

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Lili Fabilli and Eric Hoffer Essay Prize

2013-14 Topic: What I Don't Know

Winners: Andrew David King and Ramona del Pozo

Andrew David King

I remember the first time I walked into the Gardner Main Stacks at Berkeley, leaning over the ledge on the first floor to view the three stories of books below: it was something like awe mixed with anxiety, the feeling of being in the presence of a vast amount of time and human effort, an invisible cement poured into an invisible mold. I'd had a similar feeling when, as a kid, I'd wandered the rows of the local library—much smaller than anything I'd see when I went to college—and pull books off the shelves on the slightest criteria: the cover was odd, the title intriguing. More often than not I snatched books that looked entirely mysterious just to puzzle over their passages. The world swelled until my arms grew too heavy to carry more specimens back to my table.

After almost four years of college, my attraction to the library, to the archive, is coupled with fatigue. One could spend one's life on a single book—and often, for the sake of scholarship, one does; how, then, could one hope to master any meaningful excerpt of existent knowledge? For any well-formed argument, for any thesis whatsoever, couldn't there always also be another piece of

evidence out there, floating in the void, that threatens to cause the claim to collapse? The archive has, it's true, an allure, a magnetic force that beguiles one with the prospect of rearranging history. But this prospect is double-edged: the more you chip away at dominant narratives, the more possible it becomes to doubt your own.

I think, here, of two short stories by Jorge Luis Borges, "The Book of Sand" and "The Library of Babel." The former features a "monstrous" book with infinite pages and, it seems, no beginning or end; the latter tells of a library that contains every conceivable book, the infinitude of which drives people to suicide. Because it contains every book imaginable, it must also contain a book that serves as the library's catalogue—a text that lists all of the texts in the library. This is where the unnerving, even grotesque, world of "The Library of Babel" intersects with ours. For in our world, just as in Borges's nightmarish library, such a book is a Holy Grail. We think we can envision it, at least theoretically; we see, perhaps, every serious book as an attempt to move closer to this ur-text; like Faust, like Adam and Eve, we look for what shortcuts might lead there, aware of our limited time.

It seems tempting to give oneself over to the horror, if not the nihilism, of Borges's stories: they tell us, I think, something inevitable about our pursuit of knowledge. But they need not render us helpless. Every book is an aperture and a shutting-out; an opening and a closing. The ur-text, if it exists, exists because of these individual threads, tying and untying from each other—which gives me a reason to keep reading.