

**MONSTROSITY AND THE POSTMODERN:
MICHEL FOUCAULT'S APPROACH TO
JORGE LUIS BORGES**

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In his preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes that "in order to inscribe themselves in the hearts of humanity with eternal demands, all great things have first to wander the earth as monstrous and fear-inspiring grotesques" (31). The case of the reception of Jorge Luis Borges constitutes an eloquent example of this pattern. As is well-known, Borges is nearly unanimously presented today as a great "precursor," if not the fundamental "paradigm" of what has become canonized as postmodern literature. What is less known, however, is that a number of commentators, especially in Europe, have also highlighted an aspect of Borges's texts which they fail to describe in terms other than "monstrous."¹ The "greatness" of the Latin-American author would thus be at one with a kind of fear-inspiring "monstrosity."

Ever since the discovery of the Americas, "monsters" have been common currency in the Old World, for example in early representations of "monstrous" regions at the corners of the map, or in Calibanesque descriptions of the "monstrous" inhabitants of the New World. The claim about Borges's "monstrosity" certainly reflects a similar strategy to cope with the uncanny. However, it is also part of a more compelling project to incorporate the eccentricity of the "monstrous" in an unusual theory of language and interpretation. Borges thus offers the occasion for what might be called an "hermeneutic of monstrosity," which I propose to study with respect to the postmodern on the basis of one

groundbreaking instance, namely Michel Foucault's commentary on Borges in his preface to *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (hereafter *OT*).

Foucault's book, as he writes in the opening lines of the preface, "first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shatters, as one reads the passage, all the familiar landmarks of thought—of our thought, that of our age and our geography" (*OT* xv). The passage referred to is a fragment from Borges's essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," published in *Other Inquisitions* (*OI*). In this essay, Borges presents a taxonomy taken from "a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*" (*OI* 103). According to this classification quoted by Foucault, "animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) tame ones, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those included in this 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) et caetera, (m) those that have just broken the flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance" (*OI* 103, trans. modified). According to Foucault, what this taxonomy demonstrates "as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*" (*OT* xv, author's emphasis).

Commentators have given little attention so far to the profound resonances between Foucault's interpretation of this Borgesian passage and the project of *The Order of Things* in its totality.² An important occasion has thereby been missed for the reassessment of Borges's impact, not only on Foucault but also, more generally, on French critical theory and philosophy. Foucault's "archaeology of the human sciences" may be read as marking a threshold between the modern and the postmodern, as well as between structuralism and poststructuralism. Towards the end of *The Order of Things*, on the one hand, Foucault announces the famous "death of man," thereby also heralding the imminent end of the "human sciences" and the closure of the so-called "modern age." Foucault's "archaeology" thus prophetically lays the groundworks for what nowadays would be called the *episteme* of the "postmodern age."³ On the other hand, *The Order of Things* as

well as its theoretical and methodological counterpart, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, have generally been interpreted as marking at once the culmination and the consummation of the structuralist paradigm.⁴ Hence, to the extent that Foucault's commentary on the Argentine and the "monstrosity" of his Chinese encyclopedia proves vital to the project of *The Order of Things*, we might also conclude that Borges plays a pivotal role at the historical juncture between the modern and the postmodern, and promises to be instrumental in the formulation of a poststructural discourse.

The main question that needs to be answered in this respect concerns the articulation of the first and the second half of Foucault's preface. In other words, how does the commentary on the Chinese encyclopedia relate to Foucault's brief remarks in the preface about his archaeological method? How can Foucault's classification of *epistemai* arise out of the "impossibility to think *that*," namely Borges's taxonomy? The effectiveness of this articulation, I will argue, depends upon a reversal which is made possible by the ambivalence of the "monstrous," which, to use Nietzsche's words, is at once "great" and "grotesque."

For Foucault, "the monstrosity [in Borges's classification] does not affect any real body, nor does it produce modifications of any kind in the bestiary of the imagination" (*OT* xvi). In fact, "[monstrosity] would not even be present at all in this classification had it not insinuated itself into the empty space, the interstitial blanks *separating* all these entities from one another" (*OT* xvi). More specifically, Foucault adds, "the monstrosity that runs through Borges's enumeration consists ... in the fact that the common ground on which such meetings are possible has itself been ruined" (*OT* xvi). In other words, Borges "simply dispenses with the least obvious, but most compelling of necessities; he does away with the *site*, the mute ground upon which it is possible for entities to be juxtaposed" (*OT* xvii, author's italics). In Borges's Chinese encyclopedia, "things are 'laid,' 'placed,' 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *locus communis* beneath them all" (*OT* xvii-xviii, Foucault's emphasis).

The reader who is familiar with Foucault's ambitious project to order five centuries of European knowledge into three major epochs

or *epistémai* will no doubt wonder how *The Order of Things* can arise out of this "monstrosity" of Borges's Chinese encyclopedia. Only by virtue of a paradoxical reversal can Borges's "unthinkable space," or "non-place" (*OT* xvii), constitute what Foucault literally calls the "place of birth" of his archaeology of the human sciences.⁵ Before I discuss the logic behind this reversal, however, a few words are in order about the archaeological method itself, because it is only against the background of the problematic status of Foucault's own discourse that the hermeneutic of monstrosity can fully be understood.

To put the paradoxical status of Foucault's archaeology in its most dramatic form, one could say that *The Order of Things* is a book which sets the scene, both historically and theoretically, for its own impossibility. As for the historical position of his own discourse, Foucault explicitly claims to write from within what he considers "our" modernity, "a modernity that we have not yet left behind" (*OT* xxiv). Yet, he also apocalyptically announces the end of the "modern age," and thereby suggests that his own discourse on the human sciences somehow already comes *after* the modern *epistème*, or is at least sufficiently distanced from modern humanism to be able to foretell its imminent end. Foucault thereby forces himself into a well-nigh impossible position, standing on both sides of the fence that separates the modern from its as yet unnamed other—even though the Foucauldian view of radical epistemic breaks clearly prohibits the crossing of such thresholds. On the theoretical and methodological level, the paradoxical status of Foucault's archaeology is even more glaring. Most commentators agree that the method of archaeology itself cannot legitimately disentangle itself from the methodology of modern human sciences which it aggressively rejects.⁶ In other words, Foucault would be unable not only to make an historical claim to come *after* the modern age, but he would also lack the ground theoretically to reach *beyond* the modern *epistème*.

In his most theoretical work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault recognizes that it is perhaps impossible to situate his own discourse with respect to the modern human sciences. In the book's opening pages, for example, he writes: "I have tried to define this blank space from which I speak, and which is slowly

taking shape in a discourse that I still feel to be so precarious, and so unsure" (17). Even toward the end of the book, Foucault's archaeology remains marked by a profound uncertainty: "for the moment, and as far ahead as I can see, my discourse, far from determining the locus in which it speaks, is avoiding the ground on which it could find support" (205). The point to be made here, however, is not so much that Foucault is conceding the failure of his archaeological method. Rather, if one compares such alleged confessions in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* to Foucault's commentary on the "monstrosity" of Borges's encyclopedia in *The Order of Things*, the conclusion imposes itself that, in both cases, Foucault arduously formulates an unusual theory of language and interpretation, namely one which no longer seeks support in any stable "ground" whatsoever. Far from leaving the door ajar for what critics consider the solutions of his "genealogical" works, Foucault is affirming a permanent feature of his discourse here, namely its inescapable groundlessness. None of the subsequent works of Foucault seeks to compensate for this absence of a "common locus" by providing his discourse with a stable point of view from where to speak. On the contrary, "as far ahead as he can see," Foucault will write from a "blank space," that is, from the "unthinkable space" or the "non-place of language" found in Borges's Chinese encyclopedia. By nestling his discourse in the "interstitial blanks" of the "order of things," Foucault grounds his archaeology of the human sciences in nothing less, and nothing more, than the "monstrosity" of Borges's classification.

And yet, the question remains whether the anti-foundational hermeneutic of monstrosity is any better equipped to tear itself free from the impasses of thought which Foucault reveals in modern humanism. As other commentators have indicated, for example, the archaeological discourse cannot entirely free itself from the strategies of reversal which Foucault rejects so forcefully under the heading of what he calls the "analytic of finitude."⁷ One must discuss the proximities, therefore, between the hermeneutic of monstrosity and the modern analytic of finitude. In a section from *The Order of Things* called "Monsters and Fossils," moreover, Foucault provides us with the details to understand how positivity and monstrosity paradoxically are at one during the classical age.

Finally, in later texts such as *The Discourse on Language* and "Monstrosities in Criticism," Foucault returns once more to a position deliberately entangled in the hermeneutic of monstrosity.

According to Foucault, the analytic of finitude is what marks the threshold between the classical and the modern age (OT 312-35). With the modern emergence of "man" as both the subject and object of the human sciences, the task of thought no longer consists in setting up a taxonomy or a theory of representation, as it was the case during the classical age. Instead, with language having ceased to be transparent, modern critical thinking is concerned with an analytic of the conditions of possibility for any representation. Given the inescapable finitude of man, however, this analytic will have to rely on a strange reversal by which, paradoxically, man's limitations double back upon themselves to provide thought with its intrinsic foundations. In other words, in the analytic of finitude, as Foucault writes, "the limits of knowledge provide the positive foundation for the possibility of knowing" (OT 317). To illustrate this reversal, Foucault gives an account of three ways in which the finitude of man's knowledge folds back upon itself as if to liberate its foundations in a "reciprocal return or circularity" (OT 316). Only one of these so-called "doubles" will occupy us here in the context of Borges and the hermeneutic of monstrosity, namely the double of thinking and the unthought.

In the modern age, as Foucault points out, the human sciences inevitably depend upon "the articulation of thought on everything within it, around it, and beneath it which is not thought" (OT 324). Modern knowledge of the human being would be impossible, Foucault writes, without "the existence—mute, yet ready to speak, and secretly impregnated with a potential discourse—of that *not-known* from which man is perpetually summoned towards self-knowledge" (OT 323, author's emphasis). Far from constituting an insurmountable obstacle to knowledge, the obscure and unreflected double of man paradoxically "plays the role of a preliminary ground upon which man must collect himself and recall himself in order to attain his truth" (OT 327). Hence Foucault's assertion that "the whole of modern thought is imbued with the necessity of thinking the unthought" (OT 327).

Paradoxically, the human sciences thus establish their knowledge against the background of "the whole silent horizon of what is posited in the sandy stretches of non-thought" (OT 323). However, considering Foucault's commentary on Borges's Chinese encyclopedia, should one not conclude that the discourse of archaeology, too, situates itself "in that dimension where thought addresses the unthought and articulates itself upon it" (OT 325)? By transforming the "unthinkable space" of "monstrosity" into the absent ground of his discourse, Foucault indeed repeats a scenario of the analytic of finitude, which he rejects as an essential part of the modern *episteme*. Through aberrations such as Borges's unthinkable taxonomy, a culture, as Foucault writes, "finds itself faced with the stark fact that there exists, below the level of spontaneous order, things that are in themselves capable of being ordered, that belong to an unspoken order" (OT xx). Yet this "unspoken order" is what archaeology intends to "uncover" and "restore" (OT xxiv). Paradoxically, therefore, Foucault grafts his archaeology, which is an analysis of "the pure [naked, *nue*] experience of order and of its modes of being" (OT xxi), onto the "wonderment" of Borges's taxonomy, which discloses "the stark [naked, *nue*] impossibility of thinking *that*" (OT xv). By articulating itself from the outset on the collapse of order, *The Order of Things* repeats the analytic of finitude of modern thought, passing almost imperceptibly from the "unspoken" and the "unthinkable" to thought, and from the "impossibility of thinking" to its recondite "conditions of possibility."

The hermeneutic of monstrosity not only harks back to the analytic of finitude of the modern age. One can also consider *The Order of Things* a table or taxonomy of the kind typically found in the classical age.⁸ In that case, the failure of Foucault's commentators to consider the double role of Borges's "monstrosity," both as a threat and as a promise for archaeology, becomes even more surprising. Foucault dedicates indeed an entire section of *The Order of Things* to the function of "Monsters and Fossils" within taxonomies of the classical *episteme* (OT 150-57). Classifications of forms of life and their evolution, Foucault writes, often carry with them "the necessity of introducing monsters into the scheme—forming the background noise, as it were, the endless

murmur of nature" (OT 155). Thus, Foucault quotes one eighteenth-century scientist who writes that "far from disturbing the order of things, [the most apparently bizarre forms] contribute to it. It is only, perhaps, by dint of producing monstrous beings that nature succeeds in producing beings of greater regularity and with a more symmetrical structure" (OT 155). Indeed, "the proliferation of monsters," Foucault explains, "is necessary to enable us to work down again from the continuum ... to the table" (OT 156). Applied to Foucault's own classification, this means that *The Order of Things* provides us with the key to understand the necessity of Borges's "monstrous" invention for Foucault's archaeological "table."

Thus, at the margins of his corpus, in one Argentine's apocryphal Chinese encyclopedia, Foucault discovers the "mute" center of his archaeology of the human sciences, the "background noise, as it were, the endless murmur of nature," which circulates within, around, and beneath the "order of things." In the corner of the vast territory charted, namely "European culture since the sixteenth century" (OT 386), Foucault discovers a "blank space" from where he can speak; the only space, perhaps, hinting at what lies ahead on the other side of the fence, beyond humanism and pointing toward the postmodern, yet still inevitably ensnared in the impasses of modern thought and classical taxonomies.

In Foucault's reading of Borges, "monstrosity" has become the absent center of an unusual theory of language and interpretation. As Foucault indicates in *The Discourse on Language*, "within its own limits, every discipline recognizes true and false propositions, but, on the other side of its margins, it repulses a whole teratology of knowledge" (223). The innovation of Foucault's hermeneutic of monstrosity, then, consists in grafting the archaeology of knowledge onto this teratology of knowledge, by discovering the conditions of both true and false knowledge even among those "monsters on the prow!" (224). This is a lesson Foucault learns not only from Borges but from his mentor, Georges Canguilhem, who insists, in *The Normal and the Pathological*, "on the possibility and even the obligation of enhancing the knowledge of normal formations by using knowledge about monstrous formations" (31). Perhaps no one has accomplished this feat better than Foucault

when he reveals Borges to be something of "a true monster," at once "great" and "grotesque."

By way of conclusion, I would like to turn to a short text published by Foucault in reply to two reviews of his work. In this text, "Monstrosities in Criticism," Foucault starts out by questioning the distinction between "good" and "bad" criticism:

I hope that one day the old divisions will be abolished. The vague moral criterion will no longer be used which opposes the 'honest' and 'dishonest' criticism—the 'good' criticism which respects the texts of which it speaks, and the 'bad' criticism which deforms them. All criticism will appear as transformations. . . which all have their principles and their laws. And these petits textes with the sloping brow, the crooked legs, and the veering eye, that one commonly despises, will enter in the dance where they will execute movements neither more nor less honorable than the others. One will no longer seek to reply to them nor to silence their din, but rather to find the reason for their misshapeness, their lameness, their sightless eyes, their long ears. (58, author's italics)

Foucault here offers his readers a splendid summary of the hermeneutic of monstrosity and the role played by a *petit texte* like Borges's Chinese encyclopedia in *The Order of Things*. The "monstrosity" of Borges's crooked classification of animals in one way forms an imposture within the archaeology of *epistémè* charted by Foucault. And yet, this "monster" provides the ideal "birthplace" for Foucault's inquiry, because it summons the archaeologist to find the reason for its misshapeness, the principles and the laws that govern its monstrosity. For an hermeneutic of monstrosity, as Foucault writes in the same reply, "the impostures within critical space are like monsters within the realm of living: nevertheless coherent possibilities" (58). Hence, even when George Steiner, one of the targeted reviewers of *The Order of Things*, allegedly "transforms the book into a sort of monster of incoherence," Foucault seems willing to grant him the honor of having invented a kind of "criticism-fiction," which deserves an earnest archaeological reading precisely because of the monstrosity. Only, as Foucault concludes, "it is a shame that

Borges, who has genius, has already invented criticism-fiction" (60).

Notes

¹To mention only a few examples: Eric Flamand labels Borges "that monstre chaud one spontaneously identifies with Literature" (107); Antoine Compagnon dedicates a "teratology" to Borges's practice of citation (11, 362-64, 370-80); Jean-Pierre Mourey argues that Borges's literature is a quest for a "marvelous Sign" which is "a monster for the semiologies of the twentieth-century (Peirce, Saussure)" (78); Serge Champeau grounds a complete "phenomenology" in the Borgesian experience of the "monstrous"; Gérard Genette speaks about "Pierre Menard" as "the monstrous extension of the principle of minimal parody" (366), while Marie-Hélène Huet discusses the same story as one of Borges's exemplary "tales of palimpsests and monstrous filiations" (260-65).

²In an otherwise invaluable analysis, Dreyfus and Rabinow for example simply ignore Foucault's preface. Gerry O'Sullivan does quote Foucault's preface but quickly abandons this topic in favor of the question of intertextuality. An excellent analysis of Foucault's commentary on Borges is David Carroll's (53-59).

³Dreyfus and Rabinow, for example, mention Foucault's "promised post-modern science of human beings" (98). Going one step further, Richard Harland summarizes *The Order of Things*, wrongly yet suggestively, as though it were the history of "the four major epistemes of the last five centuries: Renaissance, Classical, Modern, and Post-Modern cum Structuralist" (109).

⁴See, for example, the chapters "Foucault and Structuralism" and "Beyond Structuralism" in Allan Megill (183-56). Whether or not commentators insist on the continuity rather than on the discontinuity of Foucault's work, usually the shift from Foucauldian "archaeology" to "genealogy" is equated with a shift from (radical) structuralism to poststructuralism. Cf. Harland, "Foucault as Archaeologist" and "Foucault as Genealogist" (101-20, and 155-66).

⁵In French, the opening-line of *Les mots et les choses* literally reads: "Ce livre a son lieu de naissance dans un texte de Borges" (7).

⁶Dreyfus and Rabinow, "The Methodological Failure of Archaeology" (79-100), and the conclusion of Harland's chapter "Foucault as Archaeologist" (116-20).

⁷Dreyfus and Rabinow, "Man and His Doubles: The Analytic of Finitude," and "Conclusion: Double Trouble" (26-43 and 90-100).

⁸Even literally, Foucault draws up a "General Table" of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries (OT 201). For Dreyfus and Rabinow, "Foucault's analysis of the Classical Age also reveals, in spite of his insistence on the cataclysmic break between the Age of Representation and the Age of Man, a deep continuity with the present" (99).

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