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Lost Encyclopedias: Before and After the Enlightenment

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Lost Encyclopedias: Before and After the Enlightenment

Richard Yeo (bio)

As ways of collecting, ordering, and preserving knowledge, both libraries and encyclopedias are complex concepts with nuanced histories. The

two categories have classical roots, and both have affinities with another ancient notion, the "Musaeum." All three are places of repository or display.¹ But encyclopedias, roughly as we know them today, are recent occupants on library shelves—that is to say, only since about 1700. Moreover, since that time there has been some rivalry between encyclopedias and libraries, because the former claimed a value-added status by virtue of carefully crafted summaries of the most important books and ruthless culling of the many worthless ones surviving in all libraries. Ephraim Chambers, one of the first encyclopedists of the Enlightenment, offered his *Cyclopaedia* (1728) as a condensation of all useful knowledge, and thus a substitute for libraries. He boldly proclaimed that his two folio volumes would "answer all the Purposes of a Library, except Parade and Incumbrance," and would be more useful "than any, I had almost said all, the Books extant."² In the digital age, as all texts become equally searchable in cyberspace, it may well be that such contests are no longer even rhetorically salient.³ But here I examine what the idea of encyclopedia had to say for itself before, and during, the Enlightenment, and in conclusion I briefly consider the relevance of these affirmations today.

In reflections on the category of the library it is almost *de rigueur* to cite **[End Page 47]** Jorge Louis Borges's "The Library of Babel." Encyclopedias also feature in his stories, but their presence has attracted less commentary than the library motif. Whereas the latter provides opportunities for playful (and disturbing) probing of key Western intellectual assumptions, encyclopedias seem rather more innocent, offering little epistemological challenge.⁴ Indeed, Borges mentions some actual multivolume alphabetical encyclopedias dating from the eighteenth century.⁵ These were palpable objects for him. In an autobiographical essay he recalled that as a child he reveled in his father's library and never forgot "the steel engravings in *Chambers's Encyclopaedia* and in the *Britannica*." After winning a literary prize in 1929, he used the money to buy "a secondhand set of the Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*."⁶ In his story "The Garden of Forking Paths," the narrator reports a discovery: "We came to a library of Eastern

and Western books. I recognized bound in yellow silk several volumes of the Lost Encyclopaedia, edited by the Third Emperor of the Luminous Dynasty but never printed."⁷ In Borges's stories such volumes promise to contain information, or misinformation, about other worlds: for example, the curious copy of "the *Anglo American Cyclopaedia*" of 1917, although apparently a straightforward reprint of the tenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1902), has in "Volume XLVI" an additional four-page entry on "Uqbar," a hitherto unknown "region of Iraq or of Asia Minor."⁸ In his *Threepenny Novel*, Bertolt Brecht gives another twist to this device of lost encyclopedias: "For his amusement [George Fewkoombey] read an old tattered volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which he had found in the lavatory. Only about half the volume was there and it was not the first volume. Nevertheless one could learn quite a lot out of it, even if it did not suffice for a complete education. But who had that nowadays?"⁹

These two twentieth-century writers assumed an Enlightenment notion of the encyclopedia as a set of volumes containing a comprehensive summary of knowledge. Inadvertently, perhaps, they highlight one version of the encyclopedia we have lost: namely, the original Greek notion of **Ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία** [*enkyklios paideia*], or instruction in the circle of subjects considered the basis of a liberal education. Quintilian referred to this classical ideal of a round of learning, pursued through selected disciplines, when he Latinized the Greek term as "*encyclios paideia*"¹⁰ But this ideal was not one to be realized by means of a simple compendium of knowledge.

The resonance of the classical notion of encyclopedia is observable in John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). In one passage Locke avers that the model of a tutor's...

LOST ENCYCLOPEDIAS



Before and After the Enlightenment

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Ephraim Chambers's Cyclopaedia (1728) and the tradition of commonplaces, production is not trivial.

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