someone or something is the centre of the universe; each time, it is the centre from which the universe arranges itself as a universe. Even better, that someone or something is the universe itself, into which other universes plummet and out of which they arise, swarm and dissolve. This means that all animals are indeed “included in the present classification”. Also, those who belong to the “other” category, that is, the ones who are excluded because they are exactly complementary to the ones included, and who are therefore included even though they are excluded or precisely because they are excluded. The only thing that actually is excluded, the only great outside allowed by the Chinese encyclopaedia, is the ‘we’ of the encyclopaedia writing itself. It is the extensionless border that includes the entire extension of the universe, it is the trait that in tracing itself circumscribes everything except itself. Because as soon as you try to say that something is outside that border, that there is something outside the encyclopaedia, that there is something unrelated to the trait that for some reason is establishing itself as a point of view, then you have already included it as excluded, then you have made it the rest of something and therefore the close relative of that something.

## 1.16 The Empty Empire

What Borges indicates with letter (h) “animals included in the present classification” and letter (k) “et cetera” of his hypothetical encyclopaedia is therefore not a logical paradox. Unless we say that a logical paradox is how the pragmatic, the absolutely contingent and absolutely necessary instant in which it is exercised and the instability of the gesture makes its way into the realm of logic. Ontology yields to ichnology, as we said, and ichnology turns out to be, given the impossibility of tracing an outside without drawing it as an inside, an ethics of immanence.

The trait that occurs, which is singular each time, or if we want to put it this way, the singularity that occurs each time by tracing, has no space in common with other singularities, because it itself is the common space in which every other singularity ends up taking place, ends up occurring or ends up being redrawn, retraced according to the trait imposed by that singularity on it or extracted by that singularity from it, newly collocated and substantiated according to the collocation and according to the concretisation radiated by that singularity. Singularities do not take place in space because they are the place in which a space passes through each time, refolding itself and at the same time unfolding itself. The threshold of every other threshold, the portal through which motionlessly pass other portals to countless other universes.

The imperial city made of the only portal that gives access to it. A universe enclosed in a city that encloses countless others, which in turn enclose it. An intensive empire of traits. An empire which is empty and therefore effective.

But we should correct what we said earlier, that the substances we are talking about are momentary, with no history and no future. True, they are without history and without future, but precisely for this reason they are anything but momentary. They are eternal, and moment or momentariness is the name we are forced to use for this eternity of theirs, into which all time transits each time as theirs, as saved, as the time they will make their own. They may be brief, momentary, less lasting than others, but it is always another momentary and eternal substance that says so, making them its own object, a chapter of its own encyclopaedia, a circumstance of its own event, an extension of its own measure. As for eternity, it only ever lasts as long as it lasts. This banality, this tautology, is its only paradoxically reasonable measurement. Every event lasts one. Not one second or one year or one aeon, which are units of measurement, and therefore relations between something that acts as a unit of measurement and something that is measured against that unit of measurement. No. One, only one, absolutely one. A one that measures every other thing, or that occurs as the measure of every other thing on the same basis, and of course is measured at the same time, on a completely different scene. A completely different scene which is populated by infinite other scenes, in a completely different universe made of infinite universes of which nothing will ever be known by that single universe we are considering. Absolute, amnesic and unaware universe, except that its event will resound with a sort of background noise, an immemorial memory or a blind vision of other traces, also absolute, amnesic and unaware.

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