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The Telephone Book

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The Telephone Book

No book written in the last fifty years should be read. Italo Calvino, H.L. Mencken, or someone said this. Time ennobles, matures, and offers perspective. But by heeding this *dictum* one runs the risk of not opening the telephone book, which is one of the worst misfortunes that can happen to a human being. The strategy of the telephone book is to succeed in the present and not the future.

In an attempt to define it, I realize that it's not only a list, but an ambitious and superhuman one. Is this wrong? Isn't *Moby-Dick*—a list of the varieties of Cetacea (whales), maritime techniques, and port idiosyncrasies—also one? Or the Bible—a record of the descendants of Adam, and of God's annoyances? The dictionary, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a menu, and a pocket diary are also lists. The list is the primordial text of our era, the key to chaos. But no list does what the telephone book proposes to do: alphabetically organize all the citizens of a determined geography. Its method of preparation is scientific and rigorous, but the final product is neither impersonal nor abstract; on the contrary, the telephone book is a triumph of fantasy as sister to reason. How many times, upon dialing a number, do I hear: "There is no one here by that name." From which one deduces that Reginald Czech is apocryphal, even though he's listed in those pages as a man of flesh and bones, as solid as any other. There is no human enterprise that isn't condemned to error, however minor, and the telephone book is no exception. The errors found within are quite estimable though: at a time when governments boast about knowing who is who and where, this list of infinite phonetic and numerical variations, upon including imaginary data, constitutes an affront to absolute truth.

Even with its mistakes and non sequiturs, the telephone book is completely reliable. No one would dare to doubt its information because, if one were to do so, its entire worth would be annulled. Always prepared to reach its objective, it lists the data starting with the first letter of a surname. Yes, it's sometimes repetitive, but who isn't? It constrains millions of individuals onto a few pages. What other book boasts such an ambitious goal? The encyclopedia pre-

tends to list the entirety of human knowledge, but omits the present, the vitality of today; the directory, however, is careful not to omit anyone.

Yes, the size of its letters is small. Some critics remark that to read them for more than ten minutes forces one to use glasses or a magnifying glass. It's true, and I'm not going to defend its defect. I just want to point out that such is its ambition, that if it didn't expand, contract, and synthesize, the geography which it yearns to encompass would overflow and remain unfinished. Besides, no one has the need to read it for a long period of time: its structure is designed to momentarily entertain one, from time to time. It is, then, inexhaustible and profound; it can't be thrown in the garbage, and is only replaced when the next edition arrives and when its owner passes on to a better life.

Its thickness, which depends on the locale, in most cases is overwhelming. The one I have has 1,693 pages, plus an eighteen-page appendix which lists government telephone numbers. Such an amount exceeds any human literary undertaking ever attempted, including Carlos Fuentes' novel, *Terra Nostra*. And its structure is exemplary: it tells the reader whether or not Zutano exists, and how to place him. The number makes the person available; the location is inferred from the address. I wish the same could be said about Kafka's novels: how many times have I wanted to talk to Joseph K. or Gregor Samsa, just to strike up a natural pleasant conversation and resolve a doubt.

The company that prints the telephone book is astute. First, because instead of posting various titles, one by Alberto Moravia, another by Stephen King, and a third by Borges, the company invests all its capital in a single effort. And second, because the company does this knowing that it will recover its investment. The commercial strategy is infallible: whoever appears in its dense pages always wants to enjoy the privilege, brief but real, of being an individual and not an abstraction; of knowing that if others are seeking him, he'll be at their disposal. The prestige of knowing that we share the stage with our contemporaries is gratifying and is a curious kind of posterity. The telephone book, then, refuses to use cheap commercial illustrations and devices for successful sales. Its importance lies in its contents, which can be updated. Since long ago the company has committed to an annual edition, which

appears punctually and without excuses. It doesn't allow its information to ever become obsolete, as frequently happens with biogenetic manuals. For the reader, the benefits of that edition are enormous: if one compared the 1987 and 1990 editions, one would discover, for example, Suzanne Clark moved; that José Galvez has his own number; that Dolores Pérez is now listed with a different surname but with the same telephone number, because of a divorce, a marriage, or because she became a widow; John Dickstin Jr., the son of John Dickstin, has become independent from his father; Mercedes P. de Mayoritz is solvent and already has two telephone lines; and Oscar Hijuelos removed his number because fame has motivated him to distinguish himself from the crowd. Another advantage is that it includes instructions for its use at the beginning, where its authors—always anonymous, foreign to the irritating glory of commercial success—have the scrupulousness of explaining the durability and efficiency of the volume; that is much more than should be (or could be) said about so many current novels, which no one even knows how to read, or what they're good for; and if that wasn't enough, there is no reader who will open them without finding something or someone to identify with. That something or someone could be themselves, and if that's the case, the magic of the volume multiplies, like in *Don Quixote* or the works of Pirandello: of being outside, in the margin; the reader suddenly becoming an actor in the drama. That is to say, we're in the presence of a metatextual phenomenon.

For all the aforementioned, the telephone book is a brilliant idea, intelligently brought to fruition. It isn't mere egotistical product, derived from the pen of a poet discussing fate and the divinity and who wants us to listen to him at all costs. This is a communal, necessary, honest book, compassionate, coherent. If we were to clash all telephone books in the universe into one, creating a book of books, we would have a list—perhaps the most approximate list—of our whole age. This idea might be inhuman, but its contents aren't. Under the letter "K" on page 841 of a recent edition, the telephone book lists Kinoshita, Setsuko, near, for example, Kinsof, Augustus, and Kristos, Tom. Without realizing it, the three live within a diameter of three quarters of a mile; their numbers repeat the number 2 once, end with the number 7, and the three of them have disappeared from the 1991 edition. Perhaps these are mere

coincidences, mysteries, which are beyond them; but it's also possible that they have a greater significance. The telephone book, in the end, is a reflection of the order of the universe, and to invent such surnames, invent those who bear them, invent a soup of letters and numbers with which to refer to human beings, organize them on geographical maps, pages, alphabets, is irrefutable proof of the existence of God.

Translated from the Spanish by Harry Morales