In 1976, Edward Mendelson used the novel Gravity’s Rainbow in order to introduce a genre that had “never previously been identified,” the “encyclopedic narrative.” A cynical reading of his essay (published in a volume on Thomas Pynchon entitled Mindful Pleasures) would view the new genre as Mendelson’s excuse to glorify his favorite novelist, for his definition of “encyclopedic authors” is extremely exclusive: Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes, Goethe, Melville, Joyce, and of course Pynchon. Yet Mendelson does provide a set of criteria for encyclopedic narratives which extends beyond their exceptional authors: (1) they all include an extensive account of at least one technology or science, (2) they are an encyclopedia of literary styles, (3) they all provide a history of language (are metalinguistic), and (4) they all propose a theory of social organization. Yet one suspects that all committed writers of the globalized, late capitalist era, to the extent that they are running on all cylinders, would in one way or another address such categories. This chapter, in fact, will reference the above categories more or less explicitly even as it argues, using the work of Umberto Eco and Thomas Pynchon, that the most distinctive feature of contemporary encyclopedic narratives is that they enact an aesthetic of crowdedness that not only relates to their situation in the era of late capitalism but also incorporates, on the level of both form and content, the four categories presented by Mendelson. The uncanny crowdedness of contemporary space discussed in the previous chapter will thus transform itself into, not analogous, but correspondent
spaces in these narratives, as these narratives simulate that space on
the page itself, even as they comment more or less directly on the
spatial situations that have made their existence possible. In referring
to encyclopedic narrative, I hope to also emphasize a way of writing
that is not bound to a particular genre, as the chapter’s final section
questions how, using the example of political science professor and
Language poet Bruce Andrews, the pressures producing encyclopedic
novels may lead to strategies of crowdedness in poetry, a crowdedness
that encourages readers to juxtapose various levels of reality and dis-
course even as they experience the necessary disorientation of doing
so. Crowdedness, then, on the level of social space, textual space, and
our current digital economy, may produce affinities across genres that
are more important than genre as traditionally defined.

What seems apparent from reading Mendelson’s essay today, then,
is that it introduced a provocative term that has outlived the strictures
of its “original” definition even as its component parts remain valid,
though not comprehensive, categories of analysis for all postmodern
texts. This is not to Mendelson’s discredit, however, as the same fate
has, for instance, accompanied Jacques Lacan’s phrase “the uncon-
scious is structured like a language,” or for that matter, Guy Debord’s
“society of the spectacle.” Such terms, as Robert Ray has noted, have
played an intriguing role in the history of philosophic discourse. Such
“terms and phrases, while committed to writing, remained elusive,
inchoate, quasi-oral charms. As such they enticed, beckoned, fostered
work.” Mendelson’s term is enticing, and yet the idea of the encyclope-
dic narrative deserves much more attention than the dozen or so
articles and dissertations that have been published on the topic, espe-
циально given the plethora of postmodern novels which aspire to the
general criteria Mendelson sets forth. So perhaps what Mendelson
has led us to is not a genre of “literature,” but a genre of interpreta-
tion that we may, in paracritical fashion, enter into and leave as neces-
sary in a kind of critical free indirect discourse.

Novelists themselves, in fact, seem to be the ones who have responded
most vigorously to Mendelson’s term, or at least to the conditions which
made it viable. There are many possible reasons for this response, includ-
ing the influential wake left by Gravity’s Rainbow. Someone perusing
Mendelson’s essay would probably also note that two of the encyclope-
dic work’s previously most idiosyncratic features, an extensive account
of technology and a theory of language, have attained a central posi-
tion in our postmodern, information-based technoculture. Academia’s
counterpart to this new culture would be, at least in the humanities,
the post-1968 rise of cultural and literary theory. Thus, I have chosen