

# Joanna Partyka

## On Encyclopedic “Genres” and Problems Regarding Their Definition: An Overview<sup>1</sup>

In a bulky and valuable monograph on the *silva* published by Brepols in 2013,<sup>2</sup> Frans De Bruyn remarked that one need not be such a nominalist as Benedetto Croce, who believed that any attempts at categorizing literature according to genre were unwarranted, to note just how problematic it is to use one generic concept to cover literary works that are (as it is with *silvas*) composed either in prose or in verse, make up a collection of poems by one (Status!) or many authors, constitute a single piece of work or form a collection of philosophical remarks or scientific observations—to name just a few most evident examples of what we call *silvas*.<sup>3</sup> Scholars studying Old Polish culture, and other early cultures as well, might add other characteristics of the *silva* that let us see in it a country gentleman’s encyclopedia or make the encyclopedia look like a *silva*.<sup>4</sup> Illuminating findings (and theses) presented by De Bruyn and other contributors to the monograph *La Silve* can be applied (as meant by the authors) to reflection on generic boundaries and even on the point of defining them.

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<sup>2</sup> P. Galand and S. Laigneau (eds), *La Silve: histoire d’une écriture libérée en Europe de l’Antiquité au XVIIIe siècle. Études réunies par Perrine Galand et Sylvie Laigneau-Fontaine* (Turnhout, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> F. De Bruyn, “The English Afterlife of the *Silva* in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in Galand and Laigneau (eds), *La Silve*, p. 661.

<sup>4</sup> See S. Roszak, “Między sylwą a encyklopedią. *Skarbiec rozmaitych sciencyi* nieznanego Litwina z 1759 roku,” in I. Dacka-Górzyńska and J. Partyka (eds), *Staropolskie kompendia wiedzy* (Warszawa, 2008), pp. 173–181; S. Roszak, *Archiwa sarmackiej pamięci. Funkcje i znaczenie rękopiśmiennych ksiąg silva rerum w kulturze Rzeczypospolitej XVIII wieku* (Toruń, 2004), where Roszak describes *Nowe Ateny* by Benedykt Chmielowski as “a work of encyclopedic character, but deeply rooted in the tradition of *silvas*” (pp. 160–161) and expresses the opinion that “putting Chmielowski’s work in the context of *silvas* can lead to a comprehensive reading of the work” (p. 161). See also J. Partyka, “*Skład albo Skarbiec... Jakuba Kazimierza Haura: sylwa czy encyklopedia?*” *Napis*, 1 (1998), where I first took up the subject of what the two, seemingly so dissimilar, cultural phenomena, the country gentleman’s compendium and the 17th-century encyclopedia revealing the order of a harmonious, perfect, and finite universe, have, and do not have, in common.

If, in the context of such diversity, a convincing argument is to be made for the *silva* as a distinct literary genre, then “genre,” as a critical term, must itself be understood, clearly, as something other than a prescriptive or essentialist conception of literary form. Genre theory in recent decades has in fact shifted decisively away from such static models to embrace instead a dynamic, open conception of literary form that recognizes genres as historically grounded and subject to change over time. The process of generic alteration, driven by the changing needs of authors and audiences, often occurs as a transformation of an existing form or a recombination of elements of various pre-existing genres. Both these processes can be seen at work in the history of *silva*.<sup>5</sup>

And let me add, in the history of “encyclopedia” as well.

The histories of these two open literary genres intertwine quite regularly, and it is possible to find forms that belong to both at the same time. In reference to the work of Statius that initiated the genre of *silva*, Henri Frère states paradoxically: “les Silve ne sont ni un genre, ni un espèce, mais un titre.”<sup>6</sup> Francis Bacon styled his work on natural history and medicine as *Sylva Sylvarum, or, A Natural History. In Ten Centuries* (published posthumously in 1627). It is neither a typical seventeenth-century encyclopedia nor a “typical” *silva*. Peter Shaw, an eighteenth-century editor of *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon* (London, 1737), writes in his preface to the book:

The *Sylva Sylvarum*, therefore, is to be considered as a Collection of the best Materials ... to furnish out a proper Set of *particular Histories*, for the due *Interpretation of Nature* ... and the raising of *Axioms*; that should not only direct a general *Practice*, or the Perfections of Arts; but also constitute a general *Theory* for perfecting the Understanding.<sup>7</sup>

The purposes of the seventeenth-century encyclopedia were defined in the same way.

Contemporary scholars associate “*silva*” additionally with collections of excerpts, notes, extracts from larger wholes, miscellanea, and fashionable compilations. Aulus Gellius, the author of *Attic Nights*, which has been acknowledged by Ann Blair, among others, as a kind of encyclopedia, enumerates the titles given to these collections in Antiquity (and “*silva*” is also on the list): *silvae*, *antiquarum lectiones*, *pandectae*, *problemata*, *stromata*, *memoriales*, *commentarii*, *coniectanea*.<sup>8</sup>

Encyclopedic medical works often bear the title of *Silva*, for example *Silva sententiarum ad chirurgiū pertinentium* (1576) by the Spaniard Matthias

<sup>5</sup> De Bruyn, “The English Afterlife,” p. 661.

<sup>6</sup> H. Frère, *Silvas* (Paris, 1944), p. XXVII–XXVIII; see also De Bruyn, “The English Afterlife,” p. 661.

<sup>7</sup> P. Shaw, “Preface,” in F. Bacon, *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. P. Shaw, vol. III (London, 1733), p. v.

<sup>8</sup> See W. Pawlak, “*De eruditione comparanda in humanioribus*.” *Studia z dziejów erudycji humanistycznej w XVII wieku* (Lublin, 2012), p. 348.

Narvatius, *Sylva medicamentorum compositorum* (1617) by the Swiss physician Philipp Scherbe, or the extensive, as its title indicates, *Sylva medica opulentissima* (1679) by Johannes Georgius Waltherus. The last of these works is widely considered to be a medical encyclopedia. Eighteenth-century English handbooks for gentlemen, as well as treatises on farming and country gentleman’s encyclopedias do feature “silva” in their titles, for example, *Sylvae, or Occasional Tracts on Husbandry and Rural Oeconomics* by Walter Harte. Another encyclopedic work pertaining here is the sixteenth-century Spanish work *Silva de varia lección* by Pedro Mexía.<sup>9</sup> In the seventeenth century, the Italian Jesuit, historian, and philologist Giacinto Gimma (1668–1735) produced the three-volume *Sylva rerum notabilium ab Autorum Operibus tum Latinis, tum Italicis excerptarum*.<sup>10</sup> This silva is a rhetorical notebook. It includes excerpts, announced in the title, from astrological, medical, and historiographic texts as well as those on chemistry, physics, and alchemy. It also contains a dictionary of Latin adverbs and expressions with their meanings explained. There is also a florilegium titled *Sylva locorum communium omnibus divini verbi concionatoribus, nec non variarum lectionum* (Lugduni, 1587) compiled by the Spanish mystic, popular in Poland, Louis of Granada (1505–1588); Ann Moss has classified this work as a commonplace book.<sup>11</sup> Similar content can be found in *Sylva comparationum vel similium, per alphabetum locorum communium* (Vallisoleti, 1608) by another Spanish Dominican friar, Juan Gonzales de Criptana (c. 1555–1613). The silva takes an interesting form in *Silva curiosa* (Paris, 1583) by Julián de Medrano, which is an anthology of poetry, proverbs, sentences, anecdotes, short stories, descriptions of places provided on the pretext that some epitaphs can be found there, as well as of authorial reflections on various subjects meant to be instrumental in conducting erudite and court conversation.<sup>12</sup> Most of the entries are in Spanish, but some short texts in Latin, French, and Italian are included as well.<sup>13</sup> These are just a few instances of publications where “silva” is used in the title. And it is noteworthy that Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski provided his collection of theological treatises with the title *Sylvae quatuor* (Raków, 1590).

Let us now go back to the modern interpretations of the “silva” genre that seem to be equating it with the encyclopedia, or, at the very least, group them all together as encyclopedic texts or miscellanies. In his paper “The

<sup>9</sup> P. Mexía, *Silva de varia lección* (Sevilla: Dominico de Robertis, 1540).

<sup>10</sup> G. Gimma, *Sylva rerum notabilium ab Autorum Operibus tum Latinis, tum Italicis excerptarum*, vol. I–III, ed. M. Occhinegro and F.A. Sulpizio (Lecce, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> See A. Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (Oxford, 1996), p. 203.

<sup>12</sup> The purpose of the book is clearly stated in the full title: *La Silva curiosa de Julián de Medrano, cavallero navarro: en que se tratan diversas cosas sotilissimas, y curiosas, muy convenientes para Damas, y Cavalleros, en toda conversation virtuosa, y honesta.*

<sup>13</sup> See M. Alcalá Galán, *La silva curiosa de Julián Medrano. Estudio y edición crítica* (New York, 1998).

Classical Silva and the Generic Development of Scientific Writing in Seventeenth-Century England,” De Bruyn made some key observations that can help in thinking about the *silva* in terms of genre theory: “The *silva* offered writers of natural philosophy what one theorist of genre has called ‘an invitation to form’ rather than a template to be copied ... The *silva* violated formal and stylistic preconceptions, sparking recurrent controversy on topics such as the literary value of heterogeneity; the perception of form in terms of accumulation and incompleteness; and the legitimacy of an informal, rough-hewn, raw literary style, as opposed to the rhetorically finished and embellished.”<sup>14</sup>

Paolo Cherchi considers the concept of *silva* in a similar vein, though he draws attention to another aspect of it: “Quien frecuenta la literatura del Renacimiento tropieza de vez en cuando con obras que llevan por título algo como *sintaxis o jardín o máquina o espejo o plaza o sinopticon o panopticon, polyanteas* u otros por estilo, y todos representan formas de para-enciclopedia. Hay tantas de estas obras que llevan a crear **el género opuesto que es el de las *silvas*** [my emphasis, J.P.], trabajos sin orden que intentan representar la variedad del mundo, de la selva donde el cazador tiene que buscar su ruta.”<sup>15</sup> According to the author, the *silva* presents a variety of material with the intention of describing the world in a haphazard manner, which is its distinguishing feature. Interestingly enough, Cherchi traces the origins of the genre back to para-encyclopedic works of the Renaissance.

The German historian Michael Gordian, on the other hand, while analyzing encyclopedic writing, notes the similarity of the concepts of *sylva* and *theatrum*.<sup>16</sup> William N. West devoted a whole book to the analogy between theater and encyclopedia: *Theatres and Encyclopedias in Early Modern Europe*. He defined encyclopedic texts in the following way: “they are **reference works** [my emphasis, J.P.], compiled and organized to reflect some reality to which by definition they are secondary.”<sup>17</sup>

Ann Blair also uses the handy and commodious term of “reference work,” which encompasses all collections of encyclopedic or lexiconlike character (including e.g. florilegia, commonplace books, and dictionaries). Let me quote an extensive passage of her “Encyclopedias” entry in *Encyclopedia of the Scientific Revolution: From Copernicus to Newton*:

<sup>14</sup> F. De Bruyn, “The Classical Silva and the Generic Development of Scientific Writing in Seventeenth-Century England,” *New Literary History*, 2/32 (2001), pp. 349–350.

<sup>15</sup> P. Cherchi, “Enciclopedias y organización del saber de la antigüedad al renacimiento,” in E. Rodríguez Cuadros (ed.), *De las academias a la enciclopedia: el discurso del saber en la modernidad* (Valencia, 1993), p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> M. Gordian, “Enter This Forest; and While You Relax in It, You Will Enjoy Two Thousand Delights. The Early Modern Sylva in the Context of the Theatrum,” [http://diglib.hab.de/content.php?dir=ebooks/ed000156&xml=tei-article12.xml&xsl=tei-ebooks.xsl&metsID=e-books\\_ed000156\\_article12](http://diglib.hab.de/content.php?dir=ebooks/ed000156&xml=tei-article12.xml&xsl=tei-ebooks.xsl&metsID=e-books_ed000156_article12) (accessed on October 20, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> W.N. West, *Theatres and Encyclopedias in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 14.

more practically oriented authors developed diverse types of bulky reference works, which were rarely entitled “encyclopedia” (“theatrum,” “thesaurus,” “systema” or “silva” are some of the colorful metaphors used instead). These included well-established genres like the dictionary, arranged alphabetically but containing more than strictly linguistic explanations (e.g., Ambrogio Calepino’s 1435–1511, *Dictionarium*, first published 1502), and the encyclopedic commentary, modeled on Aulus Gellius (ca. 130–170), which contained much information in a self-consciously rambling order, made usable by an alphabetical topical index (e.g., Caelius Rhodiginus, 1453–1425 [sic], *Lectiones antiquae* (Ancient Selections), first published 1542). New genres included bibliographies like Conrad Gessner’s (1516–1565) *Bibliotheca universalis* (1545) designed as a guide to all known books and, in principle, as the first step toward a complete index of the contents of the books (the goal of Gessner’s unfinished *Pandectae*, 1548–1549). Commonplace books like Theodor Zwinger’s (1533–1588) *Theatrum humanae vitae*, first published 1565, sorted information under systematically arranged topical headings but were also accessible through multiple alphabetical indices. Subject encyclopedias focused on specific fields were especially numerous in natural history, with authors like Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605) and Jan Jonston (1603–1675) generating many volumes on birds, fish, quadrupeds, and insects. Johann Heinrich Alsted’s (1588–1638) *Encyclopaedia* (1630) was one of the few works to combine the title with a philosophical organizational scheme and a detailed treatment of each discipline.<sup>18</sup>

The most cited definition of “encyclopedia” that comes from the epoch that produced its most distinctive form was coined by Johann Heinrich Alsted: “Encyclopaedia est methodica comprehensio rerum omnium, in hac vitae homini discendarum. Itaque non immerito appellaveris Pandectas, et Universitatem disciplinarum.”<sup>19</sup> It might be worth bearing in mind that Paul Scaliger had used the term “encyclopedia” in the title of his work even before Alsted did; it was called *Encyclopaediae seu Orbis disciplinarum, tam sacrarum quam profanarum, Epistemon* (Basileae, 1559). Yet earlier mention of the word, in the form of “kyklopaideia,” can be found in the title of another Basel publication: a 1538 compendium by Joachim Sterck van Ringelbergh. The title additionally suggests what the book’s content is by using the phrase “De ratione studii,”<sup>20</sup> followed by grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, mathematics, and various philosophical reflections.<sup>21</sup> The book was clearly used as a school handbook, and much of its content dealt with the rules and principles of rhetoric. The Greek term “kyklopaideia” (κυκλω παιδεια), meaning “circle of instruction,” referred to university curriculum—the set of books mandatory

<sup>18</sup> A. Blair, “Encyclopedias,” in W. Applebaum (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Scientific Revolution: From Copernicus to Newton* (New York, 2000), p. 326.

<sup>19</sup> J.H. Alsted, *Scientiarum omnium Encyclopaedia*, vol. I (Lugduni: Marc Antoine Ravaud, 1649), p. 47. The definition was added to the second edition of Alsted’s work; the first edition was called *Encyclopaedia septem tomis distincta* (Herbornae Nassoviorum: G. Corvinus, 1630).

<sup>20</sup> It is a clear reference to *De ratione studii* by Erasmus of Rotterdam. Its first authorized edition was included in *De copia* (Paris, 1511).

<sup>21</sup> J.S. Ringelbergh, *Lucubrationes, vel potius absolutissima kyklopaideia: nempe liber de Ratione studii, utriusque linguae Grammaticae, Dialectice, Rhetorice, Mathematicae, et sublimioris Philosophiae multa* (Basileae: Westhemerus, 1538).

for general education and offering universal knowledge that could be attained either at universities and other institutions of higher education or through self-study.<sup>22</sup> The book knowledge was organized in the same way as the system of academic disciplines. It is thus no wonder that such “encyclopedias” were often compiled by academic professors (e.g. Giorgio Valla or Alsted). Van Ringelbergh still understood “encyclopedia” in this way, as a “didactic program oriented towards giving the student global training before moving on to specialist knowledge,” namely as curriculum.<sup>23</sup> It needs to be borne in mind that his work is a treatise of rather modest proportions and not an encyclopedia as we know it today (or as it was known in the seventeenth century). In time, the meaning of the term shifted toward “self-sufficient and self-contained body.”<sup>24</sup>

Jan Amos Komenský was a student of Alsted’s. The Czech scholar, with close ties with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, employed the concept of pansophia, which overlapped with the idea of encyclopedia understood as the body of universal knowledge:

Liber hic nihil aliud erit, quam Librorum Dei, Naturae, Scripturae, Animoque innatarum Notionum, apographum ordine digestum: ut qui hunc leget et intelliget, legat simul et intelligat seipsum, Rerum Naturam, Deum.<sup>25</sup>

The conception entailed the idea of making access to knowledge easier, which was one of the tenets of encyclopedic thought as well: “Devoranda igitur aliquibus molestia ille erit semel, ut ea liberentur in perpetuum alii omnes”.<sup>26</sup>

William N. West says that the “encyclopedia as it was imagined in early modern Europe was thus not a space where knowledge was produced, but where it was preserved or discovered.”<sup>27</sup> Many Renaissance humanists (e.g. Daniele Barbaro) believed that the knowledge represented by all arts and sciences was complete, consistent, and perfect, just as perfect and complete was God’s universe. “Thus the universality of knowledge, the encyclopaedia, had to be related not to ‘all disciplines’ ... but rather to the ‘*coniunctio*’ and the ‘*communicatio*’ which turned all these into a ‘*corpus unum*.’”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See P. Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 94: “The term came to be applied to certain books because they were organized in the same way as the system of education.”

<sup>23</sup> A. Angelini, “Encyclopaedias and Architecture in the Sixteenth Century,” in W. Lefèvre, J. Renn, and U. Schoepflin (eds), *The Power of Images in Early Modern Science* (Boston, 2012), pp. 277–278.

<sup>24</sup> Angelini, “Encyclopaedias,” p. 272.

<sup>25</sup> J.A. Comenius, *Via lucis, vestigata et vestiganda* (Amsterodami: Christophorum Cunradum, 1668), p. 63.

<sup>26</sup> Comenius, *Via lucis*, p. 66.

<sup>27</sup> W.N. West, *Theatres and Encyclopedias in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> Angelini, “Encyclopaedias,” p. 277.



Blair also notes: “‘Encyclopedia’ in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mostly designated the relations between the disciplines and was not associated with a kind of reference book until the eighteenth century.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the *Ars magna sciendi* (1669) by the Jesuit polyhistor Athanasius Kircher contains numerous diagrams, charts, and tables defining these relations; the “Arbor Philosophica” graph included in the work serves the same purpose, just as many other similar diagrams in Theodor Zwinger’s *Theatrum vitae humanae* (1565) and the oval-shaped diagrams of relations between the arts and sciences in *Tableaux accomplis de tous les arts libéraux* (1587) by Christophe de Savigny. Characteristically, a diagram presenting the organization of all knowledge in the last work bears the title of “Encyclopédie, ou la suite et liaison de tous les Arts et Sciences.” *Margarita Philosophica* (1503) by Gregor Reisch, “a compendium of each of the liberal arts and of natural and moral philosophy, with a subsection on the mechanical arts, in a total of twelve books,”<sup>30</sup> was described by the publisher of its 1583 Basel edition as “perfectissima kyklopaideia.” Not earlier than in the eighteenth century, with the appearance of Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia* (1728) and the French *Encyclopédie*, did the new genre of the dictionary of arts and sciences, named encyclopedia, emerge.<sup>31</sup>

Authors of a broad Spanish monograph on the encyclopedias that preceded the French *Encyclopédie*<sup>32</sup> count manuals for gentlemen (*manuales de caballeros*), legal textbooks, handbooks for writers and secretaries, anthologies of emblems, military treatises (*tratados*), and pedagogical treatises as pre-Enlightenment encyclopedias. It is thus assumed that encyclopedic literature consists of texts that are meant to transmit and shape various kinds of knowledge, be it individual or common, professional, religious, legal, or cultural. The authors of the monograph remind us that there have always been syntheses of “what one ought to know” in order to qualify as a member of society or specific social group, but they vary greatly from epoch to epoch.<sup>33</sup> Many other researchers acknowledge this evident aspect as well; one of them is the British historian Robert Fowler, who remarks: “Every age has its peculiar encyclopaedia.”<sup>34</sup> Paolo Cherchi also draws attention to the fact that the character of the encyclopedia is conditioned upon the times in which it was created, as he is coining its definition: “La enciclopedia es ... un tipo de obra compleja que abarca varios géneros, y se puede definir

<sup>29</sup> A. Blair, *Too Much to Know. Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (London, 2010), p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Blair, *Too Much to Know*, p. 162.

<sup>31</sup> See Blair, *Too Much to Know*, p. 162.

<sup>32</sup> A.A. Ezquerro (ed.), *Las Enciclopedias en España antes de l’Encyclopédie* (Madrid, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> Ezquerro (ed.), *Las Enciclopedias*, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> R. Fowler, “Encyclopaedias: Definitions and Theoretical Problems,” in P. Binkley (ed.), *Pre-Modern Encyclopaedic Texts* (Köln, 1997), p. 7.

por lo general como una obra filosófico-didáctica-literaria; tal ha sido por lo menos en algunas épocas.”<sup>35</sup>

*Enkyklios paideia* meant different things in different epochs. In Antiquity, this higher level of education required knowing philosophy and rhetoric; in the Middle Ages, it meant being well versed in the Scriptures and having a good understanding of God’s Creation; in the Renaissance, encyclopedic knowledge was necessary for interpretation of literary texts. The encyclopedia was also meant to form future citizens in the spirit of patriotism, to lead to moral improvement, and the one compiling it had to be circumspect about selecting the right material.

The authors of the Spanish monograph note that not all forms of organization and transmission of knowledge qualify as encyclopedic, although one is tempted to broaden the corpus of encyclopedic texts so as to include the *Iliad* or the *Works and Days*.<sup>36</sup> Both of them served to transmit and form knowledge in their times, and to a certain extent they still do, even though the knowledge is now of different value than it used to be, and it serves a different kind of readers. Ann Blair points out that

many Renaissance writings, from compilations in various fields to novels and poetry, are considered encyclopedic today because of their bulk and/or their ideal of exhaustive and multidisciplinary scope.<sup>37</sup>

In one of his excellent articles, Anthony Grafton defines two concepts: humanism and encyclopedism:

Humanism is not difficult to define. ... It meant the cluster of disciplines that trained a scholar to interpret and produce literary texts in Latin. Above all, it meant rhetoric—the art of arts and science of sciences, which took as its lofty goal the production of the eloquent and effective citizen, the *vir bonus peritus dicendi*, and imposed as its humble task the memorization of hundreds of examples, aphorisms, and tropes, the *copia rerum ac verborum*.<sup>38</sup>... Encyclopedism is harder than humanism to define. It refers not only to the specific effort to organize knowledge in systematic compendia but also to the more general intellectual aspirations of the polyhistor—aspirations so sweeping as to boggle the modern mind.<sup>39</sup>

The problems of defining the encyclopedia as a literary genre, and then of identifying the functions of encyclopedic texts and the role of encyclopedic knowledge in different epochs, cultures, and social milieus have been taken

<sup>35</sup> Cherchi, “Enciclopedias,” p. 72.

<sup>36</sup> See J. Alvar, “Recopilaciones enciclopédicas en la Antigüedad,” in Ezquerro (ed.), *Las Enciclopedias en España*, pp. 65–82.

<sup>37</sup> A. Blair, “Revisiting Renaissance Encyclopaedism,” in J. König and G. Woolf (eds), *Encyclopaedism from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 379.

<sup>38</sup> A. Grafton, “The World of the Polyhistor: Humanism and Encyclopedism,” *Central European History*, 18/1 (1985), p. 34.

<sup>39</sup> Grafton, “The World of the Polyhistor,” p. 37.



up by the contributors to *Pre-Modern Encyclopaedic Texts*. The introductory article authored by Robert Fowler is titled “Encyclopaedias: Definitions and Theoretical Problems”:

What is an encyclopaedia? The question is not so simple. Compilations of vastly different kinds have claimed the title. What do they all have in common? Can any one provide a point of reference by which to judge all the others?<sup>40</sup>

It seems that the author of the article presupposes the contemporary understanding of encyclopedia and considers other works from this standpoint. Thus, he writes, for example, that Pliny’s work has characteristics incongruent with those of the encyclopedia, because Pliny focuses mostly on natural history and describes phenomena and things in detail, whereas other “encyclopedias” are selective and propaedeutic; additionally, it was written not by a professor for his students but by an educated author for the ordinary reader, and the information it puts together is disorganized.

This is what Fowler has established: since the Renaissance, encyclopedias have concentrated more on the first part of the term “enkyklios,” that is, more on universality and comprehensiveness than on didactics and education. In all epochs, however, one can identify encyclopedic texts aiming at the complexity of knowledge, other texts concerned mostly with propaedeutic, to wit, providing limited knowledge of universal character, and those that merely describe their subject matter versus those which impart certain norms and examples as well. At the same time, extensive encyclopedias can be either descriptive or normative.<sup>41</sup> Modern encyclopedias tend to be broader in scope and more exhaustive than their antique counterparts. Most modern encyclopedias have an underlying philosophical idea.

Fowler ponders why we would not call a seven-hundred-page-long word-processor manual an encyclopedia, even though it is a comprehensive source of information on the given topic. In the case of encyclopedias (encompassing numerous subjects or monothematic), “the subject resides in a pre-existing collection of facts waiting to be recorded. It is part of the structure of reality in a way the instructions of the word-processing manual are not.”<sup>42</sup> What is also characteristic for encyclopedias is the faith in truth and progress. The knowledge transmitted through an encyclopedia is true at the moment of its transmission, but the underlying assumption is that reality changes and develops, and hence the need for supplements and new editions of encyclopedias. The “encyclopedia,” he writes, “is a fundamentally moral project: it is a collection of useful knowledge, which will improve the

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<sup>40</sup> Fowler, “Encyclopaedias,” p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Fowler, “Encyclopaedias,” p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> Fowler, “Encyclopaedias,” p. 10.

world.”<sup>43</sup> As Leibniz writes in his encyclopedia, it is meant to lead to universal knowledge, happiness of mankind, public good, true religion, and eternal peace, and it is supposed to put an end to all useless philosophical disputes.<sup>44</sup>

Further on, Fowler points out that a word-processor manual is intended for specialists, whereas encyclopedias usually end up in the hands of non-specialists (*An Encyclopedia of Health* is not widely read by physicians, for example). Encyclopedic texts, Fowler writes, can be works that, although lacking readily recognizable qualities of encyclopedism, do in fact share an underlying common belief about cognoscibility of all things (*omne scibile*). For Fowler, they include collections of books or excerpts, as well as some literary works: “A universe can be mapped out in a work of fiction,” he ventures and cites Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* and various “reference books” collecting knowledge from other books on various topics.<sup>45</sup> A dictionary may be an encyclopedia as well. The problem with the definition arose when D’Alembert and Diderot provided their work with the title of *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. They wanted to emphasize the alphabetical arrangement of their *Encyclopedia*. “Words too are part of the *omne scibile*,” “A good dictionary is an encyclopaedia of words,” Fowler points out.<sup>46</sup> He then compares the encyclopedia with the handbook. The techniques of preparing a handbook and encyclopedia are very much alike; they are both governed by the same belief about the cognoscibility of reality, but these two kinds of text are addressed to different readers: the encyclopedia is meant for a wide readership, whereas the handbook is intended for students of a given specialty.

Summing up his reflection on the possible (and impossible) ways of defining “encyclopedia,” Fowler makes some important remarks that I would like to conclude my article with. “[T]he humanists who invented the word used it as an abstract noun, and not to refer to any one book. Encyclopaedism is the genre, not the encyclopaedia.”<sup>47</sup>

As a result, Fowler does not provide a definition of “encyclopedia,” citing instead metaphors that evoke the spirit of encyclopedism, or the encyclopedic method as it was applied in different epochs. And so, for the archaic period of ancient Greece, it would be the metaphor of genealogy; for the classical period, it was “the *kosmos*,” and for the Hellenistic period, the library. In the medieval times, the metaphor of a mirror would be the most relevant one. And then the author takes a leap and talks about the nineteenth century and the metaphor of development. In the twenty-first century, the Internet would be the metaphor of encyclopedism.

<sup>43</sup> Fowler, “Encyclopaedias,” p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> See Fowler, “Encyclopaedias,” pp. 10–11.

<sup>45</sup> Fowler, “Encyclopaedias,” p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Fowler, “Encyclopaedias,” p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> Fowler, “Encyclopaedias,” pp. 22–23.

And what about the metaphors for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that Fowler has omitted? How about *theatrum* or the forest of things?

And yet another inspiring idea: the Canadian scholar E.C. Ronquist, while looking at the encyclopedia from a sociological perspective, proposed the concept of impatient versus patient encyclopedias (or encyclopedism) depending on the model of creation and reading characteristic for a given work. The works compiled patiently, or “patient encyclopedias,” are a result of diligence and persistence, whereas impatience leads to summariness, which can, however, be accompanied by originality and inventiveness. The goal of patient encyclopedism is to collect knowledge based on tradition, which entails copying earlier texts, while impatient encyclopedism, on the other hand, consists in compiling the material so it can be used in practice. Thus, the *Essays* by Montaigne would be an impatient encyclopedia, whereas *Etymologiae* by Isidore of Seville and *De universo* by Rabanus Maurus would be patient encyclopedias. The florilegium as a genre could be located somewhere between patient encyclopedism and the impatient one. An author of a florilegium, its compiler, was patient enough to gather material from numerous works written in different epochs and to painstakingly take notes and make excerpts, but the goal was to use them in rhetorical or poetic practice.<sup>48</sup>

The foregoing reflections lead us to conclude that it is possible to formulate only a very general, very commodious, and, in effect, very vague definition of “encyclopedia,” or alternatively, a typical definition that enumerates all the genres used for transmitting and forming knowledge throughout the centuries. The process of working towards these definitions itself can lead to some interesting conclusions, though. It is now a fashionable subject of historical and cultural studies, literary studies, as well as in the sociology and psychology of creativity. In that case, perhaps it would be better to forgo the taxonomic findings and concentrate on the aforementioned conclusions instead? Archer Taylor, the author of the classic work on the proverb (*The Proverb*, 1931), begins his two-hundred-page-long reflections on the genre with the following ironical statement: “The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking,” and then goes on to devote the next two hundred pages to the proverb.<sup>49</sup> The same could be done with the encyclopedia; the only difference, however, would be that having stated the futility of defining it, one could go on for the next thousand pages at least, befitting the bulkiness of the encyclopedia itself. And maybe then one would arrive at the conclusion that it is indeed worth the trouble, and perhaps even necessary.

*Translated by Jan Hensel*

<sup>48</sup> E.C. Ronquist, “Patient and Impatient Encyclopaedism,” in Binkley (ed.), *Pre-Modern Encyclopaedic Texts*, p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> A. Taylor, *The Proverb* (Cambridge, MA, 1931), p. 3.