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A Short History of Form and Function

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Writing the Literary History of Lists

Abstract This opening chapter provides an overview of the research landscape on literary lists as well as an introduction to the approaches scholars have taken to their analyses of lists in literature. There are (at least) four strands of scholarship: historical/diachronic, narratological, cognitive, and formal/rhetorical. This study combines all these perspectives.

Keywords Literary lists • Research overview • Approaches to lists • List-making and literature

In Gary Shteyngart's novel *Our Country Friends*, the protagonist, Alexander (Sasha) Borisovich Senderovsky, a novelist and creative writing instructor, is known for the following quasi-proverbial piece of advice: "When you run out of ideas, just write down a list. Readers love lists" (2021: 196). In the novel, it is not clear if Senderovsky is pulling his students' legs or if he is serious. Do readers love lists? W. H. Auden regarded lists as the epitome of high-brow literary critical discourse: only a true literary critic could approve of "long lists of proper names such as the Old Testament genealogies or the Catalogue of ships in the *Iliad*" (1956: 48). For Umberto Eco, the list was the form par excellence of his writing

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process. In his autobiographical *Confessions of a Young Novelist*, which he wrote when he was 77 years old, he admits that he did not realise his fondness for lists when he was younger; only as he grew older did he come to recognise the value of the list as a form. The lists of Rabelais and Joyce in particular "played a decisive role in [his] development as a writer" (2011: 129). Eco came to see the dynamic and flexible nature of lists, which can be playful or comic, or highlight sound patterns but also impose order and disorder, insinuate magnitude, convey the ineffable, express deformation, excess, overabundance, or chaos, and can frustrate and delight us in equal measure. Eco closes his *Confessions* on the following note: "Lists: a pleasure to read and to write. These are the confessions of a young writer" (204).

Eco's final lines are tongue-in-cheek. Lists may be a pleasure to write, but they are certainly not always, and not for everyone, a joy to read. One of the oldest forms of literary lists, the epic catalogue, has been met with much criticism and frustration over the centuries. The catalogues in Homer's epics, first and foremost the catalogue of ships, became a *sine qua non* for poets writing in the Homeric tradition. Yet since antiquity, poets and critics have expressed their doubts as to the efficacy of the list form. In the twelfth century, Joseph of Exeter, author of a Latin poem on the Fall of Troy, claims that such lists do not actually please the Muses: on the contrary, catalogues hurt their tender ears.[1] The historian Edward Gibbon, writing in 1763, likewise finds little value in the catalogue form:

> All epic poets seem to consider an exact catalogue of the armies which they send into the field, and of the heroes by whom they are commanded, as a necessary and essential part of their poems. A commentator is obliged to justify this practice; but to what reader did it ever give pleasure? Such catalogues destroy the interest and retard the progress of the action, when our attention to it is most alive. All the beauties of detail, and all the ornaments of poetry, scarcely suffice to amuse our weariness. (328)

This book is, firstly, about the form of the list and the challenges it poses whenever it is included in literary texts. There is hardly another formal device that elicits such strong reactions. Perhaps the list is the one element in literary texts that is the hardest to ignore: because lists require reading techniques that differ from the reception of continually and

[1] See 3.417-18 of Joseph's poem *De excidio Troiae* (edition: Gompf 1970; translation: Rigg 2005).

coherently flowing texts, reading audiences can hardly look past the list and so are urged to take a stance. Should one follow the cues of the text and engage with the list as a list, embracing its formal openness, the gaps between individual items, and the looseness of syntactical embedding? Or should one reject the author's invitation and opt for not reading?

From shopping lists and to-do lists to inventories, genealogies, indices, and chronicles, human beings have always made lists. List-making is one of the most basic and oldest human practices that give utterance to cognitive processes: it articulates how we categorise and manage the knowledge of the world around us. Anthropologists have argued that the practice of list-making arose with the advent of writing and is hence closely connected with literacy (Goody 1977). As early as 2500 BC human beings made lists for administrative, religious, and educational purposes (Veldhuis 2014). In everyday life, we use lists when we go shopping, plan a workday, or invite friends to a party. Especially in the age of the Internet, lists and catalogues have seen a revival facilitated by new technologies and hypertext interfaces.

When lists are included in literary texts, the list form undergoes a change: the everyday device is creatively transformed for aesthetic, narrative, and rhetorical purposes. Literary lists are not, or no longer, pragmatic; they do not fulfil any practical use for the readership. And yet, the pragmatic dimension of lists often remains transparent in literary contexts. In fact, this transparency of their pragmatic functions is one of the reasons why forms of enumeration in literature can feel forced and alien—and indeed alienate audiences and make them *avoid* reading long lists. On another level, the practical backdrop of lists accounts for a different kind of transparency. Whether one regards lists as a form of writing or as the expression of cognitive processes, lists provide insight into the ways people organise knowledge differently throughout the centuries.

Beyond individual readers' preferences and the challenges of reading lists, this book is therefore also about the historical development of the literary list. We start from the premise that lists have been an important literary device since the beginnings of (Western) literature. The literary history of the list form—what we term "listory"—is tied to moments of (historical, intellectual, and cultural) transition and change. We argue that literary lists absorb and reflect such changes in a particularly pregnant way: since lists are, in the widest sense, about order, literary lists often become sites for expressing and negotiating changes in the way in which the world is ordered and perceived. In crucial moments of transformation, the list

emerges as a versatile and flexible form: literary lists can be seismographs of change. The major epochs and movements we focus on are the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, modernism, postmodernism, and the Digital Age.

Philosophical and aesthetic concepts were subject to a fundamental shift in meaning and function in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (Foucault 1994). Thus, the rhetorical tradition of enumeration, the literary tradition of the epic catalogue, and the philosophical tradition of the series, all of which originated in antiquity, were transformed significantly. Due to the rise of empiricism and subjectivism, new functions of literary enumeration emerged between 1500 and 1800. Rather than representing "reality" predominantly in a figurative manner, as was mostly the case in the ancient epic and its catalogues, lists in early modern literature came to imitate the world as it appears to the human senses, in an experiential manner.

In parallel with these developments, the differentiation between the literary and the non-literary (or practical) list re-entered on the side of the former. This "re-entry," in the sense of George Spencer-Brown (1972: 69-76), is characteristic of the new genre of the novel, in which quasi-practical lists produce a reality effect. What is more, literary lists came to represent sequential perception, that is, the train of impressions and ideas in the subjective mind as described by John Locke, David Hume, and others. As a result, narratives from the eighteenth century onwards have a tendency to "listify," whereas the literary lists themselves often develop a narrative dimension. This is carried to the extreme in modernism when, in response to language scepticism, enumerative storytelling was sought out as an alternative to traditional discursive narrative. Thus, ultimately, the disbelief in the efficacy of language resulted in a radical "listification" that defined not only a range of modernist but also some postmodernist literature.

This is a slim volume relative to such major themes, but we have kept our focus strictly on literary lists, and we have proceeded by example. Also, our focus is limited to literature that has been written in the English language, even though list-making is by no means an exclusively European or Western technique: literary lists also abound in non-European and non-Western literary cultures. In the small corner of the literary world we have chosen, we attempt to trace the history of the literary list and its functions in and for modern literature. We concentrate on narrative genres, especially the novel, but we also take into account poetry and, occasionally, drama. We use the term "list" as a hypernym that comprises a range of enumerative forms, including catalogues, registrars, rolls, indices,

inventories, and schedules. In a prototypical model, "list" constitutes the often-evoked "mere" list: a simple enumeration of isolated items, without syntactical embedding, vertically arranged. In literary practice, however, lists occur in diverse forms.

The (Literary) List: Terms and Approaches

There is no such thing as *the* list. We can only ever approximate the list as an abstraction. Lists function on the basis of enumeration and accumulation. They may be longer or shorter, syntactically embedded or not embedded at all, vertically or horizontally arranged; they may consist of items that comprise one word or a whole paragraph, they may be ordered alphabetically or numerically, they may be chaotic or ordered, they may follow scientific classification or an individual's mindset, and they may be infinite or finite. In the last decade, the study of literary lists has gained momentum, spurred also by research in other fields. In the context of collecting and collections, for instance, lists and the list form are often mentioned, whether in terms of exhibition catalogues, practices of arranging a collection, or the representation of collections in literary texts (Pomian 1986; Bal 1994; Assmann et al. 1998; Sommer 2002; Schmidt 2016; Bronfen et al. 2016). Sociologists have researched lists and list-making in terms of their political implications: they have drawn attention to the oftentimes concealed processes of selection and inclusion/exclusion in the creation of lists, which can heighten the illusion of objectivity (de Goede/Sullivan 2015; Stäheli 2016). Search engines, for example, easily lead their unsuspecting users to believe in objective results (Roehle 2008). In medical contexts, scholars have discussed the therapeutic potential of lists and list-making but also their usefulness for monitoring patients (Rüggemeier 2018, 2020).

When it comes to the study of lists in literature, the field that has engaged most thoroughly with the form of the list is Classics. Due to the significance of the epic catalogue as a form in antiquity, classicists have inquired into various epic catalogues, their tradition, transmission, reception, and functions within poems, ranging from Homer to Renaissance poetry and contemporary epics.[2] Outside of Classics and apart from a number of anthologies of literary lists (e.g. Spufford 1989; Eco 2009),

[2] See, for example, Kühlmann (1973), Visser (1997), Hunter (2005), Sammons (2010), Reitz et al. (2019), and Kirk (2021).

there are only a handful of studies that deal with the list form from a more comprehensive angle (see Barton et al. 2022b). The analysis of literary lists tends to be restricted to a specific period and/or type of list. Examples include medieval lists and enumerations (e.g. Barney 1982 on Chaucer; Howe 1985 on Old English examples; Jeay 2006 on the French tradition; von Contzen/Simpson 2022 on medieval and early modern lists), the early modern context (Barton 2021; Johnson 2012; Müller-Wille/Delbourgo 2012), and a number of modern and postmodern examples (Gilbert-Damamme 1989; White 1992; Thwaites 1997; Hall 2005; on detective fiction, Link 2023; on pop literature, e.g., Baßler 1994; Diederichsen 2006; on graphic narratives, Rüggemeier 2020; on life-writing, Rüggemeier 2021a, b, 2022).

Systematic treatments of literary lists are rare. One exception is Sabine Mainberger's monograph on the poetics of enumeration (2003 written in German). The book is structured around the various contexts and functions of lists: classification, definition, and description; mnemonic techniques and didactics; methods of recognition and self-understanding; rankings, canons, and manifests (which Mainberger calls "postulating" enumerations); commemoration; the depiction and passing of time; strategies of chronicling (dynamics of change); and ritual enumerations. Mainberger's study is rich and compelling, in that it introduces a broad spectrum of enumerative forms in literature. The examples are taken mostly from European literatures, often in German or French, written between the Renaissance and the twentieth century. Another critic who discusses the literary list in a more systematic way is Robert Belknap. His 2004 monograph on Emerson, Whitman, Melville, and Thoreau begins with a succinct introduction to the list form.[3] He emphasises the formal characteristics of lists, which he defines as "adaptable containers that hold information selected from the mind-deep pool of possibility" (2004: 19). Belknap's contention that "lists are deliberate structures, built with care and craft, perfectly suited to rigorous analysis" (2004: 35) fundamentally informs this book, too. Belknap, like other critics before him (most notably perhaps Stephen Barney, discussing Geoffrey Chaucer's listing techniques), attempts to define the list based on various parameters: order of the items; strategies of connectivity (paratactic/syntactic); layout (vertical/horizontal); length (finite/infinite); and function. Many of these

[3] See also Belknap (2000).

parameters are binary, inspired by structuralist approaches such as Roman Jakobson's.

Belknap's introduction in particular has been influential, not least due to his useful definition of lists "as frameworks that hold separate and disparate items together. Lists are plastic, flexible structures in which an array of constituent units coheres through specific relations generated by specific forces of attention" (2004: 2). Liam Cole Young, in his book *List Cultures* (2021), also begins with Belknap's definition. Young assumes a media cultural perspective. Each chapter is devoted to one context of list-making: epistemology, administration, computation, and poetics. For Young, the list's persistence across centuries, cultures, and media points to "the way data become culturally inscribed as knowledge" (2021: 15). He stresses that "lists teach us about the systems of order that surround and enframe us because they simultaneously conceal and reveal, enforce and subvert the contours of such systems" (ibid.). Apart from Young, the value of interdisciplinary as well as diachronic approaches to lists in literature and culture has been demonstrated in several edited collections and special issues of journals.[4] The range and potential of interpreting lists in a comparative perspective is impressive; the articles and essays offer stimulating insights into selected contexts of list-making. What these studies do not provide, however, is a more coherent perspective on (literary) lists and their uses over time, within a certain period or in a specific genre.

From a theoretical perspective, we can distinguish between (at least) four different approaches to the literary list: historical/diachronic, narratological, cognitive, and rhetorical/formal. The historical (and also, at least partly, diachronic) approach considers the changing forms and functions of lists over a certain period of time. The volume by von Contzen and Simpson proceeds diachronically (medieval to early modern), as do Doležalová and Barton et al. In these publications, the individual chapters provide snapshots of how literary lists were functionalised at different times and in different contexts, without any claims to exhaustiveness.

The narratological approach considers literary lists as part of narrative contexts. The starting point is typically the insight that, when embedded in narrative texts, lists pose a number of problems: first, the functional background of lists as a practical device can threaten the status of the literary and run counter to aesthetic appeal. Second, lists are not easy to

[4] See Lecolle et al. (2013), Doležalová (2009), von Contzen (2016), Bleumer et al. (2017), Neven et al. (2018), Rüggemeier (2021a, b), and Barton et al. (2022a).

decode: due to the gaps that necessarily occur between the individual items of a list, sense-making is impeded and requires greater cognitive input by the reader than other literary structures. Third, lists weaken the ties that bind a narrative together. Strictly speaking, a list does not narrate; it only narrates once we read it as a (proto-narrative) text and establish links between the individual items, or between the list and the narrative context in which it occurs. Similarly to descriptions, with which they often overlap, lists are characterised by a certain tension between the narrative progression (the horizontal axis of narration) and the halt they cause.[5] In addition, the systematic study of lists is also of high significance for intermedial narratology. The typographic distinctness of the list crosses the boundaries to visual art, especially, though not exclusively, in postmodern texts (Vedder 2012).

From a cognitive perspective, lists are intriguing because they have the capacity to make visible cognitive processes of order and categorisation. Thinking is fundamentally based on categorisation: human beings use principles of order to make sense of the world. In literary texts, lists and enumerations can be used to express such ordering principles. Entering someone's (whether an individual's or a collective's) way of thinking through the list form is particularly suggestive when we consider literary texts, which can function as prisms of knowledge. Eva von Contzen and James Simpson suggest approaching lists as a *Denkform*, as a form of thinking, that is, "as a cognitive structure that plays out differently in different contexts" (2022: 8). The cognitive approach has strong affinities with reader-response theory. Literary lists require the reader's input in order to be rendered meaningful to a much higher extent than other narrative elements: as part of a narrative, lists constitute a rupture and propel the reader to activate more complex cognitive strategies of sense-making. The "gaps" or "blanks" (Iser 1978) that necessarily exist between the items of a list need to be filled.

The rhetorical or, more broadly speaking, formal approach to lists highlights the way lists are made for specific purposes. As a formal device, the list is characterised by its mobility, variability, and, to some extent, unpredictability (Belknap 2000; Wolfson 2006, 2010). The list form motivates function: because of their form, lists can trigger effects that make them highly productive when they are implemented in literary

[5] See, for example, Sternberg (1981), Nünning (2007), von Contzen (2020), Fludernik (2022), and Rüggemeier (2022).