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Thomas Dutoit

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# From Cosmopolitical Literature to Cosmo-panto-mimesis and "this strange institution called literature": Kant Borges Derrida

THOMAS DUTOIT  
UNIVERSITÉ DE LILLE  
E.A. 4074 CECILLE

"All of this would not have happened if we knew what literature is. None of this would have happened if we knew what the word 'literature' means." Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

❖<sup>2</sup>

"Que serait une littérature qui ne serait que ce qu'elle est, littérature? Elle ne serait plus elle-même si elle était elle-même." Jacques Derrida<sup>3</sup>

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"I like Fidel Castro and his beard." Bob Dylan<sup>4</sup>

In "Préjugés," Jacques Derrida takes Franz Kafka's "Devant la loi" ("Vor dem Gesetz") as the literary text with which he delivers a "Talmudic" reading meant to indicate, subtly, how "différance" would be the fulcrum by which Derrida could suspend the otherwise judgmental, critical, categorical and decisive nature of Jean-François Lyotard's work, in particular in the latter's turn to the work of Kant at the end of the 1970's and early 1980's. That "différance" is deployed throughout Derrida's attention, specifically, to how Kafka's text stages the *institution of literature*. Kafka's "Before the Law" was first published in New York in 1915, and then in Prague in 1919, but was also included by him, without title, in *Der Prozeß* (*The Trial*, in English) which was published posthumously (1925). Derrida's essay is about the borders that constitute a framework, the *cadrage*, and thus about the relation of frame

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1J. Derrida, "Who or What is Compared? The Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical Problems of Translation," 49. Abbreviated hereafter as *Discourse* in text.

2This graphic sign, which might be a diamond internally cut into four, but also a three-dimensional cube in rotation, or perhaps the "tracking device" on a computer keyboard (as on the IBM "Thinkpad"™ portable computer), functions in the argumentative or narrative economy, here, as a multi-directional navigational and displacement device.

3J. Derrida, "Préjugés. Devant la loi," 133. Abbreviated hereafter as *Préjugés* in text.

4B. Dylan, "Motorpsycho Nitemare." Hereafter referred by song title in text.

and work (a subject that always interested him, and perhaps most explicitly in the essays "Parergon," "FORS," "Télépathie," and in the book, *Glas* and the "Envois" section of *La carte postale*). Thus, Derrida dwells on the protocols of reading that constitute the literary text, when one is before a short form, like the parable entitled "Before the Law," or a long form, like an unfinished novel, *The Trial*, both of which contain what otherwise might seem to be an identical text. The frame (context, situation, border) of a text may be more constitutive of its literarity than even the form or content of the text "itself": "Ce sont les mouvements de cadrage et de référentialité" which determine what an *oeuvre* "is" (*Préjugés* 131). Derrida's essay on literature here – one among his many studies of literary texts, by Jabes, Artaud, Sollers, Mallarme, Genet, Paul Celan, or Helene Cixous, without forgetting those on English language writers<sup>5</sup> – anticipates precisely the terms of the call for papers of this issue, as follow: "la littérature," "objet qui ne se laisse pas facilement saisir, qui ne se laisse pas forcer par des catégorisations." This antiphrasis resonates with Derrida's formulation, "[d]ans l'instant insaisissable où elle joue la loi, une littérature passe la littérature" (*Préjugés* 134) and with his description of his lecture on Lyotard: "C'était une scène de lecture peu catégorique" (*Préjugés* 134). The tensions between the two different forms of "force" and "forcer" from our call is also the linchpin holding together Derrida's wish, "[o]n voudrait ajoindre l'idiomatique et le catégorique" (*Préjugés* 130). The efforts by those inside and outside the university to circumscribe, to define, to enclose, literature, heard in the call's phrases such as "assigner une place", "légitimité de telle ou telle oeuvre," "elle devient institutionnalisée," are attempts to stabilize and contain, and the call stresses the role of institutions: "l'institution – universitaire mais aussi politique et médiatique." Similarly, Derrida's essay is all about the agents of institutions: "ce texte gardé par ses gardiens (auteur, éditeur, critiques, universitaires, archivistes, bibliothécaires, juristes, etc.)" (*Préjugés* 132). The entire essay is an oblique reservation about Lyotard's turn to critique and to judgment, and is commanded by a double question: "Qui décide, qui juge, et selon quels critères, de l'appartenance de ce récit à la littérature?" (*Préjugés* 104). As noted, Derrida explicitly stages his own essay as "Talmudic" ("la scène talmudique dans laquelle je me suis peut-être engouffré avec vous" [*Préjugés* 135]), one in which no answer is going to be

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<sup>5</sup>Documented in Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski, *Angles on Derrida. Jacques Derrida and Anglophone Literature*, 6.

given,<sup>6</sup> because it will seek to multiply what might be the questions, and also openly to inform the reader that no answer will be forthcoming, except perhaps the *question* of the framework. The present essay will take its lead from Derrida's various reflections, in this essay and in others, upon "the strange institution that one calls literature."<sup>7</sup>



In the aftermath of the January 7, 2015 massacre at *Charlie Hebdo*, a great quantity and quality of public expression, too much to be documented here, concerned "freedom of expression," the right to free speech as intrinsic to democratic society, regardless of the different precise forms such a right takes in various installed democracies. Perhaps not enough was said, however, about the institution of literature, for, in the first place, *Charlie Hebdo* – at least as far as concerns its drawings, which include drawn handwriting – belongs to a literary genre, which is not only caricaturist drawing but also satire, a longstanding genre to be sure, but one whose conceptual borders – for our purposes here – become defined in the course of the long 18th century. To murder Jonathan Swift for "A Modest Proposal" (or for the religious satire in *A Tale of a Tub*) would be to be unable to understand how the framework or the context of what came to be called "literature" is determined by a legal history of its institution. Among the various places where Jacques Derrida thinks about literature as institution, his remark in "Préjugés" has the merit here of concision:

[I]l y a lieu à penser *ensemble*, sans doute, une certaine historicité de la loi et une certaine historicité de la littérature. Si je dis "littérature" plutôt que poésie ou belles-lettres, c'est pour marquer l'hypothèse selon laquelle la spécificité relativement moderne de la littérature comme telle garde un rapport essentiel et étroit avec un moment de l'histoire du droit. [...] Quelle que soit la structure de l'institution juridique et donc politique qui vient à garantir l'oeuvre, celle-ci surgit et reste toujours *devant la loi*. [...] En gros, ce droit s'est établi entre la fin du XVIIe siècle et le début du XIXe siècle européens. *Préjugés* 132

The right to freedom of speech, relative to *Charlie Hebdo*, is inscribed in a specific framework: satire as literary genre. To invoke the research of Jacques Derrida might,

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<sup>6</sup>"Qu'est-ce qui autoriserait à juger que ce texte appartient à la 'littérature'? Et, dès lors, qu'est-ce que la littérature? Je crains que cette question ne reste sans réponse" (*Préjugés* 130).

<sup>7</sup>Jacques Derrida and Derek Attridge, "This Strange Institution Called Literature," trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, 33-75. We will quote from the original French text, published as "Cette étrange institution qu'on appelle la littérature," in Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski, eds., *Derrida d'ici, Derrida de là*, 253-292. Abbreviated hereafter as "Institution" in text.

to some, seem impossibly highbrow relative to the perpetrators of such massacres or to any remedying of their causes; however, in an interview by Laurent Delahousse on the *Journal Télévisé* of France 2, December 6, 2014, Abd Al Malik's appeal – for school and education, in which he implored not to forget that France is the country "de Voltaire, de Rousseau, de Zola, de Deleuze et de Derrida qui ont amené la nuance et la complexité" and that they must be taught there<sup>8</sup> – has never been more relevant, just as Derrida's own supposedly "radical" demand that philosophy be taught as early as in "*sixième*" and in a progressive manner over several years, albeit never more unlikely to be implemented, remains a suggestion as practical as it is wise.

Further development, in the present article, upon Derrida's particular description of literature as peculiar institution will stress how the "right to say everything" might articulate with cosmopolitical institutions. In the background is the cross-cultural "fit" (in all senses) between the idiomatic and the categorial as it pertains to a diverse population at all levels.



In "Motorpsycho Nitemare" (1964, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*), Dylan's speaker, in order to extricate himself from the situation (which is also based on the situation in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*), invents a statement that claims his liking, it seems, of communism: "I like Fidel Castro and his beard." The speaker is neither "Bob Dylan" nor a person whose referentiality would be in some simple reality: the song multiplies references to cinema, from Hitchcock's *Psycho*, its plot, characters and its actors such as Tony Perkins, to Anita Ekberg in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. The speaker in the song recounts how, having sought and been granted respite in a farmer's house after long travel as a "doctor," he finds himself, awoken from his sleep by the farmer's seductress daughter, trapped in a *Psycho*-like nighttime scenario that will spell his death. However, because he had vowed to milk the farmer's cow in the morning (as well as not to touch his daughter), he cannot escape given said vow, the value of the given word ("Well, I couldn't leave/ Unless the old man chased me out/ 'Cause I'd already promised/ That I'd milk his cows"). Thus, he must "say something/ To strike him [the farmer] very weird," and so delivers the verse in quote above: "I like Fidel Castro and his beard!" Because the farmer is a McCarthy American intolerant of communists, he threatens to kill the protagonist unless he leaves (or

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<sup>8</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRhvi8fJfN8>. Consulted 24 March 2015.

before he is able to): "He said he's going to kill me/ If I don't get out the door/ In two seconds flat/ 'You unpatriotic/ Rotten doctor Commie Rat'." Able to get out before the farmer is able to load and fire his gun, our traveller summarizes the aftermath of his escape: the farmer "wants to turn me in/ To the F.B.I./ Me, I romp and stomp/ Thankful as I romp/ Without freedom of speech/ I might be in the swamp." The freedom to endorse communism is the freedom to say something that, in a society without instituted free speech, otherwise would be a criminal offense. It's important to notice that Dylan's speaker does this in a song; by extension, one could – if one ignores how referentiality and contextual framing function in literary discourse – be inclined to think that Dylan himself, as author of the song, expresses some endorsement of communism. But of course, the line in favor of Fidel Castro and his beard obeys bardic constraints (diegetically, the speaker has to escape from the house and find a loophole to his vow to milk the cow; metrically, the speaker needs to fit syllables into lines of riming verse). The multiple references to cinema are, furthermore, *mise-en-abyme*; the analysis of their frames postpone indefinitely any judgmental identification and critical decision. And ironically, the admiration for Fidel Castro and his beard does not mean the speaker really likes them; the expression of admiration is much more an admiration for the freedom of speech, the freedom of the pragmatics of speech – communism and beards and their literary celebration give to American democracy the possibility of the latter's proper freedom – and thus above all is admiration for a right to literature as a specific modality of the right to say everything and anything.



In a lecture course given in 1979-80, Jacques Derrida raised the question of what it meant for the academic discipline of "Comparative Literature" to exist, institutionally in the late 1970s, despite the fact that the field of study no longer was governed by the definition of the discipline that oversaw its implementation in the 1950s, in Europe and in the United States. Between 1979-80 and 2015, much has changed in the study and in the organization of the study of literature in European and North American Universities, and yet, from another perspective, very little has changed in them, be it in departments of the dominant "national" literature, in so-called "foreign" literatures, or in "comparative" literature. Any detailed consideration of such changes must remain outside the scope of this essay. Here, the purpose of this reference to Derrida's remark on the institution of the university study of literature is

to insist upon the fact that the institution of literature can die, but also that despite this death, the study of literature can continue in zombie-like fashion.

Like many institutions, comparative literature did not wait for me, it did not wait for *us*, in order to exist. Nor did departments of literature in the West and elsewhere. To exist, for an institution, is to affirm its right to existence; it is to constantly refer, more or less virtually, to a legitimacy, but to a certain type of particular legitimacy, a historical legitimacy, an entitlement that has its origin in a historical act or in historical acts of foundation. When the day comes that this act of foundation – that founds the law upon nonlaw, upon an ajudicial situation – the day this act of foundation is contested by another claim to legitimacy, or simply the day when no one feels the necessity or the possibility of referring to the foundation of the law, when no one draws authority from it any longer, then the institution dies. *Discourse 22*

Although Derrida is specifically talking about Comparative Literature, today, this assessment can apply, for example, to various "language" departments: are they not the scene of contests for legitimacy, and are there not maybe even many cases of zombie-institutions? And are there also not *several* ways of being dead, of haunting, of surviving, some of which perhaps even being resuscitating, resurrecting or even de-re-instituting?

Even if it no longer has an object around which a living consensus can be established and can bring together a community of researchers, teachers, and students, a department in a university can long outlive the disappearance of its object and the living consensus relating to it. *Discourse 23*

To "out-live"? Over-live, hyper-live; yes, but also, to remain as ghosts, as dinosaur, as vestigial organ. Indeed, survival need not however be lethargic, because legitimacy, when it comes to an institution like literature, if literature can be an institution, will necessarily be unguaranteed. For example, the study of literature as (and in) an tertiary level institution is, in 2015, still legitimated by appeal to the nation-state and national boundaries (as it began to be in the nineteenth century); however, another way of thinking literature is to recognize its condition as mimesis: in other words, its intrinsically uncertain status. Literature, in the primary sense of "institute" as active verb, lives in *aftermath* of the secondary sense of "institute" as noun. *Mutatis mutandis*, literature in "foreign" national or language departments, like "literature" in the dominant "native" national language departments, and like "literature" in comparative literature sections, "lives" nowadays more than ever in the aftermath of "nationalist" nation-states, even if the interests of "nation-states" remain very much determinant in how such departments continue to be organized.

I believe that the university institution that bears th[e] name, th[e] title, th[e] ambition [of comparative literature], is less assured than ever of its legitimacy. And that it survives, that it is living in the aftermath of a great dream whose historical and structural conditions remain to be analyzed. *Discourse 49*

Such "literatures" survive after the demise of the (nationalist) dreams in which they were established. Furthermore, confusion and crisis regarding what "we" are doing, as teachers of literature, might be in direct correlation to the indetermination inherent to the concept of literature, such that the confusion and crisis increase as this indetermination also increases, with the caveat however that the greatest indetermination, confusion and even crisis might precisely be the best promise of health and rejuvenation, as long as one embraces this radically unstable, and therefore inchoate, process of *institution*, taken not in its static, established sense, but rather in its ajuridical sense.

[...] a crisis in comparative literature would have [...] no meaning and no chance of arising if a fundamental indetermination did not remain at the center of the concept of literature.

*Discourse 49*

"Fundamental indetermination" emanates from trouble in definition.



### **Blind memory**

Writing is/ as blind: writing does not see. Understanding, neither. When I say "I see" for "I understand," it is a catachresis, a metaphor. Knowing is not seeing. "I understand" is not an act of visual perception. Understanding is not a sense. When I understand, it is a logical act, symbolic thought. This act is blind. Memory, too, is blind. When I remember something, even someone's face, I do not see the person's face; rather, I see the memory, the image, of the person's face. Writing, remembering, are blind. Memory, as such, remembers what cannot be seen.

At the end of the 1980s, the Louvre Museum asked Jacques Derrida to choose drawings and paintings from its collection for an exhibit on a theme of his choice. At the same moment, Derrida was victim to a virus that paralyzed the left side of his face, "l'oeil gauche fixe," as he recalled, "la paupière ne se ferm[ant] plus normalement: privation du 'clin d'oeil', donc, de cet instant d'aveuglement qui assure à la vue sa respiration."<sup>9</sup> Returning home from the hospital, having been scanned by "instruments d'écoute" (sonor, not visual), the theme for the exhibit came to him while

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<sup>9</sup>J. Derrida, *Mémoires d'aveugle* 38. Abbreviated hereafter *Mém* in text.



driving his car: *L'ouvre où ne pas voir*, a polyphonic untranslatable title ("the open where don't see" or "open it where not to see" is homophonic with "Louvre or not see"), which turned into the official title *Mémoires d'aveugle*. This memory of the impossibility of closing his eye, the impossibility to blind oneself so that one can continue to see, became his essay on autobiographical writing as blind, but also on memory as blind(ness). Memory does not see; rather, it remembers what is not present to vision, what perception no longer perceives. Memory is representation itself. Derrida's argument is that the artist, and in particular the one who draws, does not see when he draws. Counter-intuitive argument, yes. One has heard of blind musicians, even blind sculptors, but our common intuition is that one who draws, a "visual artist," should be able to see what he draws. Derrida submits the counter-intuitive thesis, counter to intuition as immediate perception: the drawer draws from memory, always what he remembers. The drawer draws blindly, because he works from memory, and anamnesis is not vision. Drawing, specifically of the representational kind, proceeds from memory. Drawing, writing also, represent from the memory of a model.

Blind memories, memories of blindness, these words instruct us about the so-called "vision" of great blind artists. Derrida refers to four: Homer and Joyce, Milton and Borges. Derrida quotes Borges' lecture "La cuerga" ("Blindness") specifying that when Borges presents Homer, Joyce and Milton, he also gives an "autoportrait de l'auteur en aveugle, en homme de la mémoire" (*Mém* 40). It is not sure that Derrida knew that Borges, long blind at the time of the lecture, lectured without any physical notes.<sup>10</sup>

In *Mémoires d'aveugle*, Derrida leaves Borges at that vantage point, moving to other matters. We thus leave *Mémoires d'aveugle* here, but retain this curious "point of view" or *point de vue* in the French double meaning (viewpoint; non-view) about the absence of view that defines the work of memory but also representational work. For reasons which are left for the moment in the dark, yet which will gradually emerge, blindness links Borges, Derrida and Kant, and this link concerns precisely literature as blind insight.




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<sup>10</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLjd2eo62II>. Consulted 24 March 2015.

Derrida, Borges. Not only blindness, but a real fascination with a certain literary cosmopolitanism binds them, as this essay intends to demonstrate. And Kant? In his essay, *Idea towards a Universal History in Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1785), a breach opens in the concept of the political. The name of this breach is the novel (*ein Roman*). *Roman*, novel, is the name of literature. Borges did not write, in fact, novels, but he wrote novella called *Historia universal de la infamia*, and repeatedly writes about "universal history." Also, imagining the "novel" that would institute a cosmopolitan universal history, Kant evokes an example without precedent, without concept, an example of the to-come. Wedging Kant between Derrida and Borges is explained by three ancillary points of contact. First, Derrida published two short essays on Kant's cosmopolitanism.<sup>11</sup> Second, Derrida knew Borges. In 1968, Derrida met Borges, by accident, at the airport in Ithaca, New York. Waiting for his plane, Derrida saw Borges, waiting also. He knew that Borges had been lecturing at Cornell University the same day. Derrida went up to Borges and introduced himself.<sup>12</sup> They shared their trip back to New York City. Derrida also visited Borges in 1985, in Argentina. Third, even though a reader could fail to see its visual focus, Kant's essay on the cosmopolitan "point of view" – in German, *Absicht* specifically belongs to the lexical field of vision, of sight – relates sight to blindness and imagination.



### **Literary Cosmopolitics, Cosmopolitical Literature?**

The word "cosmopolitan" does not appear in Borges' essays, fictions, or poetry. Still, cosmopolitanism seems to me coextensive with his work itself.<sup>13</sup> Of what, of whom, whereof did he not write? His writing globalizes, worldizes, covers the earth's surface. At least, one can have this impression: what writer covers a field, a territory, a space, but also a temporal period, as vast as Borges? From Antiquity to

<sup>11</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Le droit à la philosophie du point de vue cosmopolitique*, abbreviated hereafter *Le droit* in text, and *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!*, abbreviated hereafter *Cosmopolites* in text. The present essay draws from these short, yet acutely perceptive, essays.

<sup>12</sup>Emir Rodríguez Monegal recounts this anecdote in "Borges and Derrida. Apothecaries," in *Borges and His Successors. The Borgesian Impact on Literature and the Arts*, 128-138.

<sup>13</sup>Such is the paradox formulated by Michel Berveiller at the beginning of his *Le cosmopolitisme de Jorge Luis Borges*: on the one hand, René Etiemble sees in Borges "la perfection de l'esprit cosmopolite" (Berveiller's epigraph [7]); on the other, Borges declared in 1966 (no doubt out of patriotism): "no, no, no soy cosmopolita" (15). For this reference I thank Paul-Henri Giraud, Professor of Latin American and Spanish Literature. An earlier version of this paper was presented, moreover, in the colloquium "Borges et le cosmopolitisme littéraire," Université de Lille, 13 February, 2015, organized by Paul-Henri Giraud and the Research Center CECILLE.

Contemporaneity, crossing the world's literatures on several continents, taken in their great heterogeneity, Borges' writing does not, perhaps, enounce a constative theory of cosmopolitanism, but it is the performative act of literary cosmopolitanism (perfectible, for sure, as Borges seems to include only two women writers).

In pairing Borges and Derrida, around Kant, this paper joins a literary writer known for the metaphysical and philosophical speculation of his fictions, poetry and non-fiction prose with a philosophical writer known for the pleasure he takes in "analyser le jeu de l'écriture," for liking "une certaine pratique de la fiction, l'intrusion du simulacre efficace ou du désordre dans l'écriture philosophique" ("Institution 259). This pairing is mediated by Kant, a philosopher whose commitment to rationalist discourse hardly needs demonstration, an engagement which moreover was attested by his refusal of a Professor position in Poetics in 1768, two years prior to his doctoral dissertation in 1770 that inaugurated a roughly eighteen year period during which he published the three *Critiques* (1781, 1785, 1789). Despite Kant's refusal of an institutional position in what was not yet precisely called "literature," and his waiting for the institutional position of philosopher,<sup>14</sup> his text which we spotlight here, *Idee zu einer allgemeine Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, grants to modern literature a crucial instituting role in the foundation of global, universal politics. This paper's intention is to trace the strange role of literature in this active sense of *institution* in Kant, prior to returning in conclusion to the Argentine. Borges displaces the cosmopolitical into what I propose to designate, further on, its cosmopantomimetic. Already to join the words "cosmopolitical" and "literature" requires such displacement. Our argument, regarding Kant's cosmopolitical, notices how the introduction of literature into the cosmopolitical strangely de-institutes the political.

### **Kant's Novel Cosmopolitan Point of View**

Although Derrida does not (in "Préjugés," in the Comparative Literature course, in "Cette étrange institution") discuss the role of specifically the novel in his development of the idea of literature as an modern institution emergent beginning in the 17th and 18th centuries, Homer Obed Brown, in *Institutions of the English Novel*, develops a "theory" of the English novel, indebted to Derrida's thought of "institution." There is – to my knowledge – no academic work more germane to the problematic of this issue of *L'atelier* (the institution of literature, the literature of

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<sup>14</sup> Kant's *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) carefully defined the positions of the disciplines, or faculties, in the University.

institution) than Brown's book and companion pieces.<sup>15</sup> Brown provides the lead for invoking precisely the novel as privileged site for the *institution* of literature, noting that the history of the "novel" and of "literature" dovetail: "The institution of the novel takes place about the same time as the institution of what is always called literature, in the modern sense of the term" (*IEN* 201).

Brown's reflection is based on the double meaning of "institution": "Part of its function is to make the strange, unusual, singular or the 'novel' seem familiar, even common – legitimate and 'authorized'" (*Prologue* 18). The word "institution" is ambiguous: "does it name a thing or an act, an act or an activity?" (*Prologue* 18). Indeed, Raymond Williams, in *Keywords* describes "institution" "as a noun of action or process which became, at a certain stage, a general and abstract noun, describing something apparently objective and systematic; in fact, in the modern sense, an institution" (qtd. *Prologue* 18-19). As Samuel Weber shows, this latter sense of the maintenance of the status quo, erasing the "dynamic and transformative sense," has become "dominant": that which has been, in fact, instituted – the established order, existing norms – comes to be identified as instituted in principle, while, in contrast, the instituting process is increasingly obscured (qtd. *Prologue* 19). For Weber, a more differential notion of "institution" better expresses the stakes involved: every "determinate structure" excludes that which by this token enables it to "set itself apart": "institution" therefore "designates at once an act, an action, a process, and the product of that action or process" (*Prologue* 19). Essential for our present purposes – how the novel, according to Kant, will be the counter-institutional institution by which something like a great Supra-State, super-political entity, comes to rise – Brown recalls the Latin word: "From the Latin *instituire*, to institute means literally to cause to stand or stand up, to move something so standing or at least the illusion of standing in one place – that is to say, something that *stays*" (*Prologue* 19). This coming to stand, standing, and staying standing, explains the "reification at work in the term" (*Prologue* 19): the action that happens comes to be seen as "something in itself," and thus "when we think of institution, we almost always think of buildings": "the building sites and situates the institution" (*Prologue* 19). Institution – an

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<sup>15</sup>Homer Obed Brown, *Institutions of the English Novel. Defoe to Scott*, 1997, referenced hereafter as *IEN* in text; "Prologue. Why the Story of the Origin of the (English) Novel Is an American Romance (If Not the Great American Novel)," in *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, eds. Deidre Lynch and William B. Warner, 1996, referenced hereafter as *Prologue* in text. Essential to this thinking of the problematic of institution is also Samuel Weber's *Institution and Interpretation*, 1987.

“edifice” that almost always is a site of “edification” – is a process that has a “seemingly material presence” (*Prologue* 20). “Institution,” the word, therefore paradoxically denotes both an origin and social recognition. The paradox of “institution” is that it “depends on absolute novelty, a break with the law and convention,” but also “requires social recognition, by the law and institutional forms of legitimation” (*Prologue* 20). Brown’s specific field of application for this understanding of institution is the English novel. On the question of canonization, adumbrated by showing the history of the reception of Defoe’s writing (the very changing way of asking the question, “is it a novel, is it not?” or “is it literature or is it not?”), Brown writes:

What distinguishes [...] these *other* “novels” that are still excluded from [...] the institution of the novel [...] from the accepted ‘novels’? By what generic or discursive law are they excluded? In whose jurisdiction does the judgment lie? How is it to be determined whether or not they are to be considered ‘literature’? Obviously there are no easy answers to these questions. We can, however, begin to explore the implications of the fact that such questions exist. *IEN* 194

These questions, even if without answers, cause us to dwell in the interval between determining status on the basis of internal features or by institutional evaluation. Focused on the novel, as genre, Brown’s thinking might be instructively displaced to Kant on universal history.

Interestingly, Immanuel Kant invokes, too, the novel, when he imagines what might be the condition of possibility of an institution of cosmopolitical order. Here is Kant:

Even though for example our world leaders (*Weltregierer*) have now no money left over for public educational programs or institutions (*Erziehungsanstalten*), and even for anything that concerns what is best in the world (*das Weltbeste*), because everything is already, from the outset, committed to their budgets for future wars, they will still find that their own advantage, their own interest, is, at the very least, not to hinder the independent efforts of their peoples, no matter how weak and slow they are. In the end, even war becomes gradually not only such an artificial undertaking (*Unternehmen*), in outcome for both sides such an uncertain undertaking, but also through its painful after-effects, which the State feels in the ever-increasing burden of debt (*Schuldenlast*) (a modern invention), whose repayment becomes unforeseeable (*unabsehlich* [from *Absicht*, *ab-sehen*]), such a fraught undertaking, and the impact (*Einfluss*) is so noticeable from this, which every convulsion of the State sends through every other State in our very commercially interconnected part of the world (*Weltteil*), that the other States will offer themselves as arbiters (*Schiedsrichtern*), forced by their own proper danger, even though *without any legal* [emphasis mine] basis (*Ansehen*),

and thus everything will, from far and away, destine towards a future, great State body, of which the preceding world (*die Vorwelt*) can show (*aufzeigen*) no example. Even though this State body stands there (*dasteht*) for now still in only very raw outlines, there thus begins to arise (*zu regen* [to "act," to "move," but also to "govern," to "lead," as in *Regierer* and *Regierung*, leaders and government]) nonetheless at once already a feeling in all members, which in each is fitted to the preservation of the whole. And this gives the hope that, after several revolutions of transformation (*Umbildung*), finally that which nature has as its highest intention (*Absicht*), to wit a common, universal *cosmopolitan* institution would (*werde* [subjunctive]), in days to come (*dereinst*), come for once (*einmal*) to be instituted, as the womb, in which all originary aptitudes of the human species will be developed.<sup>16</sup>

Such institution will not be a State initiative, except in a negative sense of the State not hindering. The State, holding itself up, in its military undertakings, takes itself under. Its debt prevents any supra-national, cosmopolitan, offspring in the sense of legitimate progeny or legacy. The contrary usages of *ab-sehen* (*unabsehlich* and *Absicht*) show that the cosmopolitan progeny will come from an illegitimate womb. *Bildung* (formation, education) for which the State has insufficient funds, is here prefixed as *Umbildung*. Revolution and transformation indicate a turning movement away from the existent and the static. Yet this movement returns (to) it. For an institution to be an institution, not only in the sense of zombie-like stasis and structure, but also in the active (inchoate, genetic, inventive) sense, there must needs be the possibility of this *Umbildung* (unlike, also, the French word, and tradition, of *réforme*): The institution being imagined here is not an institution in the sense of an already established foundation, a stable and static State institution. Rather, institution here has the sense it has as verb and as an action, the foundation or founding moment whose movement, *regen*, is prior to any established government (*regen*, to stir, to move, is however etymologically at the source of *Regierung*, or "government"). Just prior to this long passage, Kant had explained why enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) would operate as an impact (*Einfluss*) upon the fundamental principles of government (*Regierung*) such that it would make its way on to the thrones of the world leaders (*Regierer*). However, prior to any established "government," or "leader," there is this feeling that is acting, operating – *regen[d]*, "governing," in a counter-institutional, yet archaically institutional, sense – in all the members of the embryonic large State body.

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<sup>16</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Idee zur einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, 407, Akademie Ausgabe (AA) pagination. Abbreviated hereafter *Idee AA* in text. For Kant, translations are mine but I have consulted English and French translations.

Elsewhere, I have shown how Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was the novelistic staging of this world government, in the figure of the super-human of the "creature" coming out of the womb of Victor Frankenstein, *Frankenstein* being the novel borne in all senses of the word by Mary Shelley, whose being a female novelist counter-signs Kant's text, just as its literary *status* as novel is the counter-institution with which Kant anoints philosophy.<sup>17</sup> Kant's usage of the subjunctive, *werde*, is the sense of subjunctive which Derrida argues is the specific might or mightiness (*puissance*) of literature, as opposed to the power (*pouvoir*) associated with philosophy, with politics, with State-endorsed discourses.<sup>18</sup> In the idiom of *dereinst einmal*, *dereinst* can mean both "formerly" and "in the future," and *einmal* signifies the uniqueness of an eruption, the institution as eruption, the violent breaking of a surface whose violence is extrinsic the established law. This idiom conveys the radical differential time of the institution: both "not yet" and "formerly," the future and the past, the "presence" of this institution does not and cannot belong, ever, simply to the present, and thus can never be established once and for all, a present that would simply continue unchangingly.

Kant links onto this figure of the large State body a "philosophical attempt" to elaborate general, universal world history according to a natural plan, whose aim would be a perfect union of citizens in the human species, which he posits as possible, and even envisaged as the intention of nature (*Naturabsicht*). Yet this philosophical attempt of wanting to *write* a history (*Geschichte abfassen*) according to an idea of how the course of the world would have to run, he remarks, is a strange (*befremdlicher*) and, apparently, nonsensical or unrhythmic (*ungereimter*) project or attack (*Anschlag*).

It is a strange (*befremdlicher*), according to appearance, a nonsensical (*ungereimter*) stroke (*Anschlag* [attack, clench, aiming position, plot]), to want to write a history (*eine Geschichte abfassen*) according to an idea [of] how the course of the world would need to go (*müßte*), if it should be adequate to certain rational purposes; it appears, in such viewpoint (*Absicht*), only a *novel* could (*könne* [subjunctive]) institute itself (*zu Stande kommen* [arise, stand up]).

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<sup>17</sup>In the conclusion to Thomas Dutoit, *Sublime Duty: the Ethics of the Unpresentable in Works of Immanuel Kant, Heinrich von Kleist and Mary Shelley*, 1993, unpublished doctoral dissertation.

<sup>18</sup>In *H. C. pour la vie, c'est à dire*, 2002, Derrida argues for the subjunctive mode, the "might" or *puisse* in the verbal form of the wish, "might this happen," or *que cela puisse arriver*, as having a might or mightiness, a *puissance* (in the noun form) greater than the power, authority or *pouvoir* associated with the indicative modal form of "can" or *pouvoir* (the verb form).

If one may instead assume that nature, even in the play of human freedom, operated not without plan and end-viewpoint (*Endabsicht*), then this idea could indeed probably become useable. And, although we are just too short sighted (*kurzsichtig* ["too blind," translates the great Kant scholar Lewis White Beck]) to see through (*durchzuschauen*) to the secret mechanisms of the organization of this idea, then this idea – that there is a plan – might serve us indeed as a *fils conducteur*, with which we could imagine (*darstellen*) an otherwise plan-less Aggregate of human dealings, at least in very broad lines, as a System. *Idee AA* 408

The novel, literature, is the key to cosmopolitanism, but the latter is a cosmopolitanism beyond the State. Kant even will go further. Only non-State activities, popular activities, will bring us to cosmopolitanism, because the State is nothing but the equation, War = Debt, of which any end is purely *unabsehlich: invisible, unforeseeable*. Perhaps only a blind novelist could imagine the end of this equation, of this State, of this Institution, that otherwise *looks* zombie-like in its out-living capacity.

The foreignness, the strangeness which is also unrhythmical, out of measure, unmetrical and meaningless, of this *Anschlag*<sup>19</sup> – the force of a novel – jars less with the native or natural than with the national: indeed, this world union of the citizens of the world beckons to a world government that does not exist and which is decidedly post-national, not to mention perhaps pre-national. Kant recognizes here that, if one does not believe in this idea, then such a text of world history could (*könne*, subjunctive) only be seen as a *novel institution*, as an institution belonging to the realm of novels, in other words, as a non-institution, foundation-less, contrary to anything State-like: *könne nur ein Roman zu Stande kommen*, "only a novel could come to be instituted in such a perspective." (We recall Brown's pointing out the Latin etymology of *instituire*: to cause to stand up.) Kant admits that we are too "blind," myopic like moles (*kurzsichtig*), to see through to the "secret" (*geheimen*) mechanism by which this novel would, in fact and in principle, present the idea of the system in the otherwise chaotic and inchoate human actions.

Here, and to conclude provisionally on Kant's novel institution or institution of the novel, it is worth observing that Kant's text at once appears Euro-centric and withdraws this very (apparent) foundation of his text. For, when, just after enouncing

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<sup>19</sup>The difficulty of translating *Anschlag* owes to its various uses as "stroke," "baying (of dogs)," musical "touch," "attack," the "tension" of typewriter keys, a "placard," a "plot," a "conspiracy," the "aiming position of a rifle," the "readiness to fire," the "check" of a gun. Etymologically, *schlagen* means to "hit."



the strange and nonsensical idea of the novel of a coming cosmopolitanism (he seems to accredit the plausibility of this global democracy to come), he does so by dint of a Euro-centrism that will become a Euro-circumference: his examples for this coming world order are drawn from the line that goes from Greek history to the Roman history that swallowed the Greek, through the episode of the Barbarians who "destroyed" the Romans, up to "our time": thus will we, he advances, discover a regularly measured advance (despite the Barbaric "episode" [*episodisch*]). He adds, moreover, in parentheses that it is probable (*wahrscheinlich*) that "our part of the world" (*unser Weltteil*, or Europe) will give in the time to come its laws (*Gesetze*) to all other parts of the world (*allen anderen*). Although Europe as origin and as end of this cosmopolitanism seems to be thus posited, Kant nonetheless, as quoted already, precisely imagined the coming great State body as that for which the past world could produce no example (*wovon die Vorwelt kein Beispiel aufzuzeigen hat*). If Europe, in its past or present has nothing from which this great State bodily institution could be deduced or generated, then this great State bodily institution does not have its origin (institution in the sense of origin), or destiny (institution in the sense of establishment and self-perpetuation) in Europe.



If one wants to "seize" the *political* stakes of literature, it is necessary to specify how literature is another kind of institution, a counter-institution. In the interview, conducted by Derek Attridge (South African, specialist of poetry, Professor at Rutgers University in the United States) and especially designed to elicit from Derrida the latter's positions on literature so as to add it to the anthology, *Acts of Literature* (1992) composed by Attridge of Derrida's writings on literature, Derrida gives some of his most precise explanations of what, for him, literature "is" or performs. As he insists, literature institutes a counter-institution:

La littérature m'apparaissait confusément comme cette institution étrange qui permet de *tout dire*, et selon *toutes* les figures. L'espace de la littérature n'est pas seulement celui d'une *fiction* instituée mais aussi une *institution fictive* qui permet en principe de tout dire. Tout dire, c'est sans doute rassembler en traduisant toutes les figures l'une dans l'autre, totaliser en formalisant, mais tout dire c'est aussi franchir les interdits. C'est *s'affranchir* – et dans tous les champs où la loi peut faire la loi. La loi de la littérature tend, en principe, à défier ou à lever la loi. Elle donne donc à penser l'essence de la loi dans l'expérience du "tout à dire". C'est une institution qui tend à déborder l'institution. "Institution" 256

As that which exceeds the institution, literature is a force that counters attempts at stabilizing and containing the knowledge of what it "is." As the institution authorizing saying everything, literature is also intrinsic to democracy, as Derrida understands the latter:

L'institution de la littérature en Occident, dans sa forme relativement moderne, est liée à une autorisation de tout dire, sans doute aussi au devenir de l'idée moderne de la démocratie. Non qu'elle dépend d'une démocratie installée, mais elle me paraît inséparable de ce qui appelle une démocratie à venir, au sens le plus ouvert et sans doute lui-même à venir de la démocratie. "Institution" 257

Not an institution in the stabilized, institutionalized, sense, literature, if it will be an institution, will be in the sense of the verb, the action, of "institution" or "instituting" which will always be foundational, but this action will always be illegitimate because not the result of a prior legitimacy.

Literature, in this sense, is therefore by definition disruptive, and this disruptive force will necessarily make literature counter-institutional in its precisely institutional moment, or institutional in its counter-institutional moment.

C'est une institution qui consiste à transgresser et à transformer, donc à produire sa loi constitutionnelle; mieux, à produire des formes discursives, des "oeuvres" et des "événements" dans lesquels la possibilité même d'une constitution fondamentale est, au moins par "fiction," contestée, menacée, déconstruite, présentée dans sa précarité même. Dès lors, si la littérature partage un certain pouvoir et une certaine destinée avec la "juridiction," avec la production juridico-politique des fondements institutionnels, de la constitution des États, de la législation fondamentale, et même des performativités théologico-juridiques qui se trouvent à l'origine de loi, à un certain point elle peut aussi les excéder, les interroger, les "fictionnaliser": en vue de rien, bien sûr, ou de presque rien, et en produisant des événements dont la "réalité" ou la durée n'est pas assurée mais qui par là même donnent d'autant plus "à penser," si cela veut encore dire quelque chose. "Institution" 290

Elsewhere, and roughly at the same time, Derrida posited the impossibility of dissociating democracy and literature. As the right to say everything (*de tout dire*), which incidentally is not idiomatically identical to "free speech," literature could be said to institute democracy but such institution would never be a static, stable, guaranteed or merely self-identical and permanent institution:

La littérature est une invention moderne, elle s'inscrit dans des conventions et des institutions qui, pour n'en retenir que ce trait, lui assurent en principe le *droit de tout dire*. La littérature lie ainsi son destin à une certaine non-censure, à l'espace de la liberté

démocratique (liberté de la presse, liberté d'opinion, etc.). Pas de démocratie sans littérature, pas de littérature sans démocratie.<sup>20</sup>

Although, as Derrida goes on to add, one can be against literature and democracy and even not consider them to be "biens inconditionnels" or "droits indispensables," one cannot ("en aucun cas") dissociate the one from the other: "Aucune analyse en serait capable" (*Passions* 65). To attack a literary work is to attack democracy: "chaque fois qu'une oeuvre littéraire est censurée, la démocratie est en danger, tout le monde en est d'accord" (*Passions* 65). The authorization granted to literature is politically one with the "le droit illimité de poser toutes les questions, de suspecter tous les dogmatismes, d'analyser toutes les présuppositions, fussent-elles celles de l'éthique ou de la politique de responsabilité" (*Passions* 65-66).

However, if literature is democracy in the sense of the authorization to ask all questions and to risk saying everything, literature is also the hyperbolic condition of democracy, even contradicting a historically limited idea of democracy as based on the citizen-subject responsible before the law, because "cette autorisation de tout dire constitue paradoxalement l'auteur en auteur non responsable devant quiconque, pas même devant soi, de ce que disent et font, par exemple, les personnes ou les personnages de ses oeuvres, donc de ce qu'il est censé avoir écrit lui-même" (*Passions* 66, emphasis mine).

At stake, in Derrida and Kant, is to imagine a different history, one that does not reject history books on world history, but one which is not just an empirical account as they seem to be; a novel history, a history that would have something of the novel in it, because it would imagine what is not, the creation of which has something to do with the cosmopolitan, but beyond the aporias of the nation-state (where these blockages are either a United Nations dominated by a few powerful nation-states, or nation-states that cling to their sovereignty and disallow any world wide governing body).



### **After Kant, after the Political, after the Nation-State**

The relation of the static and the non-static, the State and the non-State, between a domain governed by the State and a domain outside State jurisdiction, is tearing apart:

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20J. Derrida, *Passions*, 1993, 65. Hereafter *Passions* in text.

C'est de plus en plus difficile [de penser] que le politique c'est de l'étatique, et qu'il est lié à un territoire irremplaçable, à une communauté nationale. C'est cela même qui se *disloque* aujourd'hui, et se délocalise, en raison notamment de la transformation techno-scientifique et techno-économique du champ national. [...] L'idéal cosmopolitique de Kant [...] supposait encore que le citoyen fût citoyen du monde "en tant que citoyen", c'est-à-dire en tant que sujet d'un État-nation. Lorsque Kant définit les conditions de l'hospitalité universelle, il se réfère néanmoins à une multiplicité d'États qui ne feront jamais un État universel. [...] [Son] concept d'hospitalité [...] me paraît encore lié à une figure de la citoyenneté de l'État-nation, celle qui se trouve en voie de dislocation, de transgression, de transformation.

Quand je parle de démocratie à venir – cette chose qui peut paraître un peu folle ou impossible – je pense à une démocratie qui ne serait plus liée de façon essentielle à la citoyenneté. [...] Les droits de l'homme doivent aussi être étendus au-delà de la citoyenneté. Tel est "l'esprit" des Déclarations des droits de l'homme [...] même si cet "esprit" reste, dans son inspiration, entravé par l'état de la lettre et la lettre de l'État.

Il faut bien sûr de l'identité, il faut de l'identité citoyenne, mais à certains moments, l'impératif catégorique *excède la responsabilité du citoyen en tant que tel*.<sup>21</sup>

There is a responsibility, and an imperative, that surpasses citizen responsibility, that surpasses my responsibility as a subject of a nation-state. This cosmopolitical responsibility refers to a politics and to a cosmos that cannot be limited to the model of State, of sovereignty either.



### **Borges and Universal History**

Kant's short essay, "Idea towards a Universal History in Cosmopolitan Perspective (*Absicht*), where the preposition "in" could mean that this universal history is already in that perspective, or that the idea is *from* such a perspective, contains the two crucially odd notions: 1) literature is the *clinamen* for such a cosmopolitan idea; 2) this cosmopolitanism would be archaically and teleologically European, yet would also be without any precedent and thus neither archaically nor teleologically European. What forms does "universal history" take in Borges' oeuvre? In the pages that follow, covering the surface of Borges' corpus is, to use another meaning of the word *Absicht*, intentional.

The expression pops up again and again. In the lecture "Enigma of Shakespeare" (1964), Borges concludes on the infinitely different readability of Shakespeare's works: "We can read Shakespeare's work, but we do not know how it

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21J. Derrida, in J. Derrida and E. Roudinesco, *De quoi demain* (2001) 161. Hereafter *Dqd* in text.

will be read in a century, or in ten centuries, or even, if universal history continues, in a hundred centuries."<sup>22</sup> The enigma of universal history is the tale, the story, an utterance ("enigma": Greek *ainigma*, from *ainis-sethai*, "to speak in riddles," from *ainos*, "tale, story") that is both unique (original in its singularity) and inexhaustively iterable: "We do know that for us the work of Shakespeare is virtually infinite, and the enigma of Shakespeare is only one part of that other enigma, artistic creation, which, in turn, is only a facet of another enigma: the universe" (*TL* 473). This difference commanding the play of part and whole, each mirroring the other, obtains in a single coin, the *Zahir*, in the story "The *Zahir*" (in *The Aleph*, 1949).

Tennyson said that if we could but understand a single flower we might know who we are and what the world is. Perhaps he was trying to say that there is nothing, however humble, that does not imply the history of the world and its infinite concatenation of causes and effects. [...] The Kabbalists believed that man is a microcosm, a symbolic mirror of the universe; if one were to believe Tennyson, *everything* would be – *everything*, even the unbearable *Zahir*.<sup>23</sup>

The coin, the *Zahir*, and the story, "The *Zahir*," mirror each other, like two sides of a coin, wherein the difference postpones any stabilization of which is which. Universal history, not to be dissociated from the history of the universe, is this "infinite concatenation" of causes and effects, of part and whole also.

Universal history also contains a "marvelous part": an iterability that is intrinsically original. Very similar to in Derrida where iterability, repetition, is that in which the origin consists, for Borges, in his lecture "Immortality" (1978), repetition, and in particular the act of reading, is the original instant of writing: "Each time we repeat a line by Dante or Shakespeare, we are, in some way, that instant when Dante or Shakespeare created that line. Immortality is in the memory of others and in the work we leave behind" (*TL* 490). This immortality, the eternal "present" of the origin, insists and persists in memory, and this phenomenon is universal history: "We will keep on being immortal; beyond our physical death our memory will remain, and beyond our memory will remain our actions, our circumstances, our attitudes, all that marvelous part of universal history" (*TL* 491).

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22J. L. Borges, *Total Library. Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, 473. All material from this book will be referenced hereafter by the abbreviation *TL* in text.

23J. L. Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 248. All material from this book will be referenced hereafter by the abbreviation *CP* in text.

In his essay "Our Poor Individualism" (1946), Borges defines the Argentine as essentially a non-citizen, therefore as non-State-affiliated, non-political. Borges argues that the Argentine is an individual, not a citizen. The Argentine does not identify with the State, contrary to North Americans (Borges forgets, perhaps, in 1946, that African-Americans might not consider themselves as granted full citizen rights), and to almost all Europeans: "The world, for the European, is a cosmos in which each individual personally corresponds to the role he plays; for the Argentine, [the world] is a chaos" (*TL* 309). Although Kant does recognize the chaos of human affairs ("the chaotic play of human affairs" (*verworrenen Spiels menschlicher Dinge*)" [*Idee* AA 49]), his conception of universal history aims at a cosmopolitanism that would have a super-State form, even if that form is unprecedented and therefore, by definition, would involve a transformation in the concept of the State, hitherto conceived nationalistically. Borges' essay resonates with the Kantian argument which holds that a true cosmo-political institution, a world government, will never come from the State, because the State is War, and if something moves in favor of the cosmo-political (the "cosmo-political" is thus an oxymoron, insofar as the "political" is always State-bound, and therefore Nation-State bound, and therefore nationalistic), if something – in humans, in living beings – moves therefore in favor of the cosmos, of the planet, this movement will involve a transformation of the political: this movement will be from peoples as non-citizens, or as world- (*Welt-*) citizens, members of a non-existent institution, a non-institution or a counter-institution to-come. Here is Borges' conclusion:

It may be said that the traits I have pointed out are merely negative or anarchic; it may be added that they are not subject to political explanation. I shall venture to suggest the opposite. The most urgent problem of our time (already denounced with prophetic lucidity by the near-forgotten Spencer) is the gradual interference of the State in the acts of the individual; in the battle with this evil, whose names are communism and Nazism, Argentine individualism, though perhaps useless or harmful until now, will find its justification and its duties.

Without hope and with nostalgia [Borges here is contrary to Kant: because the latter imagines something unprecedented, without nostalgia, but with hope], I think of the abstract possibility of a party that had some affinity with the Argentine people; a party that would promise (let us say) a strict minimum of government.

Nationalism seeks to captivate us with the vision of an infinitely tiresome State; this utopia, once established on earth, would have the providential [Kant's *Vorhersehung* and

*Vorsehung*] virtue of making everyone yearn for, and finally build, its antithesis. *TL* 310  
(This is repeated in "A History of the Tango" [*TL* 398].)

The State, in its nefarious effects, is the best instigation to its antithesis. Borges is close here to Kant who simply requests of States that they "not hinder" the efforts of their peoples towards what is "best in the world" (*Idee* AA 407).

Borges' rather well-known phrase, "Perhaps universal history is the history of a few metaphors," from "Pascal's Sphere" (*TL* 351), is remarkable in the present context not simply because Derrida quotes its two variants in his 1968 essay "La pharmacie de Platon" (the other being: "Perhaps universal history is the history of the various intonations of a few metaphors" [*TL* 353]). Relative to literary cosmopolitics, to literature being somehow important to the formation of cosmopolitics, and to Kant's "universal history" in a "cosmopolitan perspective" (*weltbürgerlicher Absicht*), the quotations from "Pascal's Sphere" remarkably turn around the central metaphor of the essay: the sphere. And if the sphere that is the earth were the basis of universal history? In Kant's essay "On Perpetual Peace" (1795), the spherical surface of the earth is essential: it is the basis for the unconditional hospitality that should exist on it. "Originally," writes Kant, "no one had more right than any other to any place of the earth," because of the "spherical surface" of the earth, which means that there is a right to the common possession of this surface: because it does not enable anyone to disperse into infinite space, the spherical globe means that all human beings (*Menschen*) must offer society, a "visitor's right," to any visitor. The unconditional "visitor's right" is what everyone has to every place on the planet, understood as its "surface"; Kant's restriction of this right to the earth's *surface* sets the surface apart from all that is built on the earth (the world, culture, institutions). Although this "visitor's right" is not a "right to inhabit" (the latter concerning the built-up world), it does stress that as inhabitants of a spherical globe we are beholden to a "right" which pre-empts positive law based on belonging to national borders, to Nation-States.<sup>24</sup> Even if in a restricted form, Kant's visitor's right coming from the finite sphere of the earth glimpses a cosmo-politics wherein "visitor's right" and "inhabitant's right" would cease to be a dissociable binary opposition, all the more relevant today, when the development of the world is creating what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the *immonde* or

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<sup>24</sup>Immanuel Kant, "On Perpetual Peace (*Zum Ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf*)," 41-42, translations mine.

unsustainable development,<sup>25</sup> destructive of the planet and therefore requiring as response to such climate deregulation a deconstructive imbrication of the link between the “visitor’s right” and the “inhabitant’s right” that Kant maintained in opposition. The right of living beings (future as well as present and past) to be “visitors” might radically re-institute any “inhabitant’s right,” when habitation is destructive of the possibility of the former.

In "The Argentine Writer et Tradition" (1951), Borges conceives something like this "visitor's right," when he describes the Argentine, but also the Jew and the Irish:

I believe that our tradition [the Argentinian] is the whole of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which the inhabitants of one Western nation or another may have. TL 426

Through analogy with the Jew and the Irish, it will be always "easier" for the outsider to innovate in the "Western culture" that is not his own: "I believe that Argentines, and South Americans in general" "can take on all the European subjects, take them on without superstition and with an irreverence that can have, and already has had, fortunate consequences" (TL 426). Although the outsider will not become the native (*the inhabitant's right*), although non-citizen will not be the native citizen, s/he can, through the *visitor's right*, make more of "Europe" than can the European. In the same lecture, when Borges writes the following about taking place in the universe and about becoming its subject, "[w]e must *believe* that the universe is our birthright and try out every subject" (TL 427, emphasis mine), Kantian cosmopolitanism is pushed beyond State jurisdiction or beyond any existent statutory juridicity. In the context of the true manner to be citizen, Borges (anticipating Derrida<sup>26</sup>) enunciates an

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<sup>25</sup>For example, in his *La création du monde ou la mondialisation* (2002) or, with, Aurélien Barrau, *Dans quels mondes vivons-nous?* (2011).

<sup>26</sup>Inspired by Kant’s account of hospitality (mentioned above), Derrida attempts in *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!* to go further. Commenting upon the institution of "refuge-cities" for persecuted writers, in particular literary writers, an action undertaken in the 1990s and in which Derrida participated, he considered it as not *foreign* to the counter-institution that literature "is": "Il s'agit de savoir comment transformer et faire progresser le droit. Et de savoir si ce progrès est possible dans un espace historique qui se tient *entre* La Loi d'une hospitalité inconditionnelle, offerte *a priori* à tout autre, à tout arrivant, *quel qu'il soit*, et les lois conditionnelles d'un droit à l'hospitalité sans lequel La Loi de l'hospitalité inconditionnelle risquerait de rester un désir pieux"; "Cette expérience des villes-refuges, je l'imagine aussi comme ce qui donne lieu, un lieu de pensée, et c'est encore l'asile ou l'hospitalité, à l'*expérimentation* d'un droit et d'une démocratie à venir. Sur le seuil de ces veilles, de ces nouvelles villes qui seraient autre chose que des 'villes nouvelles', une certaine idée du cosmopolitisme, *une autre*, n'est peut-être pas encore arrivée. / - Si – elle est arrivée.... / - ... alors, on ne l'a peut-être pas encore reconnue" (*Cosmopolites* 57-58).



unconditional hospitality towards the visitor's right, and this visitor is conceived by Borges as a literary visitation, or a visitation of literature: "I *believe* that if we lose ourselves in the voluntary dream called artistic creation, we will be Argentine and we will be, as well, good or adequate writers" (427, emphasis mine). To espouse artistic creation is the way to be Argentine. The citizen is to become a poet. Wordsworth's belief for poetry in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) is not far away.<sup>27</sup>

Unbelievable? That is what is called belief. Why might such a belief resonate with one of Derrida's most kernel formulations, "en un texte déjà où nous croyons être," which comes in the immediate context of more well-known formula, "Il n'y a pas d'hors-texte"? We, writes Derrida, "croyons être" "en un texte déjà." Being in a text is a mode of perception, a means of being, the medium of being. That is a credo.

This belief of Borges and of Derrida enables us to link them on the subject of blindness. The phrase, "en un texte déjà où nous croyons être" comes in the latter's essay *De la grammatologie* (1965-67). If we quote it here, it is because the definition of being-in-a-text is developed through an explanation of blindness. This blindness is not Borges', but is according to Rousseau, as explored by Derrida. That blindness strikes as pertinent for thinking Borgesian blindness, in its relation to literary vision.



### ***Blindness and Ab-sicht (perspective, intention)***

Some quotations from *De la grammatologie* introduce us into the Derridean penumbra. "L'aveuglement au supplément est la loi. Et d'abord la cécité à son concept."<sup>28</sup> Can one gain insight into one's blindness, and therefore become aware of supplementarity, that which occludes access to nature? "Le supplément n'a pas de sens et ne se donne à aucune intuition. Nous ne le faisons donc pas sortir ici de son étrange pénombre" (*Gram* 213); I cannot see, I cannot sense, the supplement: the supplement is my being-mole, by being cut off from vision, in order words, my being in words, in symbol, in signs: "L'aveuglement produit [...] ce qui naît en même temps que la société: les langues, la substitution réglées des signes aux choses, l'ordre du

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<sup>27</sup>Material space does not permit a careful explanation of how the poet, according to Wordsworth in his "Preface," is that mode of expression that destitutes institutionalized political subjectivity yet therefore re-institutes it also as irreducibly poetic and translational transjectivity. May the observation suffice here that the Preface is a speech act that explains how the poet is s/he who can, by altering language, speak and write in such a way as to "bind" "the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time" ("Preface," 302).

<sup>28</sup>J. Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 214. Abbreviated hereafter as *Gram* in text.

supplément. On va de *l'aveuglement au supplément*" (Gram 213). According to Rousseau, glossed by Derrida, we cannot see nature, life, plants, etc., and therefore we turned to mining earth for invisible things, ruining forever our ocular vision. The supplement is what stands in the place of ruined vision, ruined sensation. Already a similarity with blindness for Borges lets itself be detected. In his "Prologo" to *La rosa profunda* (*The Unending Rose* [1975]), Borges writes: "Blindness is a confinement (*clausura*), but it is also a liberation, a solitude propitious to invention, a key and an algebra (*una llave y un algebra*)."<sup>29</sup> Blindness is not seeing nature; yet it is a liberation because it enables conceiving the supplement, which is what invention is. As key, as algebra, invention or the supplement is a cultural, technical, and symbolic act: non-natural, non-sensorial.



Universal history is also, obviously, a written text. In his essay "On the Cult of Books," Borges refers to "the Scot Carlyle" who "said that universal history was a Sacred Scripture that we decipher and write uncertainly, and in which we too are written" (TL 361). Universal history, when it comes to the Scandinavians, is intrinsically, if invisibly, a history of modern literature, of the novel especially. Quoting William Paton Ker, Borges records: "the great Icelandic school, the school that died without an heir until all its methods were reinvented, independently, by the great novelists" (TL 381). Indeed,

in universal history, the wars and the books of Scandinavia are as if they had never existed; everything remains isolated and without a trace, as if it had come to pass in a dream or in crystal balls where clairvoyants gaze. In the twelfth century, the Icelanders discovered the novel – the art of Flaubert, the Norman – and this discovery is as secret and sterile, for the economy of the world, as their discovery of America. TL 381

"Universal history" – the novels of Flaubert! – is characterized as an unconscious repetition. The novel – literature – has the power to condense universal history: "Obviously, if universal history is the history of Bouvard and Pecuchet, everything it consists of is ridiculous and insignificant" (TL 389). Borges pursues the idea, adding that the creator of the realist novel, Flaubert, also "was the first to shatter it."

In a review essay of Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* and of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Representative Men*, Borges returns

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<sup>29</sup>J. L. Borges, *Selected Poetry*, 345. All material from *Selected Poetry* is hereafter referenced by the abbreviation *SP*.

to Carlyle. Universal history, here, is not only textual, but its textuality makes men themselves be texts. Borges quotes Carlyle: "In 1833, he declared that universal history is a Divine Scripture which all men must decipher and write, and which they are written [...]. Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones" (*TL* 413, 414). In other words, "Great Men" denotes "great texts": "Great Men are the true sacred texts and that 'your numerous talented men and your innumerable untalented men' are mere commentaries, glosses, annotations" (*TL* 414).



### **Infamy and Unsociability**

Kant's essay on universal history famously posits unsociability as condition of possibility of society: "All culture and art, which adorns (*zieret*) man, the most beautiful social order, are fruits of unsociability (*Ungeselligkeit*), which by itself even necessitates disciplining itself, and thus, through forced art (*abgedrungene Kunst*), [causes] the seeds of nature to fully (*vollständig*) develop" (*Idee* AA 397, emphasis mine: *voll-ständig*, "perfect," "full standing"). This unsociability, is it not literature? One thing for certain is that, here (i.e., in the terms of our Call for Papers), literature is *not* "adornment"! When Derrida posits literature as that "strange *institution*" (strange, for institution is, *normally*, a "come to stand," yet literature is constantly moving), he explains this strangeness by affirming that literature is *irresponsible*, itself the highest form of responsibility, insofar as it is beholden to, must respond to, *no one*, and certainly no State authority, no instance of knowledge, certainty.

Ce devoir d'irresponsabilité, de refuser de répondre de sa pensée ou de son écriture devant des pouvoirs *constitués* est peut-être la plus haute forme de la responsabilité. Devant qui, devant quoi? C'est toute la question de l'avenir – ou de l'événement promis par ou à une telle expérience, ce que j'appelais tout à l'heure la démocratie à venir. Non la démocratie de demain, non une démocratie future qui sera demain présente mais celle dont le concept se lie à l'à-venir, à l'expérience d'une promesse gagée, c'est-à-dire toujours d'une promesse infinie. "Institution," 258, emphasis mine.

The highest form of responsibility is when I cannot answer to a request for total accountability. To have to respond, now, once and for all, to a demand, is to have to give in to a metaphysics of presence and of the present as totality, and therefore abandon an ideal, and an ideality, which by definition must be non-finite, infinite. Because literature cannot be finalized, given merely a "critical function," because

literature may be the right to say anything, everything, without being held responsible, literature is responsive to what cannot be reduced to responsibility, to the ability to give answers. As such, it is responsive to what always exceeds the horizon, something beyond totality, totalization, totalitarianism.

If literature is such irresponsibility, then it is by definition unsocial. Just as literature, the "novel," in this essay of Kant, is that strange institution insofar as it institutes the strange, unprecedented, and therefore *monstrous* entity (counter- or a-institution) of a "large" or "great" "State body" (to quote again: *ein künftiger grosser Staatskörper, wovon die Vorwelt kein Beispiel aufzuzeigen hat [Idee AA 407]*)<sup>30</sup>, so, too, the creature in the novel *Frankenstein*, is the unsocializable who demands to be heard but is he whom, or that which, no society can integrate responsibly.<sup>31</sup>

If, in the quotations on universal history in Borges, there is a – Kantian – hope that universal history is one of improvement (I dare not say, however, from the *Enlightenment*), that hope should not blind us to the fact that the history of infamy is perhaps the motor of Borges' entire oeuvre, from the earliest publications, namely the novellas *Historia universal de la infamia (A Universal History of Infamy [1935])*. We recall here Derrida's formulation of literature before or *devant* (in front of, outside, owing) the law, derived from his reading of Kafka, whose work certainly in texts such as *The Trial* is abundant in infamy (Borges read Kafka already in the latter's lifetime, in 1917 [*TL 502*]):

La littérature est peut-être venue, dans des conditions historiques qui ne sont pas simplement linguistiques, occuper une place toujours ouverte à une sorte de juridicité subversive. *Préjugés*  
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Literature, perhaps, comes as the opening of a subversion of the juridical institution, but also as a juridicity, a law that is a nonlaw law because a subversive law, a law of the subversion of the law and thus an outlaw law.

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30 "L'avenir ne peut s'anticiper que dans la forme du danger absolu. Il est ce qui rompt absolument avec la normalité *constituée* [emphasis mine] et ne peut donc s'annoncer, se *présenter*, que sous l'espèce de la monstruosité" (*Gram 14*).

31 Such is my conclusion to the reading of *Frankenstein*, in Thomas Dutoit, "Re-specting the Face as the Moral (of) Fiction in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*": "the unrepresentable *monstre* is a responsibility of listening to a voice of command that commands to listen before commanding to do something. The 'hideous' *figure* disjoins parental responsibility from this other responsibility towards the unrepresentable. Between what critics fault as failed parental responsibility towards the 'issue' and a responsibility towards this unrepresentable, the asymmetry is fundamental" (868-69). Responsibility to the unrepresentable will always take the form of irresponsibility, from a social perspective, aim or intentionality.

So, to come back to Borges, Paul De Man, in a hyper-lucid analysis entitled "A Modern Master: Jorge Luis Borges" (1964) devoted to *Ficciones* and to *El hacedor*, insists upon the evil at the heart of Borgesian writing<sup>32</sup>. This evil, iniquity or infamy, is irreducibly that of duplicity, of plagiarism, of copying, of simulacrum, in a word, of mimesis, of what we will later in this article call – upping the ante on the cosmopolitical – *cosmo-panto-mimesis*.

Why mimesis? Mimesis, because it is by means of mimesis that Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe will show the limits of Lyotard<sup>33</sup>, and by means of which also Derrida will insist on literature's counter-instituting "status" which will always thwart the institution understood as the place from which criticism, judgment, and knowledge are proffered. The fact that a literator (of the odd hybridity of Borges, who confounds the distinction of literature and meta-literature, and therefore confounds referentiality) will insistently sketch out universal history indicates, perhaps, that literature is intrinsic to any universal history: any universal history will be the history of metaphor, and as such, will also be *literary* history.

Mimesis, iniquity, duplicity, are such that being is only itself one among the actors on stage. That cast or casting of characters signifies that there is a pseudo-reality equal to our proper world said to be "real." The point here is double: mimesis – the poetic world – makes supposedly real nature be one mimesis among others; mimesis – simulacra – inaugurates, opens, a cosmopolitical entity without precedent, a copy without origin, or a repetition that is the origin of the origin, which is a counter-institution. That is to say: not founded upon the State. (We are here close to the poet Shelley's "unacknowledged legislator of the world," and also to Derrida's democracy.)

For de Man, also, God is chaotic reality, which is a pleonasm. No style will overcome or domesticate this reality. Poetic creation is beautiful *and* terrifying

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<sup>32</sup>Paul de Man, *Critical Writings 1953-1978*, 123-129. Originally published in *The New York Review of Books*, 1964. Hereafter abbreviated *MM* in text.

<sup>33</sup>For Lacoue-Labarthe, and in terms of the call for papers for this present issue of *L'atelier*, Lyotard returns literature -- here, synonymous with mimesis -- to what can be "assigned a place," to something "forced by categorizations," to something institutionalizable, to the proper: "Tu [i.e., Lyotard] réhabilites la mimèsis condamnée par Platon: non seulement tu subis la surdétermination de son interprétation de la mimèsis (c'est-à-dire de sa propre soumission à la contrainte mimétique) mais tu te retrouves avec une pensée de la discrimination et du critères, c'est-à-dire avec une pensée de la justice, fondée sur la catharsis, des jeux de langage ou référé, si l'on préfère, à la propriété des phrases. Tu te retrouves avec une *exigence de propriété*." Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Où en étions-nous?" J. Derrida et al., *La faculté de juger*, 189.

because what makes the poet is a *make-believe*, an illusion, which is always only a *make-believe*, an act of faith and also an *act* or *acting*, a faithful mimesis. So much for the beautiful part of poetic creation. But this beautiful part of making-believe always intimates to us, makes us intimate with, the knowledge (which is neither faith nor belief) of destruction, death, chaos, reality. Such is the knowledge that illusion is all that we possess. The more we believe in and commit to the fabrication of this belief – in art, in literature, in imagination – the more we approach the terrible: the leper, natural degradation, temporal destruction.

Borges' poem "The Mirror" illustrates the de Manian argument regarding the face (it is noteworthy that de Man, the great thinker of defacement and of prosopopeia, writes "Borges a Modern Master" in 1964, years before those seminal essays from the 1970s and early 1980s):

As a child I feared the mirror might reveal  
 Another face, or make me see a blind  
 Impersonal mask whose blankness must conceal  
 Something horrible, no doubt.  
 [...]  
 Now I fear the mirror may disclose  
 The true, unvarnished visage of my soul,  
 Bruised by shadows, black and blue with guilt,  
 The face God sees, that men perhaps see too. *SP* 407

This horrible face that lies behind mimesis is close to the situation of Hakim, and to the unmasked leper's face in "Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv." Moreover, following de Man, the fact that God intervenes is the mark that God is reality, in other words, that God is the absence of all fiction, the unmasking of the mask.

There is here a link with blindness, which is to say, with the supplement, with a generalized mimesis. Hakim's great mask makes everyone blind, but also obliges all to follow, to adhere to, the mask. Blindness is the mental memory of the mask, and also the physical lack of vision, of nature. Faithfulness to the mask is the forgetting of reality. Rousseau's remarks on blindness are similar. Man lost vision of nature (plants, life) when he became obsessed with the minerals of the earth. This obsession was the creation of culture, the loss of nature. It was the creation of simulacra. Blindness is the gift (as Borges will say) because it hides temporal and natural decline, and thus also the death of life. All artistic cultural creation holds at bay this destruction. De Man announces the rule that governs Borgesian creation: "The fictions literally could not

have taken shape but for the presence of villainy at their very heart" (*MM* 124); "all of which would be shapeless without the ordering presence of a villain at the center" (*MM* 124); "infamy functions [...] as a formal principle," as the principle of form, that which makes form possible (*MM* 124). Why?

The villain is a deceiver. There is nothing bad here; although, from Rousseau's point of view, this is bad, evil. In Borges, the villain is a hero because his deception, his trickery, enables him to escape from reality. Reality is to be fled, because it itself is false: nature makes us think that it is orderly and beautiful, but it is chaotic, and it is the triumph of entropy, culminating in death. The villain is a hero, therefore, because he affirms simulacra (the supplement, in fact) as a belief: this belief is the positive value of the lie beyond morality and beyond cognition.<sup>34</sup> This iniquity or infamy is most centrally at the heart of Borges because it is the most lucid recognition of the terrible, the terrifying: that the earth (*la tierra*) is an error. Earth, nature, the geo-, has no logic, or at least, no logic accessible to us.<sup>35</sup> Every geography will be a fiction. Every cosmopolitics, a novel.

More. In the story "Covered Mirrors" Borges' I narrator, after recounting what the "unappealable Day of Judgment" will be in "Islam," for those who "perpetrated images of living things," recounts a childhood memory:

As a child, I knew that horror of the spectral duplication or multiplication of reality, but mine would come as I stood before large mirrors. As soon as it began to grow dark outside, the constant, infallible functioning of mirrors, the way they followed my every movement, their cosmic pantomime, would seem eerie to me. One of my insistent pleas to God and my guardian angel was that I not dream of mirrors; I recall clearly that I would keep one eye on them uneasily. I feared sometimes that they would begin to veer off from reality; other times, that I would see my face in [the mirrors] disfigured by strange misfortunes. *CP* 297

The "cosmic pantomime" is the mime of all, the panto-mimesis which is cosmic, which *is the world*. "Uneasy" with the panic of the all, the cosmic and the cosmopolitical cede to the cosmopantomime. The *polite*, the citizen, to the pantomime; the cosmopolite, to the cosmopantomime. If Kant is the author of *Idea towards a Universal History in a Cosmopolitical Point of View* (Absicht), Borges is

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<sup>34</sup>Derrida formulates such a lie outside of the otherwise defining boundaries of moral good and cognitive truth in "Histoire du mensonge. Prolégomènes," 495-520, especially 517.

<sup>35</sup>"[L]a possibilité d'une géométrie est rigoureusement complémentaire de l'impossibilité de ce qu'on pourrait appeler une 'géo-logie', science objective de la Terre elle-même." J. Derrida, *Introduction to Origine de la géométrie*, 79. Abbreviated hereafter to *Intro* in text.

the virtual author of the *Idea towards a Universal History in a Cosmopantomimic Non-View*. Recall that the German, *Ab-sicht*, for "point of view," is formed upon the prefix *Ab-*, which signifies a deviation, a distancing, and the root, *Sicht*, signifies vision. *Ab-sicht* comes from the verb *ab-sehen*, which means "extract," "pick up," "draw out," that which is not explicit in what one sees. The *Ab-sicht* sees what remains folded, im-plicit. The *Ab-sicht* is always the intention as opposed to the said, the *vouloir-dire* opposed to the *dire*. The *Ab-sicht* is always a *point de vue*, a non-view because it is the view of what is not given to the eye, to view, to vision.

For this reason, Kant's text *Idea towards a Universal History in Cosmopolitical Point of View* (or however one wants to translate *Absicht*: as *Perspective*, *Intention*, etc.) is obsessed with words from the lexical field of vision (words containing the root "to see," such as in *Vorhersehung*, *sehen*, *Sicht*, *Absicht*, *kurzsichtig* occur upwards to a hundred times). And if Kant posits the human's blindness, it is because Kant, whose doctoral dissertation was entitled *The Intelligible and the Sensible*, and who as the rationalist philosopher of the realm of the intelligible, sought to conceive that intellectual non-vision which would wrest man from the delusional world of the senses.

Saturated with references to vision, and more particularly, to the vision of the invisible, the sense of the intellectual, the sensation of the intelligible (this saturation always being a ghost-story, for Kant, always an *Erdichtung*, always a fiction<sup>36</sup>), Kant's blind insights and his fabulous novels of cosmopolitanism, anticipate Borges' dream visions and cosmopantomimesis.

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<sup>36</sup> I have elsewhere studied how fiction, for the early "pre-critical" Kant (as in the 1766 *Dreams of a Ghostseer*) enabled the "critical" Kant, starting with the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), in Thomas Dutoit, "Ghost Stories, the Sublime and Fantastic Thirds in Kant and Kleist," 225-254.



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