Runlan (Cecilia) Lin

Experiment 1

Selected Text:

This book firstarose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a ' certain Chinese encyclopaedia ' in which it is written that ' animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera , (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies '. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that.

But what is it impossible to think, and what kind of impossibility are we faced with here? Each of these strange categories can be assigned a precise meaning and a demonstrable content; some of them do certainly involve fantastic entities – fabulous animals or sirens – but, precisely because it puts them into categories of their own, the Chinese encyclopaedia localizes their powers of contagion; it distinguishes carefully between the very real animals (those that are frenzied or have just broken the water pitcher) and those that reside solely in the realm of imagination. The possibility of dangerous mixtures has been exorcized, heraldry and fable have been relegated to their own exalted peaks: no inconceivable amphibious maidens, no clawed wings, no disgusting, squamous epidermis, none of those polymorphous and demoniacal faces, no creatures breathing fire. The quality of monstrosity here does not affect any real body, nor does it produce modifications of any kind in the bestiary of the imagination; it does not lurk in the depths of any strange power. It 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. It is not the ' fabulous ' animals that are impossible, since they are designated as such, but the narrowness of the distance separating them from (and juxtaposing them to) the stray dogs, or the animals that from a long way off look like flies. What transgresses the boundaries of all imagination, of all possible thought, is simply that alphabetical series (a, b, c, d) which links each of those categories to all the others.

Moreover, it is not simply the oddity of unusual juxtapositions that we are faced with here. We are all familiar with the disconcerting effect of the proximity of extremes, or, quite simply, with the sudden vicinity of things that have no relation to each other; the mere act of enumeration that heaps them all together has a power of enchantment all its own: ' I am no longer hungry, ' Esusthenes said. ' Until the morrow, safe from my saliva all the following shall be: Aspics, Acalephs, Acanthocephalates, Amoebocytes, Ammonites, Axolotls, Amblystomas, Aphidions, Anomodas, Ascarids, Amphisbaenas, Angleworms, Amphipods, Anaerobes, Annelids, Anthozoans… ' But all these worms and snakes, all these creatures redolent of decay and slime are slithering, like the syllables which designate them, in Esusthenes ' saliva: that is where they all have their common locus , like the umbrella and the sewing-machine on the operating table; startling though their propinquity may be, it is nevertheless warranted by that and , by that in , by that on whose solidity provides proof of the possibility of juxtaposition. It was certainly improbable that arachnids, ammonites, and annelids should one day mingle on Esusthenes ' tongue, but, after all, that welcoming and voracious mouth certainly provided them with a feasible lodging, a roof under which to coexist.

The monstrous quality that runs through Borges ' s enumeration consists, on the contrary, in the fact that the common ground on which such meetings are possible has itself been destroyed. What is impossible is not the propinquity of the things listed, but the very site on which their propinquity would be possible. The animals ' (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush ' – where could they ever meet, except in the immaterial sound of the voice pronouncing their enumeration, or on the page transcribing it? Where else could they be juxtaposed except in the non-place of language? Yet, though language can spread them before us, it can do so only in an unthinkable space. The central category of animals ' included in the present classification ', with its explicit reference to paradoxes we are familiar with, is indication enough that we shall never succeed in defining a stable relation of contained to container between each of these categories and that which includes them all: if all the animals divided up here can be placed without exception in one of the divisions of this list, then aren ' t all the other divisions to be found in that one division too? Borges adds no figure to the atlas of the impossible; nowhere does he strike the spark of poetic confrontation; he 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. A vanishing trick that is masked or, rather, laughably indicated by our alphabetical order, which is to be taken as the else (the only visible one) to the enumerations of a Chinese encyclopaedia. . . . What has been removed, in short, is the famous ' operating table '; and rendering to Roussel (a small part of what is still his due, I use that word ' table ' in two superimposed senses: the nickelplated, rubbery table swathed in white, glittering beneath a glass sun devouring all shadow – the table where, for an instant, perhaps forever, the umbrella encounters the sewing-machine; and also a table, a tabula , that enables thought to operate upon the entities of our world, to put them in order, to divide them into classes, to group them according to names that designate their similarities and their differences – the table upon which, since the beginning of time, language has intersected space.

That passage from Borges kept me laughing a long time, though not without a certain uneasiness that I found hard to shake off . Perhaps because there arose in its wake the suspicion that there is a worse kind of disorder than that of the incongruous , the linking together of things that are inappropriate; I mean the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the heteroclite ; and that word should be taken in its most literal, etymological sense: in such a state, 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 common locus beneath them all. Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ' syntax ' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ' hold together ' . This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fabula ; heterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.

Recombinations of Adjectives and Nouns:

voracious sewing-machine
disconcerting slime
imaginary epidermis
squamous leaps
dangerous bestiary
welcoming contagion
stray taxonomy
ordered wings
fabulous contagion of decay
fiery interstitial blanks
monstrous pigs of geography
dangerous syllables

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Text Arrangement:

(A)
bsurdity destroys the and of the enumeration by making impossible the in where the things enumerated would be divided up.

(B)
ut what is it impossible to think, and what kind of impossibility are we faced with here?

(C)
hinese culture is the most meticulous, the most rigidly ordered, the one most deaf to temporal events, most attached to the pure delineation of space; we think of it as a civilization of dikes and dams beneath the eternal face of the sky; we see it, spread and frozen, over the entire surface of a continent surrounded by walls.

(D)
espite the impression we may have of an almost uninterrupted development of the European ratio from the Renaissance to our own day, despite our possible belief that the classifications of Linnaeus, modified to a greater or lesser degree, can still lay claim to some sort of validity, that Condillac ' s theory of value can be recognized to some extent in nineteenth-century marginalism, that Keynes was well aware of the affinities between his own analyses and those of Cantillon, that the language of general grammar (as exemplified in the authors of Port-Royal or in Bauzée) is not so very far removed from our own - all this quasicontinuity on the level of ideas and themes is doubtless only a surface appearance; on the archaeological level, we see that the system of positivities was transformed in a wholesale fashion at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century.

(E)
ach of these strange categories can be assigned a precise meaning and a demonstrable content; some of them do certainly involve fantastic entities - fabulous animals or sirens - but, precisely because it puts them into categories of their own, the Chinese encyclopaedia localizes their powers of contagion; it distinguishes carefully between the very real animals (those that are frenzied or have just broken the water pitcher) and those that reside solely in the realm of imagination.

(F)
or it is not a question of linking consequences, but of grouping and isolating, of analysing, of matching and pigeon-holing concrete contents; there is nothing more tentative, nothing more empirical (superficially, at least) than the process of establishing an order among things; nothing that demands a sharper eye or a surer, better-articulated language; nothing that more insistently requires that one allow oneself to be carried along by the proliferation of qualities and forms.

(G)

(H)
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(I)
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(J)

(K)

(L)
innaeus, and Buffon can be related to anything at all other than itself, it is not to biology, to Cuvier ' s comparative anatomy, or to Darwin ' s theory of evolution, but to Bauzée ' s general grammar, to the analysis of money and wealth as found in the works of Law, or Véron de Forthonnais, or Turgot.

(M)
oreover, it is not simply the oddity of unusual juxtapositions that we are faced with here.

(N)
ow, this archaeological inquiry has revealed two great discontinuities in the episteme of Western culture: the first inaugurates the Classical age (roughly half-way through the seventeenth century) and the second, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, marks the beginning of the modern age.

(O)
n what ' table ', according to what grid of identities, similitudes, analogies, have we become accustomed to sort out so many different and similar things?

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Experiment 2

Descriptive Words:

1. familiar 2. ordered 3. wild 4. existing 5. age-old 6. certain 7. tame 8. sucking 9. fabulous 10. stray 11. present 12. frenzied13. innumerable 14. fine 15. exotic 16. impossible 17. strange 18. demonstrable 19. fantastic 20. real 21. dangerous 22. exalted 23. inconceivable 24. amphibious 25. clawed 26. disgusting 27. squamous 28. polymorphous 29. demoniacal 30. monstrous 31. narrow 32. alphabetical 33. unusual 34. disconcerting 35. sudden 36. improbable 37. welcoming 38. voracious 39. monstrous 40. common 41. stable 42. obvious 43. compelling 44. mute 45. rubbery 46. white 47. glittering 48. glass 49. nickelplated 50. certain 51. uneasy 52. incongruous 53. large 54. possible 55. separate 56. heteroclite 57. literal 58. different 59. common 60. real 61. fantastic 62. untroubled 63. easy 64. chimerical 65. disturbing 66. common 67. fundamental 68. apparent

Nouns:

1. book 2. passage 3. laughter 4. landmarks 5. thought 6. age 7. geography 8. surfaces 9. planes 10. profusion 11. things 12. collapse 13. distinction 14. Same 15. Other 16. encyclopaedia 17. animals 18. Emperor 19. pigs 20. sirens 21. dogs 22. classification 23. camelhair 24. brush 25. pitcher 26. flies 27. wonderment 28. taxonomy 29. thing 30. leap 31. fable 32. charm 33. system 34. limitation 35. impossibility 36. categories 37. meaning 38. content 39. entities 40. powers 41. contagion 42. imagination 43. mixtures 44. heraldry 45. peaks 46. maidens 47. wings 48. epidermis 49. faces 50. creatures 51. fire 52. monstrosity 53. body 54. modifications 55. bestiary 56. space 57. blanks 58. distance 59. boundaries 60. thought 61. series 62. oddity 63. juxtapositions 64. effect 65. proximity 66. extremes 67. vicinity 68. things 69. relation 70. act 71. enumeration 72. power 73. enchantment 74. morrow 75. saliva 76. Aspics 77. Acalephs 78. Acanthocephalates 79. Amoebocytes 80. Ammonites 81. Axolotls 82. Amblystomas 83. Aphisions 84. Anacondas 85. Ascarids 86. Amphisbaenas 87. Angleworms 88. Amphipods 89. Anaerobes 90. Annelids 91. Anthozoans 92. worms 93. snakes 94. creatures 95. decay 96. slime 97. syllables 98. locus 99. umbrella 100. sewing-machine 101. table 102. propinquity 103. solidity 104. proof 105. tongue 106. mouth 107. lodging 108. roof 109. meetings 110. ground 111. voice 112. page 113. place 114. language 115. category 116. paradoxes 117. relation 118. divisions 119. list 120. container 121. atlas 122. spark 123. confrontation 124. necessity 125. site 126. ground 127. table 128. tabula 129. entities 130. order 131. classes 132. names 133. similarities 134. differences 135. time 136. space 137. uneasiness 138. disorder 139. fragments 140. orders 141. dimension 142. law 143. geometry 144. heteroclite 145. sites 146. place 147. residence 148. locality 149. cities 150. avenues 151. gardens 152. countries 153. life 154. road 155. utopias 156. consolation 157. heterotopias 158. syntax 159. sentences 160. grammar 161. myths 162. lyricism

Reorganized Text:

Absurdity destroys the and of the enumeration by making impossible the in where the things enumerated would be divided up. But what is it impossible to think, and what kind of impossibility are we faced with here? Chinese culture is the most meticulous, the most rigidly ordered, the one most deaf to temporal events, most attached to the pure delineation of space; we think of it as a civilization of dikes and dams beneath the eternal face of the sky; we see it, spread and frozen, over the entire surface of a continent surrounded by walls. Despite the impression we may have of an almost uninterrupted development of the European ratio from the Renaissance to our own day, despite our possible belief that the classifications of Linnaeus, modified to a greater or lesser degree, can still lay claim to some sort of validity, that Condillac ' s theory of value can be recognized to some extent in nineteenth-century marginalism, that Keynes was well aware of the affinities between his own analyses and those of Cantillon, that the language of general grammar (as exemplified in the authors of Port-Royal or in Bauzée) is not so very far removed from our own - all this quasicontinuity on the level of ideas and themes is doubtless only a surface appearance; on the archaeological level, we see that the system of positivities was transformed in a wholesale fashion at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. Each of these strange categories can be assigned a precise meaning and a demonstrable content; some of them do certainly involve fantastic entities – fabulous animals or sirens – but, precisely because it puts them into categories of their own, the Chinese encyclopaedia localizes their powers of contagion; it distinguishes carefully between the very real animals (those that are frenzied or have just broken the water pitcher) and those that reside solely in the realm of imagination. For it is not a question of linking consequences, but of grouping and isolating, of analysing, of matching and pigeon-holing concrete contents; there is nothing more tentative, nothing more empirical (superficially, at least) than the process of establishing an order among things; nothing that demands a sharper eye or a surer, better-articulated language; nothing that more insistently requires that one allow oneself to be carried along by the proliferation of qualities and forms. (G) Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ' syntax ' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to "hold together ".

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