

DRST 002: Directed Studies Literature  
Professor Mark Bauer

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Caroline Sydney

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1. Heading:

Caroline Sydney  
Directed Studies: Lit, Bauer  
April 29, 2013  
Word Count: 1499

2. Title:

**The essay (which others call the List)**

3. The Essay begins at three. In media res, arguably. Borges, I believe, would appreciate this gesture.

4. But I digress.

5. The Essay does not claim to be comprehensive. The Essay simultaneously discusses and illustrates the ways in which the lists (mine and Borges') suggest completeness despite inherent incompleteness.

5.1 The Essay includes selections from "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," "The Library of Babel," "Funes the Memorious," and "The Garden of Forking Paths."

6. "Everything:"

6.1 Used to describe the contents of The Library of Babel, "Everything:" promises its definition. Yet, intuitively, the reader knows that the space following a colon cannot conceivably contain such an entity.

6.2 The list that follows instead provides a sense of everything, it includes (in order of appearance):

6.21 A reference to a text similar to the list itself in its outrageous and paradoxical attempt to imply completeness—"the minutely detailed history of the future."

6.22 The imaginatively specific "archangel's autobiographies," that force the reader to consider not only the comprehensiveness and breadth of the library, but also its detail.

6.23 A series of examples that illustrate the library's iterative, repetitive, nature: "the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues." This list within the list spurs the imagination into action, encouraging (perhaps coercing) the reader to mentally continue this nearly infinite regression of catalogues.

6.24 The truncation of this imposed reverie on near-endlessness with the real but obscure “Gnostic gospel of Basilides,” a book conceivably shelved in libraries frequented by the reader.

6.25 Another instance of iteration, of texts spring-boarding off of other texts, with the inclusion of a commentary on the above work.

6.26 The confrontationally direct “true story of your death,” swallows the nonfiction of the reader’s future into the fictional realm of the library. But the death of a reader does not halt the plot of what he or she is reading, and so the list (and the story) continues.

6.27 To break this morbid pause, the narrator leaves the personal behind, panning outward to the “translation of every book in all languages,” a view from which the library appears to expand upon itself.

6.28 The list closes by examining the micro and the macro at the same time, “the interpolations of every book in all books,” the universe that is the library scatters pieces of itself throughout itself. Everything within the universe interacts in a passive and random way with everything else it contains.

6.3 The above is not Everything.

6.31 Despite the specificity given on the enumerated levels, the widest scope of examples can merely suggest an Everything.

6.32 Something is always missing.

7. That which is missing:

7.1 This category lays in the blind spot of the list genre. It is a roadblock to completeness that has no detour. The catalogue of works included in “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” best illustrates this phenomenon for the following reasons:

7.12 The narrator claims comprehensive knowledge of the works of Pierre Menard, collecting them directly from the author’s files and compiling them into the list printed in the story, initially, (at least) implying completeness.

7.121 The list is lettered, admitting to no gaps or holes. It moves seamlessly from a), to b), to c) and so on.

7.13 Yet, the narrator considers Menard’s best work, “perhaps the most significant work of our time,” to be the fragments of Menard’s *Quixote*.

7.131 The incomplete *Quixote* does not appear on the list.

7.14 Menard’s *Quixote* and the narrator’s list share the quality of incompleteness.

7.15 Even incompleteness warrants recognition. A list, however, cannot admit to its shortcomings. Its claim to comprehensiveness is inherent to its form.

7.2 Selection bias

7.21 Like the one-to-one scaled map described in “On Exactitude in Science,” a truly comprehensive list would have to contain the entirety of the enumerated works.

7.22 By paring down the works to reach their itemized (listable) forms, the list acts as literary criticism via its methods of selection and summarization. The narrator’s list is a monograph on Menard’s oeuvre to the same extent that his listed monographs are with respect to their singular subjects.

7.23 When the narrator writes “A technical article on the possibility of improving the game of chess, eliminating one of the rook’s pawns, Menard proposes, recommends, discusses and finally rejects this innovation,” he reviews the work to include it. In the words of another hypothetical listographer, the work could have been included as:

7.231 An article on the game of chess

7.232 An article on the possibility of improving the game of chess

7.233 An article on the rook's pawn

7.234 Instead, the narrator implies that he values the entirety of Menard's process of reasoning by including not only the premise of this work, but also a circuitous summary.

7.24 If we now take the list to be a form of literary criticism, the narrator contradicts Menard's judgment on the genre, imparted in item "n," "that censure and praise are sentimental operations which have nothing to do with literary criticism" by slipping in an approving adjective in item "r," "a cycle of admirable sonnets." The reader's only point of reference is the list. The reader can only base his or her opinion on the information provided in the list.

7.241 The listographer's process of critiquing occurs through a series of prioritizations and summarizations. The list is the body remaining when the Missing is discreetly squirreled away.

## 8. The list as photo album:

8.1 Both of the above lists list written works. Yet, the disease of incompleteness does not only plague the textual. The Everything continues to elude Borges in "Funes the Memorious," a story limited to conveying constrained dioramas of the visual Everything.

8.2 This genre of list collects the visual, the polaroid-like scraps of Funes' life. It is a relative, perhaps, of the "bucket list," however, this list from life does not rank items to be accomplished before death—it approximates the life itself, ordering and reprinting in text the images already registered and mentally stored (in Funes' case, with absolute accuracy).

8.3 Unlike the books mechanically created by the library's mechanical governing principle, the memories (images) in the mind of a man can be compared and contrasted by an active intellect. In the library, interaction between the works occurs only by mathematical accident. Now, the list develops an analytical interplay.

8.31 "He knew by heart the forms of the southern clouds at dawn on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, 1882, and could compare them in his memory with the mottled streaks on a book in Spanish binding he had only seen once and with the outlines of the foam raised by an oar in the Rio Negro the night before the Quebracho uprising." The list begins a dialogue between the levels of memory.

8.311 Time. Borges and his narrator consider it important for the reader to understand that the items on the list are not combinations of recollections, but specific, individual memories, each with their own coordinates in time and space.

8.3111 The narrator flags two images with the designations "dawn on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 1882" (a conventional marker, a date and time) and "the night before the Quebracho uprising" (a marker that situates the event in relation to another event, just as the images are placed in relation to other images within the list).

8.312 Image. "A circle drawn on a blackboard, a right triangle, a lozenge— all these are forms we can fully and intuitively grasp." For Funes, the memories listed above are equally graspable, concrete enough for him to compare the clouds to the "mottled streaks" as we would compare a circle to a right triangle.

8.313 Specificity and The Everything. The remarkable quality of Funes' memory, however, is not its completeness at particular moments, the moments relayed to us

by the narrator, but its comprehensive detail at every moment. The list can neither convey every detail from a single one of Funes' richly furnished memories, nor can it record a complete record of his expansive mental catalogue.

8.4 In this study on memory, relations between the captured images mold the contours of implied completeness. Of all of Borges' lists, the lists from "Funes" most openly admit to their shortcomings. The wonder of Funes is the impossibility of comprehensively cataloguing (listing) his recollections.

9. "Abstract perceiver of the world":

9.1 In "The Garden of Forking Paths," the protagonist, Yu Tsun, lapses into reverie, removing himself from his immediate reality and becoming "an abstract perceiver of the world."

9.2 The list cannot contain Everything nor a life's work nor the contents of a perfect memory.

9.3 By imposing structure, limits, and organization onto an endless, continually divisible reality, lists cannot fully contain their contents; they can only allow the reader to abstractly perceive the world.

Once again, this time with footnotes.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to note that Ludwig Wittgenstein's numbering system used in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* influenced the structure of this essay.

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### Works Cited

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