

Twentieth-Century Catalogs: The Poetics of Listing, Enumeration, and Copiousness  
in Joyce, Schuyler, McCourt, Pynchon, and Perec

by Timothy Krause

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## Abstract

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This dissertation examines the occurrence of catalogs and lists in the literary works of several twentieth-century authors, including James Joyce, poet James Schuyler, novelist and cultural historian James McCourt, the postmodern fabulist Thomas Pynchon, and the French experimental prose author Georges Perec. The dissertation seeks to trace how each author makes use of catalogs in his work, how catalogs form a central part of his style and subject matter, and how his use of catalogs can be read against the biographical, historical, and social contexts surrounding his life and work. A theoretical introduction situates my work among theorists of epistemology, narrative, objectification, and desire, theorists such as Foucault (order and classification), Deleuze and Guattari (rhizome vs. root systems), and Susan Stewart (the impulse toward collecting, the gigantic). Catalogs and lists are shown to be modes of literary representation with a millennial past, dating all the way back to Homer, and with strikingly contemporary resonances, especially for twentieth-first-century readers and critics living in the wake of Modernism and postmodernism.

Acknowledgments:

*Pace* McCourt, to all who waited,  
but most of all to Grace, always

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## 1. Introduction

First, the word: *catalog* (or *catalogue*), from French *catalogue*, which derives from Latin *catalogus*, which in turn comes from Greek *κατάλογος* (transliterated as *katalogos*): a list, an arrangement of data in sequential units, a catalog. The Greek noun derives from the verb *καταλέγειν* (*katalegein*, from *kata*, “down” + *legein*, “to write”), which means “to choose, pick out, enlist, enroll, reckon in a list, etc.”:<sup>1</sup> “to write down,” then, not in the sense of vertically down the surface of a scroll or tablet or monument (the Greeks wrote on papyrus and in stone), but down in the sense of into, on, thereupon, to inscribe: to write *down*, then, to inscribe, record, preserve; to write for memory’s retrieval; to write that nothing may be left out, nothing forgotten. Or, simply, to *write*, with, as the saying goes, emphasis added: an act of writing par excellence, of writing in one of its earliest, most direct and mnemotechnic forms.

Henri-Jean Martin notes the origins of catalogs in ancient Mesopotamia, in the need “to commit to memory concrete bits of information”:

This quite naturally led the Mesopotamian scribes to make a science of the art of organizing a list and using a clay surface to make selections and reclassifications in tables arranged in columns. Administrative lists, inventories, and accounts testify to their ingenuity. Above all the complexity of their script soon led them to make up lists of signs, lists that are true lexicographical compendia. These lexicons exclude verbs and adjectives to concentrate on the nouns that, in their minds, were closely connected with existence and reality. Not only did such lists provide materials for a number of specific definitions, they suggested ways to classify reality that extended to the ordering of all things.<sup>2</sup>

Catalogs were eminently practical, recording for easy retrieval any number of things in the real world: names of kings to be remembered to posterity for eternity; genealogies of one’s race, tribe, and family, illustrious patriarchs and forebears—rarely women—whose stern examples shone like lights from a darkened past; names of administrators and other subjects of the state,

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<sup>1</sup> *OED*, *catalogue*, n.

<sup>2</sup> Martin, 88.

any of whom might be in need at a given moment; stores of provisions, foodstuffs, wine, grains, the culinary backbones of early civilizations, whose exact numbering was at all times critical to a community's survival; names of gods to be propitiated by sinful, thankless man.

In addition to their practicality as recorders of the quotidian, catalogs were also from the first invested with another dimension, one tending toward expressivity, uncertainty, play, juxtaposition, and chaos, one that belied the smooth lines of enumerated objects with a running subtext of unforeseen correspondences, and that even questions the possibility of comprehensiveness itself. Catalogs, by their very nature as finished, closed verbal objects, raise inevitable questions as to what has been excluded, what doesn't fit, what the criteria for selection were, and a host of other linguistic-cultural issues as well: questions of epistemology and representation, how the human mind categorizes and describes the phenomenal world; questions of language, culture, power, gender, ideology, and class; questions of the sign's relation to that which it signifies, and the eternally fraught relationship between the two. Sometimes catalogs provoke questions about their provenance, stability, and claims to truth through their sheer length, their taxonomic syntax shorn of qualifiers, their impenetrability: questions about the catalog's claims to completeness; questions about its accuracy; questions about the sheer folly of trying to say anything accurate at all. This dissertation naturally inclines, from both its author's disposition and the data uncovered during research and analysis, toward the latter pole of catalogs. Especially with the use of catalogs in literature, this second, more suggestive side of catalogs—a mode that eschews the strict utilitarian nature of catalogs in favor of associative speculation, metanarrative, aleatory links and haptic (not static, hieratic) knowledge-formation—presents facets and phenomena that outshine the literal. As Jean Bottéro notes of Hammurabi's

law codes, so, too, all catalogs: they record “not only the common and commonly observable reality, but also the exceptional, the aberrant: in the end, everything *possible*.”<sup>3</sup>

While literary catalogs and lists are generally understudied, there has been some recent interest in catalogs, lists, and the poetics of enumeration, and this study has the good fortune to come after others that have broken ground. One study that has proved invaluable to mine is Robert E. Belknap’s *The List: The Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing*, published in 2004, the result of a revised doctoral thesis. Of particular use have been Belknap’s wide-ranging introduction, which spans the tablet-lists of the ancient Mesopotamians down to our own catalogs of hypermodernity, the top-ten and Amazon.com Listmania! lists—as well as his elegantly-focused reading of four great American Renaissance authors and their catalogs: Emerson, Whitman, Melville, and Thoreau. Belknap has been an invaluable counter-example as well: this study, leaving behind Belknap’s pacific readings of a sunnier American nineteenth century, moves into darker, more discordant texts of the twentieth. Similarly, I eschew the tidy unities of four related authors (all nineteenth-century Americans aware of each others’ work), for a set of five authors chosen—like Carol Mavor’s immortal quintumvirate Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D. W. Winnicott in *Reading Boyishly*—partly by whim, partly by whatever secret affinities I’ve detected (created?) between them. The five authors are James Joyce, James Schuyler, James McCourt, Thomas Pynchon, and Georges Perec: five men, four novelists and a poet, three Americans and two Europeans, all singular practitioners of the art of the catalog.

Another work influential for this study is Patti White’s *Gatsby’s Party: The System and the List in Contemporary Narrative*, which, while looking at different authors than mine—

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Manguel, 110.

American postmodernists such as John Barth and Don DeLillo, as well as the great, tragic Modernist F. Scott Fitzgerald—nevertheless covers much of the same cultural territory as I. White’s groundbreaking application of modern-day systems and information theory to the literary texts she analyzes has been particularly provocative, but has influenced my work more as a suggestion than as something to be actively emulated: indeed, one of my main interests is the aberrancy, the irreducible strangeness of catalogs, their refusal to fit comfortably within the boundaries—both that of texts containing catalogs and the boundaries of catalogs themselves—assigned to them. White’s Structuralist approach has rather encouraged my own critical vagabondage than enforced a slavish imitation, but I am particularly indebted to the sensitivity of her readings, and her admirable bringing-together of theoretical and literary texts.

Another theoretical influence on this study, one similar to Terence Cave’s idea of the cornucopian text, is Susan Stewart’s elaboration of the theme of the gigantic—which she calls *gigantism*—in visual art, language, and literature, coupled with her investigation into its corresponding cultural-historical counterpart, the collection. Stewart’s study, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, and the Collection*, examines narrative as “a structure of desire”: she notes that, “I am particularly interested here in the capacity of narrative to generate significant objects and hence to both generate and engender a significant other”<sup>4</sup> — that is, she looks at narrative as the function of a desiring subject, and the “significant objects” of narrative as objects of the narrative’s desire for depiction, elucidation, and, thus, possession. *Narrative* in Stewart’s study is not confined merely to written-verbal narratives such as texts: writing from a post-Marxist cultural materialist viewpoint, Stewart, like Foucault,

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<sup>4</sup> Stewart, ix, xi. For more on Cave’s cornucopian text—and the concept of *copia* (rhetorical surplus or copiousness) in Renaissance texts (and the significance of this work, the Renaissance list and the scholarship devoted to it, on a study of modern-day catalogs and lists), see Cave.

expands her concept of narrative to the discourses—or ruling cultural-historical metanarratives—implicit in such cultural artifacts and phenomena such as souvenirs (postcards, trinkets, memorabilia) and collections (libraries, *Wunderkammern*, museums): ways of ordering information and conveying ownership and access, regimes of class and social order, habits of mind and ways of structuring reality.

Stewart’s twin theoretical-critical poles are that of the miniature/souvenir and of the gigantic/collection. Stewart’s twinned theory of the gigantic and the collection specifically mentions lists and catalogs in her discussion of the textual gigantism of Francois Rabelais: “In Rabelais’s work, language becomes so surfeited that it erupts into the list or the list’s double, the collection. In the colloquy between Pantagruel and Panurge on ‘the virtues of Triboulet’ . . . there is a threat of an infinite series of juxtaposed adjectives, as if language could clone itself into perpetuity without the necessity of returning ‘to earth.’”<sup>5</sup> Several of Stewart’s themes, both implicit and explicit, are central to my study: the notion of surfeit, of language and narrative being somehow overcharged, outsized, too longwinded, too repetitive, or otherwise too large for mainstream literary standards of decorum and taste;<sup>6</sup> the corresponding notion of eruption, of the amassing and subsequent explosion of language, of a nonstop volcanic outpouring of words, of venting—in both the respiratory (to *vent* a sigh) and excremental (Shakespeare’s “Can he vent Trinculos?”)<sup>7</sup> senses—of ranting, holding forth, expatiating, going off; the sense of language and reading as threat, as something that can go wrong, jump the rails, leave the tracks. Note in the

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>6</sup> Stewart emphasizes the alimentary aspect of this linguistic surfeit, noting that “This hyperbolic language characteristic of the carnival grotesque arises out of folk tradition, and thus the feast of the body in Rabelais has its corollary in the feast of words and images offered during market celebrations” (*ibid.*): the sense, then, is of language filled—like the peasants in Breughel and Rabelais—to bursting. The classic study on Rabelais and folk traditions remains Bakhtin.

<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare, 1987 (*The Tempest*, 2.2.43).

idea of infinity a sense both of the interminably boring, language as a tiresome game, and of death, whether of the narrative or, figuratively, of the reader; language as something linguistic, immaterial, and nonliving that can self-replicate, “clone itself into perpetuity” (again the sense of the interminable); finally, a last note of boundary-breaking arrives, with the idea that, in lists and catalogs, language might figuratively take to the sky, never “returning ‘to earth’”: again the sense of liminality, transgression, ungroundedness, flightiness.<sup>8</sup> The gigantic list, then, is for Stewart a troubling, disruptive linguistic-literary phenomenon, one that enacts desire, is immoderate in its demands, and is copious in its output.

Stewart returns to these themes in her discussion of the collection, the cultural-historical counterpart of the list. She focuses on the boundedness of collections, their demarcation of a private, personal space of owned, familiar objects placed in order against the chaos of public, social life, which refuses limits and is largely outside one’s capacity to possess. By bestowing its own arbitrary order upon objects, the collection strips them of their original contexts, and the objects become ahistorical, domesticated: “The collection seeks a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its ahistoricism. The collection replaces history with *classification*, with order beyond the realm of temporality. In the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection’s world.”<sup>9</sup> Her following words expand upon these themes of enclosure, possession, and the replacing of historical context and time with the order and “simultaneous” time of the collection, evoking further nuances of the collection-catalog that are central to this study:

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<sup>8</sup> Stewart’s use of the hackneyed phrase *to earth* nicely, embalming its tired corpse in single quotation marks, suggesting ironically that sensible, “grounded” texts are a bit straightlaced and square.

<sup>9</sup> Stewart, 151.

[T]he collection represents the total aestheticization of use value. The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context. Like other forms of art, its function is not the restoration of context of origin but rather the creation of a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical, rather than a contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life. Yet unlike many forms of art, the collection is not representational. The collection presents a hermetic world: to have a representative collection is to have both the minimum and the complete number of elements necessary for an autonomous world—a world which is both full and singular, which has banished repetition and achieved authority.<sup>10</sup>

Accepting Stewart's formulation of the collection as "the list's double," I would like to read the above description with *list* and *catalog* continually in mind, hovering around *collection* as its semantic doubles, its ghostly twins. Stewart's words read as a key that unlocks critical aspects of catalogs—their use, format, poetics, and value to readers—indeed, as a rare theoretical text that offers, in the brief space of a suggestive few sentences, useful information and ideas about the difficult, often nebulous, subject of catalogs and lists.

A brief reading of two texts drawn from the veritable poles of catalogs in the Western canon—Homer's *Catalog of the Ships* and Joe Brainard's list-memoir *I Remember*—will suffice to show some of these theoretical constructs in action, at the local level of the close reading of texts. Homer and Brainard chart not just the chronological poles of Western catalogs, but the textual and theoretical poles as well: the scope and the limits—stylistic, cultural, and otherwise—of catalog writing as it has manifested itself across three millennia. Following this brief introduction by way of bronze-age Greece and the twentieth-century United States of America, the dissertation will delve into its subject proper, and devote a chapter to each of its main subjects, who have been paried with one or more representative catalogic texts: Joyce with *Ulysses*, Schuyler with his late long poems, and so on.

#### 1.a. Homer's *Catalog of the Ships*

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 151–52.

The most famous of all catalogs in Greek literature—indeed, in all literature—is the Catalog of the Ships in book 2 of Homer’s *Iliad*.<sup>11</sup> The Catalog first describes the Greek and allied ships that sailed to Troy, giving first the city or province of origin, followed by the commander’s name and the number of ships that sailed; a much shorter list of Trojan and allied ships follows that of the Greeks. Within this bare-bones structure is room for all kinds of ancillary explanatory material, such as details of the home cities, personal characteristics of various commanders, and even sometimes memorial looks backward, or proleptic glimpses into the future, of their fates in battle. Far from being a mere list of names and numbers, then, the Catalog of the Ships must properly be seen as an integral part of the poem in its own right; further, and more importantly, the Catalog shares, even exemplifies, the poetic strategies and style of dramatic narrative present throughout the Homeric canon. Like many other passages in Homer (often, but not restricted to, the epyllia, or short descriptions of scenes of heroic battle, such as Diomedes’ fight against the gods in book 5, or Achilles’ fight with the river Xanthus in book 21), the Catalog can be isolated from its context as a representative specimen, a paradigmatic example, of the poetry as a whole. This is not to say that such a divorcing of the Catalog from its contexts—its structural place in the poem, its historical, anthropological, and social ties to Greek culture, its later reception and critical history—for the purpose of New Critical stylistic analysis is particularly useful or desirable; it is merely to say that in the Catalog, perhaps as nowhere else in Homer, are the lively poetic descriptions, the preciseness of detail, the solid objectivity of narration, richly and vividly present. It will therefore be of some interest, before looking at the Catalog in historical and cultural terms, to view it as a poem: to analyze its style and structure by looking at a few representative passages.

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<sup>11</sup> I capitalize the Catalog of the Ships here, and will do so hereafter, following the standard usage among classicists both scholarly and lay.

Homer begins the Catalog of the Ships with an extended chain of so-called Homeric similes (termed thus due to their having originated with Homer), that narrate in detail the buildup of the Greek armies on the plains surrounding Troy. Agamemnon's war council, in which the Argive king and *hegemon* (a strategic leader among a band of generals, or "first among equals") rallies the demoralized Greek army—which has suffered a plague unleashed by the god Apollo for their impiousness—to once again sally forth against the Trojans. Agamemnon ends his harangue by threatening death for cowards who avoid the fight, and the Greeks cheer with enthusiasm:

the armies gave a deep resounding roar like waves  
crashing against a cliff when the South Wind whips it,  
bearing down, some craggy headland jutting out to sea—  
the waves will never leave it in peace, thrashed by gales  
that hit from every quarter, breakers left and right.<sup>12</sup>

A common feature of the Homeric simile is to present the foregrounded actions of the heroes, both Greek and Trojan, against the background of the natural world: that is, to present human actions in the light of natural processes, suggesting thereby either the congruence of human passions and energies with those of nature—Achilles as a lion (20.194–205), or Odysseus' words like "a driving winter blizzard" (3.267)—or the difference therefrom, the incommensurability of human life with wild animals and pitiless, inhuman phenomena like the weather, fire, or the ocean.<sup>13</sup> The simile above accomplishes both at the same time, first comparing the "deep

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<sup>12</sup> Homer, 1991, 112 (book 2, lines 469–73). This translation, by Robert Fagles, is generally to be prized more for its fluency and melodiousness as an English poem than for its strict fidelity to the Greek: such cases where the exact Greek is instructive or useful will be elaborated upon in the notes. All further references to Homer will be first to page number, followed by book and line(s) number(s) in parentheses.

<sup>13</sup> The literature on Homeric similes is vast: Fränkel, 109, looking at the natural world depicted in the *Iliad* against the natural world revealed by the similes, concludes, "In the *Iliad*'s narrative, the whole of nature serves its masters, humans and gods. It is always present when it is needed. If the warrior wants to throw a stone he needs only to reach for it: it will lie there at hand, exactly

resounding roar” of the soldiers to “waves / crashing against a cliff,” but then holding the comparison, developing it, and lingering with it to the point that the human recedes into the distance, and nature—“the waves will never leave it in peace, thrashed by gales / that hit from every quarter, breakers left and right”—usurps the narrative, becoming the subject of the simile at the expense of the human figures that first initiated the comparison. The simile has a chilling, distanced tone, focusing dispassionately on the relentless, neverending action of the water against the headland, thus anticipating the famous description of the great Argive wall built to protect the beached ships but unsanctified by the Greeks, and thus marked for divine destruction at war’s end—the Argive wall having been destroyed by storm and flood, ocean-god Poseidon effaces the last traces of the wreckage:

He made all smooth along the rip of the Hellespont  
and piled the endless beaches deep in sand again  
and once he had leveled the Argives’ mighty wall  
he turned the rivers flowing back in their beds again  
where their fresh clear tides had run since time began.<sup>14</sup>

In both the simile and the description of the Argive wall, humans have vanished from the picture: the awesome powers of the natural world have obliterated their trace. The unending, cyclical time-scale of nature—waves that will “never” cease, rivers that have “run since time began”—has triumphed over the brief lifespan of mankind.

As the Greek armies gather on the plain, the similes increase in frequency until, just before the beginning of the Catalog of the Ships, the narrative unleashes them in a spate: four Homeric similes lead up to the Catalog, comparing the armies on the plain to “ravening fire,” to

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the right size. But nature will never obtrude. It stays in the background, and would never dare to intervene in human action in any positive or decisive way, not even to lead a modest life of its own beside it. Even in order to contribute any atmospheric shading, it has to clothe itself in the garment of the simile and so stand *beside*, rather than step *into*, the narrative”; for a look at Homeric similes through the lens of cognitive theory, see Benzon and Hays.

<sup>14</sup> Homer, 1991, 326 (12.36–40).

“huge flocks on flocks of winging birds,” to “swarms of flies,” and, finally, to “wide-ranging flocks” of goats. The modulation between the four similes parallels the martial action they describe: from far away the warriors’ armor glints like fire consuming “big stands of timber / high on a mountain ridge”; as the armies gather together they seem like flocks of birds “wheeling in all directions, / glorying in their wings . . . landing, advancing, / wave on shrieking wave”; the men “massing” together ever more thickly makes them look like flies “seething over the shepherds’ stalls / in the first spring days when the buckets flood with mill”; and, finally, the captains’ ordering of their troops is “as seasoned goatherds / split their wide-ranging flocks into packs with ease / when herds have mixed together down the pasture.”<sup>15</sup> Homer thus illustrates the etymological sense of the word *syntax*, which originally meant the ordering of troops into battle formation—Greek *suntaxis*: *syn-*, “together” + *taxis*, “disposition of an army” or “body of soldiers”—as, here, the evolving syntax of the similes parallels the actual coming-together of the Greek army. Agamemnon himself receives a plethora of similes:

[T]here in the midst strode powerful Agamemnon,  
 eyes and head like Zeus who loves the lightning,  
 great in the girth like Ares, god of battles,  
 broad through the chest like sea lord Poseidon.  
 Like a bull rising head and shoulders over the herds,  
 a royal bull rearing over his flocks of driven cattle—  
 so imposing was Atreus’ son, so Zeus made him that day,  
 towering over fighters, looming over armies.<sup>16</sup>

A triad of gods—Zeus, Ares, Poseidon, each of them powerful and warlike, each of them physically massive and imposing—and an animal—“a royal bull rearing over his flocks of driven cattle,” which echoes Agamemnon’s imperious rule over his army—form the king’s constellation of similes: he is lord of both animal and human kingdoms, a powerful, dominating figure.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 114–15 (2.539–40, 546–48, 556–57, 560–62).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 115 (2.565–72).

After Agamemnon's appearance as a king fronting his army, the narrator breaks off the narration: in a rare moment in Homer, the bardic narrator's voice is heard, invoking the Muses (as at the beginning of the epic) and wondering about the limits of his poetic capacity. This sublimely self-reflexive moment, in which the poet leaves off his storytelling at a critical moment—the beginning of the Catalog of the Ships, a sustained piece of complexity and innovation, and a passage of crucial interest for the Greek audience—to comment directly on the process of his poetry, highlights the Catalog that follows; the bard's rhapsodic voice, speaking from within the Muse-inspired poetic *furor*, reaches a height of emotional intensity unequalled elsewhere in the poem:

Sing to me now, you Muses who hold the halls of Olympus!  
 You are goddesses, you are everywhere, you know all things—  
 all we hear is the distant ring of glory, we know nothing—  
 who were the captains of Achaea? Who were the kings?  
 The mass of troops I could never tally, never name,  
 not even if I had ten tongues and ten mouths,  
 a tireless voice and the heart inside me bronze,  
 never unless you Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus  
 whose shield is rolling thunder, sing, sing in memory  
 all who gathered under Troy. Now I can only tell  
 the lords of the ships, the ships in all their numbers!<sup>17</sup>

The narrator explicitly contrasts the omniscience of the Muses (“you know all things”) with the ignorance of humans (“we know nothing”): to the latter is left only “the distant ring of glory”—that is, a mere trace of the glory and fame, or *kleos*, of the heroes who lived before.<sup>18</sup> Carol Dougherty notes of this passage and of the Catalog that follows: “Marked as it is by the poet’s

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. (2.573–83). Cf. the lyric poet Ibycus (sixth century BCE), who, speaking generally of the events of the Trojan War, adopts a tone similar to that of the Homeric narrator's protestations of fallibility: “Those topics the skilled Heliconian Muses / could easily cover in story, / but a mere mortal / could never tell the details // of all the ships that set sail out of Aulis / across the Aegean from Argos / out to the horse-plains / of Troy, and sailing in them // the bronze-shielded sons of Achaea (*Greek Lyric Poetry*, 96 [282, ll. 24–32]).

<sup>18</sup> *Kleos* primarily means “rumor, report, that which is said,” and secondarily (and more commonly) “fame, good repute, glory.”

articulate and impassioned appeal to the Muses, the catalogue assumes a metapoetic status. The poet respectfully identifies himself as merely mortal in comparison with the Muses . . . and then proceeds to produce poetry that sets the standard against which all future poets will measure themselves. Thus the Catalogue of Ships . . . comes to catalogue poetic skills as well as battleships; it establishes a metaphorical framework for representing not just the heroic deeds on the battlefield but the excellence of poetic composition as well.”<sup>19</sup> The metapoetic nature, then, of the narrator’s exposition of his persona—limited, ignorant, dependent on divine help—spurs him to new poetic heights; an example of *reculer pour mieux sauter*, the narrator’s digression suspends the action of the epic by revealing its inner workings, and terminates in the verbal explosion that is the Catalog of the Ships.

The Catalog is thus one of the *Iliad*’s many examples of portraying itself in miniature, of narrating through the use of a dramatic set-piece themes and motifs that encapsulate the epic as a whole, or recapitulate one of its main concerns: for example, Hephaestus’s forging of Achilles’ shield, on which are pictured a town at war and a town at peace, a pointed reference to the war at Troy and a subtle echo of the constant twining of war with peace throughout the poem; or Nestor’s relating to Achilles the story of Meleager, another hotheaded young warrior who refrained from battle (as the enraged Achilles now does) to inflict grievous loss on his friends and allies and, ultimately, himself. Here it is the copiousness of the Catalog that figures forth the *Iliad*’s vast scope and minute detail: the ships and the men stand metonymically for the individual heroes at Troy, whose various fates—in particular, their bloody victories and bloodier deaths—will be narrated in the epic to come.

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<sup>19</sup> Dougherty, 24–25.

As noted above, the beginning of the Catalog is an eruption of proper names and toponyms, a welter of chorographic, political, cultural, even individual, information. The Catalog begins with the Boeotians:

First came the Boeotian units led by Leitus and Peneleos:  
 Arcesilaus and Prothoënor and Clonius shared command  
 of the armed men who lived in Hyria, rocky Aulis,  
 Schoenus, Scolus and Eteonus spurred with hills,  
 Thespia and Graea, the dancing rings of Mycalessus,  
 men who lived round Harma, Ilesion and Erythrae  
 and those who settled Eleon, Hyle and Peteon,  
 Ocalea, Medeon's fortress walled and strong,  
 Copae, Eutresis and Thisbe thronged with doves,  
 fighters from Coronea, Haliartus deep in meadows,  
 and the men who held Plataea and lived in Glisas,  
 men who held the rough-hewn gates of Lower Thebes,  
 Onchestus the holy, Poseidon's sun-filled grove,  
 men from the town of Arne green with vineyards,  
 Midea and sacred Nisa, Anthedon-on-the-Marches.  
 Fifty ships came freighted with these contingents,  
 one hundred and twenty young Boeotians manning each.<sup>20</sup>

The formula established above is used throughout: first a naming of the heroes—ordered, it should be noted, hierarchically, first the two commanders Leitus and Peneleos, followed by their subcommanders—followed by a lengthy naming of the cities from which these heroes have summoned their men, and capped with a tally of the number of ships that sailed. Onto this Homer grafts a load of supplementary and explanatory, but never ancillary or superfluous, detail, illustrating the lands from which the heroes have come and forming in the process a verbal map of Greece: a fictive, linguistic construction of cultural and national unity through the narration of

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<sup>20</sup> Homer, 1991, 115–16 (2.584–600). Note Fagles's recurring habit of adding to the Greek, here with "Anthedon-on-the-Marches," making a simple adjectival description—the Greek is *Anthedona t'eschatoosan*: literally, "Anthedona on the border," *eschatoosan* deriving from *eschatos*, "outermost, on the edge" (cf. English *eschatology*)—into something resembling an English market town or country seat, with *Marches* a Britishism (it derives from the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, which in turn derives ultimately from Anglo-Saxon *maerc*, "mark, boundary, limit"): good for Wales and Scotland, perhaps, but somewhat removed from the plains of windy Troy.

sacred places and notable highlights, and an objective, factual gazetteer which nevertheless manages to reveal through these selfsame facts the subjective Greek *mentalité*—a portrait, then, of both Greece and Greekness.<sup>21</sup> For example, Greece’s mountainous, craggy geography is revealed in details such as “rocky Aulis,” “Eteonus spurred with hills,” and “the rough-hewn gates of Lower Thebes,” all of which stress the somewhat harsh, somewhat forbidding territory of the Boeotian highlands; at the same time, the selfsame lushness and fecundity of the land are noted in details such as “Haliartus deep in meadows,” “Onchestus the holy, Poseidon’s sun-filled grove,” and “the town of Arne green with vineyards,” all of which denote verdancy and vegetation. Another Greek virtue, piety—not Christian holiness, asceticism, or renunciation, but due respect for the gods, their rites, and their sacred places—is also present: “the dancing rings of Mycalessus,” a reference to the choral dances of a now-obscure mythic cult and ceremonial site, Poseidon’s grove at “Onchestus the holy”—not *holy* in a moralized, ethical religious sense such as afforded by Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, but Greek *hieron*: beyond the human, “filled with or manifesting divine power, supernatural”<sup>22</sup>—and “sacred Nisa.” Finally, there are the cities and towns of men, the nexus of habitation, culture, and politics that the Greeks called the *polis*, referenced both in the names of the cities generally, and in specific details, such as the civic and military fortifications mentioned in “Medeon’s fortress walled and strong” and “the rough-hewn gates of Lower Thebes.”

As one would expect from such a war-focused work as the *Iliad*, martial prowess is stressed throughout the Catalog: thus we read of “those who held Arcadia under Cyllene’s peak, / near Aepytus’ ancient tomb where men fight hand-to-hand,” emphasizing both the Arcadians’

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<sup>21</sup> Worman, 214n79, notes that “The speech type that dominates in the [Catalog of the Ships] is formal praise, in both diction and tone,” and it is impossible to miss the tones of praise and appraisal in the Catalog.

<sup>22</sup> Liddell.

reverence for their ancestors and their prowess in fighting; or of the “Abantes breathing fury” of Euboea, “their forelocks cropped, hair grown long at the back, / troops nerved to lunge with their tough ashen spears / and slash the enemies’ breastplates round their chests”; or of “those fighting men who lived in Pelasgian Argos” and of Agamemnon’s Myceneans, “the most and bravest fighting men by far.”<sup>23</sup> The Catalog even has room for seemingly extraneous material, such as the zoological description of “Thisbe thronged with doves”: a detail that is both linguistically and thematically trivial, as the Greek adjective for “thronged with doves,” *polutreron*, is a *dis legomenon* (twice-occurring word) that appears only one other time in the entire extant Greek corpus, describing the Lacedaimonian town of Messe later in the Catalog.<sup>24</sup> However unimportant the doves of Thisbe might be, they nevertheless provide an enticing spot of local color, an evocative detail that varies the steady enumeration of people, places, and landmarks, a tiny flash of animal life among the verbal landscape Homer lays out.

The Catalog has functions other than that of gazetteer. One of its most fascinating modes is that of mythological and historical record, a mode that arises often during the narrator’s many digressions during the course of his geographical exposition. For example, during the description of the Athenian contingent of the grand armada the narrator describes “the strong-built city of Athens” as the “realm of high-hearted Erechtheus,” and then gives a brief sketch of who Erechtheus was:

Zeus’s daughter Athena  
tended him once the grain-giving fields had borne him,  
long ago, and then she settled the king in Athens,

<sup>23</sup> Homer, 1991, 119 (2.696–97); 117 (2.626, 633–35); 121 (2.777), 118 (2.669). The Abantes’ bangs are cropped, of course, so that they cannot be grabbed in battle.

<sup>24</sup> Homer, 1991, 118 (2.674): here Fagles renders *polutreron* as “crowded haunt of the wild doves,” conjuring crowdedness and wildness where the Greek just means “many” (*polu-*, “many.” The earlier “thronged” for *poluteron* is a similar poeticization. *Many-doved* (or, using Joycean spelling, *manydoved*) would perhaps not be a bad alternative.

in her own rich shrine, where sons of Athens worship him  
with bulls and goats as the years wheel round in season.<sup>25</sup>

Erechtheus, also known as Erichthonius, was born as a result of the god Hephaestus's attempted rape of the goddess Athena: the lame smith-god was unable to catch the fleet virgin warrior and, overexcited, "ejaculated over the goddess's leg"; Athena removed Hephaestus's semen with a piece of wool, which she dropped to the ground and from which divine seed Erechtheus was born.<sup>26</sup> It is impossible to know whether the bard or bards whom we label *Homer* knew of this aspect of the Erechtheus myth: its main literary witness, *The Library*, was written by the scholar Apollodorus at the Library of Alexandria in the second century BCE, some six to four hundred years after Homer.<sup>27</sup> But it is interesting to note the difference between Homer's version and Apollodorus's: in Homer there is no trace of the attempted rape, the humiliating stain, the god's semen, and the piece of wool; Erechtheus's autochthonous birth is recorded—"the grain-giving fields had borne him"—but not the lustful violence previous, a pastoralization of the myth reflected in the cult festival depicted at the end of the passage—"where sons of Athens worship him / with bulls and goats as the years wheel round in season"—that presents Erechtheus not as the child of an abrupt, aborted act of sex, but as the product of cyclical, ever-abundant nature: a son of the soil, a harvest god to whom bulls and goats are sacrificed.

This use of myth to narrate the origin of a natural phenomenon or ritual practice—here, the presence of the building known as the Erechthion (the "rich shrine" mentioned above) on the Athenian Acropolis, and the sacrifices of the "sons of Athens" to Erechtheus—is known as an *aition*, "cause, origin" (pl. *aitia*), and is common throughout the Catalog. Take, for example, the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 117 (2.637–42).

<sup>26</sup> Apollodorus, 132 (3.14.6). It is widely noted that Erechtheus/Erichthonius derives his name from the wool-dropping incident (*erion*, "wool" + *chthon*, "earth, ground").

<sup>27</sup> In the introduction to *ibid.*, vii–xiii, Robin Hard discusses the debate concerning the attribution of *The Library* to Apollodorus.

following *aition*, which comes near the end of the Greek section of the Catalog, and which explains the clearness of the river Titaressus:

And Guneus out of Cyphus led on two and twenty shps  
and in his platoons came Enienes and battle-tryed Peraebians  
who pitched homes in the teeth of Dodona's bitter winters,  
who held the tilled acres along the lovely Titaressus  
that runs her pure crystal currents into Peneus—  
never mixed with Peneus' eddies glistening silt  
but gliding over the surface smooth as olive oil,  
branching, breaking away from the river Styx,  
the dark and terrible oath-stream of the gods.<sup>28</sup>

Martial taxonomy gives way to anthropology—the homes of the Peraebians “pitched . . . in the teeth of Dodona's bitter winters,”<sup>29</sup> thus underscoring the ruggedness and physical hardness of the tribe—economy—the “tilled acres”—and ecology, with the description of the Titaressus's “pure crystal currents” revealing a water system that has its roots in the river Styx, one of the rivers of Hades, “the dark and terrible oath-stream of the gods.” So we pass from aboveground to underground, from the societies of men above the earth and the dark, mythic, god-involved bedrock on which these societies rest. The Titaressus in its purity is a natural wonder, a source of awe, but also something of an admonishment as well: a liminal geographical terrain bordering the land of the dead, and suggesting in its unique apartness a limit, a boundary line, to human experience.

In addition to *aitia*, the Catalog of the Ships contains other kinds of mythic narratives, in particular, those focusing on the actions of heroes of the past, whether fabulous—that is, belonging to the world of the surreal that myth often inhabits—or merely historical: perhaps not true by the standards of modern historiography, but true in the mythic sense of having been

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<sup>28</sup> Homer, 1991, 123 (2.850–58).

<sup>29</sup> Another of Fagles's additions to Homer's text: the Greek has *hoi peri Dôdônên duscheimeron oiki' ethento*, literally, “who built homes around wintry Dodona.”

believed, having formed the backbone of a community's cultural identity. Take, for example, one of the heroes, Tlepolemus, leader "of the proud Rhodians out of Rhodes": Tlepolemus is the son of Heracles and a mortal woman, Astyochea, whom Heracles had taken prisoner "after he'd ravaged many towns of brave young warlords / bred by the gods."<sup>30</sup> Like so many Greek heroes, however, the unlucky Tlepolemus—Graves etymologizes the name as "battle-enduring," but it means more closely "battle-suffering" or even "battle-daring" (*tlaô*, "to suffer, to dare" + *polemos*, "battle") with *daring* particularly in the sense of "contrary to one's feelings"—is fated to kill a relative and to be cast out, away from home, tribe, and city, pursued by enemies:

But soon as his son Tlepolemus  
 came of age in Heracles' well-built palace walls  
 the youngster abruptly killed his father's uncle—  
 the good soldier Licymnius, already up in years—  
 and quickly fitting ships, gathering partisans,  
 he fled across the sea with threats of the sons  
 and the sons' sons of Heracles breaking at his back.  
 But he reached Rhodes at last, a wanderer rocked by storms,  
 and there they settled in three divisions, all by tribes,  
 loved by Zeus himself the king of gods and mortals  
 showering wondrous gold on all their heads.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Homer, 1991, 120 (2.749, 755–56).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 120–21 (2.756–66). Cf. the beginning of Aristotle's *Politics* and Aristotle's famous formulation of man as a *politikon zôion*, or "political animal" (Aristotle, 13 [1253a]): "[M]an is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the 'Tribeless, lawless, hearthless one,' whom Homer denounces—the natural outcast is forthwith a lover of war; he may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts." The tag from Homer that Aristotle quotes is Nestor's description of fratricidal combat (with a nod to Achilles' quarrel with Agamemnon) in book 9 of the *Iliad* (Homer, 1991, 253 [9.73–75]), translated by Fagles as "Lost to the clan, / lost to the hearth, lost to the old ways, that one / who lusts for all the horrors of war with his own people." Pope—who translates the lines at length and "with liberty": "Curs'd is the man, and void of law and right, / Unworthy property light, / Unfit for publick rule, or private care; / That wretch, that monster, who delights in war: / Whose lust is murder, and whose horrid joy, / To tear his country, and his kind destroy!" (Pope, 430 [9.87–92])—provides an excellent gloss in his notes to his translation of the *Iliad* (*ibid.*, 455): "[T]he original comprises a great deal in a very few words, *aphrhêtor*, *athemistos*, *anhestios* . . . *aphrhêtor*, says *Eustathius*, signifies one who is a vagabond or foreigner. The *Athenians* kept a register, in which all that were born were enroll'd, whence it easily appear'd who were citizens, or not; *aphrhêtor* therefore signifies one who is depriv'd of

We are not told why Tlepolemus has killed Licymnius, only that he has done so “abruptly”; also, that Tlepolemus has taken men of his own into flight, and that the blood-feud is not over, “with threats of the sons / and the sons’ sons of Heracles breaking at his back.” Yet Tlepolemus’s exile becomes a kind of *felix culpa*, a momentary casting-forth which ends in a new and better political dispensation as leader of Rhodes.<sup>32</sup> The wanderings of Tlepolemus seem like Homer in miniature, with grievous, bitter fighting followed by a long voyage: like Odysseus, another “wanderer rocked by storms,” Tlepolemus undergoes first the horrors of war and then the risks of adventure, and survives to find his share increased, “Zeus himself the king of gods and mortals / showering wondrous gold on all their heads.” This last detail refers to a part of the myth later treated by Pindar in his Olympian 7: Apollo tells Tlepolemus and his men to build an altar and burn sacrifices to newborn Athena (a detail not mentioned in Homer); Tlepolemus and his men, distracted by their woes, forget to bring a fire to the altar they have build; in compensation “Zeus gathered a blond cloud and rained / deep gold upon them.”<sup>33</sup> The triumphant end of the myth is made poignant by Tlepolemus’s fate: struck through the neck by Sarpedon’s spear in book 5, he

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the privilege of a citizen. *Athemistos* is one who had forfeited all title to be protected by the laws of his country. *Anhestios*, one that has no habitation, or rather one that was not permitted to partake of any family sacrifice. For *Hestia* is a family Goddess; and *Jupiter* sometimes is called *Zeus hestioukhos*.

There is a sort of gradation in these words. *Athemistos* signifies a man that has lost the privileges of his country; *aphrêtor* those of his own tribe, and *anhestios* those of his own family.”

<sup>32</sup> As was the case for the father of another Argive, “Meges a match for Ares . . . / a son of the rider Phyleus dear to Zeus who once, / enraged at his father, fled and settled Dulichion” (Homer, 1991, 119 [2.720–22]). Many of these happily-ending exiles, of course, manage to turn out bad in the end: witness the twin exposures of the infants Oedipus and Paris, each of whom was left to die yet managed to come back to win a great share of worldly power and happiness (Oedipus as King of Thebes, Paris as lover of Helen), only to lose all in the end. A generation previous to Homer’s narrative, the twin exiles Polynices and Tydeus met at Argos, combined forces, and brought on the disastrous war at Thebes. Homer’s Odysseus and Virgil’s Aeneas are notable exceptions to the trend.

<sup>33</sup> Pindar, 114 (Olympian 7).

dies after having vaunted of the heroic deeds of his father, Heracles, who once razed Troy. But at this point his fate is yet to come, and the Catalog preserves him, as if photographically, at the apogee of his might and power.

The mythic exposition of the several backstories of the Achaean heroes lends the Catalog an expressive and thematic richness, a direct tie to the world of myth that is relatively rare for the *Iliad*, and is far more common to Odysseus's wanderings in the *Odyssey*. Often the Catalog records a fragment of a larger myth in explaining a hero's genealogy; for example, in the history of the brothers Ascalaphus and Ialmenus of the Minyans, we learn that the two men are "sons of Ares / whom Astyoche bore in Actor son of Azeus' halls / when the shy young girl, climbing into the upper rooms, / made love with the god of war in secret, shared his strength."<sup>34</sup> Note the stress on patrilineal descent: the brothers' direct filiation to Ares is noted, as well as their mother's residence (as daughter) in the halls of "Actor son of Azeus." The martial heritage bestowed on the brothers by their war-god father is tempered by Homer's description of their conception: the sight of the young girl (*shy* is Fagles's fabrication) "climbing into the upper rooms" of her home to sleep with Ares in secret has a domestic immediacy, a level of prosaic, unexpected—the gods generally take their lovers by force, outside, without warning, and do not wait for them patiently, coyly indoors—detail. It is a tender scene, made all the more so by Astyoche's willing, active role in the lovemaking, the young virgin (Greek *parthenos*) mounting to her lover, accepting and even hastening her encounter with the numinous divine, expressed directly by Fagles's translation as sex ("made love") but more indirectly by the Greek as *ho de hoi parelexato lathrêi*: "he lay with her secretly." A similar mythological birth is detailed in a later section of the Catalog:

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<sup>34</sup> Homer, 1991, 116 (2.602–05).

And the men who settled Argissa and Gyrtone,  
 Orthe, Elone, the gleaming citadel Oloosson:  
 Polypoetes braced for battle led them on,  
 the son of Pirithous, son of deathless Zeus.  
 Famous Hippodamia bore the warrior to Pirithous  
 that day he wreaked revenge on the shaggy Centaurs,  
 routed them out of Pelion, drove them to the Aethices.  
 Polypoetes was not alone, Leonteus shared the helm,  
 companion of Ares, Caeneus' grandson, proud Coronus' son.  
 And in his command sailed forty long black ships.<sup>35</sup>

While not the child of a god, Polypoetes yet shares with the brothers above an illustrious birth: he is the son of the hero Pirithous, companion and lover of Theseus of Athens, and, providentially, was born on a day of great triumph for his father: “that day he wreaked revenge on the shaggy Centaurs, / routed them out of Pelion, drove them to the Aethices.” Pirithous’s glory is thus transferred to Polypoetes at birth, the son’s existence both a reflection and a confirmation of his father’s greatness, a visible sign and trophy of his potency.<sup>36</sup> Note that Pirithous’s victory is not only a military one, a destruction of troops and materiel; it is a political and geographical win as well, a carving out of *lebensraum* through his driving the Centaurs “out of Pelion . . . to the Aethices”: thus Homer foregrounds themes of militarism and territorial expansion within the general nationalistic focus of the Catalog. Polypoetes’ co-captain Leonteus also receives a mini-biography, here in the space of a single line; like that of Polypoetes, Leonteus’s genealogy stresses his prowess as a warrior (he is a “companion of Ares”) and his place in the patrilineal kinship web (“Caeneus’ grandson, proud Coronus’ son”). This information, largely lost on modern audiences, was vital to the Greeks, who in the classical age

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 123 (2.840–49).

<sup>36</sup> *Trophy* derives from Greek *tropaion*, a “monument to an enemy’s defeat” that was placed at the point on the battlefield where the enemy had been successfully turned (*tropaion* derives from *trope*, or “turn,” as in the English word *trope*, “turn or figure of speech”). Polypoetes’ birth is thus a figurative trophy of his father’s victory over the Centaurs.

(ca. 500 BCE) continued to trace their family roots back into the shadows of a mythical history that they regarded as factual and true.

Sometimes the Catalog's look backward into the lives of the heroes it represents is elegiac, marked by tragedy and loss—as, for example, with Thoas, leader of the Anatolians, whose story contains within it a darker tale:

And Thoas son of Andraemon led Aetolia's units,  
 soldiers who lived in Pleuron, Pylene and Olenus,  
 Chalcis along the shore and Calydon's rocky heights  
 where the sons of wellborn Oeneus were no more  
 and the king himself was dead  
 and Meleager with his golden hair was gone.  
 So the rule of all Aetolian men had passed to Thoas.  
 In Thoas' command sailed forty long black ships.<sup>37</sup>

Homer's elliptical reference is to the hunting and killing of the Calydonian Boar, which was visited upon Oeneus for his failure to honor Artemis, goddess of the hunt; the hunting of the boar was the first assembling of a pan-Hellenic team of heroes for a dangerous adventure, and thus a kind of dress-rehearsal for the Trojan War, this latter fact made all the more poignant in that the hunt transpired a generation before the Argive war on Troy, and was undertaken by the fathers and grandfathers of Achilles and his companions: “Castor and Polydeuces from Sparta; Idas and Lynceus from Messene; Theseus from Athens and Peirithous from Larissa; Jason from Iolcus and Admetus from Pherae; Nestor from Pylus; Peleus and Eurytion from Phthia; Iphicles from Thebes; Amphiaraus from Argos; Telamon from Salamis; Caeneus from Magnesia; and finally Ancaeus and Cepheus from Arcadia, followed by their compatriot, the chaste, swift-footed Atalanta, only daughter of Iasus and Clymene.”<sup>38</sup> Homer radically truncates the myth—the impiety of Oeneus; the boar's depredations; the mustering of the heroes and their hunting of the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 120 (2.732–39).

<sup>38</sup> Graves, 1:264 (80c), who takes the list from Aelian's *Varia Historia*. Cf. Norfolk, 1–108, for a brilliant novelistic retelling of the myth.

boar; Meleager's awarding of the boar's pelt to Atalanta, and his uncles' anger at this act; Meleager's war with his uncles, and his death at his mother Althaea's hands<sup>39</sup>—focusing on the end of Oeneus' line (presumably, like Meleager, they have died in the war, but the mythographers do not recount this fact) and Meleager's death. The tone is profoundly elegiac, the tripartite lament increasing in both specificity and emotional intensity, from “the sons of wellborn Oeneus” to “the king himself” and ending in “Meleager and his golden hair,” a tender, evocative detail conveying Meleager's nobility and youthfulness.<sup>40</sup> The *translatio imperii* that follows this, “So the rule of all Aetolian men had passed to Thoas,” is grimly understated, contrasting with the florid lament which precedes it: thus Homer accomplishes an amazing modulation in tone, the lyric-elegiac section discretely folded-in between the sterner stuff of war and epic.

A similar moment comes during the Catalog's description of the death of Protesilaus, one-time leader of the Phylaceans and the first man killed at Troy:

The veteran Protesilaus had led those troops  
while he still lived, but now for many years  
the arms of the black earth had held him fast

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<sup>39</sup> Like Achilles, the almost-invincible Meleager has a single fatal weak spot: a brand from the hearthfire burning at the time of his birth, which must not be relit and consumed lest he die. Maddened by the Furies, Althaea burns the brand after Meleager has killed his uncles. Homer returns to the Achilles-Meleager pairing again in book 9 (Homer, 1991, 269–71 [9.646–729]), when old Phoenix, Achilles' tutor, narrates to his former ward the story of Meleager's rage at his mother's curse (mirroring Achilles' rage at Agamemnon) and his subsequent refusal to continue the war against his surviving uncles, who have besieged Calydon (mirroring Achilles' refusal to continue besieging Troy). Phoenix notes that Meleager took arms and conquered “too late” (ibid., 271 [9.727]), foreshadowing Achilles' own belated reentry into the war after the death of his lover Patroclus.

<sup>40</sup> A similar note is struck in the narration of the death of another rebellious son with lovely hair, King David's son Absalom, in 2 Samuel 18:33: “And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, ‘O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom: would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son’.” This and other biblical citations are from the King James Version as presented by *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible*.

and his wife was left behind, alone in Phylace,  
 both cheeks torn in grief, their house half-built.  
 Just as he vaulted off his ship a Dardan killed him,  
 first by far of the Argives slaughtered on the beaches.  
 But not even then were his men without a captain,  
 yearn as they did for their lost leader. No,  
 Podarces a fresh campaigner ranged their units—  
 a son of Iphiclus son of Phylacus rich in flocks—  
 Podarces, gallant Protesilaus' blood brother,  
 younger-born, but the older man proved braver too,  
 an iron man of war. Yet not for a moment did his army  
 lack a leader, yearn as they did for the braver dead.  
 Under Podarces sailed their forty long black ships.<sup>41</sup>

Like the death of Meleager, the death of Protesilaus—whose name means “first of the people,” a wry example of *nomen omen*, the name ironically adumbrating its owner’s fate—is first narrated with pathos, the detail of the “house half-built” (the Greek is *domos hêmitelês*, literally, a “house half-finished”) encapsulating the cutting off of the warrior’s life, marriage, lineage, and glory. But as with Meleager, Homer switches gears in a flash, assuring his audience of the continuity of rule during wartime—even, Homer winningly notes, if the new ruler is not quite as exciting as the old. Despite the more glorious times under “the braver dead,” Protesilaus, the bonds between the warrior-band with their captain remain unbroken: power, potency, force—what Simone Weil named the “true subject” of the *Iliad*<sup>42</sup>—has been transferred, swiftly and effectively, to the new leader.

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<sup>41</sup> Homer, 1991, 122 (2.796–811).

<sup>42</sup> In the opening to her “The *Iliad*, or the Poem of Force” (Weil, 3): “The true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man’s flesh shrinks away. In this work, at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to. For those dreamers who considered that force, thanks to progress, would soon be a thing of the past, the *Iliad* could appear as an historical document; for others, whose powers of recognition are more acute and who perceive force, today as yesterday, at the very center of human history, the *Iliad* is the purest and loveliest of mirrors.” As if to illustrate Weil’s point, Podarces himself dies, his right arm pierced by the Amazon Penthiselia’s spear, in the post-Homeric *Trojan Epic* of Quintus of

The Catalog's use of embedded mythic fragments extends to self-commentary as well, as, in the middle of Nestor's section, the narrator tells the story of the bardic singer Thamyris and his fatal contest with the Muses:

Next the men who lived in Pylos and handsome Arene,  
Thryon, the Alpheus ford and finely-masoned Aepy,  
men who lived in Cyparisseis and Amphigenia,  
Pteleos, Helos and Dorion where the Muses met  
the Thracian Thamyris, stopped the minstrel's song.  
From Oechalia he came, from Oechalia's King Eurytus,  
boasting to high heaven that he could outsing the very Muses,  
the daughters of Zeus whose shield resounds with thunder.  
They were enraged, they maimed him, they ripped away  
his voice, the rousing immortal wonder of his song  
and wiped all arts of harping from his mind.  
Nestor the noble old horseman led those troops  
in ninety sweeping ships lined up along the shore.<sup>43</sup>

Nestor's section of the Catalog begins with the now-familiar welter of place-names, here in nicely alternating groups of twos and threes; note the adjectives "handsome" and "finely-masoned," which, like the city-adjectives used throughout the Catalog, portray Greece as a series of beautiful, well-built polities: the Catalog as an oral Greek national anthem, a linguistic knitting-together (enumeration plus stylization) of the scattered, fractious Hellenic city-states. As so many scholars and critics have argued, it is impossible not to see the hubristic, doomed poet Thamyris as an inverted mirror-image of the narrator himself, and the Thracian poet's disastrous competition with the Muses a negation of the narrator's own invocation of the Muses at the

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Smyrna: "His going was for the men of Phylake a loss / Unspeakable. . . . Great was the grief they felt for the dead, but most of all / They wept for brave Podarkes, who had been no less / Distinguished in battle than his brother Protesilaos" (Quintus of Smyrna, 9, 23 [1.244–45, 814–16]): Penthiselia will die in turn at Achilles' hand, who will be killed by Paris, who will be killed by Philoctetes—on and on, seemingly without respite or letup, until the somewhat unsatisfactory theophany of Athena (who appears to enforce peace in the rapidly-escalating blood feud between the returned Odysseus and his subject lords) in book 24 of the *Odyssey*.

<sup>43</sup> Homer, 1991, 118–19 (2.683–95). *Minstrel's* in line 687 is an addition: the Greek is, simply, *pausan aoidês*, "they stopped the song."

beginning of the Catalog.<sup>44</sup> Thamyris stands as a type of human (particularly poetic) overweening, his arrogance a direct contrast with the narrator's humbler self-presentation. It is the narrator's inspiration that makes possible the Catalog, his placating of the Muses that makes possible his sustained poetic flight; in contrast, Thamyris is rebuked by the Muses, and stripped of his powers—even, perhaps, his life: “they maimed him, they ripped away / his voice, the rousing immortal wonder of his song / and wiped all arts of harping from his mind.” Thamyris, then, is one of the cruxes of the Catalog, an *aporia* beyond which the powers of poetic representation cannot go; paradoxically, the Catalog, this supremely verbal moment of the epic as a whole, this sustained showcasing of the art of poetic memory, highlights muteness, forgetfulness, loss. (It is one of the great ironies of the *Iliad* that its most explicit statement about poetry and *poesis*, its tribute to the “the rousing immortal wonder” of Thamyris's “song,” should come during the very narration of the destruction of a poetic career, the interruption of language itself.)<sup>45</sup> Like so many of Homer's heroes—Diomedes in his wounding of Aphrodite; Patroclus in his fight with Apollo; Hector in his fight with Achilles; and Achilles in his entire career as shown in the *Iliad*, from his challenge to Agamemnon in the beginning to his acceptance-by-fighting of his fate at the poem's end—Thamyris goes too far, crossing over the delicate, ever-shifting boundary line between the human and the divine. And, like the others, he is paid for his efforts with failure, rebuke, dissolution, and death.

The above are, of course, highlights of Homer's Catalog of the Ships, central moments of surpassing dramatic or poetic interest. As with any catalog, there are, of course, other, minor

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<sup>45</sup> It is also interesting that Thamyris's poetic career should mirror that of another unfortunate Thracian bard, Orpheus, symbol from ancient times until now of the fragile, vatic poet, capable of spellbinding, mesmerizing song, but fated through the very action of *poesis* (it is Orpheus's singing and concomitant lack of interest in women which so enrages the Maenads who kill him) to die.

moments of interest, bits of detail, character, and description, that, despite—or, rather, because of—their relative unimportance, command our attention.<sup>46</sup> They do so in a way that highlights how all catalogs work, or, better, by which all catalogs may be read: in addition and in opposition to the unceasing, ever-forward enumerative movement of the catalog (a rhetorical voice which might be ventriloquized as “and then, and then, and then”), there is a countermovement of memory, of going backward, of the retardation of the narrative. Bits of the catalog leap out at us and compel our attention, whether by their vividness, pathos, or some other quality; or, as in the following example, it is their very inaptness, their seeming unfitness for being recorded, and their apparent randomness with respect to the catalog as a whole, which compels:

Nireus led his three trim ships from Syme,  
Nireus the son of Aglaea and King Charopus,  
Nireus the handsomest man who ever came to Troy,  
of all the Achaeans after Peleus' fearless son.  
But he was a lightweight, trailed by a tiny band.<sup>47</sup>

Nireus' mini-section in the Catalog charms through its very inappropriateness: in a list of men and warriors honored for their lineage, martial prowess, courage, and power, Nireus is singled out for a quality that doesn't quite fit: physical beauty. Achilles, “Peleus' fearless son,” is mentioned as ranking before Nireus in beauty, but Achilles, of course, is also the Argives' ace-in-the-hole: their most ruthless, brutal, and efficient killer. War is Achilles' *arête*: a word

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<sup>46</sup> These must of course be checked against the original, as what seems at first a nice felicity in translation can become paraphrase in light of the Greek. For example, compare Fagles's “Mount Neriton's leafy ridges shimmering in the wind” (Homer, 1991, 120 [2.726]) against Homer's two-word formula *Nêriton einosiphullon* (literally, “leaf-shaking Neriton,” or, more archaically, “Neriton of the shaking leaves,” from *enosis*, “shaking” + *phullon*, “leaf”).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 121 (2.767–71). Fagles's placement of *Nireus* at the beginning of each line excellently captures the anaphora—the repetition of a word or words at the beginning of successive lines (from *ana-*, “again” + *phero*, “to carry”)—present in the Greek: *Nireus au Sumêthen age treis nêas eïsas / Nireus Aglaiês huios Charopoio t'anaktos / Nireus, hos kallistos anêr hupo Ilion êlthe*.

commonly defined as “virtue,” which is misleading due to *virtue*’s moral connotations; a better translation would be “excellence,” in the sense of “strength, forte,” or even “purpose,” as *arête* commonly means in Aristotle—thus, the *arête* (pl. *arêtai*) of a knife is to cut, the *arête* of Achilles is to kill. Many scholars have argued that the *Iliad* is both a contest between and a demonstration of competing *arêtai*, with the different excellences of various heroes—Achilles for sheer outstanding preeminence, the killer *par excellence*; Odysseus for craft and stratagem; Nestor for wise counsel; Ajax for defense; Agamemnon for courage and lordship; and so on—vying for the informal, yet all-important, title of “best of the Achaeans.”<sup>48</sup> Nowhere in Homer is beauty suggested as an acceptable *arête*, something which singles out its possessor for honorable praise; moreover, those who possess the *arête* of beauty are almost invariably women—the hedonistic, feminine Paris is the exception that proves the rule—such as Helen or the love goddess Aphrodite, and use their looks to deceive, beguile, cheat, and seduce the hapless men who come into contact with them—not exactly, Odysseus notwithstanding, a skill-set prized by the bronze-age Greeks.<sup>49</sup> So Nireus’s presence in the Catalog is something of a statistical

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<sup>48</sup> Nagy, \_\_\_; Scodel, especially 12–13: “Heroes acknowledge inferiority in specific areas even relative to their peers. . . . Such arguments and admissions do not lower the hero’s overall claims to heroic standing. When a hero boasts that he is best in one field, he still allows others also their own justified claims in others. This qualification of the boast makes it more plausible and acceptable. This generosity towards contemporaries thus emphasizes the heroes’ underlying competitiveness.” Raphals, 197, citing Nagy, notes that the epithet “best of the Achaeans” (*aristos Akhaiôn*) is used for Achilles, Diomedes, Agamemnon, and Ajax at different times in the poem.

<sup>49</sup> Indeed, wily Odysseus was criticized throughout antiquity for his deviousness, as evinced in his duplicitous framing (not in Homer) of his comrade Palamedes—who was also brilliantly inventive (he created dice games for the Greeks to play in their camps at Troy), and therefore an object of mistrust and envy to the lord of Ithaca—for theft, causing the innocent man’s death by stoning; it was even claimed that Homer was Odysseus’s lover, explaining thereby the poet’s favorable treatment—indeed, a literary apotheosis as the subject of his own epic—of the scurrilous Greek adventurer: see Calasso. Dante, of course, places Ulysses (the Latin form of *Odysseus*) in Hell, in the bolgia, or ditch, of the false councilors, which he shares with Diomedes, “and in their flame they groan for the ambush of the horse which made the gate by

anomaly, a glitch, and Nireus a freak or sport of nature among the hardier, more robust and warlike Grecian nobles. As if to acknowledge this fact, the narrator ties Nireus's beauty to his lack of ships: "a lightweight, trailed by a tiny band," he has a touch of effeminacy, of unmanliness, about him.<sup>50</sup> As with Thersites—the misshapen misanthrope whose desire to end the war and return home occasions an argument during the council of heroes in book 2, and whose bodily deformities are the subject of Homer's most extended physical descriptions of a character:

Here was the ugliest man who ever came to Troy.  
Bandy-legged he was, with one foot clubbed,  
both shoulders humped together, curving over  
his caved-in chest, and bobbling above them  
his skill warped to a point,  
sprouting clumps of scraggly, woolly hair<sup>51</sup>

so Homer focuses a similarly unwarranted level of attention, an overabundance of narrative detail, on Nireus, who occupies only five lines in the *Iliad*, and after whose brief appearance here departs, never to be seen—not even in death, a common fate for many of Homer's minor characters—again.

#### 1.b. "I'm going to make a list": Joe Brainard's *I Remember* and the American Century

If Homer's expansive, oceanic catalogs and lists stand as one pole of the phenomenon, then the work of Joe Brainard, in particular his reminiscence-poem-essay-catalog *I Remember*, stand as

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which the noble seed of the Romans went forth; within it they lament the craft, because of which the dead Deidamia still mourns Achilles, and there for the Palladium they bear the penalty" (Dante, 1.1:274–75 [canto 26, lines 55–63]). Ulysses, then, suffers for the tripartite perfidies of the Trojan Horse, the tricking of Achilles into fighting at Troy, and the theft of Troy's Palladium (a magical statue of the goddess Athena), without which the city lay open to attack.

<sup>50</sup> *Lightweight* is Fagles's translation of Greek *alapadnos* ("easily exhausted, i.e. powerless, feeble") from the verb *alapazo* ("to empty, drain, exhaust," but also, in the transitive sense with a city as its object, to "sack, plunder," as at *Iliad* 2.367: *polin . . . alapaxeis*) underscoring Nireus's effeminacy and thus introducing a delicious bit of verbal irony: Nireus the exhausted besieger, the already-sacked sacker.

<sup>51</sup> Homer, 1991, 106 (2.250–55).

the other: private where Homer is public, personal rather than communal, minutely detailed rather than grandly sweeping, Brainard's tiny, gemlike work charts the other extreme of catalogs and lists—and hence this dissertation. A good description of the book comes from Michael Lally, writing in the *Washington Post Book World*: “*I Remember* is a memoir, a catalogue poem, an underground classic, a well-crafted piece of work, but most of all a total delight. Brainard takes one of the oldest and most familiar of poetic devices, the list (of the Bible, of Whitman, of the Surrealists’ attempt to make it new), and couples it with a mania for trivia more personal than any craze could be, and it works.”<sup>52</sup> Lally’s review highlights a few of the most important aspects of Brainard’s text, its personal origin as a list of things remembered from Brainard’s childhood and later life, a kind of memoir-as-list; its reveling in detail, minutiae, trivia; its lapidary, epigrammatic nature, reminiscent of great literary aphorists such as Martial, Catullus, and Félix Féneon; and its winning left-of-center erraticness, a combination of Brainard’s pack-rat qualities of retention and a wistful tone that prevents the entries from ever becoming too personal, recherché, or precious. If Homer’s *Catalog of the Ships* is a textual reconstruction of the entire Greek mindset, cultural geography, and mentalité ca. 800 BCE, then Brainard’s text functions similarly yet differently: another textual time capsule, this time illuminating, not an entire culture, but the life of a gay American adolescent and man in the middle of the twentieth century.

*I Remember* in its fullest state comprises over a thousand entries, most rather short, only few sentences long—but some, especially a few scattered entries, are entire paragraphs several sentences in length—each a single memory-perception, often accompanied by commentary, dredged up by Brainard from some time in his past. As Ron Padgett notes in *Joe: A Memoir of Joe Brainard*, a memoir of his friendship with Brainard and a great source of information

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<sup>52</sup> 8 February 1976; quoted in Padgett, 233.

pertaining to Brainard's life and work, *I Remember* owes much of its inspiration, especially in terms of form and in the process of its composition, to Brainard's habit of keeping lists, a habit that he shared with many of his New York School friends and that is attested to numerous times throughout Padgett's touching, detailed recollections of his friend and collaborator. For example, in the summer of 1969 Brainard wrote in his diary: "I don't know what I'm going to do with the rest of the day. Probably read some. And roam around a bit. (Outside.) Smoke a lot. And be nervous. . . . I have been thinking a lot about what I want to do this summer. I'm going to make a list:

1. Oil paint
2. Gain weight
3. Exercise
4. Get a good tan
5. Do another issue of *C Comics*
6. Get together a manuscript for Lita Hornick
7. Try to let myself get closer to people
8. Keep this diary"<sup>53</sup>

In a letter later that summer to Padgett, Brainard, vacationing in Vermont, details the dietary regimen that he has imposed in order to achieve the second item on the list above: "I've been eating like a fiend. This is what I had for breakfast this morning.

One glass cranberry juice

One vitamin B12 pill

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<sup>53</sup> Padgett, 138–39.

Two pieces oatmeal toast with honey

One poached egg

One bowl of wheat germ with fresh peaches and cream

Two cups coffee

My poor stomach can't believe it. I think I know what it must be like to be pregnant. I even walk a bit differently."<sup>54</sup> Or consider a similar-yet-different list, one written in 1972 about another set of summer wishes, these so much more restrained and sober than those on the earlier list:

*Vermont 1972*

Stop smoking

No pills

No painting

No writing

Exercise daily

Gain weight

Improve posture

Read science books<sup>55</sup>

Note the abnegatory character of this final list, which begins with a catalog of a series of things to be avoided rather than embraced; note, too, the haunting repetition of several *desiderata* from the 1969 list, whose admonitions to gain weight and exercise have turned up virtually unchanged, subtle monuments to the persistence of habits over time, and also, perhaps, of Brainard's slow,

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 189–90.

inevitable aging. While Brainard expressed that he encountered numerous difficulties writing *I Remember*—writing, for example, in a letter to Tom Clark that he had “practically no memory and so remembering [entries for the book] is like pulling teeth”—it is important to note that catalogs and lists provided him with a ready-to-hand, simple, and intuitive technology for recording his memories when he was able to retrieve them, something he himself noted: “Every now and then, though, when I really get into it, floods of stuff just pour out and shock the you-know-what out of me. But it pours out very crystal clear and orderly.”<sup>56</sup> This crystalline clarity, this order, would have been impossible without the catalog as *I Remember*’s governing architectural principle.

*I Remember* is a catalog of trivia, the never-quite-forgotten yet seldom consciously remembered artifacts of a bourgeois childhood during the American 1950s. Brainard’s miniaturism, his devotion to the barely remembered banal, recalls the joyously trivializing aesthetic of Proust’s Bergotte, who prizes literary works for their incidental, unimportant details, details that are nevertheless precious to the rhapsodic novelist: “Doubtless again to distinguish himself from the previous generation, too fond as it had been of abstractions, of weighty commonplaces, when Bergotte wished to speak favorably of a book, what he would emphasize, what he would quote with approval would always be some scene that furnished the reader with an image, some picture that had no rational meaning. ‘Ah, yes!’ he would exclaim, ‘it’s good! There’s a little girl in an orange shawl. It’s excellent!’ or again, ‘Oh yes, there’s a passage in which there’s a regiment marching along the street; yes, it’s good!’”<sup>57</sup> Thus Brainard notes: “I

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 184–85.

<sup>57</sup> Proust, 1:598. For similar validations of the literarily trivial, see Baker, 33–34: “What once was *Portrait of a Lady* is now for me only a plaid lap-blanket bobbing on the waves; *Anna Karenina* survives as a picnic basket containing a single jar of honey; *Pnin* is a submerged aquamarine bowl . . .”; or Nabokov’s evocation of a minor scene from *Dead Souls* in which an

remember Maria Schell's very wet eyes in *The Brothers Karamazov*.”<sup>58</sup> This overall privileging of the minor, this elevation of the minor to a subject of major interest, is seen at local points in the text as well, as when Brainard speaks of odd, entrancing visual phenomena he would encounter as a child: “I remember visions (when in bed but not asleep yet) of very big objects becoming very small and of very small objects becoming very big.”<sup>59</sup> This change in valuation and size happens throughout *I Remember*, with the Big Thing of 1950s America becoming many Small Things—“I remember ‘Ma and Pa Kettle.’ ‘Dishpan hands.’ Linoleum. Cyclone fences. Shaggy dog stories. Stucco houses. Pen and pencil sets. Tinker Toys. Lincoln Logs. And red blue jeans for girls.”<sup>60</sup>—and numerous Small Things become quite Big Things indeed, as when Brainard realizes that his brother, and, by extension, he himself, has an anus: “I remember seeing my brother bend way over to pull out the bath tub plug naked and realizing for the first time that shit came out of a hole instead of a long slit.”<sup>61</sup> *I Remember* continually offers forth such minor-major moments from Brainard's life, retrieved with the seeming nonchalance with which Brainard would pluck a piece of trash from the street: “Walking down a busy New York City street, he would spy a small piece of paper or some other discarded object he would take home

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anonymous lieutenant, unable to sleep on a summer's night, tries on a pair of riding boots over and over, pacing up and down in his small room: “Thus the chapter ends—and that lieutenant is still trying on his immortal jackboot, and the leather glistens, and the candle burns straight and bright in the only lighted window of a dead town in the depth of a star-dusted night. I know of no more lyrical description of nocturnal quiet than this Rhapsody of the Boots” (Nabokov, 1961, 83). Brainard's memorial excavation of his childhood and adolescence shares this same love of the overlooked mundane, this same commitment to the tiny, and this same ability to see the minute as metonymic for the cosmic.

<sup>58</sup> Brainard, 139. I have unfortunately been unable to consult the 2012 Library of America edition of Brainard's works, edited by Ron Padgett, which as of this writing has not yet been published.

<sup>59</sup> Brainard, 39.

<sup>60</sup> Brainard, 83.

<sup>61</sup> Brainard, 92.

and use in a collage, where it would shine.”<sup>62</sup> Ragpicker of his own memories, Brainard interiorizes Benjamin’s *flâneur*, removing the physical process of *flânerie* to the mental, memorial plane—a hunt through the lost Arcades of a 1940s and ’50s American childhood, a collection of memories of feelings about things, places, and experiences that Brainard witnessed during that time.

*I Remember* is perhaps best experienced “live,” as it were, in the rush of one’s own reading or audition: a literary analysis of its text cannot hope to capture the exuberant, onrushing, one-after-the-other seriality of the text, a kind of perpetual textual present mediating the past, the repeated *I remembers* beating out an incantatory, vatic anaphora.<sup>63</sup> The book is joyously erratic and open-ended for all of its short length, capable of being read slowly, a few items at a time, or all in a rush, page after page; furthermore, the lack of any formal, thematic divisions, or ordering of the material into any recognizable sequential progression, furthers the sense of *I Remember* being somehow large and loose-limbed for all its relatively tiny size, and capable of bearing the multiple readings and associative interpretations and responses of its various audiences. Yet for all its seeming randomness, its glorious refusal to be serious and orderly—a quality and general spirit it shares with so much of the New York School’s work<sup>64</sup>—*I Remember* contains many parts of relative coherence, where Brainard discusses a topic or related topics across multiple entries. Take, for example, Brainard’s memories of riding on buses through the nighttime small towns of midcentury America:

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<sup>62</sup> Ron Padgett, in Brainard, 172.

<sup>63</sup> See Diggory, 71, who notes of anaphora that it is “a form far from new.” Nelson, 100, calls *I Remember* “a litany of memories,” further underscoring the ritualistic tone.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Ashbery’s winning formulation of this spirit in his introduction to Allen’s edition of O’Hara’s *Collected Poems* (O’Hara, viii): “It is not just that it is often aggressive in tone—it simply doesn’t care. A poet who in the academic atmosphere of the late 1940s could begin a poem ‘At night Chinamen jump / On Asia with a thump’ was amusing himself, another highly suspect activity.”

I remember Greyhound buses at night.

I remember wondering what the bus driver is thinking about.

I remember empty towns. Green tinted windows. And neon signs just as they go off.

I remember (I think) lavender-tinted windows on one bus.

I remember tricycles turned over on front lawns. Snowball bushes. And plastic duck families.

I remember glimpses of activity in orange windows at night.

I remember little cows.

I remember that there is always one soldier on every bus.

I remember small ugly modern churches.

I remember that I can never remember how bathroom doors in buses open.

I remember donuts and coffee. Stools. Pasted-over prices. And gray people.

I remember wondering if the person sitting across from me is queer.<sup>65</sup>

*I Remember* so often produces such moments of mingled randomness and order, resolving from the relative chaos of haphazard association into something more clear and strung-together, yet still strikingly (and pleasingly) variegated throughout: the “fine distraction” mentioned by Herrick is a rough analogue to Brainard’s style here, a self-conscious delight in a finely-wrought semblance of nonchalant spontaneity, a primer in New York School *sprezzatura*. Snapshots as brief and affecting as anything out of Walker Evans, Robert Frank, or Lee Friedlander, cut from the same cloth as the roadside poetics of Kerouac and Ginsberg, Brainard’s *I Remember* is nevertheless unique in its precision, its conciseness, and in the music-like effect of its many surprise harmonies and echoes alternating with its repeated dissonances and disruptions: a micro-roman-fleuve, buoyed along on the waters of Brainard’s talismanic anaphora.

Just as often in *I Remember* the lack of obvious association between entries that somehow seem similar beguiles, hinting at hidden, hard-to-discern links that might have prompted Brainard, when writing the entries, to place them together. (The fact of the book’s serial composition, in fits and spurts and extended across several decades, complicates this analysis, as it’s always possible that seemingly connected passages were written with a substantial gap of time intervening.) *I Remember* suggests a continuing and ever-shifting cybernetics of associative memory, with Brainard less a composer or author of each reminiscence than a sturdy helmsman shifting his mental tiller to meet each new shift in the waves of thought. Consider, for example, the following excerpts from the text, which would seem to roughly cohere around themes of food, danger, dismemberment, even death:

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<sup>65</sup> Brainard, 43–44.

I remember miniature loaves of real bread the Bond Bread Company gave you when you went on a tour of their plant.

I remember stories about bodies being chopped up and disposed of in garbage disposals.

I remember stories about razor blades being hidden in apples at Halloween. And pins and needles in popcorn balls.

I remember stories about what goes on in restaurant kitchens. Like spitting in the soup. And jerking off in the salad.

I remember the story about a couple who owned a diner. The husband murdered his wife and ground her up in the hamburger meat. Then one day a man was eating a hamburger at the diner and he came across a piece of her fingernail. That's how the husband got caught.

I remember that Lana Turner was discovered sipping a soda in a drugstore.<sup>66</sup>

From daily bread, bountiful and fresh (“real”), and given on tours as a surprise delight, Brainard moves to chopped-up bodies in garbage disposals, to a clandestine, illicit secreting of razor blades and other sharp implements in food meant for children, and then on to other surreptitious activities involving food (“spitting in the soup . . . jerking off in the salad”), to a murder that failed to remain a secret (again involving food, with a detail Poe or James M. Cain might have relished, the tell-tale fingernail turning up like the proverbial bad penny), to, finally, something else that failed to remain a secret and whose fortuitous discovery similarly involved food: “Lana

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<sup>66</sup> Brainard, 59.

Turner . . . discovered sipping a soda in a drugstore.” Anxiety seethes throughout this mini-annex, from childhood fears of dismembered bodies to the more reasonable, yet still endearingly paranoid, urban legends about food laced with bodily fluids. The passages constitute a mini-catalog of American anxieties concerning abundance, about the hidden dangers and secret costs of midcentury conveniences (garbage disposals, diners), and the possible threats lurking beneath sanitized American holidays (razor blades in Halloween candy). Ostensibly happy memories about fresh loaves of bread and trick-or-treating reveal a disturbing complex of forbidden actions: murder, dismemberment, hurting children, even cannibalism. And at the end—if there is really an end to a sequence imposed by the reader on the entries, of course, if any given collection of entries can constitute, properly speaking, an entity with a thematic unity, a rough sense of a form, center, beginning, middle, and end—is Lana Turner, who was discovered, according to Hollywood legend, at the famous Hollywood hangout for aspiring young actors and actresses, Schwab’s Drug Store.<sup>67</sup> The fright, horror, and uncanny quality of the previous discoveries turn into delight: not a dismembered corpse or piece of a fingernail, but the intact, whole body of a Hollywood sex symbol frozen, like silhouettes on the walls of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, at the moment of impact of the fame that would transform her life forever—and, in so doing, apotheosize her within the memories of millions of fans like Brainard.

If the aggregation of several similar passages is one of the continued small joys of *I Remembered*, then its constant dispersion of similar passages—due, no doubt, to Brainard’s imperfect memory and his fitful, desultory composition of the work over decades—over pages,

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<sup>67</sup> Basinger, 184, notes that this story became “the prototype legend for all movie stars—the unexpected discovery of a youngster sitting in the candy store, or running an elevator, or ushering at a movie house, or driving a truck.” A plethora of sources attest that Schwab’s was not, indeed, the real site of Turner’s discovery: various local drugstores compete—like numerous Greek cities over the title of Homer’s birthplace—for the honor.

its frequent refusal to condense separate memories into a contiguous set, is another of its many pleasures. *I Remember* thus flatters the attentive reader, making its audience an equal partner in the text's seemingly continuous creation and re-creation of the world—Brainard wrote to Anne Waldman that while writing the book “I feel very much like God writing the Bible”<sup>68</sup>—and rewarding with repeated mentions of a subject or memory the reader's own powers of remembrance and retrieval, archiving and analysis. Frequent repeated topics are sex, food, and friends, affectively warm topics to which Brainard seems drawn naturally during his compositional reveries: others are trademarked objects or products, Hollywood and celebrities, advertisements, and songs; movies (books much more rarely, a nice democratic, commonplace touch on the part of the unprepossessing Brainard). Other subjects are more troubling, as Brainard's infrequent, yet wholly striking, divagations into the subject of race:

I remember that “Negro men have giant cocks.”<sup>69</sup>

I remembered “colored town.” (Tulsa.)

I remember that “Negroes who drive around in big shiny Cadillacs usually live in broken-down shacks.”

I remember when Negroes first started moving into white neighborhoods. How everyone got scared because if a Negro moved into your neighborhood the value of your property would go way down.<sup>70</sup>

I remember “nigger babies.” Candy corn. And red hots.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Padgett, 146, who does not cite or date the letter.

<sup>69</sup> Brainard, 35.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

I remember the *very* ornate chrome root rest [of a barbershop]. And the old Negro shoeshine man.<sup>72</sup>

I remember feeling sorry for black people, not because I thought they were persecuted, but because I thought they were ugly.<sup>73</sup>

I remember filling out a form once and not knowing what to put down for “race.”

I remember speculating that probably someday all races would get mixed up into one race.

I remember speculating that probably science would come up with some sort of miracle cream that could bleach skin, and Negroes could become white.<sup>74</sup>

Of course, so little of *I Remember* is thus fraught by thoughts of race, or the consideration (quite different from the tone and imagery of so many contemporary considerations)—he is, after all, remembering youthful prejudices and communal verities, as signified by the repeated use of quotation marks to show the *vox populi* in action—of discrimination and inequality, that it seems almost unfair to gather together passages such as these, and to thus read *I Remember* so drastically against its sunny grain, its overall tone of happy self-regard and satisfied introspection. Yet it is fascinating to see how, like an uninvited guest at the party, race intrudes into Brainard’s excavation of his white middle-class queer origins, how so seemingly tangential a subject—tangential when considered against Brainard’s overwhelming focus on memories relating to his

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

sexuality, friends, possessions, and so on—becomes so central through one’s own act of interpretation and memorial manipulation of Brainard’s text. Even completely happenstance occurrences from one’s own time—like the shooting of five African American men in Tulsa, Oklahoma on 6 April 2012, during the final writing of this introduction—show that many Americans live in a similar “colored town,” a town of segregation and structural oppression like that of Tulsa in the 1950s or, apparently, Tulsa in 2012, and that the prejudices and hatreds of Brainard’s memories are still very much present-day realities. Thus Brainard’s catalog—thus all catalogs—opens itself to multiple readings, misreadings, anti-readings, and the like, can be configured endlessly according to the whims of the reader. Even Homer, as with the case of “lightweight” Nireus, can be etherealized, parodied, lightened from the tone of grim dutiful combat and inescapable death that generally predominates; even Brainard, whose *I Remember* tends toward the lyric, joyous, comic, knowing, exuberant—*light*, in a word—can take an unexpected gravity, a weightiness both personal and historical, when viewed from the right (or wrong) angle.

The five authors looked at in the course of the dissertation proper—James Joyce, James Schuyler, James McCourt, Thomas Pynchon, and Georges Perec—run somewhere, in each his own unique way, between the two theoretical and practical poles suggested by Homer’s and Brainard’s use of catalogs and lists. Joyce and Pynchon unsurprisingly hew closer to Homer’s example, Joyce’s Modernist mythopoesis and formal innovation and Pynchon’s postmodernist encyclopedism and pastiche drawing from the same well as Homer’s epic catalogs: all are titanic in size, all decidedly weighty and serious, all seeking some kind of mainstream engagement with their times, a representativeness and a canonicity that might qualify them—however qualified the term must be—as so-called major works. The avant-garde New York School–influenced poetics

of Schuyler and McCourt tend decidedly toward Brainard's opposite pole: more personal, shorter, more trivial, lighter and more comic, all seeking a sidelong or noncanonical engagement with their periods that might qualify them for another equally qualified term, that of so-called minor works.<sup>75</sup> Perec is an outlier for reasons of language, but otherwise fits with the other, English-language authors, particularly in that he manages to combine both Homer's maximalism and Brainard's minimalism in his work, particularly in the miniature epic *Life, a User's Manual*.

It is to be noted throughout that these two poles are wholly provisional and subjective, matters more of suggestion and tonality in most cases—except, say, in Joyce's outright competition with and transformation of Homer, or Perec's acknowledged borrowing from him, or McCourt's shared Hibernian velleities. As noted above, the five authors are meant more to represent varieties and discontinuities across the twentieth century's use of catalogs and lists, rather than the tidy similarities and geographic and cultural cohesiveness of Belknap's four New Englanders. It is an obvious objection that Joyce and Schuyler have at first blush little to do with each other, and ditto for Pynchon and McCourt, yet it is hoped that nevertheless these five writers fit in their refusing to fit perfectly, and belong together in their not-belonging, thus reflecting the fractures and dislocations of the twentieth-century societies that produced them and which they finally—however jaggedly or distortedly—mirror. All five are ultimately products of my own scholarly whim: simply put, there is space somewhere on my mental bookshelf that is comfortable containing these five together, and there are affinities and traces between them that—while perhaps largely produced from these five having been well-read chapters, as it were, in my *biographia literaria*—cannot finally be said to be *solely* produced from the same. It will

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<sup>75</sup> On the discussion of minor works generally, and the idea of *minor* as denoting not merely a relatively small or unimportant status, but a contested and unstable relationship with the language and culture in which the minor work is produced, see Deleuze and Guattari, 1986.

be this slight small sliver of empirical data, gleaned through a close textual analysis of representative works from each author, that is the ultimate goal of this study.

## 2.a. Joyce's Catalogs: An Anxious Introduction

James Joyce (1882–1941) uses catalogs throughout his fiction, from his collection of short fiction *Dubliners* (1914) to his massive, encyclopedic novels *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). But it would be a mistake to think he confines his use of them to his fiction alone, for throughout his correspondence we find a multitude of catalogs and lists, the majority of them concerning the minute details of his poor finances and daily privations, and functioning to bring to the recipient's mind a portrait of the struggling artist as a young, middle-aged, and elderly man. Joyce's letters about money are highly rhetorical, performative creations, "full of energy and of sedulous detail,"<sup>76</sup> all of them written for a highly specific economic (truly, for Joyce, in the etymological sense of "housekeeping; the management of a house") purpose: to get money from someone, to avoid paying money to someone else, and, above all, to invest these struggles with a pathos befitting that of the Promethean artist-*cum*-hero/victim, a pose adopted by many of Joyce's patron culture figures: Dante the exiled Florentine, Wagner the persevering visionary, and Wilde the self-sacrificial devotee of *ars gratia artis*.<sup>77</sup> Joyce got the catalog habit early, as witnessed by a letter written in Paris to his family in Dublin on 6 December 1902. Joyce had left Dublin only five days earlier in an attempt to escape what he saw as the stifling parochialism of Irish life, as well as his rapidly disintegrating family and his numerous, bitter enmities with other lights of literary Dublin and with various young men of his generation. Joyce would later both glorify and mock this flight, turning it into, respectively, the triumphant finale of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—in which newly-exiled Stephen Dedalus exults "Welcome, O life!" and promises "to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the

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<sup>76</sup> Ellmann, 113. In a similar (indeed, Joycean) vein, Oates, 677, speaks of Joyce's "exhibitionististicity."

<sup>77</sup> See Martin for Joyce's mediation of the artist-hero figure, and for Joyce's fascination with Wagner specifically.

smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race”<sup>78</sup>—and the lacerating introspection of Stephen, returned from Paris and down-and-out in Dublin, in *Ulysses*: “You flew. Whereto? Newhaven-Dieppe, steerage passenger. Paris and back. Lapwing. Icarus. *Pater, ait.* Seabedabbled, fallen, weltering. Lapwing you are. Lapwing be.”<sup>79</sup>

The letter home lacks either the self-aggrandizement or the self-abasement of the fictional versions of Joyce’s flight from Ireland. Instead, we are treated to a mundane, even banal, list of daily expenditures in the Grand Hotel Corneille:

I have bought an alarm-clock (4 francs) to waken me in time in the mornings as the school is some distance away. I had a bath just now (7<sup>1/2</sup>): warm. I can get breakfast for 3d, dejeuner (soup, meat, dessert, coffee) for 8d or 9d and dinner (soup, fish, meat and vegetables, dessert, coffee) for 1<sup>s/-</sup>. But I am obliged to take coffee constantly through the day. Coffee is taken here during the day without milk but with sugar. This I find to my taste as the weather here is very severe, sometimes going down to 7 or 9 degrees below zero. The wind too is very keen but there is neither fog nor rain. . . . I have to get an apron and sleeves and a dissecting case at once if I begin work on Monday, and my money will not be due in Paris from Lloyd’s till Thursday. However I dare say I shall manage. I intend next week to look around for a room at about 7£ or 8£ the year—35<sup>8/-</sup> the three months and engage it from January 1<sup>st</sup>, and my month will be up in the hotel here on January 3<sup>rd</sup> and I think the courses will begin again on January 4<sup>th</sup>. There is magnificent Norman furniture in a shop here—heavy wooden presses with paneled doors—5£ for one about twice as big as your wardrobe and though I cannot buy these yet for my room I shall certainly get them as soon as I can when I have definitely settled myself in Paris for my medical course.<sup>80</sup>

Despite—or rather because of—its sustained attention to quotidian detail, Joyce’s catalog exhibits a wide range of emotion: the resolve of the young medical student who must awaken early to travel “some distance away” to school; the direct sensuousness of “warm” and its

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<sup>78</sup> Joyce, 2003, 275–76.

<sup>79</sup> *Ulysses*, 9.952–54.

<sup>80</sup> Joyce, *Letters*, 2:19–20.

connotations of bodily pleasure, satiety, and security; the anxiety of doing without the necessary “apron and sleeves and a dissecting case,” and the frustration of being late for class, of having to go without necessities; the nervous reckoning of time in the mini-list of important upcoming dates in January; and, finally, the hallucination known to every poor window-shopper, the longed-for commodity that promises to end all pain, here manifested in the glorious apparition of the “magnificent Norman furniture” with “heavy wooden presses with paneled doors,” whose acquisition will help Joyce to become “settled.”<sup>81</sup> This break at the end into the dream-space of a stable, luxurious bourgeois existence—complete with the one-upmanship of “about twice as big as your wardrobe”—recalls Leopold Bloom’s longed-for retirement retreat, “a thatched bungalowshaped 2 storey dwellinghouse of southerly aspect,” known as Flowerville. Bloom’s fantasy future life is a prelapsarian enjoyment of particularly middle-class entertainments, from the tasteful kitsch of the cottage—“tiled kitchen with close range and scullery, lounge hall fitted with linen wallpresses, fumed oak sectional bookcase containing the Encyclopedia Britannica and New Century Dictionary, transverse obsolete medieval and oriental weapons, dinner gong, alabaster lamp, bowl pendant, vulcanite automatic telephone receiver with adjacent directory. . . .”<sup>82</sup>—to the lawn sports and outside recreations—“a tennis and fives court, a shrubbery, a glass summerhouse with tropical palms, equipped in the best botanical manner, a rockery with waterspray, a beehive arranged on humane principles, oval flowerbeds in

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<sup>81</sup> Joyce, of course, got instead a life of never-ending peregrinations and forced moves, so that the list “James Joyce’s Addresses” in *Letters*, 2:lv–lxii, gives no less than 219 separate addresses and locations for the itinerant author, including the amazing figure of ninety-one hotels—such as the Hotel de l’Épée, the Grand Hôtel du Raisin du Bourgogne, the Hôtel de l’Océan, the Hotel d’Europe and the Hotel Europa, the Hôtel Maison Rouge and the Hotel Rose, the Hotel de France et Chateaubriand, the Hôtel Belmont et de Bassano, and the Hôtel du Rhin et de Newhaven, the Hotel Krasnapolsky, the Hôtel de la Paix and the Hotel Terminus—an amazing 41.6% of his total number of abodes, by rough calculation six of his almost fifty-nine years, almost 10% of his life.

<sup>82</sup> *Ulysses*, 17.1521–26.

rectangular grassplots set with eccentric ellipses of scarlet and chrome tulips, blue scillas, crocuses, polyanthus, sweet William, sweet pea, lily of the valley. . . .”<sup>83</sup>—to Bloom’s vision of his natty, spry gentleman-farmer future self “[i]n loose allwool garments with Harris tweed cap, price 8/6, and useful garden boots with elastic gussets and wateringcan, planting aligned young firtrees, syringing, pruning, staking, sowing hayseed, trundling a weedladen wheelbarrow without excessive fatigue at sunset amid the scent of newmown hay, ameliorating the soil, multiplying wisdom, achieving longevity.”<sup>84</sup> Bloom Kadmon’s longevity is a textual one in addition to one of time; the multiple catalogs allow for successive distensions of the text, several nodal or “cluster” points in which the enumeration of objects can proliferate unhindered by the constrictions of realistic narrative.

The epistolary catalogs of Joyce at twenty hardly match in richness the novelistic catalogs of *Ulysses*, published when Joyce was forty; moreover, the irenic temper of Bloom’s ruminations is quite lacking from the anxious Paris letter. Yet the two deal with the same material, the harsh realities of the everyday and the soothing stuff of dreams: in both there is the energy that Ellmann noticed, an emotional investment in the counting and piling up that goes beyond a merely dispassionate reckoning of one’s assets. In both, too, there is a reified, uncanny note, with the objects almost taking on an inner life of their own, as Marx explains in his concept of commodity fetishism: “the fantastic form of a relation between things. . . . [T]he products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 1552–57. Note among the inset mini-catalog of flowers the name *polyanthus* (“many-flowered”), a possible self-reflexive nod to the profusion of objects in this ironic anthology of bourgeois fashion; *sweet William* is, of course, a reference to the discussion of Shakespeare in the National Library earlier in the day, during which Stephen mentions “the works of sweet William” (9.899).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 17.1582–87.

relations both with each other and with the human race.”<sup>85</sup> We see a similar anxiety in another letter home, written 26 February 1903 after the triumphant breaking of a days-long fast:

Dear Pappie I received your telegraph order on Tuesday afternoon and dined. As it was the evening of the carnival, I allowed myself some luxuries—a cigar, confetti to throw, and a supper. I bought a stove, a saucepan, a plate, a cup, a saucer, a knife, a fork, a small spoon, a big spoon, a bowl, salt, sugar, figs, macaroni, cocoa &c and got my linen from the laundry. I now try to do my own cooking. For instance last night for dinner I had two hard-boiled eggs (these are sold here hard-boiled during Lent in red shells) bread and butter, macaroni; a few figs and a cup of cocoa. Today for dejeuner I had some cold ham, bread and butter, Swiss cream with sugar; for dinner I had two poached eggs and Vienna bread, macaroni and milk, a cup of cocoa and a few figs. On Sunday for dinner I shall make a mutton stew—mutton, a few potatoes, mushrooms and lentils, with cocoa and biscuits after. Tomorrow (for dejeuner) I shall finish my ham with bread and butter, Swiss cream and sugar, and finish my figs. I think I shall reduce my expenses in this way. Anyhow I hope I shall not fall asleep now as I used dreaming of rice-pudding, which for one who is fasting is not a nice dream. I am sorry to say that after my dinner on Tuesday I became very ill and at night I had a fit of vomiting. I felt very bad the whole of the following day but I am better today except for attacks of neuralgia—induced, I believe, by my constant periods of fasting.<sup>86</sup>

Here the tone begins in a strikingly different form than that of the earlier letter: it is cheerful, festive, celebratory. Joyce’s catalogs of his shopping spree perform the triple task of assuring his family of his safety, of giving thanks for the money provided by the “telegraph order,” and to recreate, for the absent familial audience, the pleasures this money bought. Joyce was a tireless

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<sup>85</sup> Marx, 1990, 1.164–65.

<sup>86</sup> *Letters*, 2:30–31. Five days earlier Joyce had begun a letter to his mother with the arresting “Your order for 3s/4d Tuesday last was very welcome as I had been without food for 42 hours (forty-two). Today I am twenty hours without food” (2:29). Joyce’s habit in the letters of detailing what he has bought with someone else’s money, and then asking them for more, never left him: see *Letters*, 2:213, where he tells Stanislaus on 11 February 1907 “I have new hat and boots and vests and socks and a Danish Book and Georgie [Joyce’s son Giorgio] has a new coat and hat and I gave a dinner. Now when you get this you will have to send me 10 crowns.”

self-promoter, and while his gratitude is evident in the passage above, so too is a sense—discernible in “I allowed myself some luxuries,” the carnival confetti, the Swiss cream—that Joyce is not entirely unhappy to detail to his family the luxuries of his (admittedly meager) new diet, for which the Joyce family, completely broke at the time of Joyce’s trip, provided the money. The tone shifts dramatically at the end of the letter, as Joyce plans, without much heart, to keep to his budget, and hopes that he won’t dream at night of rice-pudding: a sad, wistful note, with the ghostly pudding hovering in the young man’s imagination like some cloudy, obscure symbol of unattainable desire—an alimentary commodity fetish. The “fit of vomiting” is a moment of complete abjection, Joyce mentioning it—“I am sorry to say”—guiltily, penitently, sorrowing over his wasting of his dearly-bought food as if confessing some secret crime.<sup>87</sup> It is a moment of bodily intimacy, of emotional frankness: what Bloom, feeling the shame of Molly’s infidelity with Blazes Boylan, describes simply as “Tell me all.”<sup>88</sup> Joyce’s textual account of his vomiting ironically mirrors the letter’s own torrid logorrhea, the text’s copious flow of objects

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<sup>87</sup> Vomit, like most bodily excretions, appears throughout Joyce’s fiction, including the cancer-ridden May Dedalus’ “fits of loud groaning vomiting” (*Ulysses* 1.110), Mulligan’s portrait of Stephen as drunken Prince Hal—“O, the night in the Camden hall when the daughters of Erin had to lift their skirts to step over you as you lay in your mulberrycoloured, multicoloured, multitudinous vomit!” (9.1192–94)—and the public barfing of one of the drinking party at the end of the “Oxen of the Sun” episode: “Ware hawks for the chap puking. Unwell in his abominable regions. Yooka. Night. Mona, my throe love. Yook. Mona, my own love. Ook” (14.1566–68). Ellmann—who speaks euphemistically of Joyce’s “regard for alcohol” (7) and manages, incredibly, to say of the alcoholic Joyce “He drank with a nice combination of purpose and relaxation . . . storing up what he needed for his writing. . . . He engaged in excess with considerable prudence” (680)—notes of Joyce’s drinking, “His capacity for alcohol was small, and he was prone to drunken collapses. All releases from excessive consciousness attracted him.” He quotes in support an epiphany of Joyce’s preserved in Stanislaus Joyce’s *My Brother’s Keeper* that, despite crying eagles and writhing loins, seems remarkably like a textual enactment of the act of vomiting: “What moves upon me from the darkness subtle and murmurous as a flood, passionate and fierce with an indecent movement of the loins? What leaps, crying in answer, out of me, as an eagle to eagle in mid air, crying to overcome, crying for an iniquitous abandonment?” (132).

<sup>88</sup> *Ulysses*, 8.633.

blocked by an account of uninhibited, unstoppable bodily release. Joyce's vomiting also provides a moment of narrative closure—of catharsis, literally in Aristotle's sense in the *Poetics* of “a purgation of pity and fear,” the Greek word *katharsis* having the sense of both a “cleansing from guilt or defilement, purification” and, more directly here, of the “clearing off of moribund humors . . . evacuation, whether natural or by the use of medicines.”<sup>89</sup> While the letter's close reintroduces tones of doubt and uneasiness with the “attacks of neuralgia” and the ever-present recollection and future threat of “my constant periods of fasting,” Joyce's epistolary narrative of anxiety and desire, of fasting and feasting, reaches a moment of balance, its conflicting emotions—of rebellion and nostalgia, fear and exultation, uncertainty and determination—temporarily held in check.

The personal and familial anxieties felt in Joyce's epistolary catalogs are also found in his fictional ones. Indeed, Joyce's entire project—his High Modernist literary techniques; his embattled stance toward the Western canon, which he plundered and slavishly imitated, and which he both reviled and revered; his obsessive piling up of quotations, bits of song, thoughts, which he ruefully described on 24 June 1921 (less than a year away from finishing *Ulysses*) as “pebbles and rubbish and broken matches and bits of glass picked up ‘most everywhere’<sup>90</sup>—manifests an anxiety that things not be lost, and a restless lexical acquisitiveness that hoards memories and experience against oncoming death and dissolution. Here is a moment of familial

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<sup>89</sup> Liddell Scott.

<sup>90</sup> *Selected Letters*, 281. Cf. Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, 63 (1.5.95–100), servant Humphrey Wasp's put-down of his master Bartholomew Cokes' obsession with the Fair: “He that had the means to travel your head, now, should meet finer sights than any are i' the Fair, and make a finer voyage on 't, to see it all hung with cockleshells, pebbles, fine wheat-straws, and here and there a chicken's feather and a cobweb.” Joyce assiduously studied Jonson's poems and plays while in Paris (Ellmann, 120, 127); J. M. Synge reported to Lady Gregory in a letter of 26 March 1903, “[Joyce] seems to be pretty badly off, and is wandering around Paris rather unbrushed and rather indolent, spending his studious moments in the National Library reading Ben Jonson” (ibid., 125).

anxiety from *Ulysses*, as Stephen, prompted by Bloom's blasé suggestion that he return home to his family, remembers

his family hearth the last time he saw it with his sister Dilly sitting by the ingle, her hair hanging down, waiting for some weak Trinidad shell cocoa that was in the sootcoated kettle to be done so that she and he could drink it with the oatmealwater for milk after the Friday herrings they had eaten at two a penny with an egg apiece for Maggy, Boody and Katey, the cat meanwhile under the mangle devouring a mess of eggshells and charred fish heads and bones on a square of brown paper, in accordance with the third precept of the church to fast and abstain on the days commanded, it being quarter tense or if not, ember days or something like that.<sup>91</sup>

Joyce again provides a list of domestic miseries, each sad detail of the sordid Dedalus family's home life emerging from the wandering hypotaxis of Stephen's free-association. The weak cocoa, the "sootcoated" kettle, the substitution of "oatmealwater" for milk, the cat's "mess of eggshells and charred fish heads and bones" all underline the family's grinding poverty, the combined jejuneness of the family's foodstuffs forming a brief catalog of malnutrition. Nor are they alone in their sorrow, as Bloom's far-ranging thoughts on the briefness of human life and the cyclical alternation of human history, indicate:

Cityful passing away, other cityful coming, passing away too: other coming on, passing on. Houses, lines of houses, streets, miles of pavements, piledup bricks, stones. Changing hands. . . . Piled up in cities, worn away age after age. Pyramids in sand. Built on bread and onions. Slaves Chinese wall. Babylon. Big stones left. Round towers. Rest rubble, sprawling suburbs, jerrybuilt. Kerwan's mushroom houses built of breeze. Shelter, for the night.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *Ulysses*, 16.269–78.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.484–86, 489–92.

Here Joyce's paratactic stacking of independent clauses mirrors the building up of human civilization from the first, primitive habitations, to the great monuments of cruel empires—the pyramids, Babylon, the Great Wall of China—and ending with “sprawling suburbs, jerrybuilt,” the postindustrial shantytowns and ghettos of today. Bloom's reverie is a macrocosmic version of Stephen's familial memory, a transhistorical view of futile struggling against inevitable desolation that anticipates the work of W. G. Sebald and Roberto Bolaño.<sup>93</sup> Don Gifford notes that “Kerwan's mushroom houses” is an actual reference to Dublin history: “Michael Kirwan (not Kerwan) was a Dublin building contractor who built low-cost housing . . . in the area just east of Phoenix Park in western Dublin.”<sup>94</sup> *Mushroom*, of course, suggests the ephemerality, the transitoriness of these buildings: they are constructions of a day, “built of breeze,” and just as quickly blown to the four winds. We have thus moved from the domestic economy of the Dedalus clan to the national and historical economies of Ireland and the world, to end up at a cosmic economy of energy and entropy, pitilessly ruled by the laws of thermodynamics as the planets are ruled by Newtonian physics in Bloom's cosmological speculations: “Gasballs spinning about, crossing each other, passing. Same old dingdong always. Gas: then solid: then world: then cold: the dead shell drifting around, frozen rock.”<sup>95</sup> Joyce's catalogs, then, embrace both the minute and the vast, much as Bloom, listening to Stephen depart his back garden on the morning of 17 June 1904, hears “[t]he double reverberation of retreating feet on the heavenborn earth, the double vibration of a jew's harp in the resonant lane,” and *feels* “[t]he cold of

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<sup>93</sup> Cf. Hofheinz, 41: “*Ulysses* anticipates the midden-heap of *Finnegans Wake* by suggesting that history is an enormous mass of debris, an inertial mass of cultural and psychological garbage that clutters and obstructs the creative process of living human minds and hearts.” Joyce in this respect anticipates Sebald's dominant motif of historical, cultural, and, indeed, cosmic wreckage, seen throughout his writing and most distinct in his masterpiece, *The Rings of Saturn*; or Bolaño's apocalyptic landfill-cities and *maquiladoras* in his labyrinthine *2666*.

<sup>94</sup> Gifford and Seidman, 171–72.

<sup>95</sup> *Ulysses*, 8.581–83.

interstellar space, thousands of degrees below freezing point or the absolute zero of Fahrenheit, Centigrade or Réamur.”<sup>96</sup> The anxious lists try to make intelligible two extremes of the spectrum of human experience: the chaotic, quotidian everyday, and the numbing, “spectral”<sup>97</sup> immensity of the infinite.

## 2.b. “many names at disjointed times”: Joyce’s Lists of Names

One of the most common types of Joyce’s catalogs, and the subject of much of this chapter, is the list of names. Joyce’s fiction is festooned with names: a writer in the spirit of Rabelais and Shakespeare, Joyce throngs his works with characters from all walks of life, representing most of the various stations of *la comédie humaine*. Names act often as a self-reflexive window into the catalogic energies of the text itself, as when Myles Crawford, editor of the Dublin newspaper *Evening Telegraph*, exhorts Stephen to write a book that will encompass modern Irish life in all its tawdry comic glory, to “Give them something with a bite in it. Put us all into it, damn its soul. Father, Son and Holy Ghost and Jakes McCarthy.”<sup>98</sup> While small, this mini-catalog effectively encapsulates *Ulysses* as a whole: family, literature (*Hamlet*, for example, one of *Ulysses*’ frequent literary touchstones), religion, and Dublin’s history, people, and life, ventriloquized later in the newspaper episode as “DEAR DIRTY DUBLIN,”<sup>99</sup> and here typified by “Jakes McCarthy.” But Joyce tends much more to the use of mega-catalogs—huge, interminably long lists; specifically, here, of names—as in the following parody in the “Cyclops” episode, in which Bloom quarrels with a violently drunk Irish hyperpatriot, known as the Citizen, over Irish

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.1243–44, 1246–47.

<sup>97</sup> *Letters*, 3:48 (3 September 1921): Joyce uses the word to describe the entire episode of “Ithaca.”

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.621–22.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 921.

nationalism and Irish worries about deforestation.<sup>100</sup> Brigitte L. Sandquist provides an overview of the problematics posed by the “Cyclops” episode in her review of the monstrous chapter and its critics:

[T]he question of “Cyclops” might be stated thus: what are we to do with the diverse and massive catalogues, lists, and interpolations that interrupt the first person narrative that recounts the dialogue in Kiernan’s pub, and what is their function? The narrative seems unable to incorporate these catalogues, just as the Cyclops in Homer’s *Odyssey* vomits “gobs of human meat,” the undigested remains of some of Odysseus’s companions. Many critics view the obsessive listing and cataloguing of the episode as simply another demonstration of Joyce’s stylistic gymnastics, another example of giddy encyclopedism. The catalogues are seen as either rhetorical inflation or as blocks in the narrative economy, easily detachable units, non-narrative logjams in the progress of the “real story.” Indeed, it seems almost a function of the catalogues themselves (which contain so much untheorized residue) that they go untheorized in the criticism.<sup>101</sup>

Sandquist’s valuable intervention into this debate is to resist “the privileging of narrative or story line,” the traditional critical assumption “that the catalogues have little or no rhetorical function or performance in the text,” and to instead “show that the catalogues in general have a dynamic and performative function in ‘Cyclops.’”<sup>102</sup> As Sandquist’s work has greatly informed this study, both in this chapter and in general, her reading of the “Cyclops” episode is worth quoting at length, as in her nuanced description of the performativity she finds in Joyce’s catalogs:

The interpolations and catalogues in “Cyclops” disturb, jar, block, and check any sense we may have of a continuous, cohesive, unified narrative thread. They remind us that we expect narrative continuity and a single, homogenous voice. . . . To put it another way, the catalogue splits both the *vision* and the *subjectivity* of

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<sup>100</sup> Hofheinz, 42–43, calls this episode “one of [Joyce’s] most trenchant attacks on Irish nationalism . . . a set of fierce satires on Irish nationalist themes that measure the distance between the Irish national behavior and its ideal but garbled justifications.”

<sup>101</sup> Sandquist, 195. Another early, valuable look at Joyce’s “Cyclops” catalogs is Senn.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 195–96.

the narrative. It shatters whatever illusion we may have of a single, unified narrative perspective, reminding us that a coherent, seamless, unified narrative is *constructed*, not natural. The multiperspectival mode of seeing that this move implies is the visual analogue of Joyce's heteroglossia and heterogeneity of discourses.<sup>103</sup>

Following Sandquist's lead, this chapter will read the catalogs of "Cyclops" with an eye toward their performativity, style, and rhetoric, as well as with attention toward their metafictional, metanarrative qualities.

The Citizen begins his abuse of Bloom with a catalog of his own, an *ubi sunt* longing for Ireland's vanished glories: "Where are the Greek merchants that came through the pillars of Hercules, the Gibraltar now grabbed by the foe of mankind, with gold and Tyrian purple to sell at Wexford at the fair of Carmen? Read Tacitus and Ptolemy, even Giraldus Cambrensis. Wine, peltries, Connemara marble, silver from Tipperary, second to none, our farfamed horses even today, the Irish hobbies, with king Philip of Spain offering to pay customs duties for the right to fish in our waters."<sup>104</sup> The Citizen's lament comes equipped with a handy mini-catalog of textual

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 200–01: cf. Jackson, 64: "Certainly [the catalogs'] presence breaks up the convention of reading/telling and disorients the reader's subjective positions with respect to narrative itself." Sandquist, 205–06, also has important words to the would-be scholar of Joyce's catalogs: "One of the challenges that the episode poses is how to read or listen to the catalogues without merely reproducing another list. Indeed, the logic and structure of the catalogue, which seem to prompt persistent parataxis and endless enumeration, continue in the criticism in dizzying, cyclic proportions, threatening to exhaust if not paralyze the critic who attempts to reference and cross-reference every item in a given list. . . . Just as the critics who proceed 'catalogically' attempt to totalize the text by accounting for all of the elements in the catalogues, readers focusing on the narrative tend to be blind to the performativity of the catalogues, excising them in order to see the episode as a relatively seamless and coherent political statement or critique." The need to avoid both the Scylla of endless listing and the Charybdis of omission has haunted the author throughout this work.

<sup>104</sup> *Ulysses*, 12.1248–54. The fading of imperial power and the inevitability of *translatio imperii et studii* from a declining empire to a vigorous one are themes evoked elsewhere in *Ulysses*: see, for example, Professor MacHugh's stirring recitation from memory of John F. Taylor's speech

authorities, solid historical references (he hopes)<sup>105</sup> for the lost treasures that tie them securely to a verifiable historical record. Another drinker at the bar, John Wyse Nolan, fears that Ireland will soon be as “treeless as Portugal,” and mentions that “Larches, firs, all the trees of the conifer family are going fast.”<sup>106</sup> The text then launches into one of the grotesque passages of “gigantism”—Joyce’s term in the Gilbert schema for the stylistic technique he uses in this episode—and gives a fictitious, parodic report of a grand society wedding attended solely by women (nymphs? hamadryads?) bearing arboreal names:

The fashionable international world attended *en masse* this afternoon at the wedding of the chevalier Jean Wyse de Neaulan, grand high chief ranger of the Irish National Foresters, with Miss Fir Conifer of Pine Valley. Lady Sylvester Elmshade, Mrs Barbara Lovebirch, Mrs Poll Ash, Mrs Holly Hazeleyes, Miss Daphne Bays, Miss Dorothy Canebrake, Mrs Clyde Twelvetrees, Mrs Rowan Greene, Mrs Helen Vinegadding, Miss Virginia Creeper, Miss Gladys Beech, Miss Olive Garth, Miss Blanche Maple, Mrs Maud Mahogany, Miss Myra Myrtle, Miss Priscilla Elderflower, Miss Bee Honeysuckle, Miss Grace Poplar, Miss O Mimosa San, Miss Rachel Cedarfrond, the Misses Lilian and Viola Lilac, Miss Timidity Aspenall, Mrs Kitty Dewey-Mosse, Miss May Hawthorne, Mrs Gloriana Palme, Mrs Liana Forrest, Mrs Arabella Blackwood and Mrs Norma Holyoake of Oakholme Regis graced the ceremony by their presence.<sup>107</sup>

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on Irish nationalism, which casts Ireland’s struggles for political independence as the travails of the Israelites under the Egyptians (7.828–69), and his self-satisfied gloss on the same to Stephen: “That is fine, isn’t it? It has the prophetic vision. *Fuit Ilium!* The sack of windy Troy. Kingdoms of this world. The masters of the Mediterranean are fellaheen today” (909–11).

<sup>105</sup> His character seems unlikely to have read them, and here one suspects that Joyce the obsessive bibliophile, forever shoving bits of bookish wisdom into the mouths of his characters, rears his head. For Joyce’s use of Irish history and historiography, see Hofheinz, 69: “Joyce’s use of Irish historical writing is hard to quantify . . . fragmentary and facile.” As Bulson, 94, notes, “[T]he Irish place-names are imbued with sacred connotations upon which the citizen’s nationalist rhetoric depends his first-hand experience with these sites is less significant than the exaggerated geographical list he has learned to recite.”

<sup>106</sup> *Ulysses*, 12.1258, 1259–60.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 1266–79.

What begins as a somewhat facile parody of Irish Revival hopes and aspirations becomes, through the narrative suspension caused by the additive piling-on of name after name, an enchanted moment, as strict narrative logic gives way to the gentler, dreamier logics of association and combination. As so often in the self-referential textual web of *Ulysses*, some of the names in the list above resonate elsewhere in the book: thus we find, for example, Helen Vinegadding in the list above, and the following in the “Oxen of the Sun” episode: “[Stephen] encircled his gadding hair with a coronal of vineleaves”;<sup>108</sup> to take another example, the list gives a Miss Priscilla Elderflower, which recalls Bloom’s memories of bathing his daughter Milly: “American soap I bought: elderflower”;<sup>109</sup> or, finally, Arabella Blackwood shares a surname with two of Garrett Deasy’s relations, sir John Blackwood and Mr Henry Blackwood Price.<sup>110</sup> But these are faint echoes at best, undetectable but for the chance recollections of a trivia-oriented mind, and the more synoptic ministrations of Steppe and Gabler’s *Handlist*.<sup>111</sup> What is much more striking about the names above is their punning: Daphne Bays recalls Ovid’s myth of Apollo and Daphne; Virginia Creeper is *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*, or American Ivy, a sturdy vine native to North America; Timidity Aspenall jokes on the proverbial shaking, as if in fear, of the aspen; and so on. By the canons of nineteenth-century Realism and Naturalism, there is absolutely no reason for this type of (admittedly puerile) humor. It is Joyce’s stylistic perversity that makes this catalog—digressive, indulgent, unnecessary—possible, that swells a moment’s fancy into a roster of thirty young women, none of whom reveal more than their names, and none of whom appear, in *Ulysses* at least, ever again.

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.1116–17.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.172.

<sup>110</sup> *Ulysses*, 2.279, 334. Benstock and Benstock, 218, note other humorous puns and correspondences.

<sup>111</sup> Steppe and Gabler, in this critic’s opinion the one truly indispensable scholarly work devoted to Joyce.

In the “Cyclops” episode there are many other gigantic catalogs like as the one above. Indeed, the chapter is so full of such catalogs, digressive lists, tricks, and the like, that David Hayman, echoing other critics, has written, “The collision of forms in ‘Cyclops’ introduces a final discontinuity unmatched in serious literature. On the surface, this chapter is farcical, filled with disruption and irreverence that derive from the narrative voice and combine with the seemingly gratuitous use of parodic asides. Together they turn a humdrum incident into a slapstick . . . the context into a community of outcasts.”<sup>112</sup> For example, in contrast with the verdant, tender femininity of the list of *jeunes filles en fleurs* above, we have the ekphrasis of the Citizen-Cyclops’ “girdle,” from which hang a number of stones on which “were graven with rude yet striking art the tribal images of many Irish heroes and heroines of antiquity, Cuchulin, Conn of hundred battles, Niall of nine hostages, Brian of Kincora, the ardri Malachi, Art MacMurragh, Shane O’Neill, Father John Murphy, Owen Roe, Patrick Sarsfield, Red Hugh O’Donnell, Red Jim MacDermott, Soggarth Eoghan O’Growney, Michael Dwyer, Francy Higgins, Henry Joy M’Cracken. . . .”<sup>113</sup> So far, so good: the list renders up acceptably mythic and historical Irish names, stretching from the mists of antiquity (the arch-hero Cuchulin) to Joyce’s contemporary Father Eugene (“Soggarth Eoghan”) O’Growney, professor of Irish at Maynooth and editor of the *Gaelic Journal*.<sup>114</sup> When the stray historical fact jars with the impressive unfurling of this banner of names—as with Red Jim MacDermott, who, far from being an Irish hero, actually betrayed two of his Fenian brothers, Michael Davitt and O’Donovan

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<sup>112</sup> Hayman, 1985, 165–66.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.175–80.

<sup>114</sup> Gifford, 321. Writing on *Finnegans Wake*, but using language that also applies to *Ulysses* and its catalogs, McCarthy, 415, notes that “the catalogues serve as motivistic rubbish-heaps . . . as such, they are convenient places for lumping together motifs, both external (allusive) and internal (non-allusive).

Rossa<sup>115</sup>—it does not do so on a stylistic level: that is, Red Jim MacDermott’s perfidy, if known to the reader, does not grate against the impressively Hibernian sonority of his name.<sup>116</sup> As it continues, however, wholly inapposite names erupt into the catalog, and the smooth surface of Gaelic cognomens is troubled by names both foreign and fantastic:

Goliath, Horace Wheatley, Thomas Conneff, Peg Woffington, the Village Blacksmith, Captain Moonlight, Captain Boycott, Dante Alighieri, Christopher Columbus, S. Fursa, S. Brendan, Marshal MacMahon, Charlemagene, Theobald Wolfe Tone, the Mother of the Maccabees, the Last of the Mohicans, the Rose of Castile, the Man for Galway, The Man that Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo, The Man in the Gap, The Woman Who Didn’t, Benjamin Franklin, Napoleon Bonaparte, John L. Sullivan, Cleopatra, Savourneen Deelish, Julius Caesar, Paracelsus, sir Thomas Lipton, William Tell, Michelangelo Hayes, Muhammad, the Bride of Lammermoor, Peter the Hermit, Peter the Packer, Dark Rosaleen, Patrick W. Shakespeare, Brian Confucius, Murtagh Gutenberg. . . .<sup>117</sup>

Historical personages remain, yet they are overwhelmed by the influx of purely fictional characters such as Goliath (another giant), Captain Moonlight, and the Last of the Mohicans; impossibly legendary greats, such as Caesar and Cleopatra, Dante and Muhammad, also throng the scene. As Shari and Bernard Benstock note, “Representing various countries, professions, centuries, and marks of distinction, [the cataloged characters] bear little resemblance to ancient Irish heroes. . . . In their own way, however, such casual groupings in themselves form a pattern, a sequence of non-sequiturs that follows the earlier techniques of sudden disruptions, ironic

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. Stephen’s nurse Dante Riordan carries a maroon-backed brush in Davitt’s memory: see *Ulysses*, 17.507–08.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Bazargan, 753–54: “The power of such lists derives also from their sheer mass which can impose on the observer a state of submission and intellectual abandon . . . that blurs all distinctions. . . . [L]ong lists, in their amassing of names and alleged facts, acquire their supremacy by way of subjugating the observer’s desire to check the accuracy of the catalogue.” Paraphrasing Horace’s *quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus*, we might note, following Bazargan, that “often good Joyce nods,” and we nod with him.

<sup>117</sup> *Ulysses*, 12.181–91.

juxtapositions, and meaningless couplings.”<sup>118</sup> Instead of the roughly historical Irish lineage stretching from Cuchulin to the modern day, we are given a hodgepodge genealogy formed from wildly different men and women. This heteroclitite mixing is exemplified in the last three names in the excerpt above: the first names *Patrick*, *Brian*, and *Murtagh* are all familiar Irish given names, while the surnames are all borrowed from foreign worthies and their outstanding achievements, individual and collective: *Shakespeare* (England, literature), *Confucius* (China, philosophy), *Gutenberg* (Germany, technology). With these bastard names Joyce slyly pokes fun at Irish chauvinism and pretensions to cultural supremacy: the distinctive glories of other cultures are tamed, domesticated, naturalized, are seen as always already Irish.<sup>119</sup> What Bloom, later, will promise in the New Bloomusalem—“Union of all, jew, moslem and gentile”—is here made tantalizingly present.

The catalog hurtles toward its close with the same onrushing catholicity; having followed it thus far, it would be a shame not to see it end:

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<sup>118</sup> Benstock and Benstock, 221. See especially, *ibid.*, 217–28, “The Joycean Method of Cataloguing,” printed as an appendix to the book.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. the Citizen’s rant about the “syphilisation” of the English: “No music and no art and no literature worthy of the name. Any civilization they have they stole from us” (12.1199–1200). See also Mulligan’s mocking appraisal of the English Bard: “Shakespeare? . . . I seem to know the name. . . . To be sure. . . . The chap that writes like Syngé” (9.508, 510–11). For the Citizen’s *Irland über Alles* rant and its origin in this metastasized, cancerous vision of Irishness, see Schneidau, 99, who draws an example from the Mycenaean Linear B texts to discuss Joyce’s “Cyclops” catalogs: “That the Citizen should derive evidence for a political diatribe by reading such a list is both delicious and an oblique comment by Joyce on how we can interpret apparently pointless verbal material. Recent scholarly discoveries bear him out with intriguing parallels: both the Linear B texts and the Ebla tablets reveal surprising information though they are almost entirely lists of small commercial transactions. For instance, the Linear B lists of shepherds’ names, some of which are Greek, make the important historical point that the Greek conquerors of Crete did not impose themselves as an aristocracy but took occupations in all levels of society. Joyce’s lists are much funnier, but can be equally revealing of the conceptual strands in the Irish psyche as well as of the possibilities of lists, as in newspapers, containing hidden patterns of information that the compilers never intended to put there.” Thus the incongruities and oddities of Joyce’s monstrous lists reveal the gaps and problematics inherent in any stable, monist conception of “Irishness.”

Patricio Velasquez, Captain Nemo, Tristan and Isolde, the first Prince of Wales, Thomas Cook and Son, the Bold Soldier Boy, Arrah na Pogue, Dick Turpin, Ludwig Beethoven, the Colleen Bawn, Waddler Healy, Angus the Culdee, Dolly Mount, Sidney Parade, Ben Howth, Valentine Greatrakes, Adam and Eve, Arthur Wellesley, Boss Croker, Herodotus, Jack the Giantkiller, Gautama Buddha, Lady Godiva, The Lily of Killarney, Balor of the Evil Eye, the Queen of Sheba, Acky Nagle, Joe Nagle, Alessandro Volta, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, Don Philip O'Sullivan Beare.<sup>120</sup>

Not only the vast scope of the names, but also the odd, inchoate mix of important and unimportant, symbolic and merely silly, names, creates a hermeneutic challenge: Teutonic genius Beethoven seems simply out of place here, hijacked forcibly by the jingoistic list's centripetal, self-aggrandizing power. Nemo, on the other hand, recalls us to the ever-present *Odyssey*-theme: he is not only Verne's fabulous voyager but also Nobody, or No-one (Latin *nemo*), the pseudonym Odysseus adopts when trying to fool the Cyclops.<sup>121</sup> Thus the list becomes self-consuming in the very act of reaching toward cosmic significance: Verne leads to Odysseus leads to nobody at all, much as the welter of names in Joyce's catalog leaves us, paradoxically, with no names, with a revulsion for names and their intractable opacity. Other names in the catalog's end have the all-in-one polysemy of Nemo: Adam and Eve, the parents of all humanity; Herodotus, the Father of History and, like Joyce, the creator of a vast, sprawling "chaffering allincluding farraginous chronicle,"<sup>122</sup> the *Histories*; Gautama Buddha, who sat under the Bodhi tree and gained knowledge of all his previous incarnations. But cheek-by-jowl with these illustrious men are the Nagle brothers, Acky and Joe, two Dublin publicans:<sup>123</sup> we are never allowed a moment

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 12.191–99.

<sup>121</sup> Gifford, 324; Homer, 1996, 222–23 (9.404–11). The Greek word Odysseus uses is *outis*.

<sup>122</sup> *Ulysses* 14.1412.

<sup>123</sup> Gifford, 326.

of homogeneity or unity, save that of the general drift toward Irishness, and that provided by Joyce's all-pervasive stylistic hijinks.

Catalogs of names such as the one analyzed above abound throughout *Ulysses*. As one would imagine, there is a particularly high concentration of catalogs of this type in the “Cyclops” episode, where the grotesqueness of the various parodies calls forth literally hundreds of names in lists, like so many gargoyles adorning the façade of a gothic cathedral: as John Gordon writes, “the turgid catalogues and parodies of ‘Cyclops’ . . . exemplify what can happen when words take on an explosive life of their own.”<sup>124</sup> There is the faux-description of a “viceregal houseparty,” through which Joyce’s thoroughly undergraduate wit parades a series of outrageously fake non-English names—such as “Ali Baba Backsheesh Rahat Lokum Effendi,” “Señor Hidalgo Caballero Don Peadillo y Palabras y Paternoster de la Malora de la Malaria,” and, what must be certainly the longest name in *Ulysses*, “Nationalgymnasiummuseumsanatoriumandsuspensoriumsordinaryprivat-docentgeneralhistoryspecialprofessordoctor Kriegfried Ueberallgemein”<sup>125</sup>—all of which are broad racial and cultural caricatures. During a long discussion of physical culture and Irish sports, the focus shifts from Barney Kiernan’s pub (the “actual” location of the episode) to “the ancient hall of *Brian O’Ciarnain’s* in *Sraid na Bretaine Bheag*,” where now present is a host of Catholic priests: “the very rev. William Delany, S. J., L. L. D.; the rt rev. Gerald Molloy, D. D.; the rev. P. J. Kavanagh, C. S. Sp.; the rev. T. Waters, C. C.; the rev. John M. Ivers, P. P.; the rev. P. J. Cleary, O. S. F. . . .”<sup>126</sup> A much longer theological catalog occurs near the end of the episode,

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<sup>124</sup> Gordon, 233.

<sup>125</sup> *Ulysses*, 12.551–52, 562–64, 577–79.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.927–30. The catalog ends, as if in frustration, “The laity included P. Fay, T. Quirke, etc., etc.” (938), the doubled *etc.* serving as a hurried close to a now-tedious (the laity are presumably less important than the clergy) recitation. Richardson, 1041, writes dismissively of

when Martin Cunningham, responding to the Citizen's anti-Semitic animosity toward Bloom, says "God bless all here is my prayer."<sup>127</sup> To the hurried *amens* of the other drinkers, the narrative describes a grand pilgrimage of clergy and saints to bless the pub:

And at the sound of the sacring bell, headed by a crucifer with acolytes, thurifers, boatbearers, readers, ostiarii, deacons and subdeacons, the blessed company drew nigh of mitred abbots and priors and guardians and monks and friars: the monks of Benedict of Spoleto, Carthusians and Camaldolesi, Cistercians and Olivetans, Oratorians and Vallombrosans, and the friars of Augustine, Brigittines, Premonstratensians, Servi, Trinitarians, and the children of Peter Nolasco: and therewith from Carmel mount the children of Elijah prophet led by Albert bishop and by Teresa of Avila, calced and other: and friars, brown and grey, sons of poor Francis, capuchins, cordeliers, minimes and observants and the daughters of Clara: and the sons of Dominic, the friars preachers, and the sons of Vincent: and the monks of S. Wolstan: and Ignatius his children: and the confraternity of the christian brothers led by the reverend brother Edmund Ignatius Rice. And after came all saints and martyrs, virgins and confessors: S. Cyr and S. Isidore Arator and S. James the Less and S. Phocas of Sinope and S. Julian Hospitator and S. Felix de Cantalice and S. Simon Stylites and S. Stephen Protomartyr and S. John of God and S. Ferreol and S. Leugarde and S. Theodotus and S. Vulmar and S. Richard and S. Vincent de Paul and S. Martin of Todi and S. Martin of Tours and S. Alfred and S. Joseph and S. Denis and S. Cornelius and S. Leopold and S. Bernard and S. Terence and S. Edward and S. Owen Caniculus and S. Anonymous and S. Eponymous and S. Pseudonymous and S. Homonymous and S. Paronymous and S. Synonymous and S. Laurence O'Toole and S. James of Dingle and Compostella and S. Columcille and S. Columba and S. Celestine and S. Colman and S. Kevin and S. Brendan and S. Frigidian and S. Senan and S. Fachtna and S. Columbanus and S. Gall and S. Fursey and S. Fintan and S. Fiacre and S. John Nepomuc and S. Thomas Aquinas and S. Ives of Brittany and S.

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this passage: "It is a rather superfluous exercise in list making, a tired exaggeration for its own sake, a redundant and repetitious sliver of gigantism. It is in fact a sort of hollow version of the technique that worked so effectively in the earlier pages of the episode, and it is this willed failure, this decision to go through with avowedly empty narrative gestures, that we correctly associate with the postmodern. Such depleted forms of exaggeration, like the *pro forma* utilization of abandoned or rejected narrative techniques, recur elsewhere in this episode and more insistently in most of the book's last chapters." Leaving Richardson's unearned dismissiveness aside, this is a tellingly accurate description of Joyce's strategies in "Cyclops" and in the second half of *Ulysses* altogether.

<sup>127</sup> *Ulysses*, 12.1673.

Michan and S. Herman-Joseph and the three patrons of holy youth S. Aloysius Gonzaga and S. Stanislaus Kostka and S. John Berchmans and the saints Gervasius, Servasius and Bonifacius and S. Bride and S. Kieran and S. Canice of Kilkenny and S. Jarlath of Tuam and S. Finbarr and S. Pappin of Ballymun and Brother Aloysius Pacificus and Brother Louis Bellicosus and the saints Rose of Lima and of Viterbo and S. Martha of Bethany and S. Mary of Egypt and S. Lucy and S. Brigid and S. Attracta and S. Dympna and S. Ita and S. Marion Calpensis and the Blessed Sister Teresa of the Child Jesus and S. Barbara and S. Scholastica and S. Ursula with eleven thousand virgins. And all came with nimbi and aureoles and glorie, bearing palms and harps and swords and olive crowns, in robes whereon were woven the blessed symbols of their efficacies, inkhorns, arrows, loaves, cruses, fetters, axes, trees, bridges, babes in a bathtub, shells, wallets, shears, keys, dragons, lilies, buckshot, beards, hogs, lamps, bellows, beehives, soupladles, stars, snakes, anvils, boxes of vaseline, bells, crutches, forceps, stags' horns, watertight boots, hawks, millstones, eyes on a dish, wax candles, aspergills, unicorns. And as they wended their way by Nelson's Pillar, Henry Street, Mary Street, Capel Street, Little Britain Street, chanting the introit in Epiphania Domini which beginneth Surge, illuminare and thereafter most sweetly the gradual Omnes which saith de Saba venient they did divers wonders such as casting out devils, raising the dead to life, multiplying fishes, healing the halt and the blind, discovering various articles which had been mislaid, interpreting and fulfilling the scriptures, blessing and prophesying. And last, beneath a canopy of cloth of gold came the reverend Father O'Flynn attended by Malachi and Patrick. And when the good fathers had reached the appointed place, the house of Bernard Kiernan and Co, limited, 8, 9 and 10 little Britain street, wholesale grocers, wine and brandy shippers, licensed for the sale of beer, wine and spirits for consumption on the premises, the celebrant blessed the house and censed the mullioned windows and the groynes and the vaults and the arrises and the capitals and the pediments and the cornices and the engrailed arches and the spires and the cupolas and sprinkled the lintels thereof with blessed water and prayed that God might bless that house as he had blessed the house of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and make the angels of His light to inhabit therein. And entering he blessed the viands and the beverages and the company of all the blessed answered his prayers.<sup>128</sup>

Catalogs such as this present an extreme of *Ulysses'* totalizing energies. While the novel presents an impressively large number of characters, from fully-realized leads such as Bloom and Stephen

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 12.1676–1739.

to shadowy, sketched-in characters that are little more than names, it does so over time, at an expansive, often leisurely speed: here the tidal press of the book is inescapable, the steady flowing-on of names either requiring a heroic feat of attention—there is, after all, little fascinating about the names themselves to most readers, and Joyce’s name catalogs (unlike, say, Homer’s *Catalog of Ships*) are largely unvaried by embroidery or digression—or disrupting the reader’s attention entirely, perhaps leading to boredom and frustration, if not to outright skimming over the lists or to stopping reading. Joyce does, of course, vary the texture of the catalog somewhat: note, for example, the “name” saints “S. Anonymous and S. Eponymous and S. Pseudonymous and S. Homonymous and S. Paronymous and S. Synonymous,” whose ridiculous cognomens highlight the relentlessly self-referential bent of Joyce’s text. Other relief from monotony is provided by thematic variation, as when the list of names ends and the narrator switches to listing their symbols. Such relief is short-lived, however, as the listing technique remains the same: the saints’ “inkhorns, arrows, loaves, cruses, fetters, axes, trees, bridges” appear with the same one-by-one regularity as did the saints’ names. Enumeration itself, rather than any single name or group of names, has become the true subject of the catalog.

However, not all of Joyce’s catalogs of names are as titanicly huge as the one above. Consider in this light the famous “love” digression in the “Cyclops” episode. Bloom is arguing with the drinkers at Barney Kiernan’s, and has fearfully, halfheartedly offered a negative definition of love—“I mean the opposite of hatred”<sup>129</sup>—as a proper remedy for force and the violence of history; the narrative then switches to its gigantic, parodic mode, and offers a saccharine portrait of universal love that is tinged with disgust and derision:

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.1485.

Love loves to love love. Nurse loves the new chemist. Constable 14 A loves Mary Kelly. Gerty MacDowell loves the boy that has the bicycle. M. B. loves a fair gentleman. Li Chi Han lovey up kissy Cha Pu Chow. Jumbo, the elephant, loves Alice, the elephant. Old Mr Verschoyle with the ear trumpet loves old Mrs Verschoyle with the turnedin eye. The man in the brown macintosh loves a lady who is dead. His Majesty the King loves Her Majesty the Queen. Mrs Norman W. Tupper loves officer Taylor. You love a certain person. And this person loves that other person because everybody loves somebody but God loves everybody.<sup>130</sup>

Christine van Boheemen-Saaf, noting “Bloom’s tendency toward grandiose phantasy”—and thus hinting that the parody is somehow an extrapolation from his own, romantically imbalanced, subjectivity—writes of this passage “The text seems indiscriminate in its irony. Its object is not only the sentimentality of Irish nationalism . . . God’s authority and the universal human value of love and fellowship are also ironized.”<sup>131</sup> Joyce catalogs an entire range of clichéd amatory tropes, from adolescence (Gerty Macdowell) to old age (the Verschoyles), from lost love (the man in the macintosh) to active sexual love (“lovey up kissey”) to dynastic marriage (the king and queen). Hovering above them is the hoariest cliché of all, “God loves everybody,” a love painfully absent from Joyce’s fallen, Modernist Dublin. Note, too, the defectiveness and comic inconsequentiality of many of the lovers—the Verschoyles’ “ear trumpet” and “turnedin eye,” the captured circus elephants, the Orientalized, exotic Chinese, the plethora of police—

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.1493–1501.

<sup>131</sup> van Boheemen-Saaf, 80. For other negative views of the passage, see Burgess, 145: “the parodic technique seems to sneer along with the citizen”; Jameson, 61–62, who notes, characteristically, a postmodern turn to the passage: “style, as a category of some absolute subject, here disappears, and Joyce’s palpably linguistic games and experiments are rather to be seen as impersonal sentence combinations and variations beyond all point of view”; Perelman, 102: “sadistic in its lack of semantic variation: it is not the stuff of nursery rhymes, it is the asphyxiation of them”; Williams, 86: “The parody . . . farcically undermines the notion of love as political philosophy”; and Valente, 120: “one of the episode’s most vicious parodies.” For countervailing positive views, see Ellman’s introduction to the Gabler edition (*Ulysses*, xiii), where he notes, somewhat unconvincingly, “It is the kind of parody that protects seriousness by immediately going away from intensity”; and Armstrong, 155–56.

suggesting that love is not only the province of the weak and sentimental, but the grotesque and pathetic, as well. The parody functions not only as a rebuke to Bloom's naïve view of geopolitics, exploding his weak notions of global brotherhood in a cruel *reductio ad absurdum*; it also functions, once again, to break the flow of the narrative, to foreground textuality.<sup>132</sup> A similar moment occurs at the end of the episode, which narrates the mock-destruction of Dublin— analogous to the Cyclops' destruction of Odysseus' fleet with giant boulders—caused by the Citizen's throwing of his snuffbox at Bloom; a fake newspaper account details the cleanup efforts:

The work of salvage, removal of *débris*, human remains etc has been entrusted to Messrs Michael Meade and Son, 159 Great Brunswick street, and Messrs T. and C. Martin, 77, 78, 79 and 80 North Wall, assisted by the men and officers of the Duke of Cornwall's light infantry under the general supervision of H. R. H., rear admiral, the right honourable sir Hercules Hannibal Habeas Corpus Anderson, K. G., K. P., K. T., P. C., K. C. B., M. P., J. P., M. B., D. S. O., S. O. D., M. F. H., M. R. I. A., B. L., Mus. Doc., P. L. G., F. T. C. D., F. R. U. I., F. R. C. P. I., and F. R. C. S. I.<sup>133</sup>

Tony E. Jackson writes of this passage, “The obsessive listing in the journalistic interpolations displays the same almost paranoid desire for totality we have seen with the image of the Irish hero. . . . [T]he interpolations foreground a kind of categorical fear of incompleteness, as if any name missed will signal a catastrophic omission, a mutilation of a sacred Irish wholeness. It would also seem that journalism's Imaginary Irish male self must prove its autonomy and its self-sufficiency . . . by wearing validating initials, and the writing must not forget any lest the

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<sup>132</sup> As Sandquist, 207, writes, “Catalogues, with their vertical, block-like structures, create bumps, elevations, contours, or landmarks on the more horizontal ‘plain’ of the narrative. They can be seen as discursive cliffs or even ‘bluffs’ on the textual map. Whichever way we look at them . . . the catalogues force us to pause before the materiality of the text, before we make conclusions about the materiality of what it signifies.”

<sup>133</sup> *Ulysses*, 12.1888–96.

man himself be lost.”<sup>134</sup> Again, Joyce uses the technique of the catalog to indulge in an extended joke: Anderson’s improbable titles make him at once a Knight Templar (“K. T.”), a Master of Fox Hounds (“M. F. H.”), and a “‘sod’—a clod or sodomist [*sic*]” (“S. O. D.”).<sup>135</sup> The improbable aggregation of the titles becomes an assault on officialdom itself; the various acronyms, intelligible and plausible taken singly, become an unreadable code when placed together, a meaningless jumble of capital letters and periods.<sup>136</sup> This is a perfect ending for *Ulysses*’ most politically invested chapter, in which various pretensions to national greatness—Ireland’s heroic antiquity, the Irish Revival, the Catholic Church—are grotesquely inflated by Joyce’s catalogs. Here the British Empire, the target of much of the anger displayed by the drinkers in the pub, gets the same treatment: Joyce thus avoids a facile, dualistic view of Anglo-Irish history, and both parties are tarred with the same brush, their aspirations made ridiculous through their relentless enumeration.

Not all of Joyce’s panoramic catalogs of names and people share the aggressive, even violent, characteristics of the pitiless, probing catalogs of the “Cyclops” episode. At the end of the “Wandering Rocks” episode, for example—in which the procession of the Viceroy of Dublin, William Humble, earl of Dudley, threads through the streets of the city—Joyce unleashes a *tour de force* catalog that presents the various “wandering” citizens of Dublin, most of whom have

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<sup>134</sup> Jackson, 71.

<sup>135</sup> Gifford and Seidman, 381.

<sup>136</sup> As Bazargan, 759, points out, “Sir Hercules . . . is emblematic of those authorities upholding social and intellectual order and presiding over the restoration of the house of justice. The parody, of course, highlights the failure of their mission. To emphasize the pervading inequity in Ireland, Joyce deploys the only means left to redeem the persecuted and oppressed: an act of poetic justice, which transforms and projects Bloom into the vastness of the heavens.” Bazargan is speaking here of Bloom’s comic apotheosis as the prophet Elijah: what she misses is the simultaneous devaluation of the earthly power that Bloom, in his weak pacifism, seeks to transcend—a corrupt, earthly, and illegitimate state power whose bureaucratic ineptitude and collaboration with British rule is magnified by the catalog’s ocean of meaningless acronyms, the hollowed-out shells of political power.

appeared previously in isolated vignettes throughout the chapter, as a seamless, carnivalesque whole. Far from sharing the monolithic homogeneity of the catalogs looked at above, the catalog of Dubliners in “Wandering Rocks” takes on the immensity, the life-pulse of a city’s streets; each citizen’s name is presented not singly, but in full sentences that place the characters firmly in a realistic urban setting; finally, the words used to describe each citizen are inflected, colored by language, descriptions, traits, and so on, that are unique to the character being described:

Between Queen’s and Whitworth bridge lord Dudley’ viceregal carriages passed and were unsaluted by Mr Dudley White, B. L., M. A., who stood on Arran quay outside Mrs M. E. White’s, the pawnbroker’s, at the corner of Arran street west stroking his nose with his forefinger, undecided whether he should arrive at Phibsborough more quickly by a triple change of tram or by hailing a car or on foot through Smithfield, Constitution hill and Broadstone terminus. In the porch of Four Courts Richie Goulding, with the costbag of Goulding, Collis and Ward saw him with surprise. Past Richmond bridge at the doorstep of the office of Reuben J. Dodd, solicitor, agent for the Patriotic Insurance Company, an elderly female about to enter changed her plan and retracing her steps by King’s windows smiled credulously on the representative of His Majesty. From its sluice in Wood quay wall under Tom Devan’s office Poddle river hung out in fealty a tongue of liquid sewage. Above the crossblind of the Ormond hotel, gold by bronze, Miss Kennedy’s head by Miss Douce’s head watched and admired. On Ormond quay Mr Simon Dedalus, steering his way from the greenhouse to the subsheriff’s office, stood still in midstreet and brought his hat low. His Excellency graciously returned Mr Dedalus’ greeting. From Cahill’s corner the reverend Hugh C. Love, M. A., made obeisance unperceived, mindful of lords deputies whose hands benignant had held of yore rich advowsons.<sup>137</sup>

Joyce’s use of modifying information in this catalog is reminiscent of Homeric epithets: Richie Goulding appears with his customary costbag, the heads of Misses Kennedy and Douce appear

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<sup>137</sup> *Ulysses*, 10.1184–1204. Hayman, 1985, 164, writes of this passage, “[T]hough it can be read as a simple list, [the catalog] has obvious temporal and spatial coordinates and functions as a recapitulation. . . . [I]t illustrate[s] a central trait of parataxis, its role as a context that mediates between the spatiality of being there and the temporality of getting there.” See *ibid.* generally for a look at parataxis and hypotaxis throughout Joyce’s work.

“gold by bronze,” as they will throughout the “Sirens” episode, Simon Dedalus, drunk, is seen “steering his way”—sober men do not steer themselves—and stands “still in midstreet.” Each character performs a characteristic action, the viceregal procession providing the thread that links these disparate events. The characters think in characteristic ways as well: the reverend Hugh C. Love, a devotee of Irish history whom we have seen previously in the episode admiring the basement of St. Mary’s Abbey—“the most historic spot in all Dublin”<sup>138</sup>—makes his “obeisance unperceived” (another inflection of the narrative voice by the subjectivity of a character) and is “mindful of lords deputies whose hands benignant had held of yore rich advowsons.” “Rich advowsons” is the language of the romanticized past in which Love (who is writing a book on the old Fitzgerald family), like so many Dubliners, finds imaginative refuge<sup>139</sup>; they are representative, in Love’s mind, of the luxuries he, a young prince of the Church, someday hopes to have.<sup>140</sup> The catalog is not entirely free from fancy, as demonstrated by the “tongue of liquid sewage” that the Poddle river extends “in fealty”: this is still a Joyce-animated universe, alive with his “gloomy jesuit jibes” and not fully reducible to perfect realism.<sup>141</sup> But perhaps the most wonderful moment of the viceregal procession—in the part of it quoted above, at least—is that given to Sir Dudley White. Like the young dandy who appears on the first page of Gogol’s *Dead*

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.

<sup>139</sup> See, for example, the first vignette in the episode, devoted to Father John Conmee S. J., in which the aging priest breaks for a moment into a faux-historical reverie: “Don John Conmee walked and moved in times of yore. He was humane and honoured there. He bore in mind secrets confessed and he smiled at smiling noble faces in a beeswaxed drawingroom, ceiled with full fruit clusters. And the hands of a bride and the hands of a bridegroom, noble to noble, were impalmed by Don John Conmee” (10.174–78).

<sup>140</sup> Gifford and Seidman, 285, define *advowsons* as an English legal term for “the right to name the holder of a church benefice.”

<sup>141</sup> Indeed, as *ibid.*, note, the river “[h]as been moved for the convenience of fiction”: its real location is some “350 yards east” of the sluice under Tom Devan’s office. It is difficult not to suspect Joyce of a purposeful, deliciously scatological mistake in geography here. “Gloomy jesuit jibes” is Mulligan’s description of Stephen’s words at *Ulysses*, 1.500.

*Souls* during Chichikov's entry into the small provincial town of N.—“a young man in white twill trousers, quite narrow and short, and a tailcoat with presumptions to fashion, under which could be seen a shirtfront fastened with a Tula-made pin shaped like a bronze pistol”<sup>142</sup>—only to walk away, wholly disappearing from the novel. Sir Dudley White is a minutely-realized character, a quick, vivid sketch of a personality that hovers, fleetingly, before our eyes and is quickly gone. Sir Dudley literally personifies the exuberant, ever-burgeoning energies of Joyce's catalogs, providing a local habitation and a name to one of the most pervasive stylistic tropes in *Ulysses*; here the narrative mimics the enumerative qualities of the catalog's style, and creates a new being in the very process of counting familiar, already-seen ones. Sir Dudley is so minor a character as to be miniscule, a mere chip on the vast frothy sea of the book, but for one moment he occupies center stage, his nervous stroking of his nose and his hurried calculation of transportation alternatives a miniature version of Bloom's novel-long Odyssean wanderings: an epyllion of urban travel and anxiety that momentarily dominates the narrative.

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<sup>142</sup> Gogol, 3. Vladimir Nabokov in *The Gift* steals this trick from Gogol, and has his protagonist, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, observe a man and woman watching a moving-van: “The man, arrayed in a rough greenish-brown overcoat to which the wind imparted a ripple of life, was tall, beetle-browed and old, with the gray of his whiskers turning to russet in the area of the mouth, in which he insensitively held a cold, half-defoliated cigar butt. The woman, thickset and no longer young, with bowlegs and a rather attractive pseudo-Chinese face, wore an astrakhan jacket; the wind, having rounded her, brought a whiff of rather good but slightly stale perfume. They both stood motionless and watched fixedly, with such attentiveness that one might think they were about to be shortchanged, as three red-necked husky fellows in blue aprons wrestled with their furniture. Some day, [Fyodor] thought, I must use such a scene to start a good, thick old-fashioned novel” (Nabokov, 1991, 3–4). Nabokov later wrote of the scene in his study of Gogol, and picked out the character of the young man as an example of the digressive, embellishing drive of Gogol's prose: “Another special touch is exemplified by the chance passer-by—that young man portrayed with a sudden and wholly irrelevant wealth of detail: he comes there as if he was going to stay in the book (as so many of Gogol's homunculi seem intent to do—and do not). With any other writer of his day the next paragraph would have been bound to begin: ‘Ivan, for that was the young man's name’. . . But no: a gust of wind interrupts his stare and he passes, never to be mentioned again” (Nabokov, 1961, 76–77).

Perhaps the most extensive and interesting use of catalogs of names in *Ulysses* comes in the “Circe” episode, the nightmarish, phantasmagoric play-within-a-novel that erupts in a libidinal surge of repressed psychosexual energies. “Circe” is, to borrow Stephen’s “symbol of Irish art,” the “cracked lookingglass” of the novel;<sup>143</sup> various elements from elsewhere in the narrative—characters, bits of text, symbols, objects—reappear grotesquely, and the action of the episode careens wildly out of hand, following an associative dream-logic that disregards the dimensions of time and space as handily as it disregards the conventions of realistic narrative. Like the viceregal procession of “Wandering Rocks” and the name catalogs of “Cyclops,” the lists of names in “Circe” demonstrate *Ulysses*’ carnivalesque tendencies, its riotous display of language and character, at their fullest. Catalogs proliferate throughout one of the main “events” of the episode, Bloom’s meteoric rise and fall as, first, Lord Mayor of Dublin, and then increasingly as a comically inept Christ-like savior, a fast-talking mystic huckster peddling a banal *programme* that alternates between vague civic-humanitarian sentiments, municipal luxuries and strictures, and the occasional bizarre domestic time-saving appliance:

I stand for the reform of municipal morals and the plain ten commandments. New worlds for old. Union of all, jew, moslem and gentile. Three acres and a cow for all children of nature. Saloon motor hearses. Compulsory manual labor for all. All parks open to the public day and night. Electric dishscrubbers. Tuberculosis, lunacy, war and mendicancy must now cease. General amnesty, weekly carnival with masked licence, bonuses for all, esperanto the universal language with universal brotherhood. No more patriotism or barspongers and dropsical imposters. Free money, free rent, free love and a free lay church in a free lay state.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> *Ulysses*, 1.146.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.1685–93.

Bloom's panaceas, in their heterogeneous vapidness, deftly combine local bread ("Three acres and a cow," "Electric dishscrubbers") with global circuses ("All parks open to the public," the litany of "free" benefits) in an unstoppably vapid platform: there is very little to disagree with, because there is so little feasible, in his outpouring of hazy utopian nostrums. Bloom's envisioned (hallucinated?) world of the future enjoys an endless surplus of resources—the compulsory manual labor will never slack or cease, the free money and free love never exhaust themselves—and a concomitant total lack of inimical forces—Bloom's *fiat* presumptively ends "Tuberculosis, lunacy, war and mendicancy," and patriots, "barspongers and dropsical imposters" will, presumably, happily beat their swords into ploughshares: truly a new world for an old, a world in which the abundance of material happiness is circumscribed only by the limits (and they are endless) of rhetorical afflatus. Like any politician, Bloom's current promises contrast with his earlier-made ones, as a look at his earlier, "impassionedly" delivered invective against reactionaries and other undesirables shows:

These flying Dutchmen or lying Dutchmen as they recline in their upholstered poop, casting dice, what reck they? Machines is their cry, their chimera, their panacea. Laboursaving apparatuses, supplanters, bugbears, manufactured monsters for mutual murder, hideous hobgoblins produced by a horde of capitalistic lusts upon our prostituted labour. The poor man starves while they are grassing their royal mountain stags or shooting peasants and phartridges in their purblind pomp of pelf and power. But their reign is rover for rever and ever and ev ...<sup>145</sup>

Bloom's flip-flopping—his fulminating against "Laboursaving apparatuses" and "supplanters," and his later worshipping of electric dishscrubbers—is not really to be held against him: consistency is not the point. Rather, it is the catholicity, the all-encompassing reach, of the

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 15.1390–97.

catalogs in which Bloom speaks—or, to borrow Heidegger’s famous dictum, in which *he is spoken*—that are of central interest. Both Bloom’s rants and raves are capable of infinite expansion, and both constitute themselves with marvelously hybrid fecundity.

In “Circe” Bloom’s productions are not limited to the verbal. The episode is filled with a multitude of impossible physical feats both grandiose and slapstick, as in Bloom’s exultant display of civic exuberance, in which stage directions describing Bloom’s actions alternate with his increasingly zany pronouncements with a manic energy that Billy Wilder would have envied:

*(shaking hands with a blind stripling)* My more than Brother! *(placing his arms round the shoulders of an old couple)* Dear old friends! *(he plays pussy fourcorners with ragged boys and girls)* Peep! Bopeep! *(he wheels twins in a perambulator)* Ticktacktwo wouldyousetashoe? *(he performs juggler’s tricks, draws red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet silk handkerchiefs from his mouth)* Roygbiv. 32 feet per second. *(he consoles a widow)* Absence makes the heart grow younger. *(he dances the Highland fling with grotesque antics)* Leg it, ye devils! *(he kisses the bedsores of a palsied veteran)* Honourable wounds! *(he trips up a fat policeman)* U. p: up. U. p: up. *(he whispers in the ear of a blushing waitress and laughs kindly)* Ah, naughty, naughty! *(he eats a raw turnip offered him by Maurice Butterly, farmer)* Fine! Splendid! *(he refuses to accept three shillings offered him by Joseph Hynes, journalist)* My dear fellow, not at all! *(he gives his coat to a beggar)* Please accept. *(he takes part in a stomach race with elderly male and female cripples)* Come on, boys! Wriggle it, girls!<sup>146</sup>

Bloom’s exertions show him in the politician’s act of trying to be all things to all people; the hallucinatory style of “Circe,” however, allows him to actually become, chameleonlike, his audience, in an orgy of flesh-pressing: shaking hands, hugging, playing with children, kissing the veteran’s “honourable wounds,” whispering, belly-wriggling, and so on. Note the nice mini-catalog of the colored handkerchiefs that Bloom pulls from his mouth: Bloom’s modern-day

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 1600–15.

incarnation of the manytongued Odysseus is here ironically concretized, his meandering, *homme moyen* glossolalia embodied by the multicolored silk that cascades from his mouth. The stomach race that concludes the festivities is an unexpected, almost cheap, descent into cruel gutter humor, Joyce's carnivalesque vision—like the paintings of Breugel, who in works such as *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (1559; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) and *The Beggars* (1568; The Louvre, Paris) depicted the social outcasts, disabled persons, and mentally ill of his day—unsparing in its portrayal of bodily imperfections.<sup>147</sup> Bloom's most amazing production comes a few pages later, when, swelled with his newfound stature of secular prophet and bourgeois Christ, he becomes pregnant—one of *Ulysses'* many digs at the Immaculate Conception—and, with the help of the midwife Mrs. Thornton, gives birth to the Bloom Octuplets:

*(Bloom embraces her tightly and bears eight male yellow and white children. They appear on a redcarpeted staircase adorned with expensive plants. All the octuplets are handsome, with valuable metallic faces, wellmade, respectably*

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<sup>147</sup> Cf. Johan Huizinga's catalogic marking of differences between the Middle Ages and the modern era in the famous opening to *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (Huizinga, 1): "There was less relief available for misfortune and for sickness; they came in a more fearful and more painful way. Sickness contrasted more strongly with health. The cutting cold and the dreaded darkness of winter were more concrete evils. Honor and wealth were enjoyed more fervently and greedily because they contrasted still more than now with lamentable poverty. . . . In short, all things in life had about them something glitteringly and cruelly public. The lepers, shaking their rattles and holding processions, put their deformities openly on display." On Brueghel, see Snow, 75-76, who writes of *The Beggars*: "Of one thing we can be sure: the deformities of Breugel's cripples are not faked. . . . Nor do they appeal to us for pity. Bruegel's presentation makes denouncing them as frauds and offering them charity seem merely two different ways of turning away, drawing back from a disruptive experience of otherness into modes of 'reasonable' seeing. . . . What Bruegel does instead is paint his subjects in their own world, as they appear in their absence from us, before they disperse to assume the postures calculated to elicit from us our stock responses to their suffering. Such 'objectivity is itself moral, though it involves a refusal of all readily available moral sentiments. And as such it is always on the verge of turning its critique upon itself. . . . [I]t takes radically upon itself the burden of its object, not by offering sympathy or acting on its behalf, but by refusing the frames of reference the ordinary world has devised for coming to terms with it. And for all the strength of the gesture, we are still made to feel that it is not enough, that it does not escape complicity, that it, in fact, makes us sharers in the general blame." I argue that Joyce's humor here provokes a similar shock of recognition.

*dressed and wellconducted, speaking five modern languages fluently and interested in various arts and sciences. Each has his name printed in legible letters on his shirtfront: Nasodoro, Goldfinger, Chrysostomos, Maindorée, Silversmle, Silberselber, Vifargent, Panargyros. They are immediately appointed to positions of high public trust in several different countries as managing directors of banks, traffic managers of railways, chairmen of limited liability companies, vicechairmen of hotel syndicates.)*<sup>148</sup>

The textual fecundity of “Circe” permits Bloom’s parturition: like the other apparitions of the episode, Bloom’s children are delicately obscene, their “valuable metallic faces” uneasily coexisting—like the jewels affixed to des Essiente’s tortoise in Huysmans’ *À Rebours*—with their middle-class interests “in various arts and sciences.”<sup>149</sup> Note Joyce’s pastiche of the languages of commercialism and self-improvement, as the octuplets’ attributes—they are “respectably dressed and wellconducted,” speak “five modern languages fluently,” they are “immediately appointed to positions of high public trust,” the dream of every good bourgeois—sound remarkably like the miracles promised by various health and fitness regimes of the day.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> *Ulysses*, 15.1821–32.

<sup>149</sup> Their metal faces recall the faces of the robots in Czech playwright Karel Čapek’s *R.U.R. (Rossum’s Universal Robots)*, written in 1920 and first produced in 1922; one of their creators, Dr. Gall, “Head of the Psychological and Experimental Department” (Čapek, 12) notes ruefully “You know, we made one serious mistake. . . . We made the Robots’ faces too much alike. A hundred thousand faces all alike, all facing this way. A hundred thousand expressionless bubbles. It’s like a nightmare” (*ibid.*, 37).

<sup>150</sup> In the “Ithaca” episode we see the contents of Bloom’s unlocked desk drawer (see below, p. \_\_\_), which holds, among other detritus and rejectamenta, a prospectus for an enema kit dubbed “The Wonderworker, the world’s greatest remedy for rectal complaints” (17.1820–21). The prospectus contains “numerous” testimonials from various satisfied customers—including a “clergyman, British naval officer, wellknown author, city man, hospital nurse, lady, mother of five, absentminded beggar,” which last laments “What a pity the government did not supply our men with wonderworkers during the South African campaign! What a relief it would have been” (17.1835–36, 1838–39) ironically glossing Britain’s bloody colonial campaigns in the Second Boer War (1899–1902)—and is lavish in its promises: “It heals and soothes while you sleep, in case of trouble in breaking wind, assists nature in the most formidable way, insuring instant relief in discharge of gases, keeping parts clean and free natural action, an initial outlay of 7/6 making a new man of you and life worth living. Ladies find Wonderworker especially useful, a

Thus we see two unlikely strands—Joyce’s high-literary sources for the dream images, the play format, and the surreality of the episode, the “Walpurgisnacht” section of Goethe’s *Faust* and the entirety of Flaubert’s *Temptation of St. Anthony* and the rough languages of advertising and commerce—fused in the crucible of Joyce’s Modernist catalogs.

“Circe” also includes a genealogy of Bloom’s ancestors; not only Bloom’s improbable births, but his lineage as well, are inflated to comic proportions. On one level this is merely a continuance of the text’s preoccupations—evinced in the self-consciously Latinate title *Ulysses*, in the frequent discussions of metempsychosis (which Molly garbles as “Met him what? . . . Who’s he when he’s at home?”<sup>151</sup>), and in the text’s persistent questioning of the boundaries of identity, personality, and personal history—with rebirth and reincarnation, with previous lives and existences. Stephen in the National Library will humorously absolve himself from a monetary debt by thinking “Molecules all change. I am other I now,” only to run into a solid wall of Catholic dogma and guilt: “But I, entelechy, form of forms, am I by memory because under everchanging forms”; Bloom thinks at the moment of Patrick “Paddy” Dignam’s interment in Glasnevin Cemetery, “If we were all suddenly somebody else.”<sup>152</sup> But none of this quite prepares us for “Circe”’s all-out assault-by-enumeration on the genealogy, that stable marker (or so it was hoped) of lineage and patrimony since the far-off times of classical antiquity. As David Galef writes, “Such epic catalogues are particularly suited to both Joyce’s Homeric classical designs

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pleasant surprise when they note delightful result like a cool drink of fresh spring water on a sultry summer’s day. Recommend it to your lady and gentlemen friends, lasts a lifetime. Insert long round end. Wonderworker” (17.1826–33).

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 4.336, 340. Bloom can at first only lamely gloss “It’s Greek: from the Greek” (4.341: another self-conscious nod, as in the title, to Joyce’s stealing [in T. S. Eliot’s sense] from Homer) but finally hits on “Reincarnation: that’s the word” and tells her “Some people believe, he said, that we lived before. They call it reincarnation. That we all lived before on the earth thousands of years ago or some other planet. They say we have forgotten it” (4.362–65).

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 9.205, 208–09; 6.836.

and his more free-wheeling Rabelaisian temperament. . . . The descriptive style is a satiric hybrid of epic and romance, soon becoming an end in itself. Classical progression becomes mere escalation, the humor deriving from the sheer exhaustion of all categories.”<sup>153</sup> During his civic apotheosis, “Circe” details the genealogy of Bloom the Irish Jew—an ethnic and national concept widely considered in Joyce’s time to be both an impossibility and a joke, and which the genealogy’s mix of real and false (as with the other catalogs of names seen above), of solemn and silly, attempts to render even more ridiculous. As if preparing for the roll-call of his illustrious ancestors, just before the genealogy is read Bloom undergoes a series of physical metamorphoses “*so as to resemble many historical personages, Lord Beaconsfield, Lord Byron, Wat Tyler, Moses of Egypt, Moses Maimonides, Moses Mendelssohn, Henry Irving, Rip van Winkle, Kossuth, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Baron Leopold Rothschild, Robinson Crusoe, Sherlock Holmes, Pasteur*”;<sup>154</sup> it is only after these transformations have ended—Bloom has, in the meantime, eclipsed “*the sun by extending his little finger*”<sup>155</sup>—that the torrent of names and *begats* begins:

*Leopoldi autem generatio.* Moses begat Noah and Noah begat Eunuch and Eunuch begat O’Halloran and O’Halloran begat Guggenheim and Guggenheim begat Agendath and Agendath begat Netaim and Netaim begat Le Hirsch and Le Hirsch begat Jesurum and Jesurum begat MacKay and MacKay begat Ostrolopsy and Ostrolopsy begat Smerdoz and Smerdoz begat Weiss and Weiss begat Schwarz and Schwarz begat Adrianopoli and Adrianopoli begat Aranjuez and Aranjuez begat Lewy Lawson and Lewy Lawson begat Ichabudonosor and Ichabudonosor begat O’Donnell Magnus and O’Donnell Magnus begat Christbaum and Christbaum begat ben Maimun and ben Maimun begat Dusty Rhodes and Dusty Rhodes begat Benamor and Benamor begat Jones-Smith and Jones-Smith begat Savorgnanovich and Savorgnanovich begat Jasperstone and Jasperstone begat Vingtetunieme and Vingtetunieme begat Szombathely and

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<sup>153</sup> Galef, 424.

<sup>154</sup> *Ulysses*, 15.1844–49.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.1850–51.

Szombathely begat Virag and Virag begat Bloom *et vocabitur nomen eius Emmanuel*.<sup>156</sup>

As with the catalog of Irish worthies seen above, Bloom's *faux* genealogy is an unstable mixture of the seemingly authentic—the various biblical and Hebraic names—and outright false—Eunuch, who would presumably (like Onan) break the chain of begetting; Vingtetunieme, or “Twenty-One,” who, Gifford and Seidman note, is actually the twenty-seventh name in the list;<sup>157</sup> and Weiss and Schwarz, whose incongruous pairing one suspects of being another of Joyce's little jokes, a miniature iteration of the cosmic cycles of day and night, order and entropy, on which *Ulysses* turns.<sup>158</sup> The Latin tags that bracket the genealogy—reading, respectively, “[And] thus the generation of Leopold” and “and he will be called Emmanuel”—give the nonsense names and spurious filiations a veneer of credibility, while at the same time—through their close parody of biblical passages (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:1–18) relating to the coming of the Old Testament Messiah or the New Testament Christ—reintroduce the theme of Bloom as mock-prophet, a false, wholly maculate, savior.<sup>159</sup> While Bloom's pretensions to greatness are

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 1855–69. The genealogy is delivered by a Papal Nuncio named Brini, whose appearance—“*papal zouave's uniform, steel cuirasses as breastplate, armplates, thighplates, legplates, large profane moustaches and brown paper mitre*”—is a mini-catalog of sartorial delight. Galef, 420, notes that “fashion . . . encompasses an entire semiotic network; a psychosexual sensibility; and a model for the writer, the text, and the reader that mimics the whole of *Ulysses*.”

<sup>157</sup> Gifford and Seidman, 483.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. Bloom's musing on the “elaborate ballet, ‘The Dance of the Hours,’ which represents the passing of the hours from dawn till dusk” (ibid., 81) in Amilcare Ponchielli's opera *La gioconda*: “Explain that: morning hours, then evening coming on, then night hours. . . . Evening hours, girls in grey gauze. Night hours then: black with daggers and eyemasks. Poetical idea: pink, then golden, then grey, then black. Still, true to life also. Day: then the night” (*Ulysses*, 4.526–27, 534–36).

<sup>159</sup> As Benstock and Benstock, 227, reviewing other critics' readings of this passage, note, “Both Thornton and Gifford have made heroic efforts to track down the participants or, that failing, to dissect the names into component elements. It is soon apparent that none of this works. The essence of the catalogue is in what it mocks: the genealogy of a self-professed messiah.”

thus comically undercut, Joyce uses Bloom's ragged family tree to advance a Modernist artistic genealogy, one, like his art, attuned to both literature and the street, to the rounded simplicity of myth and the chaotic flux of industrialized urban life.

Joyce's cosmic irreverence toward his central characters, his repeated qualification of the mythic and archetypal aspects of his character portrayal by earthy, human, fallible elements—often ones dealing with sex and the body—continues into the last great name catalogs he wrote: the long lists of titles and nicknames given throughout the ages to the married couple of *Finnegans Wake*, Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker and Anna Livia Plurabelle, or HCE and ALP for short. While not the subject of this chapter, it will be instructive to see how Joyce's last work continues many of the aesthetic strategies—in particular, catalogs, enumeration, and lists—developed in Joyce's earlier works. In *Ulysses* Joyce makes Leopold Bloom become Odysseus and Everyman; in *Finnegans Wake* he presents the Earwicker family as representatives of the entire human race, past, present, and future, from all ages and races and walks of life, all embodied by the respective members of the family. HCE and ALP each get a catalog detailing their names and attributes: these are all presented in a maddeningly elusive and hermetic style, replete with deadly puns and unfunny in-jokes. The effect is that of viewing a long frieze: the names scroll by, taunting us with hints and half-revelations of personality and affect, but we are confined to the surface of things, to the play of signifiers: we do not see things in the round. Earwicker's sobriquets are all abusive ones, titles of derision that refer to his undefined indiscretion—an event variously reported in the text and centering on Earwicker's propositioning of two women to show him their knickers—in Phoenix Park:

*Firstnighter, Informer, Old Fruit, Yellow Whigger, Wheatears, Goldy Geit, Bogside Beauty, Yass We've Had His Badannas, York's Porker, Funnyface, At Baggotty's Bend He Bumped, Grease with the Butter, Opendoor Ospices,*

*Cainandabler, Ireland's Eighth Wonderful Wonder, Beat My Price, Godsoilman, Moonface the Murderer, Hoary Hairy Hoax, Midnight Sunburst, Remove that Bible, Hebdromadary Publocation, Tummer the Lame the Tyrannous, Blay Clay, Tight before Teatime, Read Your Pantojoke, Acoustic Disturbance, Thinks He's Gobblasst the Good Dook of Ourguile, W.D.'s Grace, Gibbering Bayamouth of Dublin, His Farther was a Mundzucker and She had him in a Growler, Burnham and Bailey, Artist, Unworthy of the Homely Protestant Religion, Terry Cotter, You're Welcome to Waterfood, signed the Ribbonmen. . . .*<sup>160</sup>

The list, as they say, goes on and on. What is important here, as ever, is the catalog's ability to distend the narrative, each unit, if read closely, capable of a near-infinite expansion of rhetorical and semantic possibilities. This act of microreading is potentially nonlinear as well: there is no reason, say, in reading the list, to privilege one semantic unit (here, names) over another; indeed, the hermetic catholicity of the list, so obviously a product of whimsy and a deeply private—mockingly so: rarely before Joyce was interiority so guardedly and triumphantly “performed” (i.e., narrated) in literary texts—sense of humor, actually encourages such selective misreadings: one can cherrypick the good, fun, or interesting names and leave the rest. Joyce's linguistic experiments in *Finnegans Wake*, his cobbling together of some fifty or so languages into a dreamlike meta-English, heighten the stylistic density of the catalog: now each name, rather than being a clearly recognizable verbal entity (even in parody, as with the *-nomous*-named saints in the “Cyclops” episode), is now resistant, polysemic, heteroglossic.<sup>161</sup> Like the rhizome of

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<sup>160</sup> Joyce, 1976 (hereafter *Finnegans Wake*), 71.

<sup>161</sup> For more on heteroglossia, see Bakhtin, especially 276–77, where he offers the following, highly artistic, definition: “Indeed, any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist—or, on the contrary, by the ‘light’ of alien words that have already been spoken about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents. . . . And into this complex play of light and shadow the word enters—it becomes saturated with this play, and must determine within it the boundaries of its own semantic and stylistic contours. . . . If we imagine the *intention* of such a word, that is, its *directionality toward the object*, in the form of a ray of light, then the living and unrepeatable

Deleuze and Guattari,<sup>162</sup> any node within the catalog is a possible entry-point—or, to use Stephen Dedalus’ famous formulation, a portal of discovery<sup>163</sup>—into interpretation: as, for example, “*Tummer the Lame the Tyrannous*,” who recalls not only Tamerlaine<sup>164</sup> but also Oedipus, who was both lame<sup>165</sup> and a tyrant; or “*the Good Dook or Ourguile*,” a corruption of *the Duke of Argyle* with a possible nod to Shakespeare’s “princes orgulous”<sup>166</sup> and a certain one to Grandfather Adam (*Ourguile* = “Our guile,” that is, our common fault in Adam’s proud and

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play of colors and light on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray-word, not within the object itself . . . but rather as its spectral dispersion in an atmosphere filled with the alien words, value judgments and accents through which the ray passes on its way toward the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object, makes the facets of the image sparkle.” Joyce’s multilogic heteroglossia is never more operative than in his catalogs, in which the overlaid *tesserae* of enumerated words and images create a shimmering, ever-shifting conceptual and semantic kaleidoscope.

<sup>162</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 3–25. The authors often resort to botanical metaphor when describing the decentered, non-hierarchical, “headless” textual space of the rhizome: “the principal root has aborted, or its tip has been destroyed; an immediate, indefinite multiplicity of secondary roots grafts onto it and undergoes a flourishing development.” Roots return in a discussion of Joyce that goes on to verbally enact (one of many enactments, *pace* Yvor Winter’s fallacy of imitative form) a rhizomatic space: “Joyce’s words, accurately described as having ‘multiple roots,’ shatter the linear unity of the word, even of language, only to posit a cyclic unity of the sentence, text, or knowledge. Nietzsche’s aphorisms shatter the linear unity of knowledge, only to invoke the cyclic unity of the eternal return, present as the nonknown in thought, This is as much as to say that the fascicular system does not really break with dualism, with the complementary between a subject and an object, a natural reality and a spiritual reality: unity is constantly thwarted and obstructed in the object, while a new type of unity triumphs in the subject. The world has lost its pivot; the subject can no longer even dichotomize, but accedes to a higher unity, of ambivalence or overdetermination, in an always supplementary dimension to that of its object. The world has become chaos, but the book remains the image of the world: radicle-chaosmos rather than root-cosmos. A strange mystification: a book all the more total for being fragmented. At any rate, what a vapid idea, the book as the image of the world” (6). Nunes, 182–83, explicitly compares Joyce’s style in “Cyclops” to the Deleuzian rhizome.

<sup>163</sup> *Ulysses*, 9:228–29: “A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery.”

<sup>164</sup> McHugh, 71.

<sup>165</sup> Liddell-Scott gives the definition of *Oedipus* (Gr. *Oidipous*) as “the swollen-footed” (from Gr. *oidos*, “swelling, tumour” [from *oideo*, “to swell”] + *pous*, “foot”), an etymological reference to the piercing and binding of the infant’s feet and his exposure on Mount Cithaeron at the hands of his parents, Laius and Jocasta.

<sup>166</sup> *Troilus and Cressida*, prologue, 2.

deceitful Fall).<sup>167</sup> But other of Earwicker's names retain their strangeness, their inaptness, their otherness: "*Grease with the Butter*" has a directness, a blunt demotic plainness, that defies elaborate interpretative schemes; "*Yass We've Had His Badannas*" is merely a joke on the song "Yes, We Have No Bananas" in an offensive dialect; "*Tight before Teatime*" is a funny but not necessarily illuminating reference to Earwicker's chronic drunkenness; and so on. Some names offer us multiple clues, links in the interpretative chain of Joyce's text; some remain aporias, mute, resistant, unyielding. There is, finally, a question of affect: whether or not Joyce's text rises above its play of signification; whether the bedazzlement is genuine or meretricious, a sharing of delight between author and reader—as much of the ecstasy that is *Ulysses* most certainly is—or a solitary, masturbatory performance (in an interview with Alfred Appel, Jr., Nabokov called *Finnegans Wake* "a persistent snore in the next room"<sup>168</sup>); whether or not the time and energy needed to decode—and, in the process, create—the text is worth it at all: will the *ars longa* of Joyce's text conquer the reader's imperiled *vita brevis*? Thus the melancholy of Joyce's name catalogs, the exhaustion bred from reckoning their minute and endless figurations.

## 2.c. Joyce's Catalogs of Texts and Books

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<sup>167</sup> McHugh, 71, notes that "God Bless the good Duke of Argyle" is "said when rubbing one's back against a post," but does not note my other two possibilities. The name *Old Fruit* in the catalog is another nice nod to Adam, both evoking his eating of the apple (the "old fruit" that doomed mankind) and suggesting his dotage.

<sup>168</sup> Nabokov, 1990, 71 (25–29 September 1966): "[T]he unfortunate *Finnegans Wake* is nothing but a formless and dull mass of phony folklore, a cold pudding of a book, a persistent snore in the next room, most aggravating to the insomniac I am. Moreover, I always detested regional literature full of quaint old-timers and imitated pronunciation. *Finnegans Wake*'s façade disguises a very conventional and drab tenement house, and only the infrequent snatches of heavenly intonations redeem it from utter insipidity"; *ibid.*, 102–03 (interview with Herbert Gold, September 1966): "I detest *Finnegans Wake* in which a cancerous growth of fancy word-tissue hardly redeems the dreadful joviality of the folklore and the easy, too easy, allegory. . . . I am indifferent to *Finnegans Wake* as I am to all regional literature written in dialect—even if it be the dialect of genius."

Joyce's works—most especially *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, but the earlier works as well—are intertextual to a surpassing degree, quoting, referencing, paraphrasing, parodying, and mimicking a vast range of other texts, canonical and non-, both from within and without the so-called Western tradition. They are preeminently *bookish* works as well: not only are they highly intertextual, but their intertextuality centers, as often as not, on texts that appear in the works as books: as physical objects that are bought, sold, owned, and collected. Joyce often resorts to catalogs and lists when dealing with books in his novels. The most famous example of this is the catalog of Bloom's library in the penultimate chapter of *Ulysses*, the "Ithaca" episode.<sup>169</sup> 16 June 1904 is rapidly drawing to a close; Stephen, having nearly been arrested following a drunken brawl with some British soldiers, has accompanied Bloom back home to No. 6 Eccles Street; the two men have talked; Stephen has left Bloom's house, refusing Bloom's offer of a bed for the night. The second half of "Ithaca" is devoted to Bloom's nighttime, getting-ready-for-bed reflections on the past day, during which the narrative—divided into two "voices," one asking questions and the other answering (Joyce patterned the episode after the Catholic practice of catechism)—wanders in and out of Bloom's thoughts, itself increasingly sleepy and prone to lengthy ruminations. To the questioning voice's imperative "Catalogue these books" the answering voice responds at length, giving in full the contents of Bloom's "two bookshelves."<sup>170</sup>

The catalog is worth giving in full:

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<sup>169</sup> As Madtes, 453, writes, "Catalogues and itemization, subdivision and multiplication, *things* and *things* and *things*—these are the life cells of Ithaca." Speaking positively of "the voluminous force of the episode's textual abundance" and "the episode's unwieldy effluence," Miller, 211, notes that "'Ithaca' resembles less a rock of narrative solidity than a gushing textual cataract. . . . Hardly the stuff of Victorian dénouement, the episode's catalogues and detailed descriptions seem to expand outward exponentially, effectively subordinating the efficacy of answers [i.e., the episode's catechistic, question-and-answer structure] to a value of prolixity and superabundance."

<sup>170</sup> *Ulysses*, 17.1361, 1359–60.

*Thom's Dublin Post Office Directory*, 1886.

Denis Florence M'Carthy's *Poetical Works* (copper beechleaf bookmark at p. 5).

Shakespeare's *Works* (dark crimson morocco, goldtooled).

*The Useful Ready Reckoner* (brown cloth).

*The Secret History of the Court of Charles II* (red cloth, tooled binding).

*The Child's Guide* (blue cloth).

*The Beauties of Killarney* (wrappers).

*When We Were Boys* by William O'Brien M. P. (green cloth, slightly faded, envelope bookmark at p. 217).

*Thoughts from Spinoza* (maroon leather).

*The Story of the Heavens* by Sir Robert Ball (blue cloth).

Ellis's *Three Trips to Madagascar* (brown cloth, title obliterated).

*The Stark-Munro Letters* by A. Conan Doyle, property of the City of Dublin Public Library, 106 Capel street, lent 21 May (Whitsun Eve) 1904, due 4 June 1904, 13 days overdue (black cloth binding, bearing white letternumber ticket).

*Voyages in China* by "Viator" (recovered with brown paper, red ink title).

*Philosophy of the Talmud* (sewn pamphlet).

Lockhart's *Life of Napoleon* (cover wanting, marginal annotations, minimising victories, aggrandising defeats of the protagonist).

*Soll und Haben* by Gustav Freytag (black boards, Gothic characters, cigarette coupon bookmark at p. 24).

Hozier's *History of the Russo-Turkish War* (brown cloth, 2 volumes, with gummed label, Garrison Library, Governor's Parade, Gibraltar, on verso of cover).

*Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland* by William Allingham (second edition, green cloth, gilt trefoil design, previous owner's name on recto of flyleaf erased).

*A Handbook of Astronomy* (cover, brown leather, detached, 5 plates, antique letterpress long primer, author's footnotes nonpareil, marginal clues brevier, captions small pica).

*The Hidden Life of Christ* (black boards).

*In the Track of the Sun* (yellow cloth, titlepage missing, recurrent title intestation).

*Physical Strength and How to Obtain It* by Eugen Sandow (red cloth).

*Short but yet Plain Elements of Geometry* written in French by F. Ignat. Parides and rendered into English by John Harris D. D. London, printed for R. Knaplock at the Bishop's Head, MDCCXI, with dedicatory epistle to his worthy friend Charles Cox, esquire, Member of Parliament for the burgh of Southwark and having ink calligraphed statement on the flyleaf certifying that the book was the property of Michael Gallagher, dated the 10<sup>th</sup> day of May 1822 and requesting the person who should find it, if the book should be lost or go astray, to restore it to Michael Gallagher, carpenter, Dufery Gate, Enniscorthy, county Wicklow, the finest place in the world.<sup>171</sup>

Bloom's library catalog exists simultaneously as a triumph of nineteenth-century literary Realism, and as self-reflexive Modernist text. That is, the list of books exists on two levels, that of being merely books on a shelf, indicative of the reader-owner's taste, education, and class; and that of commenting, sometimes obliquely, sometimes obviously, on the narrative-text of which they are a part.<sup>172</sup> Take, for example, Bloom's first book, the 1886 edition of *Thom's Dublin Post Office Directory*. On the level of realistic narrative, this is precisely the kind of book a self-employed, itinerant advertisement canvasser such as Bloom would need to own in order to practice his trade in the Dublin of that period. *Thom's*, published yearly, was the Yellow Pages (or the Google, if you prefer) of its day, printing alphabetically the various shops, businesses, pubs, etc., then operating in Dublin. It was a massive book—the boy narrator of “Sisters,” the

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 17.1362–1407.

<sup>172</sup> Miller, 213–14, borrows Deleuze's idea of the textual unconsciousness to speak of these and other passages in *Ulysses* as “literary machines,” “not an image that structures textual meaning, but a movement or action at work within textuality; it is, literally, the work of the text. To read ‘Ithaca’ as a literary machine in this sense is therefore to engage in its textuality as a production rather than as an expression. What is produced by this textual production is a physical, rather than a representational, flow of textuality that forges connections and disconnections continually.”

first story in *Dubliners*, notes wonderingly that “the fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the *Post Office Directory* and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper”<sup>173</sup>—a real-life catalog of Dublin’s commerce and trade. But a closer look reveals that the title as given in the catalog above is inaccurate: Gifford and Seidman note that “This could be either of two publications: *The Post Office Directory and Calendar for 1886 . . .* printed by Alexander Thom; or the much more comprehensive *Thom’s Official Directory of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland for 1886 comprising the 1886 Post Office Dublin City and County Directory*”<sup>174</sup>—that is, either the Dublin directory alone, or as part of a larger directory for all of Great Britain; another annotator of Joyce, Weldon Thornton, notes at length: “This catalogue of Bloom’s books is puzzling, for some of the entries represent actual books, correctly cited, while others do not seem to. In the instance of items that I have not located (almost always those for which Joyce gives no author), I have frequently found books with very similar titles. It is, of course, possible that there are actual books by these titles which I have not yet discovered. But if not, two explanations suggest themselves: either Joyce is making up some of these titles, but patterning them on common titles, or he is drawing on a book dealer’s catalogue, or perhaps on binders’ titles observed and noted in a book store, so that the title citations are abbreviated or incomplete. I am inclined to the former explanation, but know of no way to prove it.”<sup>175</sup> So a note of unreality intrudes: Joyce has either fudged the details of the *Directory*’s title purposely, or has gotten them wrong. Another layer reveals itself when we consider what was one of Joyce’s primary sources in writing *Ulysses*: the 1904 edition of the *Directory*, which he plundered for accurate details of street names, shops, and homes, and which later scholars have

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<sup>173</sup> Joyce, 1992, 5.

<sup>174</sup> Gifford and Seidman, 588.

<sup>175</sup> Thornton, 473–74.

strip-mined in their efforts to connect Joyce's fictions with the world from which they sprung. Seen in this light, the *Directory's* place at the head of the list is not so much a realistic detail as a Modernist (even postmodernist) one: Joyce has ekphrastically capped his list-of-books-within-a-book with one of the most important books in the genesis of *Ulysses*. In addition to providing a recognizable, verifiable, "real" detail, then, the *Directory* also intertextually looks outward, thus foregrounding the textuality of the book we are reading, and self-referentially highlighting the fictive nature of the text of *Ulysses* itself.

Other titles in the catalog of Bloom's books oscillate similarly between the poles of Realism and Modernism-postmodernism. As has been frequently pointed out, many of the works and authors on Bloom's shelf have been encountered previously in the text, having flashed through Bloom's mind during his peregrinations throughout Dublin. Take, for example, Sir Robert Ball, author of *The Story of the Heavens*, whom Bloom imagines visiting during the "Lestrygonians" episode: "Timeball on the ballastoffice is down. Dunsink time. Fascinating little book that is of sir Robert Ball's. Parallax. I never exactly understood. There's a priest. Could ask him. Par it's Greek: parallel, parallax."<sup>176</sup> Bloom's astronomical speculations continue later in the episode: "Now that I come to think of it that ball falls at Greenwich time. It's the clock is worked by an electric wire from Dunsink. Must go out there some first Saturday of the month. If I could get an introduction to professor Joly or learn up something about his family. That would do: man always feels complimented. Flattery when least expected. Nobleman proud to be descended from some king's mistress. His foremother. Lay it on with a trowel. Cap in hand goes through the land. Not go in and blurt out what you know you're not supposed to: what's parallax?"

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<sup>176</sup> *Ulysses*, 8.109–12.

Show this gentleman the door.”<sup>177</sup> Bloom’s thoughts here follow a familiar pattern: interested in a factoid or fragment of knowledge unexpectedly hit upon by his ceaselessly-working mind, Bloom pursues it desultorily, widening the scope of the thought beyond the intellectual to the personal and metaphysical.<sup>178</sup> All of this is wonderfully realistic, Bloom’s buzzing, minutiae-minded thoughts perfectly imitating the sparkling scrim of consciousness.<sup>179</sup> But the deep intertextuality of these references push the text beyond realism as well: tracking the various references to Ball, one becomes aware of the larger architecture of the book, of its extremely inwrought, patterned nature: of the constellation of signs and signifiers whose play, rather than any realistic action or narrative, is perhaps *Ulysses*’ true subject.<sup>180</sup> This even more true of the poetically-titled *In the Track of the Sun*, whose explanatory tag in the catalog—“Frequent title intestation”—is another metatextual joke. The extremely rare *intestation* would seem to derive not from the English adjective *intestate*—a legal term denoting one who has died without making a legal will—but from Joyce’s etymological cobbling together of the Latin prefix *in-* (“in, within, on, upon, among, at”) and *testatus* (“public, manifest, evident, indisputable, published”):

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<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.571–78. During his apotheosis in “Circe,” Bloom will brag of knowing Sir Robert: “I have moved in the charmed circle of the highest .... Queens of Dublin society. (*carelessly*) I was just chatting this afternoon at the viceregal lodge to my old pals, sir Robert and lady Ball, astronomer royal, at the levee, Sir Bob, I said .....” (15.1009–12).

<sup>178</sup> It is worth noting that after his imagined trip to Dunsink, Bloom becomes extremely dejected (he is hungry, and his empty stomach contributes in no little part to his vacillating mood)—“Never know anything about it. Waste of time” (8.581)—and his thoughts expand outward to a vision of total cosmic entropy (the “Gasballs spinning about. . . .” passage looked at above, pp. 8–9).

<sup>179</sup> As Lawrence, 561, notes, “At certain, specific points in the text when the narrative catalogues objects or focuses on nature, it is paraphrasing the thoughts of Leopold Bloom.”

<sup>180</sup> Bazargan, 749, notes that “In their rigidity and malleability, lists inhabit the space between order and chaos, certainty and uncertainty, discipline and anarchy, power and play.” Her reading of the lists in *Ulysses* is more Foucauldian—cf. *ibid.*, 749–51, for her exquisite look at Joyce’s first experience of lists, his enrollment in the Punishment Book at Clongowes College as a boy—than mine, which tends more toward the ludic, transgressive, and aporetic functions of these astonishing verbal productions.

*intestation*, then, means “manifestation, occurrence.” The joke becomes obvious when we turn to the first chapter of Bloom’s wanderings, the “Calypso” episode, in which Bloom, setting out from his home to buy a pork kidney for breakfast, indulges in the first of what will be many Orientalist reveries about voyaging to the Far East:

Somewhere in the east: early morning: set off at dawn. Travel round in front of the sun, steal a day’s march on him. Keep it up for ever never grow a day old technically. Walk along a strand, strange land, come to a city gate, sentry there, old ranker too, old Tweedy’s big moustaches, leaning on a long kind of a spear. Wander through awned streets. Turbaned faces going by. Dark caves of carpet shops, big man, Turko the terrible, seated crosslegged, smoking a coiled pipe. Cries of sellers in the streets. Drink water scented with fennel, sherbet. Dander along all day. Might meet a robber or two. Well, meet him. Getting on to sundown. The shadows of the mosques among the pillars: priest with a scroll rolled up. A shiver of the trees, signal, the evening wind. I pass on. Fading gold sky. A mother watches me from her doorway. She calls her children home in their dark language. High wall: beyond strings twanged. night sky, moon, violet, colour of Molly’s new garters. Strings. Listen. A girl playing one of those instruments what do you call them: dulcimers. I pass.

Probably not a bit like it really. Kind of stuff you read: in the track of the sun. Sunburst on the titlepage.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.84–100. A tantalizing question, never answered by the text, is what has happened to the title page of Bloom’s copy of the book: the catalog lists it as “missing,” but Bloom, as the above makes plain, has obviously seen the title page somewhere, raising the possibility that Bloom has perhaps mutilated his book himself (as he would seem to have done with his copy of *Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland*, from which, the catalog notes, the “previous owner’s name on recto of flyleaf [has been] erased”—did Bloom, seized by the coincidence of his name appearing on the cover, steal the book and then erase the owner’s name to cover up his theft?). Ouimet, 37, discusses the above passage as an example of Bloom’s frequent *flânerie*, and quotes Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* in support: “We know that, in the course of flânerie, far-off times and places interpenetrate the landscape and the present moment.” (Benjamin, 1999, 419). The girl playing the dulcimer is, of course, a reference (wonderfully obscured by Bloom’s uncertain “what do you call them”) to that great nineteenth-century Orientalist dream-poem, Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”—“A damsel with a dulcimer / in a vision once I saw. / It was an Abyssinian maid / and on her dulcimer she played / singing of Mount Abora”—which in turn derives from bk. 4, ll. 280–82, of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “where *Abassin* kings thir issue Guard, / Mount *Amara*, though this by som suppos’d / True Paradise under the *Ethiop* Line” (Milton, 324).

Hugh Kenner refers to passages such as the above as “Mr. Bloom’s *Drang nach Osten*”:<sup>182</sup> that is, Bloom’s “drive toward the East,” his frequent, romantic journeys away from grey Dublin to the more colorful lands of his imagination. While the phrase *in the track of the sun* appears nowhere else in *Ulysses*, the *Drang nach Osten* theme—itsself a subset of Joyce’s obsessive repeating and refiguring of the larger “Wanderings of Odysseus” theme<sup>183</sup>—occurs throughout the book, as in Bloom’s catalog of Eastern pleasures in the beginning of the “Lotus-Eaters” episode: “The far east. Lovely spot it must be: the garden of the world, big lazy leaves to float about on, cactuses, flowery meads, snaky lianas they call them. Wonder is it like that. Those Cinghalese lobbing about in the sun in *dolce far niente*, not doing a hand’s turn all day. Sleep six months out of twelve. Too hot to quarrel. Influence of the climate. Lethargy. Flowers of idleness.”<sup>184</sup> The “recurrent title intestation” announced by the catalog of Bloom’s library, then, takes the reader completely out of the mimetic verisimilitude of the text: it is a comment, an authorial signpost revealing Joyce’s aesthetic and technique.

If the catalog of Bloom’s books wavers uncertainly between Realism and Modernism, between verisimilitude and self-referential inter- and intratextuality, then an earlier catalog of books, from the “Circe” episode, gives itself wholly to the surreal and bizarre pole of the text. The catalog of “*the World’s Twelve Worst Books*” comes at the end of another catalog describing gifts distributed by Bloom’s retinue during his madcap carnivalesque tenure as Lord of Misrule over Dublin’s Nighttown:

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<sup>182</sup> Kenner, 1962, 241.

<sup>183</sup> The theme is struck again in the catalog of books with the pseudonymous author “Viator”—Gifford and Seidman, 124, note that the *nom de plume* “was used by several travel writers at the turn of the century”—which is Latin for “a wayfarer, traveller.”

<sup>184</sup> *Ulysses*, 5.29–35. Note how Bloom’s thoughts are themselves lethargic, as if dazed by the midmorning sun, and become increasingly staccato and fragmented.

*Bloom's bodyguard distribute Maundy money, commemoration medals, loaves and fishes, temperance badges, expensive Henry Clay cigars, free cowbones for soup, rubber preservatives in sealed envelopes tied with gold thread, butter scotch, pineapple rock, billets doux in the form of cocked hats, readymade suits, porringers of toad in the hole, bottles of Jeyes' Fluid, purchase stamps, 40 days' indulgences, spurious coins, dairymade pork sausages, theatre passes, season tickets available for all tramlines, coupons of the royal and privileged Hungarian lottery, penny dinner counters, cheap reprints of the World's Twelve Worst Books: Froggy and Fritz (politic), Care of the Baby (infantile), 50 Meals for 7/6 (culinic), Was Jesus a Sun Myth? (historic), Expel That Pain (medic), Infant's Compendium of the Universe (cosmic), Let's All Chortle (hilaric), Canvasser's Vade Mecum (journalic), Loveletters of Mother Assistant (erotic), Who's Who in Space (astric), Songs that Reached Our Heart (melodic), Pennywise's Way to Wealth (parsimonic).<sup>185</sup>*

It would be difficult to find a less serious moment in the book: Joyce's comedic addition of the bad books to the end of an already overstuffed catalog is a kind of literary brinkmanship, a willingness to push at the reader's already taxed limits, a brazen disregard of form and proportion. From the list of goodies bestowed on Dublin's fawning populace, we can see that the New Bloomusalem is a gilded paradise at best, one given to shows of munificence—the soup bones, sweets, condoms, “*spurious coins*,” and fake lottery tickets—rather than to any real public weal. The Worst Books are just icing on the cake, mental pabulum to go along with the butterscotch, pineapple rock, and toad in the hole.<sup>186</sup> Some of the titles, however, bear interest, such as *Froggy and Fritz*, which calls to mind the First World War (1914–18), fought largely between France and Germany during the years in which Joyce, safe in Zurich, was writing *Ulysses*. Joyce's aloofness to the war seems almost shockingly callous, an excessively Olympian

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 15.1568–84. Gifford and Seidman, 476, note (rather too dutifully, it seems) that “The books . . . may well be fictional, since only one of them (mercifully) appears in standard book catalogues.”

<sup>186</sup> Some critics, such as Goldberg, 190, speak dismissively of “the immense catalogues of junk,” such as this one.

attitude toward the historical cataclysm that was the Great War and its aftermath.<sup>187</sup> Yet there is a point to the nose-thumbing as well: the comic diminution of the two great powers through their respective national stereotypes has the effect of ironizing the entire conflict, of rendering its causes and passions (once so important and now largely forgotten) silly, the stuff of a stupid joke: what *was* all the fuss about, anyway?<sup>188</sup> The “culinic” addition to the list, *50 Meals for 7/6*, could stand in as an alternate title for the three volumes of Joyce’s *Letters*: one recalls especially the letters from Paris, their uneasy mingling of fear and bravado, their revelation of the young Joyce’s desperate attempts not to starve. (Here the book uncannily anticipates the budget travel guides of today, Joyce ironically portraying abject poverty as Yet Another Thrilling Adventure.) The *Canvasser’s Vade Mecum* brings us back again to *Ulysses* itself: as noted above, Bloom is an advertisement canvasser, and a vade mecum (Latin: “go with me”) is any sort of handy reference guide, especially one often carried about on one’s person. While the imposing bulk of *Ulysses* certainly prevents it from being a pocket-sized guide to Dublin and its environs, the text makes similar claims to encyclopedic comprehensiveness; moreover, reading the text we accompany Bloom, going around Dublin with him, visiting familiar haunts and unfamiliar locales, taking in the sights and sounds, and meeting with him citizens of every type and

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<sup>187</sup> Of course, *Ulysses*, which takes place in 1904, a full ten prelapsarian years before the outbreak of the war, could not treat of the historical events that accompanied its composition without committing gross anachronism. Ellmann, 728, quoting and paraphrasing an interview with Samuel Beckett, offers the following anecdote of Joyce’s dismay upon the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939: “‘What is the use of this war?’ he demanded of Beckett, who thought it had a use and a reason; Joyce was convinced it had none. What was worse, it was distracting the world from reading *Finnegans Wake*, in which the unimportance of wars in the total cycle of human activity was perfectly clear.”

<sup>188</sup> Joyce returns to this theme at the beginning of *Finnegans Wake*, where he parodies the names of two once-fearsome Germanic tribes, the Ostrogoths and Visigoths, by way of Aristophanes’ *Frogs* and some unbridled onomatopoeic ululation: “What clashes here of wills gen wonts, oystrygods gaggin fishygods! Brékkék Kékkék Kékkék Kékkék! Kóax Kóax Kóax! Ualu Ualu Ualu! Quaaouauh!” (4).

character.<sup>189</sup> Seemingly comedic, then, the list of the World's Twelve Worst Books reveals a surprising range of tonality, not the least of which is self-reflexivity, as the text once again snakes back upon itself.

Another interesting self-reflexive textual catalog comes in the “Eumaeus” episode. This time it is not a list of books, but a list of names of the mourners present at the funeral of Patrick Dignam, which Bloom has attended earlier in the day in the “Hades” episode. Bloom and Stephen are at the cabman’s shelter near Butt Bridge; tired from his night’s exertions—he has just saved Stephen from the mob outside Bella Cohen’s brothel—Bloom’s eyes rove over the headlines of the “pink edition extra sporting” of the *Evening Telegraph*: “Great battle, Tokio. Lovemaking in Irish, £200 damages. Gordon Bennett. Emigration Swindle. Letter from His Grace. William Δ. Ascot meeting, the Gold Cup. Victory of outsider *Throwaway* recalls Derby of ’92 when Capt. Marshall’s dark horse *Sir Hugo* captured the blue ribband at long odds. New York disaster. Thousand lives lost. Foot and Mouth. Funeral of the late Mr Patrick Dignam.”<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Cf. Stephen’s peroration to his Shakespeare lecture in “Scylla and Charybdis,” yet another of the text’s self-referential moments: “Maeterlinck says: *If Socrates leave his house today he will find the sage seated on his doorstep. If Judas go forth tonight it is to Judas his steps will tend.* Every life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves” (*Ulysses*, 9.1042–46). The *Canvasser’s Vade Mecum* also seems a buried reference to *Thom’s Dublin Post Office Directory*, discussed above, pp. 36–38. Budgen, 69, records Joyce’s now-famous desire “to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book”; for a critical unpacking of this claim, and of *Ulysses*’ claims to encyclopedic status as a chronicle of Dublin, see Hegglund, esp. 164–65, who notes (165), “Joyce’s reliance on mapping is merely a modernist aesthetic strategy designed to give his novel the legitimating weight of fact.”

<sup>190</sup> *Ulysses*, 16.1240–45. A computerized recreation of the paper, necessitated by the deterioration of the originals, is available online at <http://joyce.msk.ru/ulysses/LastPink.pdf>. Joyce includes fake headlines from the *Evening Telegraph* in *Stephen Hero* (Joyce, 1963, 221), which comically place literature last after a string of quite uninspiring news stories: “Nationalist Meeting at Ballinrobe. Important Speeches. Main Drainage Scheme. Breezy Discussion. Death of a Well-known Solicitor. Mad Cod at Cabra. Literature &.” (The list is printed vertically in the book, and I have altered the punctuation slightly.)

The short list of news items leads to the description of the funeral itself, interspersed with Bloom's thoughts and comments:

*This morning (Hynes put it in of course) the remains of the late Mr Patrick Dignam were removed from his residence, no 9 Newbridge Avenue, Sandymount, for interment in Glasnevin. The deceased gentleman was a most popular and genial personality in city life and his demise after a brief illness came as a great shock to citizens of all classes by whom he is deeply regretted. The obsequies, at which many friends of the deceased were present, were carried out by (certainly Hynes wrote it with a nudge from Corny) Messrs H. J. O'Neill and Son, 164 North Strand Road. The mourners included: Patk. Dignam (son), Bernard Corrigan (brother-in-law), Jno. Henry Menton, solr, Martin Cunningham, John Power, .) eatondph 1/8 ador dorador douradora (must be where he called Monks the dayfather about Keyes's ad) Thomas Kernan, Simon Dedalus, Stephen Dedalus, B. A., Edw. J. Lambert, Cornelius T. Kelleher, Joseph M'C Hynes, L. Boom, CP M'Coy, – M'Intosh and several others.<sup>191</sup>*

Bloom's parenthetical comments act as a sort of chorus to the primary text of the newspaper column: "Hynes" is Joe Hynes, the *Telegraph* correspondent covering the funeral, "Corny" is Corny Kelleher, the mysterious undertaker who brings Dignam's body to Glasnevin cemetery. Bloom humorously notes the prominence given to Kelleher's employers: written "with a nudge from Corny," Hynes's article gives them full prominence, a somewhat cynical mix of business with civic and private duty. There are other lapses between truth and newsprint as well: Dignam, a petulant drunk like many Dubliners in *Ulysses*, was hardly the "most popular and genial personality in city life" remembered by the obituary, as the thoughts of his son, Patrick junior,

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<sup>191</sup> *Ulysses*, 16.1248–61. Cf. Bloom's contemptuous listing of the "stale news" published in newspapers at 7.89–96: "Queen Anne is dead. Published by authority in the year one thousand and. Demesne situate in the townland of Rosenallis, barony of Tinnahinch. To all whom it may concern schedule pursuant to statute showing return of number of mules and jennets exported from Ballina. Nature notes. Cartoons. Phil Blake's weekly Pat and Bull story. Uncle Toby's page for tiny tots. Country bumpkin's queries. Dear Mr Editor, what is a good cure for flatulence? I'd like that part."

thinking of his father's death in the "Wandering Rocks" episode, attest: "The last night pa was boosed he was standing on the landing there bawling out for his boots to go out to Tunney's for to boose more and he looked butty and short in his shirt."<sup>192</sup> Perhaps the most glaring error is a typographic one, the nonsense line "*eatondph 1/8 ador dorador douradora*" that follows John Power's name: as Bloom surmises, this error was introduced by Bloom's distracting of Nannetti, the *Telegraph's* foreman, during his visit to the *Telegraph* offices in the "Aeolus" episode.<sup>193</sup> The final, funniest errors come in the catalog proper, with the false addition of "*Stephen Dedalus, B. A.*" and "*C. P. M'Coy*" to the mourners—as seen in the "Proteus" episode, Stephen is out walking on Sandymount strand during Dignam's funeral,<sup>194</sup> and M'Coy prevails upon Bloom in "Lotus Eaters" to put his name down in his absence<sup>195</sup>—the transformation of the ubiquitous "Man in the Macintosh" into the proper name "*M'Intosh*," and the reduction of Bloom's name to "*L. Boom*." Bloom's bemused thoughts on the errors round out the section: "Nettled not a little by L. Boom (as it incorrectly stated) and the line of bitched type but tickled to death simultaneously by C. P. M'Coy and Stephen Dedalus B. A. who were conspicuous, needless to say, by their total absence (to say nothing of M'Intosh) L. Boom pointed it out to his companion B. A. engaged in stifling another yawn, half nervousness, not forgetting the usual crop of

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.1167–69. Bloom's memories in "Hades" echo and confirm this: "Blazing face. Redhot. Too much John Barleycorn. Cure for a red nose. Drink like the devil till it turns adelite. A lot of money he spend colouring it" (6.307–09).

<sup>193</sup> The action takes place at *ibid.*, 7.120–94, most likely during Nannetti's confusion at 180–94, where (180) he hands back a half-read "galley page" while looking for Monks, the *Telegraph's* dayfather, or "shop steward" (Gifford and Seidman, 132). Monks himself gets a nice mini-catalog when Bloom thinks of his past work at the newspaper: "Queer lot of stuff he must have put through his hands in his time: obituary notices, pubs' ads, speeches, divorce suits, found drowned" (197–99).

<sup>194</sup> The men glimpse him walking on their way to Glasnevin (they are riding in a carriage) at 6.39–50.

<sup>195</sup> *Ulysses*, 5.169–77.

nonsensical howlers of misprints.”<sup>196</sup> Yet again, we are turned from narration to text, from the world of mimesis and realism to the world of material textuality: as with the *Telegraph*, whose mistakes are largely unnoticeable (excluding, of course, the “line of bitched type”) save to Bloom, who was a witness and knows the truth, we are reminded that all that exists are words on the page, black letters on white paper whose claims to truth are provisional, contingent, and open to question.<sup>197</sup>

Similar textual fun is to be had in “Scylla and Charybdis,” which takes place in Dublin’s National Library, and during which Stephen harangues a group of unsympathetic *litterateurs* with his highly idiosyncratic theories on Shakespeare, his troubled marriage to Anne Hathaway, the Bard’s (imputed) melancholy, and the composition of the poet’s dramatic works. Like any

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<sup>196</sup> *Ulysses*, 16.1262–67.

<sup>197</sup> A similar moment of textual confusion and error breaking the “fourth wall” of verisimilitude comes when Bloom reads “Martha Clifford’s”—it is a pseudonym, and we never definitively learn her true identity—letter in “Lotus Eaters.” The letter is peppered with misspellings and malapropisms, as in her naïve attempt at seduction: “Please write me a long letter and tell me more. Remember if you do not I will punish you. So now you know what I will do to you, you naughty boy, if you do not wrote” (5.251–53). To this Bloom bitchily responds: “Wonder did she wrote it herself” (268–69). Johnson, xxx, traces the fascinating textual history of Bloom’s remark: “The odd things about this mistake is that Joyce the author wrote ‘write’. It was either the typist or the typesetter who ‘wrote’ ‘wrote’. Joyce did not notice it until several proofs of this episode had been pulled and had repeatedly repeated ‘wrote’. When he did notice it, Joyce the writer wrote Bloom’s ‘I wonder did she wrote it’, thus opening wide his authorial arms to embrace the typesetter’s mistake. . . . Errors, it seems, are volitional even when made by someone else.” Johnson notes further “We trust . . . that despite their erroneous status ‘L. Boom’ . . . and ‘wrote’ communicate meanings that lie outside the scope of narrow rectitude. . . . Joyce’s alternative authority is one which recognizes the inevitability of error, exercises a healthy skepticism, and yet happily embraces the new world occasioned by the fall, the lapses” (ibid.). To this I would add that such self-referential moments also ironize the text, adding to Joyce’s love of error by stressing that his literary productions themselves are fallen, untrustworthy, and fictive, both in the sense of “false” and of “put together” (from Latin *ingere*, “to put together, create”). For another example of Joyce’s incorporation of the words of his assistants into the writing of *Ulysses*, see Ellmann, 521–22, who relates the tale of Joyce’s French translator, Jacques Benoît-Méchin, and his providential addition—through the difficulty of translating the final sentence of the “Penelope” episode and his subsequent discussion-argument with Joyce—of the last word, Joyce’s famous “Yes,” to *Ulysses*.

interesting work of criticism, Stephen's speech-lecture-improvisation is much more about himself than its ostensible subject, although he frequently displays (for the time) a fine sensitivity to the role of history and culture in Shakespeare's work. Not surprisingly, he often uses catalogs to connect the plays with Shakespeare's life and times, as when he offers the fine mini-catalog as proof of the overflowing abundance—or "infinite variety," to use Shakespeare's words, as Stephen will himself later in his talk<sup>198</sup>—of the Elizabethan era and of the plays: "His life was rich. His art, more than the art of feudalism as Walt Whitman called it, is the art of surfeit. Hot herringpies, green mugs of sack, honeysauces, sugar of roses, marchpane, gooseberried pigeons, ringocandies. Sir Walter Raleigh, when they arrested him, had half a million francs on his back including a pair of fancy stays. The gombeenwoman Eliza Tudor had underlinen enough to vie with her of Sheba."<sup>199</sup> Much of this, of course, is fancy set dressing, as Stephen, ever the good Jesuit, lards his sentences with much extraneous colorful detail, perfectly in line with the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius.<sup>200</sup> He is more direct when discussing the plays themselves and their numerous borrowings from Elizabethan-Jacobean history:

All events brought grist to his mill. Shylock chimes with the jewbaiting that followed the hanging and quartering of the queen's leech Lopez, his jew's heart

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<sup>198</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra* 2.2.243; *Ulysses*, 999–1002, 1012–15: "The note of banishment, banishment from the heart, banishment from home, sounds uninterruptedly from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* onward till Prospero breaks his staff, buries it certain fathoms in the earth and drowns his book. . . . It is in infinite variety everywhere in the world he has created, in *Much Ado about Nothing*, twice in *As You Like It*, in *The Tempest*, in *Hamlet*, in *Measure for Measure* – and in all the other plays which I have not read."

<sup>199</sup> *Ulysses*, 9.625–31.

<sup>200</sup> Cf. 9.158, 163: "Local colour. Work in all you know. Make them accomplices. . . . Compostion of place. Ignatius Loyola, make haste to help me!" This last line comes from Joyce's Trieste notebook of July-August 1914—published as *Giacomo Joyce*—as Joyce catalogs the various expressions conveyed by the pleasantries of Signore Leopoldo Popper, father of his pupil, Amalia, on whom Joyce has a crush: "O! Perfectly said: courtesy, benevolence, curiosity, trust, suspicion, naturalness, helplessness of age, confidence, frankness, urbanity, sincerity, warning, pathos, compassion: a perfect blend. Ignatius Loyola, make haste to help me!" (Joyce, 1983, 5).

being plucked forth while the sheeny was yet alive: *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* with the coming to the throne of a Scotch philosophaster with a turn for witchroasting. The lost armada is his jeer in *Love's Labour Lost*. His pageants, the histories, sail fullbellied on a tide of Mafeking enthusiasm. Warwickshire jesuits are tried and we have a porter's theory of equivocation. The *Sea Venture* comes home from Bermudas and the play Renan admired is written with Patsy Caliban, our American cousin. The sugared sonnets follow Sidney's. As for fay Elizabeth, otherwise carrotty Bess, the gross virgin who inspired the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, let some meinherr from Almany grope his life long for deephid meanings in the depths of the buckbasket.<sup>201</sup>

Stephen's remarks are telegraphic and elliptical, off-the-cuff, wholly extemporized: a remarkable tour-de-force of wit. His comparisons collapse both time and space: he notes the "Mafeking enthusiasm" of Shakespeare's histories, alluding to the British garrison that held out for the better part of a year during the Second Boer War, and whose relief on 17 May 1900 was greeted in London with "a riotous victory celebration out of all proportion to the military significance of the event"<sup>202</sup>; his note on *The Tempest* takes in the theories of Sidney Lee, who in *The Life of William Shakespeare* (1898) first advanced the theory that the wreck of the *Sea Venture* in 1609 inspired Shakespeare's play,<sup>203</sup> and goes on the French critic Ernest Renan, who was inspired by

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 9.748–60.

<sup>202</sup> Gifford and Seidman, 235. The authors note further that "'Mafeking' later became a term for extravagant (and essentially unwarranted) display of enthusiasm for the British Empire and expansionist policy" (ibid.): a good contemporary adjective would be *Wolfowitzian*.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid. Cf. Stephen Orgel's introduction (with further bibliography) to Shakespeare, 1987, 31–36, where he notes (32) "[Passenger] William Strachey's account of the adventure is generally considered to have clear echoes in the play. This letter, though not printed until 1625, certainly circulated in manuscript, and Shakespeare was evidently familiar with it. The playwright was associated, moreover, with a number of members of the Virginia Company: Southampton, the dedicatee of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, Pembroke, who was to be a dedicatee of the folio, Christopher Brooke, Dudley Digges, and others; and he may have known Strachey. Shakespeare's interest in the venture would have been at least partly personal." Orgel reprints selections from the letter, often called by its title, "A true repertory of the wreck and redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, Knight. . . ." at 209–19.

*The Tempest* to write a sequel, “Caliban,”<sup>204</sup> and ends with a snide swipe at Irish emigration to America: *Patsy*, as Gifford and Seidman note, is a common name in “nineteenth-century stage caricatures of the immigrant Irish,”<sup>205</sup> thus turning Shakespeare’s cannibal savage into an Irish-American “cousin” of Stephen and other stay-at-homes.<sup>206</sup> Stephen ends his riff on a downbeat, nearly disowning his own bravura performance—as he will do later, when, asked “Do you believe your own theory?”, he “promptly” responds “No”<sup>207</sup>—and distancing himself from his own energetic labors. Curiously, he leaves the task of further interpretation to others, here contemptuously dismissed as “some meinherr from Almany”—a shot at nineteenth-century German philological criticism and scholarship—whom he imagines “grop[ing] his life long for deephid meanings in the depths of the buckbasket.” We are again made to think of *Ulysses* and its own considerable hermeneutic challenges, encapsulated by Joyce in his famous (and, by now, quite tiresome) statement “I’ve put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that’s the only way of insuring

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<sup>204</sup> Gifford and Seidman, 218.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>206</sup> *Our American Cousin* is, of course, the play Lincoln was watching at Ford’s Theater when he was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth on 14 April 1865: *ibid.*, 144. It is tempting to suspect Joyce of further mischievous splicing of history and fiction here: Booth was a famous Shakespearean actor, and *The Tempest* (not to mention other of Shakespeare’s plays, perhaps most notably *Julius Caesar*) contains multiple references to the assassination of tyrants both perceived and real: cf. the backstory of Prospero’s deposition and deportment, narrated by Prospero to Miranda at 1.2, during which Miranda wonders “Wherefore did they not / That hour destroy us?” (138–39), to which Prospero responds “Dear, they durst not, / So dear the love my people bore me, nor set / A mark so bloody on the business” (140–42); Antonio’s lengthy attempt to seduce Sebastian to murder his brother Alonso, King of Naples, at 2.1.201–325; and, finally, the drunken porters Trinculo and Stephano’s hilariously half-assed attempt to kill Prospero in his cell—Caliban (who notes that he is “subject to a tyrant” [3.2.40]) having advised them that “There thou may’st brain him / . . . or with a log / Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake, / Or cut his weasand with thy knife” (3.2.86–89)—at 3.2.40–150 and 4.1.194–267. It is worth noting that one of the dogs that Prospero sics on Caliban and the drunks is named “Tyrant” (4.1.258): a far cry from Booth’s *sic semper tyrannis*, but nevertheless interesting.

<sup>207</sup> *Ulysses*, 9.1065–66, 1067.

one's immortality."<sup>208</sup> As this chapter has shown, Joyce's *Ulysses* catalogs, in their intractable density, their stylistic polymorphousness, and their narrational perversity, remain among the most puzzling of Joyce's textual enigmas.

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<sup>208</sup> Ellmann, 521 (1956 interview with the French translator of *Ulysses*, Jacques Benoît-Méchin). Ellmann reports this conversation as having taken place sometime in October of 1921, some thirty-five years before his interview: it is perhaps not too much, then, to ascribe the vapidness of the statement to Benoît-Méchin's (faulty? romanticized? self-aggrandizing?) memory, and not to Joyce himself.

### 3. “Let’s make a list”: James Schuyler’s Catalogs

More than his companions among the New York School of poets, authors such as Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery, the work of poet, novelist, belletrist, and critic James Schuyler (born James Ridenour, 9 November 1923–12 April 1991) is alive with catalogs and lists, first as simple tools for recording the details of everyday life, and, more centrally to his art, as aesthetic strategies that lend expansiveness, energy, and an encyclopedic scope to his writing. Schuyler’s work teems with catalogs, as can be seen from one of his earliest surviving letters—the first in editor William Corbett’s superb, useful collection *Just the Thing: Selected Letters of James Schuyler 1951–1991*—in which Schuyler, writing to his friend, the art dealer John Hohnsbeen, launches into an ecstatic list of seemingly everything on his mind: “I am well. How are you? It is wonderful here, etc. *Long* to see you (those pretty eyes!), to hear that dear voice saying those scandalous things. Well, well, so you scalped a British-American novelist! *Good* for you; go it boy! When are you leaving for the West? Have you memorized the *Bhagavad-Gita* yet? So you think Vedanta is more *us* than Catholicism, Anglo-, Roman- or otherwise? Do answer me seriously; you know if there is anything I approve of more than another it’s the sexy road to Heaven. Tell me all: is it Vedanta, the Mystic Way, Huxley, Heard & Hollywood, or is it still Connecticut, the dear deer, the steady lay, the unprivate walls?”<sup>209</sup>

While not a catalog proper in the strict sense of the term as used in the previous chapter, Schuyler’s letter is indeed a catalog of sorts, a dumping-ground and overbrimming container for the twenty-seven-years-old poet and his enthusiasms. The first paragraph of the letter breathlessly includes the required pleasantries, talk of sex, Schuyler’s boisterous approval of the same, travel plans, and reading material, before settling on the subject of religious deliverance,

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<sup>209</sup> Schuyler, 2004, 3.

what Schuyler winningly terms “the sexy road to Heaven.” Schuyler’s short catalog is a private (almost hermetically so) communication: “Vedanta” refers back to Hohnsbeen’s recent reading of the *Bhagavad-Gita*; “Connecticut” refers to architect Philip Johnson (Hohnsbeen’s lover at the time); “the unprivate walls” refers to Johnson’s home, Glass House; and so on. It also functions as an impromptu literary performance, a witty mingling of the paths to bliss offered by, respectively, Hindu philosophy, Hollywood movies, country living, and gay sex. Catalogs were natural, ready-to-hand forms for Schuyler (and, indeed, his fellow New York Schoolers) to write in, a technology rooted in the practices of his everyday life and offering an expandable space within which to list an ever-growing universe of loved objects, places, and people, a natural register for what Wayne Koestenbaum calls “the sound of pre-Stonewall urban gay argot, a lingua franca of dropped hairpins and insider references to film and opera—a weft of arcane allusions that turned the simple sociable act of talking nonstop into performance art.”<sup>210</sup>

Schuyler’s prose catalogs are of a piece with his poetic ones, each seeking to capture in a comprehensible form the vagaries and vicissitudes of Schuyler’s complex, busy life, what Schuyler describes in his *Diary* as “the extraordinary *excess* of experience.”<sup>211</sup> It is worth lingering over Schuyler’s prose catalogs before turning to his poetic ones, for it is there that what critics have so celebrated in Schuyler’s poems—a sense of vivid presence and immediacy; a sharp attention to the lyrical and humdrum aspects of daily life;<sup>212</sup> a keen sense of passing time,

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<sup>210</sup> Koestenbaum, intro *MC*. As Corbett notes in his introduction to Schuyler, 2004, ix, “Schuyler liked to provide his friends . . . with his guide to beloved Italian cities, gardening advice, recipes, and quotes [*sic*] from his omnivorous reading. He loved to amuse them with gossip and anecdotes drolly told, but his letters are entertaining by virtue of their tone of spoken immediacy.” My idea of Schuyler’s listmaking and cataloging as rooted in his practical responses to issues of the everyday was suggested by de Certeau.

<sup>211</sup> Schuyler, 1997, 99. Italics in original.

<sup>212</sup> An attention that Schuyler valued in other artists, as in his friend and benefactor Fairfield Porter, of whose paintings Schuyler, 1998, 16–17, wrote, “What we are given is an aspect of

dates commemorated, friends celebrated, mourned, and remembered—can be met with equal intensity. Indeed, it is in Schuyler’s letters and *Diary* that we find what Roland Barthes calls “a form which in fact rallies [literature’s] qualities: the individuation, the scent, the seduction, the fetishism of language.”<sup>213</sup> Another comment from Barthes, this time from *The Pleasure of the Text*, provides further gloss for Schuyler’s diaristic and epistolary catalogs:

Why do some people, including myself, enjoy in certain novels, biographies, and historical works the representation of the “daily life” of an epoch, of a character? Why this curiosity about petty details: schedules, habits, meals, lodging, clothing, etc.? Is it the hallucinatory relish of “reality” (the very materiality of “*that once existed*”)? And is it not the fantasy itself which invokes the “detail,” the tiny private scene, in which I can easily take my place? Are there, in short, “minor hysterics” (these very readers) who receive bliss from a singular theater: not one of grandeur but one of mediocrity (might there not be dreams, fantasies of mediocrity)?

Thus, impossible to imagine a more tenuous, a more insignificant notation than that of “today’s weather” (or yesterday’s); and yet, the other day, reading, trying to read [Henri-Frédéric] Amiel, irritation that the well-meaning editor (another person foreclosing pleasure) had seen fit to omit from this *Journal* the everyday details, what the weather was like on the shores of Lake Geneva, and retain only insipid moral musing: yet it is this weather that has not aged, not Amiel’s philosophy.<sup>214</sup>

Schuyler’s prose catalogs offer this “hallucinatory relish” of the past’s “petty details” with the crucial component of pleasure, both Schuyler’s poetic persona’s self-evident pleasure in lyricism, and the pleasure his poems create in their readers. As Wayne Koestenbaum notes of Schuyler,

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everyday life, seen neither as a snapshot nor as an exaltation. Its art is one that values the everyday as the ultimate, the most varied and desirable knowledge. What these paintings celebrate is never treated as an archetype: they are concentrated instances. They are not a substitute for religion, they are an attitude toward life. . . . Their concern is with immediacy: “Look *now*. It will never be more fascinating” (partly quoted in Gray, 176).

<sup>213</sup> Barthes, 1996, 482.

<sup>214</sup> Barthes, 1975, 53–54.

“Each day is an eclectic collection of moods and circumstances, potentially catastrophic; toward a ruined day’s end, cheerfulness sometimes breaks through. The movement of his thought owes more to the diary’s or letter’s amplitudes than to the poem’s parsimoniousness. . . . Schuyler opens up ‘poem’ to gay air; changes the dull wallpaper; lets light fall on a neglected corner; solves the question of garbage collection—how to handle a day’s waste, how to convert indolence into literature. Indolence is more than a temperament. It is a religion. The indispensable poets have cultivated it.”<sup>215</sup> We get, as we do in the poems, both the poet’s musings and the excitement and buzz of his daily life: both the philosophy and the weather on the shores of Lake Geneva, then, or, rather, the mental weather on the shores of Lake Schuyler, a vast, dazzling catalog of thoughts, impressions, memories, and desires.<sup>216</sup> As Mark Hillringhouse writes, himself offering up a mini-catalog of Schuyler’s guises, “Schuyler is a painterly poet, descriptive rather than metaphorical. The act of dropping names and naming objects (a typical New York School trait)<sup>217</sup> connects him to the reality of his world. He is a poet of domestic routine, of cups and saucers, milk and jam. He is the poet of friends’ visits, birthdays, people dropping by, (another very New York School trait), of weekends in the Hamptons or upstate, or Maine or New Hampshire, or Vermont. He is a poet of past events shaping his life into the

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<sup>215</sup> Koestenbaum, 36.

<sup>216</sup> Lehman, 254, notes that “The notation of the weather turns into a sublime activity in Schuyler’s diaries.” Indeed, the weather appears so often in Schuyler’s writing as a whole as become for him a masterplot, leitmotif, and dominant metaphor. Cf. Clark: “*Ta meteora*—“the elements”—have been a subject of written poetry as far back as Hesiod and doubtless in the oral tradition well beyond that. They surround us and inhabit us. The expressive mimetic figurations of Schuyler’s poems play out as language the hidden resemblances one senses between the weather and one’s inner life. . . . With Schuyler, weather and mood become so closely interrelated that it’s probably wiser to regard them as aspects of a single process; the poet feels as the day feels, and vice versa. Thus the changeable weathers of fall and spring occupy him so extensively through that roller coaster of moods which is the midsection of the *Collected*, a part of the book, and a time in the poet’s life, when the swing from exhilaration to depression and hack again can take place in a matter of moments.”

<sup>217</sup> Cf. Lehman, 247.

present, of things said remembered years later. He is a poet of long conversations with friends over dinner.<sup>218</sup> Taken together, the diary entries, letters, and poems display a career-long use of catalogs and lists, a reliance on the technique of ordered enumeration that becomes metonymic—Schuyler as listmaker, Schuyler as list, a textual function encompassing the minutest fluctuations of emotional affect, the cyclical metamorphoses of nature (the day, the year, the human life cycle), Schuyler’s fellow revelers at a dinner party, or Schuyler’s own grocery list.

At one pole, the lists are baldly reportorial, as in Schuyler’s record of his morning activities on July 7, 1971, which he spent at the Suffolk County Psychiatric Hospital in Islip, New York:

So far:               shaved                       {this  
                           breakfast                    {side  
                           clean-up                    {“in ward”  
                           blood test  
                           pissed in paper carton: full: “Beautiful!” said the male nurse, casually hefting its weight.

Now to shower—

From which I was hailed for utter X-ray boredom—now in commissary and—Saints love us!—it’s only 10:30 ay em —<sup>219</sup>

Note how even Schuyler’s most telegraphic catalogs nevertheless crackle with fictive, narrational energies, as his diagnostic piss becomes a moment of empathic connection, aesthetic delectation (“Beautiful”), and evocative description, the male nurse “casually hefting” the weight of

<sup>218</sup> Hillringhouse, 174–75.

<sup>219</sup> Schuyler, 1997, 123. I have been unable to learn the meaning of the bracketed text at right: perhaps it is a transcription of a bit of instructional text (the tag on Schuyler’s robe?) somewhere at the hospital.

Schuyler's carton of pee much as Schuyler casually hefts the burden of vividly depicting a humdrum scene.<sup>220</sup> Even dull things in Schuyler are presented vividly, his "X-ray boredom" tersely aphoristic yet humming with scorn, in the style almost of Ginsberg: note too Schuyler's implicit sense of an audience (this is a private diary entry, after all), an appeal to empathy ("Saints love us!"), and a perfect sense of closure, the story hanging fire with Schuyler stuck in the commissary at only 10:30 in the morning, a day-long parade of further trials and claims on his attention doubtlessly ahead.

At the other pole of Schuyler's cataloging are the broader, lusher, fuller catalogs, which often read like running commentaries on the poet's train of thought, efforts at transcribing the scrim of consciousness as it mediates the phenomenal world, as in the following diary entry from November 23, 1987, which records a nighttime ramble around Chelsea in New York City:

Going out at 5 a.m. to buy the *Times*: the mystery man who fills some secondary function at the desk: "Can't complain, can't complain;" a shrouded motorcycle chained to a support of the entrance canopy; a growing mountain of garbage in black plastic bags; a night (or rather, morning) "black as ink"; the wide-spaced horrible street lights that do their job so well; in the east the tower of the Metropolitan Life building (didn't walk far enough for the gaudy Empire State Building to come into view); the Y with a banner across it "JOIN NOW AND..."; no dogs, but a cat in the deli (the Aristocrat!), and Turk Turchetti buying—lunch? dinner? breakfast?: I have worked a 4 to midnight shift, but never midnight to 8: how is his day structured? I sometimes see him in Riss, the Greek greasy spoon, about 4 or 5 in the afternoon; two dimes, two nickels buy the *Times*: Steffi Graf Wins Virginia Slims; baskets of apples, oranges, a case full of ice cream; the night man, in uniform, from the apartment house next door talking with a young man sweeping up: what? discarded lottery tickets, it looks like; why, always, at this time is a limousine parked in front? waiting for...? a rock star? rock stars don't go

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<sup>220</sup> In words that echo for Schuyler's prose, Nelson, 83, writes that "The pleasure the poetry takes in scoring the ephemeral and the bodily also represents a way of coping with what can otherwise seem an inexorably cruel fact of life." The theme of poetry as therapy and recuperation runs throughout Schuyler's work. Schuyler's peeing here recalls his much more famous pissing of his pants at the end of "The Morning of the Poem."

to work at dawn: oh well; a sticker on the glass door: NO VACANCY, and another, RING BELL, but the buzzer sounds before I do; the west elevator is in a mood, so I take the east, which for once takes me to 6, instead of 10, and, when good and ready, directly back to the lobby, to take the tinny service elevator, in which I once got trapped. I made it.

But was the night clear? Were there stars? A moon? Clouds dully lighted by city lights? No, not the last: the air is too fresh, too deliciously just at freezing for that.<sup>221</sup>

Schuyler's prose catalog presents a tiny urban myth, whole and complete, a going away from home into the night, the magical gift of the *Times*, a perilous return. Much more importantly, it is steadfastly grounded in the sense data of Schuyler's journey, phrased in a language at once factual and figurative ("a growing mountain of garbage in black plastic bags," "the west elevator is in a mood"), curious and elegantly expressive. Note Schuyler's transcriptional awareness to the purported exactness of everyday speech, as in the quoted pleasantries, repeated as if a mantra or talisman against harm, "Can't complain, can't complain"; or the banalized poetic description of the night "black as ink," enclosed in prophylactic quotation marks as if lovingly plucked from some trash found on the street; or the banner at the Y, with its truncated message rendered mysterious (Schuyler perhaps tired of transcribing it, or forgot), enjoining membership yet curiously vague as to the benefits thereof: "JOIN NOW AND..."<sup>222</sup> And what? Schuyler doesn't say, and the prose poem moves on to consider Turk Turchetti and his trio of hypothetical lunches, the "discarded laundry tickets," the rock star: an entire sunken world of the Manhattan streets at night. What particularly distinguishes this nocturnal catalog is Schuyler's lyrical *envoi*, in which the poet uses preterition to satirize the normative expectations of a journalistic diary entry: the

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<sup>221</sup> Schuyler, 1997, 201–02.

<sup>222</sup> Lehman, 245, notes, "Schuyler weds the dialect of the tribe to the bride of descriptive exactness."

mock questions throw what Schuyler *does* tell us into relief, the bits and scraps of the Chelsea night taking on added importance due to their unsentimentalized reality, their sheer mute facticity.

Unlike the *Diary*, which covers the years from 1967 to 1991 and chronicles Schuyler's later, often more solitary life, Schuyler's letters reveal the poet in the flush of youth, among of a fascinating matrix—the New York of the 1950s and '60s, center of the Twentieth Century—of other writers, artists, and intellectuals. The buzz and froth of these years finds a home in Schuyler's letter catalogs, as, for example, in a letter of August 15, 1955 to Kenneth Koch, in which Schuyler complains of the summer weather—"New York is hot and tiresome"—and brings Koch news of their friends:

Jane is learning a trade. It's some kind of electrified typewriting and super-shorthand. I guess it depresses her, but she will be able to make pots and pots of money and go far, far away from her chinks and plasticene.

Frank has written one play, one short story, ten or more poems. I have read some of the poems but not the play or the short story. He also has a new friend he likes very much, a poet named Edward Field who has been published in *Botteghe Oscure*. He seems sweet and good, qualities I never found it in my heart to attribute to Larry Rivers.

John is going home to Sodus next week. Then he will come back on Sept. 18 before he goes to France. Morris Golde is going to give a drunken rout for him I know Baby Cathy will not want to miss.

Arthur and Bobby are recording all the two piano and four hand music of Mozart. It is a lot of work, but the works are very, very beautiful.

In Maine Anne used to say every morning, "I must write Janice and invite Kenneth and Janice and the baby to come and stay with us for weeks and weeks."

I started another novel there. But I don't like it, no not a bit. I will start another one!

Fairfield painted many pictures. He painted a picture of me! In a yellow shirt.<sup>223</sup>

The events Schuyler relates aren't significant in and of themselves, insofar as they give precise details about the youthful activities of soon-to-be-famous artists. (Indeed, we should be wary of the nostalgic value that the cultural signifier John Ashbery imparts on the historical John Ashbery and his trip to Sodus, a young man of twenty-eight at the time of the letter, whose *Some Trees* would be published a year later in 1956.) Rather, it is the intensity of Schuyler's enthusiasm, the precision of the recorded details with which he adorns his letter, not the ostensible fame or weight of his subjects—they aren't famous to him, not yet—that convinces: his rueful nod to Jane Freilicher's depression, for example, in which the possibility of future riches barely tempers the loss of her mediums, "chalk and plasticene"; or the delightfully bitchy putdown of Larry Rivers, whom Schuyler allows to intrude only in order to rhetorically squash him. Even Schuyler's own news is expressed joyously, ecstatically, even childishly—"I started another novel there. But I don't like it, no not a bit. I will start another one!" and "Fairfield painted many pictures. He painted a picture of me! In a yellow shirt."—blazing forth with the fires of youthful experimentation and discovery, perhaps symbolized by Schuyler's "yellow shirt," both vivid and (one guesses) fitting.<sup>224</sup> This intensity is conveyed even in Schuyler's purely social reportage, such as the following description of a New Year's party in a letter to Koch in January 1957:

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<sup>223</sup> Schuyler, 2004, 26.

<sup>224</sup> I here refer rather lamely to Horace's *dulce et decorum*, but Schuyler's art has always seemed to be a Horatian one, devoted to daily pleasures and vexations, to the discreet and perceivable facts of the world. Cf. Crase, 234, who similarly admits the lameness of the connection: "I once told Jimmy that his lines in 'The Morning of the Poem' looked like the *Epodes* in my paperback Horace and he seemed mildly amused but not much impressed by my yard-sale pedantry."

At five p.m. New York time on New Year's eve I was sound asleep. Then I woke up and went to a New Year's eve party at Jane & Joe's. They have become New York's leading party givers. Everybody was there; Joe's parrot flew across the room and landed on Lorraine Smithberg's bun! or chignon. Gene Smithberg tried to quiet her but she kept screaming she wanted to see the parrot RIGHT THERE ON A SPIT IN THE FIREPLACE NOW! John Gruen kept on dancing in his maroon tuxedo coat. The Gay Nevelsons kept on drinking and dancing. Rudi (Burckhardt) was there with Edith (Schloss) who had on something funny around her neck. Tibor and Roland Pease were there. Roland has sold his first novel to Doubleday with a \$2,500 advance I can't stand it! Doubleday has asked him to take the word fuck out of his novel (it occurs 18 times) so the book clubs will buy. Arnold kept saying he was going to drink less in the New Year while his cup ranneth over. Esther Leslie looked gloomy until 2:30 a.m. when Frank decided she was the Swan Queen and threw her on the floor. They looked very happy lying there on the floor. Cy Twombly said, "Edwin Denby is beautiful. He looks like a Whistler." How it made me laugh. I wonder why? Some of the boys—Joey, George Montgomery, Johnny Button, Alvin Novak—went off to a boy party given by Bernard Perlin. "He called up central casting," reports Alvin, "and said send one of each." Lincoln Kirstein insulted everybody—George the most—so George fell down and then went to the Remo "because if I fell down there at least it wouldn't be in front of people I know." Others went on to the club. "Dull" reports Rudi and Jane. "No more hootch." Frank does not remember after he got to the club but when George came in at 6 Frank was on the phone babbling to Don Berry in Boston! (D.B. is a married painter, a sort of juvenile delinquent Larry Rivers.) I can hardly wait for the first phone bill of the New Year. Then a lot of other dumb things happened.<sup>225</sup>

"Then a lot of other dumb things happened" might work to sum up the entirety of Schuyler's letter and its breathless reportage, which show New York's talented elite at insouciant, drunken, raucous play. Situated at the most social, most active pole of Schuyler's work, a far cry from his later, more muted lists and catalogs, the letter nevertheless offers fair tribute to Schuyler's gregarious, people-loving art as a whole.

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<sup>225</sup> Schuyler, 2004, 76–77.

Wayne Koestenbaum's theories on the link between Schuyler's prose and poetic works are a good place to begin a discussion of Schuyler's poetic catalogs: "It's possible that Schuyler considered his prose diaries to be mildly broken into poetic lines but lacked the energy to decide about all the breaks so left the entries in prose paragraphs whose arrangement on his typed page was nonetheless fastidious. Evidently he perceived continuity between his prose and poetry. . . ." <sup>226</sup> Catalogs are present in Schuyler's poetry right from the beginning, as in the titular poem from his first collection, *Freely Espousing* (1969). "Freely espousing" is a good leitmotif for Schuyler's work as a whole, <sup>227</sup> centered as it is upon the poet's various likes, loves, passions, and desires: a gay man who never married, Schuyler nevertheless both weds himself to his subject matter and becomes its enraptured advocate. <sup>228</sup> Much of Schuyler's early work is elliptical; like O'Hara's and Ashbery's work, the poems are often discontinuous, new thoughts or feelings arising in them with a seemingly unstudied spontaneity. Many of Schuyler's early poems also hinge on etymological punning and a fine, ironic ear tuned to the rhythms, vagaries, and oddities of everyday speech, both of which modes Schuyler would employ throughout his career. Both the ellipticality and the linguistically-oriented, self-referential nature of Schuyler's style can be seen in "Freely Espousing," especially in a catalog of feelings and words that come, seemingly spontaneously, to the speaker's mind:

the sinking sensation  
 when someone drowns thinking, "This can't be happening to me!"  
 the profit of excavating the battlefield where Hannibal whomped the  
 Romans

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<sup>226</sup> Koestenbaum, 39.

<sup>227</sup> Lehman, 245, calls the poem "a brief statement of his poetics."

<sup>228</sup> A conceit suggested by *ibid.*

the sinuous beauty of words like allergy

the tonic resonance of

pill when used as in

“she is a pill”

on the other hand I am not going to espouse any short stories in which

lawn mowers clack.

No, it is absolutely forbidden

for words to echo the act described; or try to. Except very directly

as in

bong. And tickle. Oh it is inescapable kiss.<sup>229</sup>

Schuyler’s devotion to bad punning, his relish for the tinniness of shopworn, hackneyed speech, valorizes the lame rhyming of *sinking/thinking*, along with the agreeably hollow (in the sense that the exploded clichés of Gustave Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet* [1881] ring agreeably hollow, their deadness lovingly displayed by the author’s half-admiring, half-censorious attention) conceptual echoing of “sinking sensation” with an imagined, actual drowning. The reference to Hannibal is glancing, casual: the name of the actual battle is not specified, the date is not given—this is not one of Cavafy’s poems, which precisely reconstruct, through a telling detail or slip of the tongue, the classical era of which they treat—and any detailed description of the battle and Hannibal’s victory has been replaced by the demotic, resoundingly Whitmanic, “whomped.”<sup>230</sup> Schuyler’s vowing to forswear “any short stories in which / lawn mowers clack”

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<sup>229</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 3. This edition is currently out of print.

<sup>230</sup> The battle is most likely the Battle of Cannae (summer of 216 BCE), where Hannibal’s Carthaginians annihilated a much larger Roman force under the command of Consuls [Caius Terentius Varro](#) and [Lucius Aemilius Paullus](#). Paullus died; Livy, 150, notes dryly that only seventy men escaped with Varro. Schuyler was W. H. Auden’s secretary on the Italian island of

recalls John Cheever's story "A Miscellany of Characters that Will Not Appear," in which Cheever eviscerates the stock characters—"No parts for Marlon Brando"—of popular media and fiction. Schuyler's crankiness prompts a mock-serious aesthetic pronouncement, a tongue-in-cheek *ars poetica* delivered in a cheekily peremptory ("it is absolutely forbidden") tone. This dictum leads in turn to a list of acceptable onomatopoeic words, which all have some desirable sensuous connotations, from the rounded auralty of "bong" to the physical intimacy of "tickle" to the blissful consummation of "kiss."<sup>231</sup> Schuyler's ejaculation at the end—"Oh it is inescapable"—sounds as a moment of resignation, a refusal to play the game of linguistic exclusion, to be fastidious before certain time-honored (or time-ravaged) keywords of the lexicon.<sup>232</sup> Thus Schuyler eschews stricture for receptivity, fastidiousness for a delighted openness.

Schuyler's turn from critique to embrace is repeated in another poem from *Freely Espousing*, the city poem "December." Schuyler's poems center on the city of New York to a lesser extent than the poems of O'Hara; nevertheless, New York remains a vibrant backdrop to, and point of reference for, much of Schuyler's work. Here he—or, more properly speaking, the

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Ischia from 1947 to 1949: of which experience Crase, 233, writes, "In his twenties Jimmy typed manuscripts for W. H. Auden, and he used to tell us he had realized then that if poetry was what Auden wrote he would never be able to write it." Richardson, 61–64, describes meeting Schuyler—"Jimmy had one of those mesmerizing sensibilities peculiar to schizophrenics. With his short haircut, tight blue jeans, and white T-shirt, he epitomized the fresh American sailor-boy look that would soon become mandatory for young men everywhere" (62)—and gives a memorable account (*ibid.*) of their making love under the watchful eyes of Auden himself.

<sup>231</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 27, revisits *bong* in the catalog of soiled objects in "Sorting, wrapping, packing, stuffing": "dirty socks in dirty sneakers / capless tubes of unguents among brushes and septic Band-Aids / adhesive flowers into spongy books / when the great bronze bell / sounds its great bronze bong / it will find a lifetime jar of Yuban Instant in my right hand, / in my left, Coleman's Mustard."

<sup>232</sup> Cf. James Merrill's longing in the invocation to *The Changing Light at Sandover* for "a tone licked clean / Over the centuries by mild old tongues, / Grandam to cub, serene, anonymous" (Merrill, 1995, 3).

speaker of the poem—is broken from a mood of holiday peevishness by the tactile delights of Christmas decorations and shopping:

Each December! I always think I hate “the over-commercialized event”  
 and then bells ring, or tiny light bulbs wink above the entrance  
 to Bonwit Teller or Katherine going on five wants to look at all  
 the empty sample gift-wrapped boxes up Fifth Avenue in swank shops  
 and how can I help falling in love? A calm secret exultation  
 of the spirit that tastes like Sealtest eggnog, made from milk solids,  
 Vanillin, artificial rum flavoring; a milky impulse to kiss and be friends<sup>233</sup>

In a *Diary* entry of 27 December 1969, Schuyler cattily parodies Keats, “Hateful Christmas—‘Season of greed and sullen cheerlessness’—Or rather, hateful feelings that come at Christmas—another matter.”<sup>234</sup> “December” begins in this tone, yet the speaker’s emotions, affected by the spectacle of Christmas lights and window-dressing, change from pessimism to happiness. The ringing bells accompany Schuyler’s change of mood, as do the “tiny light bulbs” that “wink,” suggesting both optical shimmer and an animate complicity. It is the detritus of the holiday that charms him, the evident emptiness of the “gift-wrapped boxes” behind the windows of the “swank shops,” an emptiness obvious to the adult Schuyler but mysterious and suggestive to the five-year-old Katherine, whom he observes and, in the act of observing, mimics, wondering “how can I help falling in love?” If “calm secret exultation / of the spirit” threatens to slip into Wordsworthian-Emersonian bathos, whose more oracular strains sound strange in Schuyler’s

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<sup>233</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 13.

<sup>234</sup> Schuyler, 1997, 75.

humbler poems, it is grounded in the unpretentious taste of Sealtest,<sup>235</sup> whose contents are lovingly analyzed: “milk solids / Vanillin, artificial rum flavoring.” This in turn leads to the “milky impulse to kiss and be friends,” its suggestions of a pervasive holiday carnivalesque anchored by *milky*’s connotations of nourishment, childhood (a theme introduced by young Katherine), and universality (the Milky Way). Neither the overcommercialization of the holiday nor the rum-less eggnog are precisely the point, or, rather, they are: objects of Schuyler’s bemused affection, they charm, not just despite, but *because of*, their familiar tawdriness. The section also introduces a common motif in Schuyler, the reckoning of time—here inaugurated by the poet’s half-surprised “Each December!”, as if in awe at the fact of the succession of the months, at an infinity of Decembers—performed through the evocation of a unique essence or spirit of a specific moment of time, more often than not grounded in minutely-observed particulars of the natural world, and tied to the larger temporal context of the remembered past and imagined future.

We see this at work in the short poem “May 24<sup>th</sup> or So” (also from *Freely Espousing*), which describes a day in May through a series of objectively portrayed sense observations that are in turn mediated by Schuyler’s editorializing consciousness:

Among white lilac trusses, green-gold spaces of sunlit grass.  
 The shade side of a clothes pole, dark innards of a light-violet shell.  
 Everything trembles  
 everything shakes  
 in the great sifter:  
 bud scales, pollen, all the Maytime trash

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<sup>235</sup> Note, as in n5 above, the reference to a consumer product.

whose sprinkles are clocks that tell  
 the time of the dandelion take-over generation,  
 never quite coming to pass.

A man passes  
 in calendula-colored socks.

A robin passes

zip

thud

punctuating the typescript of today with a comma on the too-close cut

grass.<sup>236</sup>

Schuyler begins with sketching tiny details of light and shade, details that are gently magnified through the lens of his perception, as in the clothing pole’s “dark innards” having the color of “a light-violet shell”: the delicate fusion of the shaded metallic pole with the organic, inwrought, whorled sea-shell turns this enumeration of backyard lawn furniture—those “white lilac trusses”—into something more, a suburban pastoral.<sup>237</sup> Schuyler’s “the great sifter,” a force that

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<sup>236</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 24–25.

<sup>237</sup> My use of the term *suburban pastoral* is inspired by previous discussions of Schuyler as an “urban pastoral” poet: cf. Vendler, 62–63, “[Schuyler’s work] values leisure, the sexual life, the ‘trivial’ (as in Herrick), and retirement from the active life”; 70: “Schuyler allies himself with an American pastoral aesthetic of the found, the cared-for, and the homemade—with Stevens’ Tennessee gray jar and home-sewed, hand-embroidered sheet, with Elizabeth Bishop’s doilies and hand-carved flute”; Gray, 1998; Gray, 2000, 177–78: “[Schuyler’s] search for pastoral bliss is laden with difficulties because it takes place in the city, the hot zone of civilization’s ills. . . . Nonetheless, in many of his best poems Schuyler was able to find pastoral *otium* (leisure) amidst the concrete, steel, noise and pollution of New York, and he did so with little of the backsliding irony that O’Hara and Ashbery brought to the table in their postmodern parodies. At the same time, Schuyler never comes off as too earnest. With his wit and his eye for the offbeat, he balances the simple text of his pastoral project with the complex subtext of his troubled life.” Gray leaves out the enormous time Schuyler spent outside of New York, and the huge role nature played in his writing (although he does, 178, speak of Schuyler’s ability to “bridge” the urban

seems to both unify and animate the disparate natural phenomena in the poem, is ambiguous: it recalls the Lucretian *clinamen*, the vital “swerve” (“Everything trembles / everything shakes”) of atomic particles that allows for movement (and, by extension, growth, life, free-will, and chance) in the *De rerum natura*;<sup>238</sup> it is possibly a diminution of the Romantic concept of Nature, the uniting force behind natural processes conceptualized as a turbulent power that shakes together the mini-catalog of florescent detritus: “bud scales, pollen, all the Maytime trash.” Finally, it is a stand-in for Schuyler’s mediating presence itself, which has arranged and “sifted” the scattered elements of the spring scene into an intelligible aesthetic whole.

This leftover from spring’s generative outburst occasions a reflection on time: the “sprinkles” of pollen floating in the air are “are clocks that tell / the time of the dandelion take-over generation, / never quite coming to pass”: thus time is temporarily held in abeyance, paused between the current seasonal moment and that of the dandelions, whose “take-over” is, for the moment of this May day, delayed. The man and the robin—with Schuyler nicely mimicking the bird’s flight with the broken lines “zip” and “thud,” whose staccato typographical progression reenacts the bird moving across Schuyler’s field of vision—add to the catalog of springtime

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and the rural), but his comments are otherwise sound. Cf. also Clark, whose central thesis—that Schuyler’s *Collected Poems* can be read as a kind of twentieth-century *Shepheard’s Calendar*—manqué, an aborted project to write a succession of “monthly coronal poems” whose traces nevertheless appear throughout the poems as fragmentary garlands and “sunny spots of greenery,” to borrow Coleridge’s phrase—is perhaps a bit stretched, yet whose incisive comments on Schuyler’s pastoralia have greatly influenced my own views.

<sup>238</sup> Lucretius, 42–44 (book 2, ll. 216–94), where at 43 (2.257–60) Lucretius describes the *clinamen* as “this will-power wrested from the fates / Whereby we each proceed where pleasure leads, / Swerving our course at no fixed time or place / But where the bidding of our hearts leads.”

objects and sensations, with the man's "calendula-colored socks" echoing the general pastoral tone.<sup>239</sup> Schuyler ends the poem with a meditation on the seasons:

Why it seems awfully far  
 from the green hell of August  
 and the winter rictus,  
 dashed off, like the easiest thing<sup>240</sup>

*Et in Arcadia ego*: no matter how "awfully far" they seem, "the green hell of August" and the freeze of winter—here imagined as an icy "rictus" of frost, which appears so ubiquitously as to seem "dashed off, like the easiest thing" (which doubles as an ironic comment on Schuyler's seemingly-effortless poem)—are always on their way.<sup>241</sup> Their arrival is as inevitable as other natural processes, and while the poet may for a moment create a suspensory pause through an act of heightened attention followed by writing, time only stops in the poem, not in life.

In the criticism, Schuyler's early poems are often scanted in favor of his later, grander masterpieces, long poems such as "Hymn to Life," "The Morning of the Poem," and "A Few Days." It is therefore worthwhile to linger a little longer with them, in order to analyze early displays of Schuyler's mature style: the personal address to the reader; the mixing of daily trivia

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<sup>239</sup> It also echoes the temporal theme: *calendula* derives from the Roman day of Calends (Lat. *Kalendae*), which fell the first day of every month. The obvious denotations of vivid color and of cheerfulness—calendulas, or marigolds, are bright orange and yellow in color—must not be ignored.

<sup>240</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 25.

<sup>241</sup> Cf. the following moment from the great "Hymn to Life" (ibid., 221): "All spring and summer stretch / Ahead, a roadway lined by roses and thunder. 'It will be here / Before you know it.' These twigs will then have leafed and / Shower down a harvest of yellow-brown. So far away, so / Near at hand. The sand runs through my fingers. The yellow / Daffodils have white corollas (seapals?). The crocuses are gone, / I didn't see them go. They were here, now they're not."

with meditations on the larger world; Schuyler's sometimes calm, sometimes wild, enthusiasm; his eye for nature and for nature's counterpart, the city; his gentle humor. Most important for this study, many of the early poems also contain catalogs, a favorite technique of Schuyler in his later work. Take, for example, the following catalog from "Industrial Archaeology," also from *Freely Espousing*. In the poem (the time is "Early May") Schuyler examines a junk-strewn plot of land, "a field / of clover and rust where jungles / in June will hide a perilous adit." The garbage—of which, due to American "Ingenuity / So recent in our history," there exists a "marginal plethora"—is desultorily named: "A tangle of string, / clamps and catches"; "tomatoes in metal sleeves (old king- / size juice cans"; and, finally, a long list of trash that threatens to kill the grass:

Old wooden  
 colander, mirror-winged vanity table,  
 disposable aerosol-cologne dispenser,  
 magnesium chain ladder, bottled good-luck  
 sprig, green-wax stem, circuitry,  
 unique patented mechanism, in Connecticut  
 even grass fights for its life. Also  
 wild blue tar-loving chicory  
 the negative expression of a wish.<sup>242</sup>

Note how the list proceeds from the real—the colander and vanity table—to the progressively more strange and abstract—the "bottled good-luck / spring" and "unique patented mechanism," which latter in its bland generality encapsulates the entire American postwar consumer ethic and aesthetic. While this capitalist detritus might seem at first to choke the natural growth cycle—

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 37–38.

“even grass fights for life”—the end of the poem turns outward, from human garbage to the fecundity of nature: the “wild blue tar-loving chicory.” The chicory suggests a rapprochement between the spheres of human civilization and of nature; the adjective *tar-loving* suggests a nature that (like Schuyler’s) finds nurture in hardy opposition, in a symbiosis with human garbage.<sup>243</sup> The ambiguity deepens in the last line, “the negative expression of a wish”: Schuyler seems to indicate that the rank, “wild” growth of the chicory is beyond mere human wishing; its existence amid so much human waste is a direct rebuke to, or “negative expression” of, all human striving, the vanity of which is represented by the worn-out trash.

A similar feeling appears in one of Schuyler’s New York poems, “An East Window on Elizabeth Street,” from his second collection, *The Crystal Lithium* (1972). William Watkin notes in *In the Process of Poetry: The New York School and the Avant-Garde*, “The poem manages to be both taxonomic and diaristic, establishing a sense of how the subject and object can be given equal emphasis in what one might call a taxonomic autobiography: the self as list.”<sup>244</sup> The poem begins with Schuyler listing various seedy, crumbling surfaces of the city streets, “the silvery, the dulled sparkling mica lights of tar roofs,” “Junky buildings,” and a cavalcade of traffic motorized and foot: “Across an interstice / trundle and trot trucks, cabs, cars, / station-bound fat dressy women / . . . all foundation garments and pinched toes.”<sup>245</sup> Instead of distaste or revulsion, however, the chaotic urban scenes inspire in Schuyler a reverence for the persistence of beauty and growth in the heart of the mechanized, planned metropolis, in language reminiscent of that used for the hardy grass and chicory in “Industrial Archaeology”:

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<sup>243</sup> I can find nothing regarding chicory’s imputed love for tar. Horace, 50 (*Odes* 1.31), supplies the earliest reference to chicory in a nice catalog of his “easily digestible” diet: “olives, chicory, and mallows” (*me pascunt olivae, / me cichorea levesque malvae*).

<sup>244</sup> Watkin, 97.

<sup>245</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 84.

I don't know how

it can look so miraculous and alive  
 an organic skin for the stacked cubes of air  
 people need, things forcing up through the thick unwilling air  
 obstinate and mindless as the glorious swamp flower  
 skunk cabbage and the tight uncurling punchboard slips  
 of fern fronds.<sup>246</sup>

The “organic skin” of the city’s buildings displays the same stubbornness as the forgotten vegetation in the earlier poem: “obstinate and mindless,” it grows upward “through the thick unwilling air,” obeying some unseen inner biological imperative.<sup>247</sup> Schuyler does not elaborate on what exactly this organic skin is; judging from the rest of the poem, a catalog of the buildings’ and their inhabitants’ outside and inner spaces, it would seem to be some collusion between building and human, a symbiotic habitation.<sup>248</sup> Schuyler begins by describing the outside walls, and moves progressively inward:

Toned, like patched, wash-faded rags.

Noble and geometric, like Laurana’s project for a square.

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Writing of Schuyler’s poem “Afterward,” Gray, 2000, 181, notes its “surreal sequence of urban organicism,” an apt phrase here.

<sup>248</sup> Schuyler’s presentation of urban chaos as an organic, aesthetic cosmos mirrors his praise of Jane Freilicher’s paintings (Schuyler, 1998, 29), which he lauds for their attention to particularities: “In addressing herself to the actual, her paintings in part became much tighter: within one of these views some objects seemed much more sharply seen than others: a length of window frame caught the eye, as though slightly magnified. This inconsistency within the picture creates exactly New York as it is: *out of the visually deafening plethora the eye is forced to abstract detail in varying sequences*” (my italics). Hillringhouse, 167, quotes a letter of 23 March 1982 from Howard Moss saying of Schuyler that “I think he has one of the truest senses of the city I know.”

Mutable, delicate, expendable, ugly, mysterious  
 (seven stories of just bathroom windows)  
 packed: a man asleep, a woman slicing garlic thinly into oil  
 (what a stink, what a wonderful smell)  
 burgeoning with stacks, pipes, ventilators, tensile antennae—  
 that bristling gray bit is a part of a bridge,  
 that mesh hangar on the roof is to play games under.  
 But why should a metal ladder climb, straight  
 and sky aspiring, five rungs above a stairway hood  
 up into nothing?<sup>249</sup>

The buildings are visual hybrids, with mottled, textured surfaces “like patched, wash-faded rags” and proportions and symmetry “Noble and geometric,” like the perfect perspective demonstrated in Luciano Laurana’s (ca. 1420–79) *La città ideale* (*The Ideal City*).<sup>250</sup> A spate of catalogism follows, from the five adjectives “Mutable, delicate, expendable, ugly, mysterious” to the list of mechanical growths “burgeoning”—again, note the biologic language used for inorganic matter—the “tensile antennae” for television sets like the feelers of a giant insect. Schuyler’s parenthetical comment about the woman slicing garlic, “(what a stink, what a wonderful smell),” encapsulates his ambiguous, enraptured embrace of seeming opposites: like the living brick façade of the apartment buildings, the garlic is both somewhat offensive (“stink”) and wholly savory (“wonderful smell”)—this resolution of tension, this holding together of antitheses, is common in Schuyler’s poems, reminiscent (yet humbly, erratically) of the great Romantic syncretic thinkers, from Blake’s visionary “Every thing that lives is holy” to the balanced

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<sup>249</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 84–85.

<sup>250</sup> Ca. 1480. Urbino, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche.

fullness of Keats's Odes. The apartment building has all the illogical, fecund growth of vegetative life, as with the seemingly-purposeful "metal ladder," which is "straight and sky aspiring," hinting at some useful end, but instead climbs "five rungs above a stairway hood / up into nothing[.]" Mankind's needed creations have exuberantly outgrown their makers' intentions, and the rooftop ending of the poem reveals further unimagined pleasures far above—like the Earthly Paradise atop Mount Purgatory in Dante's *Purgatorio*—the fume and mess of the streets:

Out there

a bird is building a nest out of torn up letters  
 and the red cellophane off cigarette and gum packs.  
 The furthest off people are tiny as fine seed  
 but not at all bug like. A pinprick of blue  
 plainly is a child running.<sup>251</sup>

The bird and its nest figure the poet Schuyler and his poem, both works collaged together from New York's waste: like the poem, it is a home (like the other homes in the building below) perched on the edge of nothingness. The people the speaker glimpses below are nearly anonymous, as "tiny as fine seed," but still retain individual characteristics, as in the "pinprick of blue . . . a child running," who blazes across the poem's end, a bright, hopeful meteor—the child's running, like the ladder extending into the nothingness of the sky, a purposeless, joyful expenditure of energy. As Timothy Gray notes, "[Schuyler's] imagination has taken flight from the gritty underworld, assuming the viewpoint of a bird looking down on a polluted but still beautiful city. . . . This high-flyer is not Keats's nightingale, nor is it Shelley's skylark, nor is the poem traditionally romantic or pastoral in its subject matter. But this resourceful bird, making do

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<sup>251</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 85.

with found objects, offers us a liberatory way of viewing concatenated images, and in its own fashion stands as a figure for the urban pastoral poet.”<sup>252</sup> I think of the bird rather as Schuyler the poet: embattled maker, tireless nester, a grubby, scrappy spark of life in the metropolitan wilderness.

In other poems Schuyler uses catalogs to determine the overall shape of the lyric: rather than use an itemized list running for a few lines in the broader context of the poem, the poem itself is a catalog, each line contributing (like the opening lines of “May 24<sup>th</sup> or So”) a concrete, detailed sense impression, the cumulative result of which is a catalogic portrait of a place or a moment of time. Take, for example, “An Almanac,” in which simple, declarative lines, each describing a separate observation, create a portrait of the changing seasons:

Shops take down their awnings;  
 women go south;  
 few street lamp leaners;  
 children run with leaves running at their backs.  
 In cedar chests sheers and seersuckers displace flannels and wools.  
 Sere leaves of the Scotch marigolds;  
 crystals of earth melt;  
 the thorn apple shows its thorns;  
 a dog tracks the kitchen porch;  
 wino-hobos attempt surrender to warm asylums.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Gray, 2000, 191.

<sup>253</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 19.

The transition from summer to fall is effected quietly, almost unnoticeably: we are left to piece together the implied narrative of passing time. The lines are muted, undramatic, Schuyler avoiding the melancholy often displayed in the poetry of autumn, with its associations of death and decay: no falling on the thorns of life, no bleeding here in Schuyler's enraptured pastoral.<sup>254</sup> He presents instead a finely-delineated series of facts, subtly and movingly demonstrated, as with the leaves that seem to chase the children who run before them, and the dog, who "tracks the kitchen porch" with his (wonderfully unstated) muddy feet.<sup>255</sup> The mini-catalog of "sheers and seersuckers . . . flannels and wools" is sheer delight, the "cedar chests" mirroring—in their capacity to store and disburse, their safekeeping—the verbal abundance of the poem-catalog. The chests also echo, through their alternate receiving and disgorging of seasonal apparel, the cyclical timeframe of the poem, which moves from the fall of the second stanza on through winter in the third—"snow bends the snow fence. / Heavy food; / rumbling snowplows"—to arrive at spring in the fourth:

Seats in the examination hall are staggered.

The stars gleam like ice;

a fragment of bone;

in the woods matted leaves;

a yellowish shoot.

A lost key is found;

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<sup>254</sup> At the beginning of the terrific "A Vermont Diary," Schuyler (*ibid.*, 105) addresses directly the presence of nature in his poems, and rejects sentimentality for a larger realism: "It's / not—'the fly buzzed' / finding moods, reflectives: / fall / equals melancholy, spring, / get laid: but to turn it all / one way: in repetition, change: / a continuity, the what / of which you are a part."

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, again associates dogs with cold weather in the poem "In January": "A dog stirs the noon-blue dark with a running shadow and dirt smells cold and doggy."

storm windows are stacked on the beams of the garage.<sup>256</sup>

Time goes on, with the return of warm weather heralded by the stacked storm windows of the last line: like the awnings of the first line, they offer protection against an element—in this case, cold—that, momentarily at least, no longer threatens.

“An Almanac” reaches a resting point, a pause in its progression through time; some of Schuyler’s poem-catalogs, however, avoid the passing of time in favor of a panoramic view of a single moment or place, as with the exquisite chorography of “Penobscot”:

Open water facing Bradbury snags fog in its spruce.  
 Eagle has a meadow down its spine;  
 Compass, a cave; Scrag, five trees.  
 On Dirigo apples hang down into raspberries;  
 nearby, a lilac. Many remember  
 its old name, Butter, though Little Spruce Head  
 only one man still calls Frenchman’s.  
 Birch-pale Beach has a chapel,  
 Bear has sheep. On others:  
 seals, butter-and-eggs, cellar holes.  
 From here we see them all, and more,  
 and the Camden Hills, Mount Desert, Blue Hill, Deer Isle  
 and ocean facing Isle au Haut  
 where the breakers roll stones to cannon balls.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 25–26.

Penobscot Bay is on the northern stretch of the Maine shoreline, near Acadia National Park: the poet is high up on one of the many steep rocky hills in the region, looking down at the various islands in the bay. They are briefly detailed: note in particular the wonderful staccato cadence of “Compass, a cave; Scrag, five trees,” whose telegraphic brevity is a marvel of compressed differentiation. The middle of the catalog of place-names, or toponymy, reaches back in time, as Schuyler remembers the former name of Dirigo Island and the homey, appealing Butter, and a note of pathos intrudes when he reflects that “only one man still” uses an old name for Little Spruce Head: Frenchman’s. The near-extinction of a name from an earlier generation’s lexicon signals a shift in time, history, and culture: an old world is passing away. From here Schuyler returns to the present, naming other islands and their attributes, briefly cataloging the attributes of others—“seals, butter-and-eggs, cellar holes”—and ending in a tumultuous rush of names, “Camden Hills, Mount Desert, Blue Hill, Deer Isle / and ocean facing Isle au Haut,”<sup>258</sup> that finally crashes—like the sea that crashes in the end of Edgar’s description of the sea to his blind father Gloucester in *King Lear*: “The murmuring surge, / That on the unnumbered idle pebble chafes”<sup>259</sup>—in the stately swell of the final line. Again the passage of time is invoked in the incessant tidal surge that “roll[s] stones to cannon balls.” Schuyler’s catalog of Penobscot names resists this inevitable force through the acts of collection—the names are saved in the poem like the clothes in the chest in “An Almanac”—and narration: as seen above, Schuyler uses place names to describe a Maine seascape, as well as to explore larger themes of human communities, memory, and time. The names are thus arranged in an intelligible order, a poetic cosmos that is at once unified and pleasing.

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<sup>258</sup> “Ocean facing” should properly read “ocean-facing.”

<sup>259</sup> Shakespeare, 2001, scene 20, ll. 20–21.

Not all of Schuyler's poem-catalogs are devoted to nature. In the longer poem "Voyage autour de mes cartes postales"—from *The Home Book 1951–1970*, published in 1977—Schuyler gives a sustained tour around his room, inspired by Xavier de Maistre's *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (*Voyage Around My Room*, 1794), and focused on a detailed ekphrasis of his many postcards.<sup>260</sup> Schuyler's description of each postcard is lavishly detailed, often focusing on a minute reconstruction of the pictures thereupon, as well as a short history of its provenance. Beginning with a rhyming couplet—"A man of words and not of deeds / Is like a garden full of weeds'," which ironically announces the coming lightness, spontaneity, and seeming inconsequentiality of the poem—Schuyler dives right into his postcard journey:

Travelling widdershins: The Shelf.

No. The postcards on and above the shelf.

A lurking pale-gray Irish castle by a pebbly river.

A cuboid castle, like something torn down at Battery Park.

A perfect castle for the message on the back:

Letter will follow.

It came a long long time ago

two weeks at least. Autumn chat

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<sup>260</sup> Editor William Corbett notes in an appendix to Schuyler's letters (Schuyler, 2004, 456) that "Schuyler sent thousands of postcards. . . . The volume and frequency with which he sent postcards underlines what is evident in the number of poems he wrote to friends—Schuyler thought constantly about his friends, and he liked to be in touch whenever an occasion occurred to him." It would seem that an edition of these postcards—ideally, reproducing both their illustrations and Schuyler's handwriting, with a transcription of the latter—is sorely needed: cf. Weschler. In a letter to Frank O'Hara, Schuyler, 2006b, 66, wonders "Dear Frank, do you think *l'esprit des cartes postales* will overwhelm us?" Indeed, the affective power of his postcards must not be underestimated for Schuyler, who writes in his *Diary* (Schuyler, 1997, 119), returning from a trip to his room at the Fairfield Porters' home in Spruce Head, Long Island, "My pictures and postcards are as I left them," as if his short, two-month absence had wrought some dispersion of his private archive.

among the glasses: “I wanted to write but . . .

much of a mad whirl\_\_\_\_\_

sick\_\_\_\_\_ (tourista\_\_\_\_\_ (other\_\_\_\_\_

caught up in mural\_\_\_\_\_ (Destruction of Coole)

sleeping &/or drinking\_\_\_\_\_

hadn't squat\_\_\_\_\_

didn't know Erse for\_\_\_\_\_

other\_\_\_\_\_

check one & complete<sup>261</sup>

*Widdershins* means “anticlockwise,” giving an approximate sense of direction; it also means, more colloquially, “topsy-turvy” or “nonsensical,” from its German cognate *widersinnig*:<sup>262</sup> thus Schuyler again suggests the silliness, the folly of the affair, its triviality—it is both gloriously unimportant and obsessed with trivia—and unimportance. After a slight stumble in the beginning, narrated in the self-conscious correction of the ominously-capitalized “The Shelf” to “No. The postcards on and above the shelf,” Schuyler turns to the picture on the first postcard. The castle is described in three precise, clear lines, a technique familiar from the early pastorals discussed above. (Note again the intrusion of a somber note, with the Irish castle in the picture resembling “something torn down at Battery Park,” a plangent, troubling ghost of urban architecture.) Then Schuyler gets miffed: he notes that while it promises that a “Letter will follow,” the postcard itself “came a long long time ago / two weeks at least,” and the promised letter has not appeared. He then sarcastically imagines the many banal reasons one gives for not writing when one has

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<sup>261</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 64–65.

<sup>262</sup> From *wider* (“against”) + *sinnig* (“witted”): i.e., one whose wits are “against” sensible things, one who has lost one’s wits or who is deranged.

promised to do so, imagined as a helpfully-organized list of possibilities—from being too busy to being sick to being too enraptured by a mural—from which the prospective apologist can “check one & complete” their prefabricated excuse. Many of the reasons are completely silly, as in my favorite, “didn’t know Erse for \_\_\_\_\_,” which puns on Erse, the ancient name for the Irish language, and the common putdown “[x] doesn’t know his/her arse [or ass] from [something].”<sup>263</sup> From the checklist Schuyler turns his attention to another postcard, and his amused, satisfied, quietly fascinated tone begins again:

ah, a button card. A long lashed “20’s” chap, slick-haired,  
 blue bow-tied, puffy sleeved, tweezed, lips a thin red gash,  
 his right thumb hooked in his belt,  
 left arm up, wrist in and resting on his waist  
 holding *The Red Book*  
 eyes winsomely askance asking, “Ain’t I cute?”  
 He wears six mermaid pearls.  
 Those at the wrists completely hide his cuffs.  
 Not so the Indian above  
 enjoining a bison: “Turn not away your head  
   O brown and curly!”  
 They stand before two teepees and in the sky  
 fly two sides of a nickel.  
 Look softly! For above the teepees  
 among curtains and flowers  
 sits a saintly Spanish child

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<sup>263</sup> Such as a hole in the ground.

her eyes uplifted to the lobby of The Brown Palace  
 six balconies under glass,  
 green glass over the flags, palms, vitrines and fat furniture  
 without people. Hard times at the old Brown Palace?  
 Or “dim, subaqueous delights”?  
 Working down the next stud  
 from seven hand-tinted children posed as  
 wading, swimming, rowing, diving  
 GREETINGS FROM LINCOLNVILLE CENTER, MAINE.  
 GREETINGS TO YOU, TOO. How cold they must be  
 Maine being what it is, how well they feign!<sup>264</sup>

The scope and detail of Schuyler’s ekphrasis shifts from the ’20s dandy, complete with *The Red Book*—a social register of the wealthy and important—and “six mermaid pearls,” to the “Indian” and his bison and “the saintly Spanish child,”<sup>265</sup> who gazes, as if prophetically, up to yet another postcard depicting “the lobby of The Brown Palace” (in Denver, Colorado) in all of its modern horror: “six balconies under glass, / green glass over the flags, palms, vitrines and fat furniture.” The next card, showing young children in a frenzy of healthful sport “wading, swimming, rowing, diving,” explodes with an all-caps proclamation of American friendliness and good cheer: “GREETINGS FROM LINCOLNVILLE CENTER, MAINE. / GREETINGS TO YOU, TOO.”<sup>266</sup> Schuyler gently undercuts the loud boosterism of the postcard’s message with the

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<sup>264</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 65.

<sup>265</sup> I take these to be two separate postcards, the first showing the Indian and his bison, the second showing the Spanish girl.

<sup>266</sup> As often in Schuyler, there is some pleasing ambiguity here: the second line is either the postcard greeting’s hyper-enthusiastic, tone-deaf repetition of the first greeting—that bluff

following lines, which seem to acknowledge, in their faux-naïf wonderment at the children's feigned comfort, the false artificiality of the photograph and its commercialized sentimentality.

This remarkable poem continues on for some pages, taking in, like a visitor to a museum gallery, more of Schuyler's lovingly-curated postcards, such as one showing "*The Death of Chatterton* the glory of the Tate," which lingers caressingly over the painting, as in the exquisite detail of Chatterton's "primrose-lined grape- / juice velvet coat / tossed on a chair,"<sup>267</sup> a vivid, almost tactile description, rendered sublime by the precise, unexpected use of *grape-juice* (again, a note of gustatory delectation) as an adjective of color modifying the adjective *velvet*.<sup>268</sup> Further catalogs intrude, as in Schuyler's thumbnail description of some "religious bits":

a face from an annunciation;  
 a bit of gaudy Gaudi flamed  
 like Niagara Falls with colored lights  
 a Rest on the *Flight into Egypt*  
 (Jesus eats grapes, St. Joseph  
 hits something with his stick)<sup>269</sup>

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American desire to please and to ingratiate—made awkwardly personal, or (as seems more likely) Schuyler's own bitchily sarcastic response to the postcard, spoken in the postcard's own, relentlessly happy, typographic voice. Schuyler (*ibid.*, 240) memorably employs all-caps again in the first lines of "I sit down to type": "and arise whatever for? / SUGAR FREE! SUGAR FREE! TAB"—another wry ode to American consumerism.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 65–66.

<sup>268</sup> *Grape-juice velvet* also reads as an ironic, *echt*-gay twentieth-century updating of Homer's famous *epi oinopa ponton*, or "winedark sea," although it would be quite wrong to accuse Schuyler of imitating or wrestling with the shade of the great epic poet.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 66. The painting is Gerard David (ca. 1460–1523), *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, ca. 1510, now in Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art.

From the religiously-themed pictures Schuyler arrives “at last to where the happiest,” a reproduction of Claude Michel Clodion’s terracotta sculpture *Cupid and Psyche*. To describe the action of the painting Schuyler employs a blazon, describing the two writhing bodies part-by-part, in lines that are increasingly sexually suggestive:

gut to gut  
 her arms and one of his around  
 thick and hearty, his other arm raised  
 to hold a garland above her head  
 and disclose that interesting flank,  
 a pit no longer, where underarm meets chest.  
 The nipple of a soup-bowl breast points up  
 and across hefty dragonfly wings  
 that rise with a tumescent weight.  
 Down his back, across his rump, between their thighs  
 flows an amazing bit of cloth  
 or is it an effluvia that rises  
 condensed into steam like cloth?  
 Two *putti* at hip level pound each other.  
 Another strains as he lifts her leg,  
 her foot free, just, of the ground,  
 in aid of entry.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 66–67.

From the opening “gut to gut” the language is unabashedly carnal, with Schuyler focusing on and enumerating body parts—“that interesting flank / a pit no longer,” “The nipple of a soup-bowl breast,” and Cupid’s “rump”—candidly, knowingly. Everything seems to be sliding over into the sexual: the “tumescent weight” of the phallic “dragonfly wings”; the naked eroticism of “between their thighs”; the Herrickesque cloth that, as if excited by their excitement, “flows” about their bodies, or hovers about them like “effluvia”;<sup>271</sup> the “steam” and funk of lovemaking. The “Two *putti*” that “pound” each other might, in this context alone, be just as well having sex as hitting each other: it is only by looking at the sculpture that a third possibility reveals itself, that the two *putti* are clinging to each other for dear life, trying desperately to catch up with the frenzied lovers Cupid and Psyche.<sup>272</sup> The final detail, of the third *putti* lifting Psyche’s leg “in aid of entry,” is graphically sexual, a blunt consummation to Schuyler’s witty double-entendres: just after this we read that the pair are “Entwined like trees,” suggesting copulation.<sup>273</sup>

The poem ends in a burst of feeling, as Schuyler gives a winging envoi to the sculptor Clodion:

This photo of a deliberate swift terra-cotta cyclone  
on the back is called

Cupid and Psyche

Clodion (1738–1814)

The Frick Collection, New York

but on the pedestal can just be read

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<sup>271</sup>As Schuyler (*ibid.*, 250) wryly wonders at the end of “Dining Out with Doug and Frank,” “Why is this poem / so long? ‘Enough is as good / as a feast’ and I’m a Herrick fan.”

<sup>272</sup>Sexually pounding *putti* call to mind the homosexually incestuous Delehantey twins, Patrick and Michael, of Schuyler’s second novel, *What’s for Dinner* (Schuyler, 2006a).

<sup>273</sup>Schuyler, 1993, 67.

## The Embrace

Claude Michel Clodion

Embrace indeed, Clodion!  
 Seventy-six years of it (one hopes you had)  
 seems a fair share. Passionate, virginal postcard  
 to whom shall I scribble you?<sup>274</sup>

Attention brings rewards, as Schuyler's divination of the title on the statue's pedestal shows: instead of the bland "Cupid and Psyche" we have the warmer, fuller "The Embrace," which title is enthusiastically taken up by Schuyler in his exhortatory good wishes—"Embrace indeed, Clodion!"—for the dead artist. Note the parenthetical "one hopes you had," a somewhat doubtful note in Schuyler's musing that "Seventy-six years" of love, sex, and happiness "seems a fair share": perhaps the sculptor did not enjoy these, Schuyler's doubt acknowledging the possibility—indeed, the likelihood—of human frailty, error, and unhappiness.<sup>275</sup> But he ends on an upbeat tone, the "Passionate, virginal postcard" alive with possibilities of further human contact, and Schuyler's apostrophe to it—"to whom shall I scribble you?"—a witty updating of the poet's traditional *vale* to his poem, a gentle turning-outward of the poem's intense appreciative scrutiny to the livelier, more social pleasures of friends and conversation.

Schuyler's catalogs extend to his prose poems as well. While the prose poem was a rare form for Schuyler to write in, they nevertheless dot his oeuvre, ranging from short prose pieces in much longer metrical poems, such as in "A Vermont Diary," to somewhat longer mini-essays printed as stand-alone poems, to the florilegium (a collection or anthology of memorable writing,

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Schuyler himself died at sixty-eight, not all of those years devoted to embraces.

often of quotations or other pithy sayings) “The Fauré Ballade,” the penultimate work in Schuyler’s third collection, *Hymn to Life* (1974). Schuyler’s prose poems draw on the same abundant energy and precision of detail, the same wide-ranging eclectic interests and enthusiasms, that go into his letters, and which make the latter a feast of lists, of beloved people,<sup>276</sup> of movies seen<sup>277</sup> and books read<sup>278</sup>: of a lived life expressed in letters to friends.<sup>279</sup>

Consider, for example, the descriptive vividness of the following prose observations from

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<sup>276</sup> On names in Schuyler generally, see Crase, 225–26, who writes, “Gradually I came to understand that when [Schuyler] wrote about John and Jane and Wystan he wasn’t name-dropping either. To Jimmy these were real people, and real people were the kind that counted. Readers of poetry are used to poems that are pumped up with references to Orpheus and Eurydice, to Bogart, and soon perhaps to Bart Simpson. . . . When Jimmy put our names in [“Dining Out with Doug and Frank”] it was a way of saying what to him was always obvious, that we must treat our friends and ourselves as if we were the stars, unalterable and moving as the stars.” List of names festoon his work from start to finish.

<sup>277</sup> Schuyler’s cinephilia itself merits fuller study. Representative passages, mainly lists of movies Schuyler had seen and his comments on them, are at Schuyler 2004, 53 (“Larry [Rivers] called up just now and managed to make so many innuendoes in one and a half minutes my head feels like the merry-go-round at the end of *Strangers on a Train*”), 55, 115, 122, 143, 144–45, 224.

<sup>278</sup> Schuyler, 1997, 44: “Sometimes I mean to keep track (‘Make a list’) of what I read, the books anyway. What for? To amuse me when I’ve forgotten.” Long lists of books can be found at *ibid.*, 56–58; Schuyler, 2004, 121.

<sup>279</sup> The gregariousness of the New York School poets is legendary, and Schuyler’s affability should be seen against this intensely social backdrop, approaching that of coterie, of artists and friends: see Lehman for an excellent general introduction to the habits and patterns of this set, and *ibid.*, 243–79, on Schuyler in particular. (Specifically for coterie, see Ted Berrigan to Schuyler in a letter of 30 January 1964 [Waldman, 8; quoted in Lehman, 243], “It seems that your manuscripts circulate just like Elizabethan court sonnets.”) Cf. Schuyler’s “Statement on Poetics,” first printed in Donald Allen’s landmark *The New American Poetry* in 1959, in which Schuyler traces the genealogy of “the best American writing” as explicitly French-derived, and then gives a short taxonomy of prominent New York Schoolers and their indebtedness to painting: “[I]t’s not surprising that New York poets play their own variations on how Apollinaire, Reverdy, Jacob, Eluard, Breton took to the School of Paris. Americans are, really, mightily unFrench, and so criticism gets into it: John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Frank O’Hara, myself, have been among the poets regularly on the staff of *ARTnews*. . . . Kenneth Koch writes about Jane Freilicher and her paintings. Barbara Guest is a *collagiste* and exhibits: Frank O’Hara decided to be an artist when he saw Assyrian sculpture in Boston. John Ashbery sometimes tried to emulate Léger; and so on”: Schuyler, 1998, 1–2. Schuyler’s writing teems with this kind of social taxonomy, not so much namedropping as Schuyler’s continual interaction with a living community.

“November 1,” the first “day” of “A Vermont Diary”: “Quarter past four and evening turbulence begins, the sky clotted with clouds, glazed and crazed like gray pottery. . . . The hills that last year in early October I saw enflamed and raging are now the browns and grays of lichened bark, the woods lit by bare birch trunks and warmed by spruce and pine.”<sup>280</sup> Schuyler’s nature prose recalls the notebooks of Dorothy Wordsworth<sup>281</sup> or the extensive journals of Henry David Thoreau: the attention to detail is the same, as is the vivid, unpretentious use of metaphor—a sky “glazed and crazed like gray pottery,” the “enflamed and raging” autumn leaves, the woods “warmed by spruce and pine”—and a rhythmic, cadenced, seemingly spontaneous style.<sup>282</sup> The prose poems, despite their similarities to other authors, are distinctly Schuyler’s own, as in this affecting mini-catalog of a Vermont house on a fall night: “From the ceiling comes a soft irregular scuffling—Joe moving his feet as he works—a fly at the window makes a dry repetitive nagging sound, like someone trying to start a car; and on the couch Whippoorwill, all wrapped up in himself, grunts and pulls himself a little tighter.”<sup>283</sup> The tiny universe of the house, each sound radiating from its origin to Schuyler’s recording consciousness, is a picture of comfort and security, troubled only by the fly’s “dry repetitive nagging sound,” which Schuyler recuperates and domesticizes by comparing it to “someone trying to start a car.”

Other prose-poem catalogs are boisterous and loud, as in the street carnival that erupts at the end of “Wonderful World”: “The night was hot, everybody went out in the street and sold each other hot sausages and puffy sugared farinaceous products fried in deep fat (‘Don’t put your

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<sup>280</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 105. I am printing as a single sentence what are two discreet mini-paragraphs in the original.

<sup>281</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Journals* are listed in a *Diary* entry of May 1970 (Schuyler, 1997, 78) as “D. Wordsworth Journals,” but whether or not Schuyler had read them is unclear.

<sup>282</sup> To be sure, both Schuyler and Wordsworth quite lacked the scientific training and interests that are evident on every page of Thoreau’s *Journal*.

<sup>283</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 106.

fingers in that, dear') while the band played and the lady in the silver fox scarf with the beautiful big crack in her voice sang about the young man and how he ran out in front of the stock exchange and drank a bottle of household ammonia: 'Ungrateful Heart.' Big rolls of paper were delivered, tall spools of thread spun and spelled Jacquard, Jacquard. Collecting the night in her hand, rolling its filaments in a soft ball, Anne said, 'I grew up around here,' where, looking uptown on summer evenings, the Empire State Building rears its pearly height."<sup>284</sup> The episode hovers on the boundary of the surreal, with images such as the "puffy sugared farinaceous products" at once wholly familiar and, through the additive power of Schuyler's catalogism—here, the triad of adjectives—wholly strange. The abundance of New York's streets is figured in these half-absurd objects, the "silver fox scarf" and "Big rolls of paper," which collide together incongruously, competing for prominence. The poem's extended hypotactic construction—with the various clauses linked together by subordinate conjunctions such as *and*, *while*, and *where*—creates a sense of temporal depth, the various street sights strung together in an expansive procession. Over all this presides the Empire State Building, whose "pearly height" rests above the commotion below: again, as so often in Schuyler, the poem ends on an upbeat note, the gleaming verticality of the famous monument contrasting with, and terminating, the maculate, variegated, horizontal street-level pleasures below.

The qualities manifested in Schuyler's early poems, not least his love of catalogs and lists, are present in his larger, fuller masterpieces, the long poems "The Crystal Lithium," "Hymn to Life," "The Morning of the Poem," and "A Few Days." Here everything in the shorter works—the sly humor, the digressive tone, the attentiveness to nature, the address to the reader—comes together fully united, allowed greater breathing-space by the greater length of the poems, and

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 88.

often swelling into virtuoso runs of Whitmanic temper and tone.<sup>285</sup> Here catalogs and lists run gloriously rampant, as in the catalog of months in “The Crystal Lithium,” which arises from a rather convoluted association of the heat, cold, and Schuyler’s affective state. The poem is an extended meditation on time and change; like many other of his poems, it is full of weather and its effects—Tom Clark notes that “this four-hundred-line anthem to nature’s plenitude enacts in language the struggling, turbulent birth of the northeastern seaboard spring, from the first halting emergence of new growth in March to the ‘churning energy’ of the ‘miracle’ that is Maytime”<sup>286</sup>—and a persistent image is cold, cold in all its forms, such as the snow with which the poem begins:

The smell of snow, stinging in nostrils as the wind lifts it from a beach  
 Eye-shuttering, mixed with sand, or when snow lies under the street lamps and on  
 all  
 And the air is emptied to an uplifting gassiness  
 That turns lungs to winter waterwings, buoying, and the bright white night  
 Freezes in sight a lapse of waves, balsamic, salty, unexpected:  
 Hours after swimming, sitting thinking biting at a hangnail

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<sup>285</sup> The comparison between Schuyler and Whitman is common, as, for example, Lehman, 266, who describes Schuyler as “Quietly Whitmanic, a planetary celebrator”; see also Clark, who speaks of “Schuyler’s long, rolling lines, Whitmanesque in their magnanimous openness.” For an important complication and correction of this commonplace, see White, 120, who notes importantly of Schuyler’s work, “This is a poetry of transparent renderings of the world, not of self-expression nor of appropriation. Although Schuyler admires Whitman, he does not share Whitman’s urge to assimilate everything and everyone to himself. Schuyler is worn away by the world until he lapses into it; Whitman seizes the world and gathers it into himself. Schuyler forgets; Whitman remembers. Schuyler becomes the world, whereas Whitman remade the world in his own image.” Whitman’s arrogance—literally, his assuming unto himself—is lacking from Schuyler’s limpid, almost passive (Eileen Myles noted of Schuyler, “The presence of his attention was so strong, so deeply passive. . . . He was like music, and you had to be like music too to be with him”: Myles, 274) voice, as are Whitman’s political interests.

<sup>286</sup> Clark.

And the taste of the—to your eyes—invisible crystals irradiates the world

“The sea is salt”

“And so am I”

“Don’t bite your nails”<sup>287</sup>

The world of “The Crystal Lithium” is a chaotic and confusing one, at first linked tenuously by the snow—the snow on the beach, the snow “under the street lamps,” the frozen “lapse of waves”—only to dissolve to a beach scene in warmer weather, “Hours after swimming,” and the tasting of salt crystals on the hand.<sup>288</sup> Note the clumping-together of words in threes, the “balsamic, salty, unexpected” waves and the triple verbs “sitting thinking biting at a hangnail,” Schuyler’s enumerative bent working even in small corners of the poem. The thoughts that come from tasting the salt echoes one of A. E. Housman’s lyrics, “Stars, I have seen them fall”—“The toil of all that be / Helps not the primal fault; / It rains into the sea, / And still the sea is salt”<sup>289</sup>—note, however, how the metaphysical turn of the second line, “you”’s recognition of a common bond with the ocean and, possibly, with all inanimate matter, is humorously deflected by, again, the voice of cliché erupting joyously, clangingly into the poem: “Don’t bite your nails.” Cold reappears a few lines later, with the “you” of the poem laying “cheek upon the counter on which sits a blue-banded cup / A counter of condensed wintry exhalations glittering infinitesimally”: that is, glass, which feels cool to “you”’s cheek, and is described by Schuyler as “A promise, late on a broiling day in late September, of the cold kiss / Of marble sheets to one who goes barefoot

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<sup>287</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 116.

<sup>288</sup> White, 121–22, describes “The Crystal Lithium” as “a vertiginous Baroque phantasmagoria in which elements metamorphose into one another, the senses fuse through synesthesia, the seasons commingle, levels of diction rise and fall, scraps of unassigned dialogue invade the narrative, and even the syntax becomes snarled and collapses under the confluences of multiple antecedents and tenses.”

<sup>289</sup> Housman, 166.

quickly in the snow and early / Only so far as the ash can—bang, dump—and back and slams the door.”<sup>290</sup>

The theme of changing time is taken up in full in the catalog of months on the next page, in which Schuyler draws a strong, yet oblique, parallel between nature (as personified by the twelve seasons, for each of which is named a single characteristic attribute) and human (as embodied by “you”) thoughts and feelings:

And above these thoughts there waves another tangle but one parched with heat  
 And not with cold although the heat is on because of cold settled all  
 About as though, swimming under water, in clearly fishy water, you  
 Inhaled and found one could live and also found you altogether  
 Did not like it, January, laid out on a bed of ice, disgorging  
 February, shaped like a flounder, and March with her steel bead pocketbook,  
 And April, goofy and under-dressed and with a loud laugh, and May  
 Who will of course be voted Miss Best Liked (she expects it),  
 And June, with a toothpaste smile, fresh from her flea bath, and gross July,  
 Flexing itself, and steamy August, with thighs and eyes to match, and September  
 Diving into blue October, dour November, and deadly dull December which now  
 And then with a surprised blank look produces from its hand the ace of trumps  
 Or sets within the ice white hairline of a new moon the gibbous rest. . . .<sup>291</sup>

From the elemental confusion of hot and cold comes one of the most striking images in Schuyler’s poetry, the wonderful simile of tangled thoughts as a dreamlike discovery that while

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<sup>290</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 116.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

“swimming under water, in clearly fishy water”—note Schuyler’s golden ear for awful puns in “fishy water,” which is both stocked with fish and somehow disreputable—one “Inhaled and found one could live and also found you altogether / Did not like it”: a quietly shocking revelation of an obscure feeling, an irrecoverable sadness or trauma, suddenly noticed (as a fish might become cognizant of the actions of its gills) and deeply, immediately suffered. Subaqueous life is possible in Schuyler’s simile, but it is “altogether” inhospitable and strange. The monthly catalog begins immediately thereafter, the unsaid link acting as a further simile: like the amphibious “you” of the earlier comparison, submerged but breathing (and not liking being underwater), humans are submerged in time, in the yearly wheeling round of the seasons, and in the ever-changing weather—ubiquitous and all-pervasive, like the subsuming fishy water of the first simile—both mental and meteorological.<sup>292</sup> And the weather is bad in Schuyler’s calendar, from “January, laid out on a bed of ice” to “gross July” and “steamy August,” and back to “dour November” and “deadly dull December”: an unending cycle of unpleasantness. The odd attributes of the middle months—“March with her steel bead pocketbook, / And April, goofy and under-dressed and with a loud laugh, and May / Who will of course be voted Miss Best Liked (she expects it)” —only add to the sense of discomfort; instead of the clichéd roses and raptures of spring we have the months personified by annoying teenagers, callow, awkward, and shallow. The concluding image of the above passage, “the ice white hairline of a new moon,” recalls the “winter rictus” of “May 24<sup>th</sup> or So”: a reminder of mortality, the frozen smile of a corpse or skeleton.

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<sup>292</sup> Crase, 230, writes that Schuyler “was writing . . . to observe, true to his principles, one more aspect of things as they are: mental weather, before intervention by pity or by our expectations of what that weather should be.” The catalog of months recalls Clark’s *Shepherdess Calendar* thesis: cf. n26 above.

If the catalog of months in “The Crystal Lithium” ends on a grim note, one echoed at the end of the poem:

there, where yesterday’s puddle  
Offers its hospitality to people-trash and nature-trash in tans and silvers  
And black grit like that in corners of a room in this or that cheap dump  
Where the ceiling light burns night and day and we stare at or into each  
Other’s eyes in hope the other reads there what he reads. . . .

and in the poem’s final line, a glimpse into the nothingness of “unchanging change” itself, a call from the abyss—“‘Look,’ the ocean said (it was tumbled, like our sheets), ‘look in my eyes’”<sup>293</sup>—then the catalogs in Schuyler’s second great long poem, the triumphant “Hymn to Life,” are altogether different: sunnier, happier, lending their catalogic thrust, not to an anatomy of confusion or despair, but to a delineation of living joy. The poem even foregrounds the act of cataloging during Schuyler’s seriocomic defense of human history and culture, prompted by brief desires for pastoral anarchy during a train-bound contemplation of nature:

I hate fussing with nature and would like the world to be  
All weeds. I see it from the train, citybound, how the yuccas and chicory  
Thrive. So much messing about, why not leave the world alone? Then  
There would be no books, which is not to be borne. Willa Cather alone is worth  
The price of admission to the horrors of civilization. Let’s make a list.

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid. Cf. Randall Jarrell (Jarrell, 22) on Frost’s “Neither Out Far Nor In Deep”: “When we choose between land and sea, the human and the inhuman, the finite and the infinite, the sea has to be the infinite that floods in over us endlessly, the hypnotic monotony of the universe that is incommensurable with us—everything into which we look neither very far nor very deep, but look, look just the same.”

The greatest paintings. Preferred orchestral conductors. Nostalgia singers.  
 The best, the very best, roses. After learning all their names—Rose  
 de Rescht, Cornelia, Pax—it is important to forget them. All these  
 Lists are so much dirty laundry. Sort it out fast and send to laundry  
 Or hurl into washing machine, add soap and let'er spin. The truth is  
 That all these household tasks and daily work—up the street two men  
 Install an air conditioner—are beautiful.<sup>294</sup>

The movement is a familiar one, and similar to that of “December” above: Schuyler, initially dismissive of or upset by something—here, humans’ incursions upon nature—reconsiders, and after weighing the thing’s positive qualities (the beauty of New York at Christmas in “December,” civilization’s benefits here) embraces it enthusiastically. As before, his method of evaluation is the catalog; here, however, his cataloging is explicit, a subject of the poem as well as a source of its imagery. Schuyler’s examples begin as general ones, all objects of delectation, ranging from visual delights (“The greatest paintings”) to aural ones (“Preferred orchestral conductors. Nostalgia singers”). The mini-catalog of the roses’ names adds a level of specificity, the names, mentioned as an aside, adding depth and texture to Schuyler’s enumeration. But just as the catalog seems about to take flight it ends, with Schuyler’s disavowal of his work—“All these / Lists are so much dirty laundry”—marking a shift from dilettantish pleasures to a more immediate, direct perception of life, concretized by the image of the “two men” who “Install an air conditioner”: a practical, earthy boon, unlike the pleasures of consuming art. Schuyler’s seeming distaste for his listing transmutes to an enthused interest, with the recognition that the dirty laundry that is list-making is part of daily life, a mental equivalent of “household tasks and

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<sup>294</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 218.

daily work,” and therefore “beautiful” (a word that Schuyler, notably, does not use for the paintings or conductors or roses). From a rejection of “fussing with nature” Schuyler has arrived at a happy contemplation of air conditioning and other household tasks, guided, as always, by his contemplation of things that move him.

Such moments are far from rare in “Hymn to Life,” which, as its title suggests, is a song in praise of living—of what Schuyler terms (with a deft combination, as above, of the general and the specific) “dailiness: where the wished for sometimes happens, or, just / Before waking tremulous hands undo buttons.”<sup>295</sup> As noted above, the poem is markedly brighter and more optimistic than “The Crystal Lithium”; indeed, in many places it reads as a specific response to the darker, moodier tone of the earlier poem, as in its beginning, which again details the action of the wind and the weather. It is a far gentler wind, and far more clement weather, however:

The wind rests its cheek upon the ground and feels the cool damp  
 And lifts its head with twigs and small dead blades of grass  
 Pressed into it as you might at the beach rise up and brush away  
 The sand. The day is cool and says, “I’m just staying overnight.”  
 The world is filled with music, and in between the music, silence  
 And varying the silence all sorts of sounds, natural and man made:  
 There goes a plane, some cars, geese that honk and, not here, but  
 Not so far away, a scream so rending that to hear it is to be

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 219. Clark uses *dailiness* in a brief summation of Schuyler’s characteristic poetic qualities: “dailiness, temporality, presence, process, and [an] excited involvement with the natural continuum”; Clark later notes that “Dailiness is Schuyler’s measure.” Similarly, White, 118, Schuyler’s “calm, concentrated acceptance of the round of daily life. . . . The fierce hum of tranquility, the ability to ‘wait busy,’ informs all his activities.” Lehman, 264, notes “That Schuyler should be a poet of warm benediction and praise is one of the splendid anomalies of his work.”

Never again the same.<sup>296</sup>

As with so many of the poems we have looked at, “Hymn to Life” is primarily concerned with enumeration and detail, the stitching-together of a poetic cosmos from disparate sensations and thoughts. The dominant action is that of perception: the verbs, such as the repeated indicative “is” and the locatory “there goes,” simple, direct, indicative. Again there is Schuyler’s wonted plainspokenness, a unadorned simplicity of diction that almost borders on flatness of affect; declarative phrases such as “The world is filled with music” and “There goes a plane” creating a mood of things-as-they-are, of objects perceived in their true light.

With this tone Schuyler combines—again, as in the poems above—somewhat more fantastic and whimsical touches, such as the day’s promise “I’m just staying overnight” (another snippet of everyday speech), or the disturbing scream at the end of the section quoted above. The scream leads Schuyler to think, briefly, “Why, this is hell,” and he then speculates on the cyclical nature of time and nature, specifically the growth cycle of plants:

Out of the death breeding

Soil, here, rise emblems of innocence, snowdrops that struggle  
Easily into life and hang their white enamel heads toward the dirt  
And in the yellow grass are small wild crocuses from hills goats  
Have cropped to barrenness. The corms are come by mail, are planted,  
Then do their thing: to live! To live! So natural and so hard  
Hard as it seems it must be for green spears to pierce the all but  
Frozen mold and insist that they too, like mouse-eared chickweed,

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<sup>296</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 214.

Will live. The spears lengthen, the bud appears and spreads, its  
 Seed capsule fattens and falls, the green turns yellowish and withers  
 Stretched upon the ground.<sup>297</sup>

Throughout this impassioned meditation Schuyler closely entwines the antinomies of life and death: the plants grow paradoxically from “the death breeding / Soil”; flowers are like “snowdrops” (a metaphor expressing both their intricate beauty and their evanescence) and, like Keats’ “droop-headed flowers all,” “hang their white enamel heads toward the dirt”; and, in what feels like a time-lapse film showing birth, growth, decay, and death compressed into a single minute, we are treated to the condensed life-cycle of the “green spears,” which “pierce” the soil, “lengthen,” grow buds and seed capsules, germinate, and then die away and lie (in an image that seems more appropriate to describe a corpse) “Stretched upon the ground.”

Schuyler’s treatment of the “small wild crocuses” is even more compact, managing to fit an entire ecosystem into the space of a line and a half. The crocuses once grew on hills, hills that have been “cropped to barrenness” by goats, and they now live on in “yellow grass,” having presumably—and Schuyler, wonderfully, does not tell us this—migrated from the hills by means the goats themselves: the goats having eaten the crocuses and ingested their seeds, only to defecate them later in a different place (the yellow grass), thus inadvertently providing them with a new place to live, and acting simultaneously (another example of Schuyler’s twinned opposites) as both destroyer and preserver. As Schuyler notes, again combining antithetical propositions, growing is at once “So natural and so hard,” a consideration which leads him to one of his favorite images—and one that must have had some autobiographical, emotional weight for the

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

difficult, prickly, mental- and physical-illness-haunted Schuyler—that of vegetation thrusting blindly upward into life, persevering in its instinctive behavior despite hardship and adversity. In “Industrial Archaeology” there was “grass fight[ing] for life,” in “An East Window on Elizabeth Street” it was the “organic skin” of apartment buildings, which Schuyler compared to “the glorious swamp flower / skunk cabbage and the tight uncurling punchboard slips / of fern fronds”: here it is an image of “green spears,” which “pierce the all but / Frozen mold.” In a particularly affecting note, Schuyler notes that the spears—as if they had human agency—“insist that they too, like mouse-eared chickweed / Will live,” thus further collapsing the boundary between the human and the vegetal, and drawing a further connection between the human and plant impulses toward life.

Schuyler makes similar connections throughout “Hymn to Life,” repeatedly showing the interrelations and similarities between the growth cycles of the natural world, the weather and the seasons, and the lives of human beings. Noting a “tree, that dominates this yard, thick-waisted, tall / and crook branched,” Schuyler links its peeling bark to the sloughing-off of forgotten events from memory, a comparison that sparks one of his grand, far-reaching considerations of nature and human perception:

Its bark scales off like that which we forget:

Pain, an introduction at a party, what precisely happened umpteen  
 Years or days or hours ago. And that same blue jay returns, or perhaps  
 It is another. All jays are one to me. But not the sun which seems at  
 Each rising new, as though in the night it enacted death and rebirth,  
 As flowers seem to. The roses this June will be different roses  
 Even though you cut an armful and come in saying, “Here are the roses,”

As though the same blooms had come back, white freaked with red  
 And heavily scented. Or a cut branch of pear blooms before its time,  
 “Forced.” Time brings us into bloom and we wait, busy, but wait  
 For the unforced flow of words and intercourse and sleep and dreams  
 In which the past seems to portend a future which is just more  
 Daily life.<sup>298</sup>

Schuyler’s thoughts begin with a mini-catalog of “that which we forget: / Pain, an introduction at a party, what precisely happened umpteen / Years or days or hours ago”; the attempt at enumeration founders on the word *umpteen*, a nice introduction of the colloquial into the poem, and after which comes a further mini-catalog of the time distancing the forgotten event from the present moment. The lines exhibit a seeming dissatisfaction with the actions of memory: faced with the omnipresence of oblivion and forgetfulness, attempts at remembering seem somewhat foolish, wasted efforts that will certainly be defeated. As Schuyler notes, “that same blue jay returns, or perhaps / It is another. All jays are one to me”: that is, like Keats’s transhistorically warbling Nightingale, nature goes on, and replenishes itself with a fecundity that is baffling to humans, who try to put an individual face on the workings of the natural world but, largely, cannot. Thus, “All jays are one” to Schuyler, the sun “seems at / Each rising new,” and the definite article *the* causes him to conflate momentarily the “different roses” of this June with those of last year.

Again, as with the earlier poems, vast and intricate patterns of birth and decay are foregrounded: each sunset and sunrise appear “as though in the night [the sun] enacted death and rebirth,” and humans—“Time brings us into bloom and we wait, busy”—follow the same cycle.

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<sup>298</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 215.

Schuyler seems almost to reach toward a paradisiacal wished-for life for humankind, his desire—“For the unforced flow of words and intercourse and sleep and dreams”—a leaving-off of cares, inhibitions, and limitations, an unmediated agency, an instinctiveness, like that unthinkingly enjoyed by animals and plants. The word *unforced* is key: from this flows the catalog of supreme human pleasures, such as conversation, sex, and sleep. Note that the dreams he mentions are not heroic or utopian ones, transformative fantasies of lust or power or dominion; rather, they are dreams contiguous with the everyday, “just more / Daily life,” in touch with the mundane quotidian that serves Schuyler both as the starting-off point for his poetic flights and as the resting-place to which he returns. What kind of daily life Schuyler has in mind is spelled out in the following lines, in which the poet turns his attention to his old, injured cat, Hodge:

The cat has a ripped ear. He fights, he fights all  
 The tom cats all the time. There are blood gouts on a velvet seat.  
 Easily sponged off: but these red drops on a book of Stifter’s, will  
 I remember and say at some future time, “Oh, yes, that was the day  
 Hodge had a torn ear and bled on the card table?” Poor  
 Hodge, battered like an old car.<sup>299</sup>

Daily life is not all roses, as cat Hodge’s repeated fighting—encapsulated in the wonderful repetition of “He fights, he fights” and “all . . . all the time”—attests. But even the bloodstains can be recuperated by Schuyler’s engrossed, recording, taxonomic aesthetic. The stains in the “book of Stifter’s” are not merely disfiguring: they are possible future *aides mémoires*, saving—perhaps—from oblivion the (otherwise unremarkable) “day / Hodge had a torn ear and bled on the card table.” Schuyler’s final line, the seemingly tossed-off description of Hodge “battered

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

like an old car,” rounds out his meditation, closing the metaphysical inquiries into time and fate with an earthy touch of pathos, grounding the high-flown in the everyday.

Not surprising for the time-wary Schuyler, one of the most central subjects of “Hymn to Life” is the passing of time. Throughout his work Schuyler pays intimate attention to time; one of his most characteristic movements, seen in poem after poem, is the reckoning of time, in which chronological units are subdivided, thought about, weighed, and planned with an energy and care that border on the obsessive. The theme of time and time’s passing is omnipresent in “Hymn to Life,” as in the following passage, where the sight of raindrops patterning a window screen leads to further musings:

A window to the south is rough with raindrops  
That, caught in the screen, spell out untranslatable glyphs. A story  
Not told: so much not understood, a sight, an insight, and you pass on,  
Another day for each day is subjective and there is a totality of days  
As there are as many to live it. The day lives us and in exchange  
We it: after snowball time, a month, March, of fits and starts, winds,  
Rain, spring hints and wintry arrears. The weather pays its check,  
Like quarreling in a D. C. hotel, “I won’t quarrel about it, but I made  
No local calls.”<sup>300</sup>

The “untranslatable glyphs” drawn by the spots of rain “caught in the screen” lead Schuyler to ponder greater mysteries: they are a micro-example of “A story / Not told,” and much greater examples—described in the appropriately vague language of “so much not understood, a sight,

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<sup>300</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 215–16.

an insight, and you pass on”—come to the fore. As always, the particular brings Schuyler to the general; as always, macrocosmic speculations unfold irresistibly from his microcosmic perceptions. “[A]nd you pass on” displays Schuyler’s wonted understated ambiguity, the proximate, obvious reading of “you go on to something else” overshadowed by the deeper, more disturbing reading of “you die.” But as Schuyler notes, it all leads—without us or not—to “Another day,” which is itself part of “a totality of days”: again the reckoning, the anxious marking of time as it slips past. Here enumeration itself—not the cataloging of objects, or the making of lists, but *counting itself*, reduced to its simplest unit, that of time—is the subject, not the enumeration of the poet’s loves but simple counting, stripped away from any comforting referent: there are no beloved names or places or books that can be piled up to hide time’s passage, no distraction possible from this most basic, most appalling fact.

When Schuyler turns later in the poem to consider the evanescence of actual things, and not merely time, the pathos is heightened even further; each item cataloged appears simply and as if for the last time:

All evaporates, water, time, the  
 Happy moment and—harder to believe—the unhappy. Time on a bus,  
 That passes, and the night with its burthen and gift of dreams. That  
 Other life we live and need, filled with joys and terrors, threaded  
 By dailiness: where the wished for sometimes happens, or, just  
 Before waking tremulous hands undo buttons. Another day, the sun  
 Comes out from behind unbuttoned cloud underclothes—gray with use—  
 And bud scales litter the sidewalks. A new shop is being built,  
 An old one refurbished. What was a white interior will now be brown

Behind men's clothes, there are these changes in taste. Fashion  
 It anew. Change in everything yet none so great as the changes in  
 Oneself, which, short of sickness, go unobserved. Why watch  
 Yourself? You know you're here, and where tomorrow you will probably  
 Be.<sup>301</sup>

Note Schuyler's exquisite shuttling between the mundane and the numinous, between "Time on a bus" and "the night with its burthen and gift of dreams": each, like the "joys and terrors" in the next line, is "threaded / By dailiness," Schuyler's supreme touchstone, a *via media* against which all experience is tested. He returns again to the taxonomic cataloging of perceptions, with each item weighing doubly, both as simply itself and as something more: thus the "bud scales" are both dead vegetation and symbols of greater loss, the "new shop . . . being built" and the "old one [being] refurbished" both simple registers of everyday human activity—like the air conditioner being installed a page before—and tokens of a greater hopefulness. The low-key, almost Steinian-sounding reason for these changes—"there are these changes in taste"—leads Schuyler to one of his resounding imperatives, "Fashion / It anew," an inspiring command that is all the more remarkable for being delivered so quietly, as if off the cuff, and for being so dangerously close to being a horrendously bad pun ("changes in taste"/"Fashion"). The passage ends optimistically, with Schuyler shrugging off the need for an anxious, day-to-day pulse-taking of one's life; the rhetorical question "Why watch / Yourself?" is left unanswered, as if, safely ensconced within living itself ("You know you're here, and where tomorrow you will probably / Be"), there were no need to such potentially disruptive and troubling questions. Yet the question hangs fire, the "probably" of the last line admitting a small kernel of doubt: Schuyler does not

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 219.

overreach for an unearned happiness, and the tiny *probably*, its exquisite soft-spokenness standing in for a whole host of implications—one might possibly *not* be “here” tomorrow, despite one’s best-laid plans; one might be sick or insane or, worst of all, dead (indeed, the probability of one of these disturbing outcomes occurring becomes an ever-increasing certainty as we age)—that, while left unsaid, are nevertheless present.

“Hymn to Life” ends on a note of titanic, ringing optimism, with Schuyler returning once more to the poetry of nature that has permeated the poem, the lines building and building to a rousing, exultant climax. There are signs of this near the poem’s end, as when Schuyler, once again riding a train and looking out the window, notices the landscape rushing past:

From the train, a stand of larch is greener than  
 Greenest grass. A funny tree, of many moods, gold in autumn, naked  
 In winter: an evergreen (it looks) that isn’t. What kind of a tree  
 Is that? I love to see it resurrect itself, the enfolded buttons  
 Of needles studding the branches, then opening into little bursts.  
 And that Washington flower, the pink magnolia tree, blooms now  
 In little yards, its trunk a smoky gray. And soon the hybrid azaleas,  
 So much too much, will follow, and the tender lilac. Persia, we  
 Have so much to thank you for, besides the word lapis lazuli.<sup>302</sup>

From the “stand of larch” Schuyler imagines forward in time to the procession of trees to come: “the pink magnolia tree,” which “blooms now,” the “hybrid azaleas,” and “the tender lilac.” The larch in its springtime green seems to him to “resurrect itself,” another of Schuyler’s knife-edge

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<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

metaphors, trembling on the boundary of the ordinary and the wonderful. Note the range of Schuyler's poetic register, encompassing parenthetical asides (“(it looks)”), questions (“What kind of a tree / Is that?”), effusions (“the hybrid azaleas, / So much too much,” an example of Schuyler at his breathiest), and even shout-outs (the nod to Persia, thanking it for lilacs and for the word *lapis lazuli*): the poem achieves thereby a density of texture and detail unavailable to less catholic sensibilities, and reaches beyond the traditional boundaries of the lyric to embrace other modes of writing, such as the diary, journal, notebook, and report.<sup>303</sup>

These disparate strands unite in the poem's conclusion, which turns—with a movement that we have seen above—from the detailing of domestic scenes to a full account of nature and the cyclical time of natural processes:

In

A dishpan the soap powder dissolves under a turned on faucet and  
 Makes foam, just like the waves that crash ashore at the foot  
 Of the street. A restless surface. Chewing, and spitting sand and  
 Small white pebbles, clam shells with a sheen or chalky white.  
 A horseshoe crab: primeval. And all this without thought, this  
 Churning energy. Energy! The sun sucks up the dew; the day is  
 Clear; a bird shits on my window ledge. Rain will wash it off  
 Or a storm will chip it loose. Life, I do not understand. The

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<sup>303</sup> See Watkin, 97: “The diary, the journal, the almanac, and home book; all these are forms of autobiographical writing used in the Schuyler oeuvre.” In the *Diary Schuyler* (1997, 80: 10 June 1970) once again ponders lilacs, and in doing so displays more of his penchant for reckoning time by nature's green clock: “In May before I left Amherst I cut a bunch of just opening lilac & two weeks later when I was leaving Southampton I cut another first bunch and when I got back to Amherst (from NYC) on May 28<sup>th</sup> the lilacs were over. But riding up here they turned from brown scratchiness to a few spoiled trusses whose brownness vanished as the road wound up until here in early June they were at their height—a Persian word so native to New England.”

Days tick by, each so unique, each so alike: what is that chatter  
 In the grass? May is not a flowering month so much as shades  
 Of green, yellow-green, blue-green, or emerald or dusted like  
 The lilac leaves.<sup>304</sup>

The “soap powder dissolves” into “the waves that crash ashore” in one of Schuyler’s inspired similes, another example of his incessant mixing of the homely with the grandiose. The waves’ “restless surface” mirror the turbulent flux and reflux of Schuyler’s own verse, and again we have a catalog: the pebbles, clamshells, and horseshoe crab, which elicit from the poet a single, glowing word of tribute, “primeval.” It is their irreducible untouchability, their aloofness from the world and mind of man, that so enchant him, calling forth a rhapsodic paean (“this / Churning energy. Energy!”, recalling “to live! To live!” above) in praise of its mindless, restless, incessant motion (“And all this without thought”). Schuyler’s praise of thoughtlessness echoes his love of the embattled vegetation in “Industrial Archaeology” and the architectural encrustations of “An East Window on Elizabeth Street”: like them, the ocean’s power is ultimately beyond agency, a process not of individuals but of a collective, an accumulation of disparate single units—grass stalks, TV aerials, and waves, respectively—acting in unison.

Schuyler’s longest, and perhaps greatest, poem, “The Morning of the Poem” (from the 1980 volume bearing the same title), is his most stylistically wide-ranging, diffuse, and all-encompassing work. Intimately autobiographical, the poem shuttles back and forth between several main thematic and narrative lines: 1) Schuyler’s staying at his mother’s house in East Aurora, New York, in July and August of 1976; 2) Schuyler’s addressing of the absent male

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<sup>304</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 223.

painter Darragh Park, often envisioned in his studio somewhere on West 22<sup>nd</sup> Street in Manhattan, and to whom Schuyler sends news and wishes for good health and happiness, and to whom Schuyler's wandering thoughts frequently return; 3) Schuyler's meditations on nature, time, the seasons, absent and dead friends, and the past, which are quite similar in style and tone to the poems looked at above; and 4) finally, lyric passages of surprising immediacy and simplicity, whose short, direct lines arise from the longer, more typically Schuylerian long line almost abruptly, as with Schuyler's elegiac farewell to his two dead dogs, Whippoorwill and Rossignol:

Rest, lie at rest  
 among these hills  
 and mountains  
 in autumn flowing  
 in maple colors:  
 crimson, yellow,  
 orange, green  
 with white:  
 ripeness, a resurrection,  
 leaves, leaves, leaves,  
 when it's time,  
 cover us all.<sup>305</sup>

Schuyler's brief threnody widens its focus from the two dogs, who are directly addressed in the exhortatory opening, "Rest, lie at rest," to encompass, once again, the totality of natural cycles—

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 280.

“ripeness, a resurrection, / leaves, leaves, leaves,” which compresses, marvelously, seasonal growth and decay, Hamlet’s “Ripeness is all,” and the biblical doctrine of the Resurrection, all into the space of two short lines—and the sum of human experience: death comes not just to individuals alone, but, in time, will “cover us all.” Note Schuyler’s use of the mini-catalog of the colors of autumn leaves; in what feels like a deft parrying, a sly refusal, of Shelleyan-Romantic thanatoptic posturing—“the leaves dead / Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing, // Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red, / Pestilence-stricken multitudes!”—in which the fallen leaves stand as symbols of the dead generations and races of mankind<sup>306</sup>—here the leaves are merely leaves, the taxonomy of “maple colors” a simple visual description of autumn foliage in its dying glory.<sup>307</sup> Thus Schuyler moves from the particular, local, somewhat comic, deaths of the two dogs—“Whippoorwill, of / the mysterious / determined inner life,” and Rossignol, last glimpsed “leaping out of / the back seat of / an open car never / to be seen again”<sup>308</sup>—to a moving glimpse of a cosmic last end, a common, graceful, coming-to-rest of all life.

Clocking-in at some forty-two pages, “The Morning of the Poem” is lengthy enough to embrace a stunning range of poetic styles and modes: the poem reads at times as a dense, impossibly detailed laundry-list of Schuyler’s inner life, a catalog of thoughts, feelings, and emotions that is at once microscopic and vast, huge in its scope and minutely detailed. Far from being merely the stylistic vehicles of the poem, catalogs and lists are often (as with “Let’s make

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<sup>306</sup> Shelley (“Ode to the West Wind, ll. 2–5), following Homer, 1990, 200 (*Iliad* 6.171–75), Glaucus’s famous speech to Greek Diomedes: “Like the generations of leaves, the lives of mortal men. / Now the wind scatters the old leaves across the earth, / now the living timber bursts with the new buds / and spring comes round again. And so with men: / as one generation comes to life, another dies away.”

<sup>307</sup> Although one suspects Schuyler of dabbling in symbolism with the chromatically-improbable pairing of “green / with white,” the latter color not present (at least in my experience) in maple leaves, and the two together bearing the perhaps-unsupportable weight of traditional associations: green with verdancy, youth, and growth, white with decline, old age, and death.

<sup>308</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 280.

a list” in “Hymn to Life”) its explicit subjects as well, as with the grocery list that Schuyler inserts into the poem immediately following the elegy looked at above:

Another day, another dolor. A shopping list:

watermelon wedge

blueberries (2 boxes)

(In a far recess of summer

Monks are playing soccer)

Bread (Arnold sandwich)

Yogurt (plain)

Taster’s Choice

Brim

Milk (2 qts)

Whipping cream

Dispoz-A-Lite

Lee Riders

Something for Sunday dinner

Blue Top-Siders (10½)

Little apples

Paper napkins?

Guerlain Impériale

Steak

Noxzema medicated shave foam

Alka-Seltzer

Baume Bengué

K-Y<sup>309</sup>

Schuyler's interpolated shopping list provokes questions about the vagaries of textual transmission, historical loss and preservation, and the ever-shifting priorities of archival inclusiveness: the list creates a sense of wonder at the presence of mundane trivial life so lovingly detailed and curated, slapped down into the middle of the poem as tender leaves of beautiful flowers are pressed between the pages of books for desiccation and safekeeping. Schuyler's onetime secretary, poet and novelist Eileen Myles, once described the men of the New York School as "Three boys riding in the back of a red Cadillac convertible yelling 'Whoopee!' in the middle of the American Century":<sup>310</sup> Schuyler's shopping list, perhaps more than any other moment in his oeuvre, allows us, if not a privileged backseat place with the exuberant trio, then at least a fly-on-the-wall's-eyes' view of the poet shopping for food and other necessities. Schuyler presses this somewhat reluctant material into poetic service, bringing the skeletons of consumer products alive, creating a heart and soul, a glimpse of spiritual life, beneath the bare ribs of commerce and mere sustenance. It is not so much the facts of the list and what they may or may not reveal—although I, for one, note with approval Schuyler's evident love of blueberries, "(2 boxes)," as well as his preference for plain over flavored yogurt; and, although it casts little light on his work, I am delighted to know his shoe size, "10½": a precious factoid, a perfectly useless scrap of information wrested from oblivion's maw—as the fact of the list itself, the continued survival of these bits of data: time has transmuted the trivial into the sacred; the throwaway has become a primary text in its own right. Moments in the grocery list are as exquisitely subtle as anything in Schuyler's work: the question mark after "Paper napkins,"

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<sup>309</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 281.

<sup>310</sup> I beg my readers' pardon for whatever inaccuracies my periphrastic memorial reconstruction of Myles's comments may have introduced.

a graphical record of the poet's wavering between waste (paper napkins get thrown out) and propriety (napkins are useful); the now-charming tawdriness of product names and twentieth-century American business-speak (the Dispoz-A-Lite, Noxzema, and Alka-Seltzer) both intimately familiar and uncannily strange, like so many examples of the capitalist outmoded, their linguistic oddity preserved in the integument of the list like prehistoric flies trapped in frozen amber; the delicate uncertainty of "Something for Sunday dinner," the item not a specific product to be bought, but a memorial placeholder, a provocation of future thought made by Schuyler the list-writer on the behalf of Schuyler the in-store shopper; and the indispensable K-Y jelly, placed provocatively at the bottom of the list, a luxury product somewhat removed by its function from the more prosaic foodstuffs above it: a sexual lubricant, mark of passion and desire, whose inclusion in the poem underscores the frank homosexuality of Schuyler's late work.<sup>311</sup> This sexual explicitness echoes the catalogic explicitness of the grocery list itself: thus Schuyler itemizes both needs and wants, and mere products are made to shadow forth the larger human habits and emotions—sociability, conviviality, eroticism—that lie behind their acquisition.

The stylistic range and register of "The Morning of the Poem" is so heteroclitic, so catholic, that Schuyler even manages to squeeze in, among the grocery list, meditations on nature and time, and thoughts of friends, a brief *ars poetica* in the form of a quick, rather nasty diatribe against bad poets and their worse poetry. Like Schuyler's homosexuality, this infighting between poets is much more pronounced in Schuyler's later work, a cattier, chattier side to the normally sunny poet: for example, in the charming, easygoing "Dining Out with Doug and Frank," we

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<sup>311</sup> As, for example, in the first poem in *The Morning of the Poem*, the heartbreaking "The Dark Apartment," an angry farewell to a former lover, or Schuyler's memories of his Navy days in "The Morning of the Poem": "I remember walking under the palms on liberty in / 1943 with a soldier / I had just picked up and in my sailor suit some- / thing stony as the / Washington Monument I wanted to hide from the / officer coming toward me" (Schuyler, 1993, 270).

have Schuyler's blunt admission, while discussing the relative impossibility of teaching writing, of "The reams / of shit I've read."<sup>312</sup> In "The Morning of the Poem" Schuyler responds angrily to an unnamed, unseen poetaster who offers him some speed, "get away from me you / Poet with no talent, only a gift to destroy," and immediately following we get an anatomy of the ills Schuyler sees afflicting lesser writers:

So many lousy poets  
 So few good ones  
 What's the problem?  
 No innate love of  
 Words, no sense of  
 How the things said  
 Is in the words, how  
 The words are themselves  
 The thing said: love,  
 Mistake, promise, auto  
 Crack-up, color, petal,  
 The color in the petal  
 Is merely light  
 And that's refraction:  
 A word, that's the poem.  
 A blackish-red nasturtium.  
 Roses shed on  
 A kitchen floor, a

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 250.

Cool and scented bed

To loll and roll on.<sup>313</sup>

Schuyler's turning to a linguistic essentialism behind good poetry, a consonance between sound and meaning, harks back to the very first work in the *Collected Poems*, "Freely Espousing," looked at above. In Schuyler's aesthetic "The words are themselves / The thing said": this simple equation looks beyond the mere harmony of form and expression, such as the onomatopoeia he cheerily disposes of in "Freely Espousing," to philology and love of words in themselves, a sensuous appreciation of words, their sounds, and their denotations and connotations—a visual, tactile handling of language that recalls High Modernists such as Joyce and Stein, or, closer to home, Imagists such as William Carlos Williams, whom Schuyler, later in the poem, mentions having read in a bemused, affectionate tribute to one of his childhood schoolteachers, Luther Smeltzer:

Mr Smeltzer, who opened windows for me on  
 flowering fields and bays where the water greenly danced,  
 Knifed into waves by wind: the day he disclosed William Carlos  
 Williams to us, writing a short and seemingly  
 Senseless poem on the blackboard—I've searched the collected  
 poems and am never sure which it is (Wallace  
 Stevens, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, I found for myself:  
 even then, there's a chance that I was somewhat  
 Smarter than Luther Smeltzer: "Who, where, what and  
 why": his journalism lessons were not too novel)<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 268.

Schuyler's short list of beloved poets he discovered in high school reveals the pride of a teenaged autodidact, a suburban hipster kid for whom (as for many) poetry was a youthful delight: both a means of escape and an entry into the wider world. Note again the acerbic personal tone, this time in Schuyler's criticism of Smeltzer, whom he (seemingly backhandedly, in a questioning afterthought that reads more as sly insinuation than genuine naïveté: "Jim the Jerk" at his snarkiest) suspects of having been less well-read, and whose rote pedagogy, exemplified in the clichéd list of journalistic tenets "Who, where, what and / why," Schuyler disdains as having been "not too novel." Schuyler's musings on bad poets culminate, first in a list of words, second in a lushly Williamsian succession of concrete, precisely described images. The images are offered, not only as implicit examples of Schuyler's dictum "A word, that's the poem," but as positive examples of "good" poetry, their immediate sensuousness a contrast to, and rebuke of, the bad poetry scorned earlier. Schuyler luxuriates in these lists, much as one is invited "To loll and roll on" the "Cool and scented bed": moments of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure, invitations to rest and idleness, like the "cups of old wine" that Keats discerned in the passages dealing with classical mythology and pastoral beauty in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Words, then, are not merely the roots and kernels of poems; the aesthetic delight of an "innate love" of words and images is itself a poetic, creative act.

Schuyler's pastoralism, and his use of catalogs to record the names of all manner of flora, reaches its apogee in "The Morning of the Poem"; so, too, does his cyclical sense of time and nature, his strong appreciation of the seasons, and his endless reckoning of time backward and forward from his present situation. An early passage in the poem is typical; Schuyler notes that

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 285–86.

in eastern New York “the firs crowd too thickly on these village / lawns,” and then focuses upon a particular street in East Aurora:

Chestnut Hill Road,  
 But the blight came and there are no chestnuts;  
       the blight came, and there  
 Are no elms; only spruce and maples, maple saplings  
       springing up in hedges,  
 A skinny weed, and this weed, this wild yellow  
       flower lower and larger than  
 A buttercup, not lacquer yellow, more the yellow  
       of a marsh marigold, meaty  
 Like it, though not so large, not nearly so  
       large, sprinkled in the weedy  
 Wild-flower lawn, for God’s sake, what is your  
       name?<sup>315</sup>

Rather than the verdancy promised by the crowding firs’ luxuriousness, the short catalog is a catalog of absence and impoverished growth: the vanished chestnut and elm trees (note the repetition of “the blight came”), the short “maple saplings” and “skinny weed,” which seem to struggle for existence. Schuyler’s “wild yellow / flower” receives more attention, prompting a miniature sketch that is surprising in its detail (my favorites are the color “lacquer yellow,” the conversational, seemingly casual “not so large, not nearly so / large,” and the use of “Wild-flower” as an adjective). But Schuyler cannot name the flower, a failure that draws from him the

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 261.

half-exasperated “for God’s sake, what is your / name?”: thus the catalog, in its attempt to be exhaustive, exhausts both itself and the cataloger Schuyler. Similarly, a few pages later Schuyler, once again taking note of the surrounding countryside, notes wistfully:

More kinds of  
conifers than spruce grow  
On this hill. I wish I knew their names, I have  
a friend, a botanist,  
Who could tell them to me, one by one.<sup>316</sup>

Schuyler’s desire to know the names of the trees provokes the thought of his botanist friend—his name is later given as Frank<sup>317</sup>—thus combining, as Schuyler so often does, friendship with intellectual curiosity and stimulation. Schuyler’s imagined vision of Frank’s “one by one” naming of the trees—a scene delicately, humorously reminiscent of Adam’s naming of Creation—is narrated in a tone of childlike anticipation of, and pleasure in, the steady, one-after-the-other rhythms of enumeration.

Schuyler’s pastoral landscapes in “The Morning of the Poem” manage to combine both the harsh, hostile nature of “The Crystal Lithium” with the sunnier, more clement scenes from “Hymn to Life.” For example, one lyric moment in the poem occurs with Schuyler looking

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>317</sup> This is Frank Polach, partner of Douglas Crase and dedicatee of Schuyler’s “Dining Out with Doug and Frank.” Crase, 227, sheds light on Polach and Schuyler’s relationship, as well as on Schuyler’s communal botanical knowledge-gathering: “I remember how Jimmy would sometimes turn to Frank, who was once Plant Information Officer at the New York Botanical Garden, to verify the exact identity of a fruit or flower. The last request (though Frank had long since left the Garden) came in the matter of ‘Yellow Flowers,’ a poem in which *Coreopsis* is distinguished by its sweetness. A fact checker at *The New Yorker* had balked at this, as might anyone who noses up to the *Coreopsis* on sale at the local florist. Jimmy was delighted, and perhaps a little relieved, when research turned up a scented variety.”

through the interstices of a screen window—another recurrence of this common image, both barrier and grid—the change in perspective transforming the outside:

The screen through which I peer cubes all into  
 sampler stitches: the supertime shadows laid  
 Out in topiary work, a dolphin, a spire, a dog, your name, flat  
 and roughly clipped, dark on light, dark green  
 On bright moon green, the world smells of mown grass. I think  
 I see a mountain it must be a cloud: there is  
 No mountain. Let there be a mountain: Why not? Didn't Long  
 Island have a hurricane last night? Didn't  
 I long to be there in the four-poster bed and hear the shutters  
 rattle and the windowpanes whistle and sing  
 And the thunder of the surf, wind in the giant plane tree?<sup>318</sup>

As so often in Schuyler's work, the passage above is primarily concerned with perception, with Schuyler first seeing, and then subsequently describing in detail, the lawn around the house; his act of perception is highlighted by the screen, which divides the yard into so many tiny boxes ("cubes all into / sampler stitches), like some allegory of seeing itself: as one stitches a picture into a sampler, so Schuyler weaves his sense impressions and ruminations into the poem. The topiary catalog begins with a list that starts fantastically ("a dolphin, a spire") and immediately turns silly ("a dog, your name") only to veer off again, fixating on a minute description of the name cut on the grass: "flat / and roughly clipped, dark on light, dark green / On bright moon green." "Moon green" is a delicately odd conceptual-visual pairing—note its elongated vowels

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<sup>318</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 294.

ending in *n*—and the non-sequitur which follows, “the world smells of mown grass,” suggests a suffusion, like Marvell’s “green thought in a green shade,” of the poet’s consciousness with the pastoral form, a temporary triumph of summer fullness over the entire world. Schuyler’s following playful mistake of the cloud for a mountain begins inconsequentially enough, with Schuyler seriocomically intoning “Let there be a mountain”; his justification for his willfulness, however, takes flight, and becomes a defense of the imagination and its powers, the immediacy of Schuyler’s desire to “hear the shutters / rattle and the windowpanes whistle and sing / And the thunder of the surf, wind in the giant plane tree” bringing the unseen, not-experienced events into vivid life.

The note of sublimity in this passage, achieved partly through the breathless enumeration of the storm’s effects, is carried on into the following lines, as Schuyler describes the beach after the storm. It is a liminal world, filled with shapes of ruin that nevertheless hold great beauty and interest for the poet:

And

to get up in a cleared-off day and go to the beach

And the dunes and see the scattered wrack, fish and weed and

(always) some cast-up surprise: fishing

Gear, net, an ominous object of red and orange plastic, breakers

rough, dull and full of sand and the sinus-

clearing oceanic smell. Dunes carved into new shapes, salt

air, combing through cut grass, beach plum,

Unkillable *rosa rugosa*. Maybe a big beach cottage has had its

foundation of sand eroded by water and wind:

Toppling, ready to tumble: why so much pleasure in wrack and  
 ruin? A house falls into the sea: my heart  
 Gives a jump.<sup>319</sup>

Like “the great sifter” of “May 24<sup>th</sup> or So,” the storm-tossed sea acts as a great randomizing force, configuring “the scattered wrack” on the beach into “some cast-up surprise”; once again the focus is on change and flux, on the transformation of a substance into something else. Thus lost, once-useful items such as the “Gear, net, an ominous object of red and orange plastic” become treasures rescued from the sea-change oblivion of the waves; thus the sand-dunes are “carved into new shapes.” The “salt / air, combing through cut grass” and other vegetation—note, in particular, the “Unkillable rosa rugosa,” another of Schuyler’s hardy, embattled plants—recalls the earlier image, from “Hymn to Life,” of the wind blowing through “twigs and small dead blades of grass”: Schuyler’s repeated use of this image, a visible sign of nature’s operant powers, recalls the Aeolian harp of the Romantic poets, who saw in the amusing novelty toy a profound symbol of the incessant, tidal flux and reflux of natural processes.<sup>320</sup> The imagined wreck of the “big beach cottage” is the grandest of the storm’s remnants; although hypothetical, it is presented concretely, at a point suspended between salvage and ruin: “its / foundation of sand eroded by water and wind: / Toppling, ready to tumble.” Schuyler muses on his “pleasure in wrack and / ruin,” hitting on the formula “A house falls into the sea: my heart / Gives a jump”: like the grass impelled by the wind, or like the harp played upon by the same, Schuyler is

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> Cf. Coleridge, 52–53 (“The Eolian Harp,” ll. 26–29 [not published in the original 1796 edition of *Sybilline Leaves*], 44–47: “O! the one Life within us and abroad, / Which meets all motion and becomes its soul, / A light in sound, a sound-like power in light, / Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where. . . / And what if all of animated nature / Be but organic Harps diversly fram’d, / That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all?”

extraordinarily sensitive to the various stimuli of the natural world, his trembling heart signifying perhaps both fear and joy, pleasure and trepidation. The wrecked house he imagines figures either as a tribute to the awful beauty of nature's destructive powers, or a fearful *memento mori*, a harbinger of crumbling foundations, undermining, slippage, falling, crashing, physical events that it seems impossible that the often-ill Schuyler would not have interpreted symbolically. The mixing of pleasure with fear is typical of Schuyler's vision, which, as exemplified by the great long poems, takes a balanced, nuanced, perpetually active and inquisitive view of some very basic facts of human life—the omnipresence of nature and the natural world, the effects of time, the mixed joys and sorrows of friendship and love, the inevitability of death and memory—mediating them constantly through a poetic consciousness that is at times ironic, self-mocking, tender, sentimental, longing, hopeful, joyous, and which continually uses a register that is both poetic and plainspoken, capable both of blunt commonplace statements and of passages of great lyric power. In the long poems this voice is allowed its greatest freedom of range and expression, with Schuyler's naturally digressive style flowing on page after page, a continuous poetic record of thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

As noted above, the quantifying of time—its reckoning and counting out, its weighing, thoughts about its passing and about times to come—is a central motif in Schuyler's work, never more so than in "The Morning of the Poem." An early moment of Schuyler's time-checking comes during an address to the absent Park, in which Schuyler wishes "I were posing on West 22nd Street, seated / by a window and the plants"; as Schuyler imagines looking out the window—"I watch / The street and kids skim on skateboards"—he whirls forward through the calendar:

it's July,

Or else it's winter, December, January, February  
 and the kids are gloved and  
 Bundled up and it's snowball-fighting time: "Gonna  
 rub your face in it!" and  
 Does and one breaks loose and runs crying home.<sup>321</sup>

Schuyler's imagined calendar comes complete, like an illuminated Book of Hours, with the customary activities of each season, from skateboarding to "snowball-fighting"; his use of the imagery of children playing suggests an abstract, perhaps even allegorical, element, the playing standing in for all human activity, and its fruits—from the effortless "skim" of the skateboards in summer to the rivalry and ritualized aggression (the almost sexual "rub your face in it!") of winter warfare. Later in the poem Schuyler addresses Park again, wishing to send to him the entirety of his experience of a single day; as usual in his minute descriptions of a day or a moment in time (such as "May 24<sup>th</sup> or So"), Schuyler uses a catalog to enumerate his details:

This day, I want to  
 Send it to you, the sound of stirring air, soft  
 sunlight, quivering trees  
 That shake their needles and leaves like fingers  
 improvising on a keyboard  
 Scriabin in his softest mood, and the wind  
 rises and it all goes Delius,  
 The sky pale and freshly washed, the blue flaked  
 off here and there and

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<sup>321</sup> Schuyler, 1993, 269.

Showing white, flat and skimpy clouds haunting  
 a bright green, a soft blue day.<sup>322</sup>

Schuyler's transitions from image to image—from things considered simply (the “stirring air” and “soft sunlight”) to things considered more complexly (the “quivering trees” whose “needles and leaves” are “like fingers improvising on a keyboard,” a simile that introduces the extended comparison of the wind and its moods to the works of Scriabin and Delius), to a full, panoramic view of “The sky pale and freshly washed, the blue flaked / off here and there and / Showing white”—is remarkable; Schuyler varies the length and complexity of each entry in the catalog, thus avoiding monotony and giving his discursive, paratactic lines the texture and syntax of wandering, ruminative thought. Schuyler's landscape is animate, full of psychological affect and impact, from the “stirring wind” that both stirs and is exciting to its beholder to the “soft / sunlight” to the “skimpy clouds haunting,” like shadows of some troubling thought, the day. Schuyler's wish to comprehend the day and send it to the absent Park is, of course, ironic, as it is precisely through the enumeration of the qualities of the day that he'd like most to convey that Schuyler conveys.

Of course, this plenitude cannot be sustained for long, even in the realm of poetry, and Schuyler is soon contemplating the forward roll of the seasons, noting “the full moon is past” and envisioning the time to come:

The days  
 Go by, soon I will go back, back to Chelsea, my  
 room that faces south

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 275.

And the ailanthus tree wound with ivy, my records,  
 stacks and stacks of them,  
 Spohr's Double Quartet, Ida Cox, and sit in your  
 parlor on the squishy chairs  
 On West 22nd Street, the Fauré Second Piano Quartet,  
 mirrors and pictures  
 On the walls<sup>323</sup>

Again Schuyler presents a catalog of beloved domestic objects, the interior furnishings and cultural products that comprise his microcosm. Schuyler's tone here is similar to a passage from his final long poem, "A Few Days," in which Schuyler describes a visit to his ailing mother in upstate New York and, typically, wonders how to make use of the time he has to spend with her:

A few days: how to celebrate them?

It's today I want  
 to memorialize but how can I? What is there to it?  
 Cold coffee and  
 a ham-salad sandwich? A skinny peach tree holds no  
 peaches. Molly howls  
 at the children who come to the door. What did they  
 want? It's the wrong  
 time of year for Girl Scout cookies.  
 My mother can't find her hair net. She nurses a cup of  
 coffee substitute, since

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

her religion (Christian Science) forbids the use  
of stimulants. On this  
desk, a vase of dried blue flowers, a vase of artificial  
roses, a bottle with  
a dog for stopper, a lamp, two plush lions that hug  
affectionately, a bright  
red travel clock, a Remington Rand, my Olivetti, the  
ashtray and the coffee cup.<sup>324</sup>

From anxieties over commemoration Schuyler returns to the comfort of the particular, the known, the tangible and nameable: the “skinny peach tree” with its “no / peaches”—whose exquisite line break marks the caesura of rupture, of lack, of not having peaches—yields to coffee substitute, “a vase of dried blue flowers, a vase of artificial / roses,” even the means of poetic production, Schuyler’s “Olivetti, the / ashtray and the coffee cup,” the recording angel and the chemical Muses, respectively. This humble domestic catalog is a good place to end this look at Schuyler’s catalogs and lists: beloved detritus of the everyday, these are the objects through which the poet recorded his life and times. Artifacts of the American Century, they are mute witnesses to its bygone tawdry splendor, and to the unique vision of one of its most determined and perceptive chroniclers.

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 356.

#### 4. The Magic Circle: James McCourt's *Mawrdew Czegowchwz*

One of the most melancholy, most suggestive catalogs is the *Annals of the Metropolitan Opera*, first compiled by William H. Seltsam in 1947 and subject to numerous revisions, the latest a deluxe CD-ROM version comprising the years 1883–2002. The *Annals* meticulously list each production at the Metropolitan, both the Old Met and the New, and divide the information into a number of categories: thus, every designer, singer, conductor, librettist, who has ever performed, produced, worked, at the Metropolitan Opera is locatable, stored electronically and cross-indexed for easy access and retrievability. Reading through the *Annals*, particularly during the years of the Old Met's heyday, is like reading a catalog of ghosts: so many names, so many lives involved in a common goal, all so minutely and scrupulously recorded, take on, not only a measure of permanence, a stay against oblivion, but a setting-above, an awarding of importance, as well—like Tennyson's Ulysses' sailors, these men and women “strove with gods,” the lists and tables say; they and their labors are worthy of being remembered.<sup>325</sup> All the greater, then, the melancholy of reading their names. Skimming through the lists of names in the *Annals*, or reading the *Annals*' abundant supplementary materials at greater length, I get an overwhelming

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<sup>325</sup> Memory and memorials, a roster of the famous dead, were already inscribed into the Old Met's architecture, in the list of names of famous composers that adorned its proscenium arch, as noted admiringly by Kreisman, 13: “Even after the lights dimmed and the curtain rose, my attention focused on the names of the composers carved around the proscenium arch and the frescoed figures romping on the ceiling rather than on the stage.” Ibid. later offers an evocation of the ruins of the Old Met that is tonally and thematically apposite to this study, and to McCourt's work of celebration and remembrance (literally, in the sense to reconstitute a dismembered body or artifact): “I distinctly remember walking through the ruins of the old Met during its demolition in 1967 (it had not been given landmark status), picking up what would become a treasured artifact, a small piece of gold-leafed plaster. It wasn't simply the physical finality that upset me. After all, the building had never been an ideal performing space. But the memories that building carried for many thousands of people around the world would never be replaced by the marble, the Chagall murals or the imported crystal chandeliers of the new opera house at Lincoln Center.” Kreisman's Golden Bough—*manqué* is a lovely symbol for any excavation and retrieval of lost time, a sign of *katabasis*, of a descent into the twin underworlds of memory and the past.

feeling of a world and a time gone by, a microcosm temporarily united, and then sundered by death. The names from the Old Met betoken that far-off, lost glory; suggestive yet mute, they seem like echoes from a vanished past, a time imperfectly preserved by its written records.

The same feeling comes from much of the writing of American novelist and belle-lettrist James McCourt (1941–), whose great theme—revealed most fully in his splendid first two novels, *Mawrdew Czgowchwz* (1975) and *Time Remaining* (1993), and in his later work, such as the sprawling ethnography-cum-memoir *Queer Street: Rise and Fall of an American Culture, 1947–1985* (2004)—is the magnificence of 1950s gay New York and its passing, the latter due to the newfound sense of identity and political awareness experienced by many members of the gay community following the Stonewall Riot and the AIDS epidemic. McCourt elegizes the campy, closeted queer culture of the '50s and '60s, most particularly its cultural signs and detritus: what Wayne Koestenbaum calls its “lingua franca of dropped hair pins and insider references to film and opera,” or what Vladimir Nabokov—speaking of a similarly self-enclosed cultural entity, the Russian émigrés who flocked to Berlin between the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 and Hitler’s accession as Chancellor of Germany on 30 January 1933—termed “the bird-signs and moon-signs” of a “mythical tribe.”<sup>326</sup>

Nabokov’s witty, wistful, fictional anthropology of the White Russian diaspora recalls Harold Beaver’s epochal “Homosexual Signs (In Memory of Roland Barthes),” which applies the tools of structuralism and semiotics to a reading of both homosexual signs and of *homosexuality as a sign*, or, rather, of homosexuality as a mode of signification, a crucial

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<sup>326</sup> McCourt, 2002, x; Nabokov, 1991, second page of unpaginated “Foreword.” In Ferrell, McCourt calls his cast of characters an “extended tribe of people.” McCourt’s afterword to the reprinting of James Schuyler’s *What’s for Dinner?* (Mccourt, 2006, 208), describes this tribe as “the then relatively small circle of New York’s camp intellectual elite (bent on theatergoing, with its gossipy scrums in overcrowded lobbies and its wickedly catty postmortems).”

counter-discourse or minor language operating at the heart of Western culture.<sup>327</sup> Beaver locates this signifying power in homosexuality's liminality, its alternately privileged and endangered position for much of its history in the West. In words that apply perfectly to McCourt's work, Beaver sees homosexuality as a kind of signifying machine, a modality of discourse that interprets, narrates, and deconstructs everything in its path: "For to be homosexual in Western society entails a state of mind in which all credentials, however petty, are under unceasing scrutiny. The homosexual is beset by signs, but the urge to interpret whatever transpires, or fails to transpire, between himself and every chance acquaintance. He is a prodigious consumer of signs—of hidden meanings, hidden systems, hidden potentiality. Exclusion from the common code impels the frenzied quest: in the momentary glimpse, the scrambled figure, the sporadic gesture, the chance encounter, the reverse image, the sudden slippage, the lowered guard. In a flash meanings may be disclosed; mysteries wrenched out and betrayed."<sup>328</sup> Beaver further depicts homosexuality as an interpretative act: "[Homosexuality] entails a dual vision, in other words, that must withhold a truth (that the speakers are male), while affirming art. For queens are all accomplices in the art of fiction. Deprived of their own distinctive codes, homosexuals make art itself into their distinctive code. Aesthetic absorption is all. For Wilde . . . it was no longer homosexuality that was duplicitous but its paradigm, art. That is the revelation which all the paradoxes from Wilde to Barthes pursue. Art and sex are analogous activities since both are projections of fantasy. Their mutual term 'camp' reveals as much a sexual as an aesthetic norm

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<sup>327</sup> For more on minor literatures, cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, especially 16–27.

<sup>328</sup> Beaver, 164. It is important not to swallow wholesale Beaver's essentializing and reifying of homosexuality: not all homosexuals are men, nor are all avid mythologists of culture: for important nuances to Beaver's totalizing take, see *Camp*, 92–93; Ross. Nevertheless, Beaver's "male homosexual as semiologist" is a useful lens through which to view McCourt's writing.

of indirection, self-protection, and speculative irresponsibility.”<sup>329</sup> McCourt’s campy aesthetics, then, make use of the same stylistic feints and diversions, the same semiotic decodings and re-codings, open to the drag queens and homosexuals whose lives he narrates; Beaver’s trinity of “indirection, self-protection, and speculative irresponsibility”—lighter, happier versions of Joyce’s artistic credo of “silence, cunning and exile”—allow for McCourt’s masquerade, his irony, his sublimated eroticism, his panoramic catalogs, his rhapsodic joy.

Indeed, camp—as explored by Beaver and other critics and cultural theorists during the last sixty years or so—provides a crucial interpretive paradigm for McCourt, whose work provides readers with a theory and practice of camp, an endlessly elaborated set of variations on the basic set of camp motifs. Indeed, many theorists of camp seem at times to be writing with McCourt in mind: witness, for example, Susan Sontag’s “Notes on ‘Camp,’” some of whose entries seem to uncannily anticipate McCourt’s work a decade later.<sup>330</sup> Sontag’s 33<sup>rd</sup> postulate sounds remarkably like one of McCourt’s own apothegms on the flamboyant brilliance of his subjects: “What Camp taste responds to is ‘instant character’ . . . and, conversely, what it is not stirred by is the sense of the development of character. Character is understood as a state of continual incandescence—a person being one, very intense thing. This attitude toward character is a key element of the theatricalization of experience embodied in the Camp sensibility. And it helps account for the fact that opera and ballet are experienced as such rich treasures for Camp, for neither of these forms can easily do justice to the complexity of human nature. Wherever there is development of character, Camp is reduced.”<sup>331</sup> McCourt’s work shares clear affinities

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<sup>329</sup> Beaver, 165.

<sup>330</sup> Sontag. “Notes on ‘Camp’” was first published in *Partisan Review* in 1964, eleven years before *Mawrdew Czegowchwz*: it should be noted in this connection that Sontag was an early, vocal supporter of McCourt’s work.

<sup>331</sup> Sontag, 61.

with Sontag's definition, most strongly that of incandescence: both McCourt's characters and the style in which they are depicted continually burn, flame, flash, and glow, with the "hard, gem-like flame" that Walter Pater, another queer critic and aesthete, counted "success in life."<sup>332</sup> This scintillation of character, its emphasis on lyricism over drama, of stylized expressions of emotion over realistic depictions of character, place, and incident, extends to the plot and structure of McCourt's texts as well, which privilege the single-paragraph vignette over the extended scene, flashes of speech over dialogue and long conversations, exteriority over interiority. Embodied most directly by McCourt's central character, Mawrdew Czegowchwz, the themes of the aestheticization of life, of personal incandescence, the showing-forth of talent as a phenomenon to be witnessed, shared, and lauded, the awareness of an audience, are central to his fictions.

Another camp lens through which to view McCourt and his work is that of Andrew Ross's "camp intellectual," outlined in his suggestive, productive "Uses of Camp." Ross situates the camp intellectual between the "the traditional intellectual, whose function is to legitimize the cultural power of a ruling group" and "the organic intellectual, who promotes the interests of a rising class"—two groups, then, imbricated in current structures of power, class, representation, and gender, one firmly entrenched, the other on its way to being so. Against these, Ross poses "the marginal (or camp) intellectual [who] expresses his impotence as the dominated fraction of a ruling bloc in order to remain there (i.e., as a non-threatening presence) while he distances himself from the conventional morality and taste of the growing middle class."<sup>333</sup> McCourt clearly fits Ross's camp-intellectual paradigm, and for a number of reasons: his work is endlessly allusive, learned, abstruse, but not with the grand Modernist mythopoesis of a Joyce or a Pound; rather, McCourt's learned prose tends toward the obscure, the minor, the recondite, be it opera

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<sup>332</sup> Pater, 152.

<sup>333</sup> Ross, 317.

lore or a film buff's love of trivia, memories from the lost world of 1950s Queens, New York or the Everard Baths during the '60s: a collector and hoarder, then, a stocker of private *Wunderkammern* and stager of extravagant tableaux, like Joseph Cornell and Jack Smith. McCourt's marginality is also borne out by his uncertain, liminal place in the literary canon: as of this writing, of the fiction only *Mawrdew Czgowchwz* and *Now Voyagers* are currently in print; *Queer Street* was well-received by critics but often dismissed as a curiosity;<sup>334</sup> there is at present no full-length study of McCourt's work, and few articles devoted to him wholly or in part: indeed, even among teachers, critics, and other cognoscenti, he remains unknown, unread, remembered, if at all, mistakenly, confused with his far more popular namesakes, Frank and Malachi McCourt (to which he bears no relation, familial, stylistic, or otherwise). Ross's anatomy, then, of the camp intellectual is largely an anatomy of McCourt and his work: "The . . . camp intellectual may well be a parody or negation of dominant bourgeois forms: anti-industry, proidleness; antifamily, probachelorhood; antirespectability, proscandal; anti-masculine, profeminine; antisport, profrivolity; antidecor, proexhibitionism; antiprogress, prodecadence; antiwealth, profame. But his aristocratic affectations and a sign of his *disqualification*, or remoteness from power, because they comfortably symbolize, to the bourgeois, the deceased power of the aristocrat, while they are equally removed from the threatening, embryonic power of the masses."<sup>335</sup> A queer flaneur, then, sophisticated and urbane, less upwardly mobile than laterally so, cutting across, like the dispossessed ragpicker in his wanderings, hidden and previously-unarticulated lines of class, culture, knowledge, and experience. A mobility born of

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<sup>334</sup> Cf. Chauncey, 2003, who writes, "Long stretches of 'Queer Street' seem to delight in mystifying readers with opaque writing, unannounced shifts in direction and unexplained references. It began as a collection of disparate essays and often still reads that way." Chauncey concludes, somewhat patronizingly, with, "'Queer Street' reads like a long conversation with a gay uncle who insists on occupying center stage."

<sup>335</sup> Ross, 317.

marginality, a dweller in multiple cities at once: cities of passion and desire (Auden: “Eros, builder of cities”), of silence and secrecy, of work and play both public and private, of festive celebration and elegiac mourning, all intermingled.

McCourt’s work can thus be productively situated at the crossroads of twentieth-century gay American life, liminally touching on the pre-Stonewall days of the closet and the post-Stonewall era of widening political and social engagement and acceptance. McCourt’s primary linguistic and stylistic tools—irony, detachment, performativity, gesture; camp; *copia*, breathiness, plenitude, surplusage; a privileging of the comic and carnivalesque over the tragic and serious—are perfectly suited to his ambivalent, Janus-like stance, straddling two worlds at once, throbbing, like Eliot’s Tiresias, between two lives: both Designated Mourner of the Old Gay World and Reluctant Harbinger of the New Queer Millennium. Ross again, apropos of the camp intellectual: “[C]amp intellectuals become an institution in the twentieth century, within the popular entertainment industries, reviving their role there as the representative or stand in for a class that is no longer in a position to exercise its power to define official culture. So too, they maintain their parodic critique of the properly educated and responsibly situated intellectual who speaks with the requisite tone of moral authority and seriousness as the conscience and consciousness of society as a whole (i.e., as the promoter of ruling interests).”<sup>336</sup>

Which is not to say, by quoting Ross, that McCourt’s work lacks seriousness, or that it confines itself to entertainment—McCourt’s two favorite media, opera and film, are both far more than “mere” entertainment (while at the same time being marvelously entertaining, even disposably so)—or that its excavation of the minor and major arcana of midcentury gay male American life must perforce (despite its current reception) be confined to the critical-cultural

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 318.

closet of neglect and oblivion. Rather, it is to encode McCourt's playful, difficult, exuberant, performative style in a sensibility at once celebratory and oppositional, a minor language that has managed, through its endless work of reappropriation, critique, parody, and deconstruction, to "queer" much of the dominant culture that once surrounded and subsumed it. McCourt is "High Camp," following Christopher Isherwood's famous, first, definition of the term: "High Camp is the whole emotional basis of the Ballet, for example, and of course of Baroque art. You see, true High Camp always has an underlying seriousness. You can't camp about something you don't take seriously. You're not making fun of it; you're making fun out of it. You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance."<sup>337</sup> McCourt's, then, is a playful seriousness, at once celebratory and mournful, an elevation of the esoteric to the cosmic, a comically subversive project that recognizes that the realization of joy is a demanding, arduous task, the seriousness of which is on a par with more traditionally serious subjects.<sup>338</sup>

As noted above, much of McCourt's writing pays tribute to this lost world of midcentury gay American culture. In the opening paragraph of *Mawrdew Czgowchwz*, for example, McCourt imaginatively displaces 1970s nostalgia for the '50s backward a generation, reconfiguring it as the jaded '50s New York opera world's longing for the heyday of the great tenor Enrico Caruso (25 February 1873–2 August 1921): "There was a time (time out of mind) in the sempiternal progress of *divadienst*, at that suspensory pause in its career just prior to the advent of what was to be known as 'Mawrdolatry,' when the cult of Morgana Neri flourished in the hothouse ambience of the Crossroads Café, in the shadow of the old *Times* building, across Broadway

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<sup>337</sup> Isherwood, 51.

<sup>338</sup> As Sontag, 61, notes, apropos of the serious High Western Culture represented by Homer, Shakespeare, and Bach: "[T]here are other creative sensibilities besides the seriousness (both tragic and comic) of high culture and of the high style of evaluating people. And one cheats oneself as a human being, if one has *respect* only for the style of high culture, whatever else one may do or feel on the sly."

from the very hotel (a ghostly renovated ruin) where Caruso had sojourned in the great days, whose palmy lobby, once ormolu and velvet, had been transformed into a vast drugstore, and in Caruso's suite a podiatrist had been installed."<sup>339</sup> Note the cadences of the passage, its clauses linked paratactically by copulae such as "at," "when," "in," "across," the sentence seemingly refusing to end with a quality Koestenbaum terms a "lush aversion to termination."<sup>340</sup> The devolution from Caruso's "great days," embodied by the "palmy lobby, once ormolu and velvet" of his hotel—now, we learn parenthetically, "a ghostly renovated ruin," one of McCourt's many Benjaminian confluences between old and new ages, between a vanished golden age and the ruin of the present—happens almost casually, as if an afterthought to the onward-plunging text. The podiatrist is another seeming afterthought: a delayed punchline, the replacement of the singer by the foot-surgeon. Morgana Neri is the current reigning opera queen; her successor-to-be, the Czech-Welsh "diva of the moment"—as she is named in the list of dramatis personae that opens the book<sup>341</sup>—the book's heroine, Mawrdew Czegowchwz.

The "seemingly endless Neri era" has stultified the world of opera, Neri's devotees and acolytes persisting in their devotion to the aging singer beyond the bounds of reason: "The rolling electric *Times* sign might proclaim in its career the end of the modern world; I Neriani, unbothered, would rant on over the latest Neri triumph at the house, on record, in Paramus, at the stadium."<sup>342</sup> The short list at the end conveys a sense of tedium: these triumphs have happened before, and have now become rote, predictable. This feeling reoccurs in a sentence sketching Neri's discography: "For many years Neri recordings outsold those of her every rival at Macy's,

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<sup>339</sup> McCourt, 2002, 3. This chapter will focus solely on *Mawrdew Czegowchwz* as a representative example of both McCourt's fiction and his literary technique in general.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 3.

at the Gramophone Shop, on Mulberry Street and Mott.”<sup>343</sup> Again there is the note of deadening finality, the list of stores encompassing all of Manhattan, the center and nexus of opera; the reign of this Wicked Witch seems unlikely ever to end. As the narrator wryly notes in the following paragraph, “It ended.”<sup>344</sup> The advent of Mawrdew Czgowchwz sweeps away Neri’s decrepit rule, ushering in a new golden age of opera for McCourt’s fictional New York—frequently referred to by the text as Gotham—a time of joy and plenitude whose early years will be narrated during the remainder of the book.<sup>345</sup>

As with James Schuyler, looked at in the previous chapter, McCourt employs catalogs and lists to render the fullness, abundance, energy, and cacophony of New York in its ’50s flood tide: many of these catalogs celebrate the carnivalesque, teeming anarchy of streets and parties and crowded rooms, the buzzing vibrancy of a city perpetually on edge, perpetually in the act of changing itself with loud, brassy, strident self-assertion. As the center of her eponymously-titled text—the “eye of the novel’s apostrophizing Petrarchan hurricane”<sup>346</sup>—Mawrdew Czgowchwz attracts to herself an amazing amount of catalogic description, from the hagiographical lists attributed her by her idolatrous supporters to the lists and other forms of *copia* the narrator employs to describe her and her new era: “It had all begun at and in a certain place and time. . . . But waiting for Czgowchwz was quite outside history; it was the thirty-fourth day of the sixteenth month, in the seventh season. Later seasons they were to remember, to chronicle,

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 3–4.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>345</sup> Cf. Yohalem, an early review of the book: “‘Mawrdew Czgowchwz’ is . . . a mélange of fantasies, the author’s daydream of what the world could be if a few discrepancies in the perfection of reality were set to rights, something like Nabokov’s ‘Ada’ or Vian’s ‘Mood Indigo.’ This is a world where hunger strikes occur to protest the Met’s firing of a singer, where blizzards vanish in a day, permitting audiences to attend the opera, where crowds gather and respond on cue, as do clouds. Everyone is wise and good save for a few wicked on whom divine retribution swiftly falls.”

<sup>346</sup> McCourt, 2002, vii.

seasons informed by the each and every time that she, herself, *stessa*, would mount the boards, made up from assorted paint pots at a table mirror ringed in merciless bulbs ablaze, and heap upon music a variety of disguises, none of which could ever hope to equal or to obscure what she was in her immutable self. So many times Czgowchwz, or Czgowchwz to this or that root or power, was still Czgowchwz, as is the number one; and Czgowchwz over Czgowchwz, like Czgowchwz in an infinite hall of electric Czgowchwz mirrors, was but Czgowchwz.”<sup>347</sup> The repetition of the heroine’s already-almost-unpronounceable name creates a *mise-en-abyme* like that of the “infinite hall of . . . mirrors” in the simile; the overwroughtness of the style simultaneously raises Czgowchwz to a mythic plane and ironizes her mythic stature, McCourt’s language at once, *à la* Joyce, elevating his subjects and rendering them comic by suggesting—or, better, *performing*—the slightly outré, flamboyantly outrageous aspects of their preeminence.

The text stresses Mawrdew Czgowchwz’s quasi-mythic stature throughout: in a world that straddles the line between the everyday and the unreal, in which evil curses and “black voodoo,”<sup>348</sup> Rabelasian street processions, miraculously improbable plot twists, and fairy-tale genealogies, rub shoulders with a more-or-less-recognizably “real” New York, the singer is the central figure, the gateway to the numinous both for her adherents and for the narrative, the focus (and often the cause) of the text’s frequent flights of fancy. Consider, for example, the “forty roles” she promises to sing in the year immediately following her New York debut, a punishing workload that would be the death of any merely mortal voice but which the text, reporting the story as given in *The New York Times*—in a slavishly reproduced Times New Roman font to boot—presents without comment:

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<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–8.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

Violetta, in “La Traviata”; Desdemona, in “Otello”; Leonora, in “Il Trovatore”; Azucena, in the same opera; Lady Macbeth, in “Macbeth”; Mistress Quickly, in “Falstaff”; Amneris, in “Aida”; the Princess of Eboli, in “Don Carlo”; “Norma,” the title role; Elvira, in “I Puritani”; Donna Elvira, in “Don Giovanni”; Donna Anna, in the same opera; the Countess, in “Le Nozze di Figaro”; the Queen of the Night, in “Die Zauberflöte”; Orfeo, in “Orfeo ed Euridice”; Poppea, in “L’Incoronazione di Poppea”; the Marschallin, in “Der Rosenkavalier”; Octavian, the title role in the same opera; “Elektra” and “Salome,” the title roles; the Dyer’s Wife, in “Die Frau ohne Schatten”; Sieglinde, in “Die Walküre”; Brünnhilde, in the same music drama; Elisabeth, in “Tannhäuser”; “Manon” and “Thaïs,” the title roles; “Louise,” the title role; Dalila, in “Samson et Dalila”; “Carmen,” the title role; Cassandra, in “Les Troyens”; Dido, in the same opera (in the same performance); “Rusalka,” the title role; “Turandot,” the title role; Minnie, in “La Fanciulla del West”; Cio-Cio-San, in “Madama Butterfly”; Marie, in Berg’s “Wozzeck”; Jocasta, in Stravinsky’s “Oedipus Rex”; Emilia Marti, in Janáček’s “The Makropoulos Affair”; Leonore, in “Fidelio”; and Romeo, in Bellini’s “I Capuletti ed I Montecchi.”<sup>349</sup>

This panoply of roles extends far beyond the range of any historical or living singer’s ability to perform in a single year; Czgowchwz’s range is so wide, so all-encompassing, as to seem a greatest hits list of operatic female roles, an impossible *annus mirabilis* of commanding performances.<sup>350</sup> The improbability of the list foregrounds McCourt’s meta-subject, language: here the listing function outgrows all possible use, reveling in the steady accretion of role after role; the catalog pushes the subject of Mawrdew Czgowchwz beyond realistic narrative into the realms of myth and fable, enacting this apotheosis through its own rhetorical inflation. As the narrative voice notes at the end of the *Times* article, giving a key to reading the novel thereby, “That was Czgowchwz, her story, history. But out of it the Czgowchwz people forged

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 6. Earlier in the *Times* article she is mentioned as “singing Mahler’s ‘Kinder otenlieder’ [*sic*] from the steps of the Palais de Chaillot in Paris,” the slip—the correct form is *Kindertotenlieder* (German: “songs of children’s deaths”)—perhaps owing to a bleb of whiteness obscuring most of the letter “t” on the corresponding page (9) of first editions of the novel, the resulting graphical absence—the vanished “t” a missing obelus or dagger (†), the cross-like mark used to note a person’s decease, robbing Mahler’s songs of death and the phrase of sense—either confusing the scanning software or typist (and certainly the editors) of the 2002 New York Review Books Classics edition.

<sup>350</sup> This is hinted at, but not stated explicitly, in Yohalem, who wonderingly mentions twelve of the forty roles, but does not comment on the absurdity of this repertoire.

differences. They dealt in genre, discovering that tragedy lay in the quotidian depiction of anything (anything gorgeous); that comedy, conversely, swelled to bursting, in proud dimensions. All the rest, the reportage, was waste.”<sup>351</sup> The “proud dimensions” of McCourt’s style in *Mawrdew Czgowchwz*—what McCourt elsewhere terms “the feeling of an extra, libidinal dimension, the inside story,”<sup>352</sup> an anecdotal narrative vouchsafed only to initiates—embrace stylistic overplusage, avoiding the “quotidian depiction” offered by strict realism: hence McCourt’s catalogs and lists, pressed into service to record the “bursting” sides of his breathy, hyperinflated Gotham.<sup>353</sup>

*Mawrdew Czgowchwz* begins with a list—“an enthralling list of dramatis personae,”<sup>354</sup> titled, simply, “THE LIST,” as if there were no other—of characters, followed by a brief description of their role in the novel.<sup>355</sup> Most of the characters have a symbolic, or “speaking”

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<sup>351</sup> McCourt, 2002, 7.

<sup>352</sup> McCourt, 1997. The passage is worth giving in full, as it extends *Mawrdew Czgowchwz*’s own preoccupations with narrative, style, and truth: “A fan’s notes are usually interesting, for as Auden famously asked, who can praise enough the world of his belief? Moreover, a woman talking about opera—diva memoirs of a grand thesis like Catherine Clement’s “Opera, or the Undoing of Women”—gives me the feeling of an extra libidinal dimension, the inside story.”

<sup>353</sup> On breath in McCourt, cf. Lehmann-Haupt, who describes *Mawrdew Czgowchwz* as a “risen soufflé of a first novel . . . [a] bottomless barrel of Meringue glacée.” Or cf. McCourt, 1985, which describes song parodist Anna Russell’s autobiography as “a certain breathless, scattershot reminiscence. A book like this . . . is intended to give its subject’s votaries a look inside the complex circuitry that galvanizes the performing clown”—words that apply neatly to *Mawrdew Czgowchwz* and the rest of McCourt’s oeuvre. On the downside of breathiness, see McCourt, 1997, a negative review of Kim Chernin and Renate Stendhal’s biography of Cecilia Bartoli: “Much of Ms. Chernin’s section I must call gush, incorporating dutifully transcribed puffery from handlers with commercial agendas.” Clearly, then, in McCourt’s poetics of breath there are “good” and “bad” enthusiasms, outpourings, manias, and holdings-forth.

<sup>354</sup> McCourt, 2002, ix.

<sup>355</sup> I use “begins” advisedly, and a short detour into descriptive bibliography shows why: both editions of *Mawrdew Czgowchwz* include, as do many novels, a dedication page. The 1975 edition is dedicated, simply, “TO EVERYONE WHO WAITED,” each word occupying a single line; the 2002 edition omits this, giving instead a much-longer list of “*The Order of the Angels Who Have Watched over Mawrdew Czgowchwz*,” arranged vertically in the book, horizontally here (with commas separating each name) for the sake of space: “Victoria de Los Angeles, Kitty

name: that is, a name whose etymological or referential meaning gives some aspect of the character's personality, job, origin, or habits. Thus we have the homophone of *Czgowchwz/Gorgeous*, which denotes the heroine's physical beauty and the beauty of her voice; Pèlerin (Pierrot) Deslieux, roughly "pilgrim from afar" (from French *pèlerin*, "pilgrim" + *des lieux* "from places, from far away"), mirroring both the novel's themes of exile and wandering, as well as Pèlerin's mock-voyage from the Russian Tea Room to the solstice party at Magwyck, the home of his lover Madge O'Meaghre Gautier, at the end of chapter two;<sup>356</sup> and so on. The speaking names reinforce the enchanted, magical-realistic aspect of McCourt's work, blurring the already-tenuous literary line between realism and non-realism. As one would expect, the list is organized hierarchically, with *Czgowchwz*, "*the diva of the moment*," at the top, followed by her honor guard, "*The Czgowchwzians*." Neri and "*The Neriacs (I Neriani)*" follow, and are in turn followed by the lesser spheres of characters, *Czgowchwz*'s helpers after her breakdown, the "*Engineers of / Mediators in the Czgowchwz Restoration*" and the novel's *hoi polloi* or common folk, the staffage that throngs McCourt's fictional Manhattan, the "*Citizens of New York and Elsewhere*."<sup>357</sup> (Jacob Beltane, *Czgowchwz*'s lover and eventual partner in song, comes last, mirroring his cameo role in the novel itself: here, as often in his work, McCourt aping the style and language of Hollywood.) Like the credits that roll after a film, the list of the novel's

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Moore, Mary Curtis-Verna, Harry Blair, Vincent Virga, Donald Lyons, Theodore Solotaroff, Elaine Markson, Susan Sontag, Michael Di Capua, Leo Lerman, Maria Callas, Leontyne Price, J. D. McClatchy, Victoria Wilson, Christopher Cahill, Edwin Frank." McCourt's 2002 dedicatory list further expands the book's shining circle of *Czgowchwz*'s happy acolytes, extending its circumference to include real-life singers, critics, and writers as well.

<sup>356</sup> The description of his ride home gives McCourt an opportunity to slip in one of his many small catalogs: "[A]s the result of an exquisite (if routine) courtesy on the part of the eternally resourceful Mme M. Czgowchwz, oltrano, [Pierrot] was availed of the use of a sled-runnered calèche, a Shetland-pony team, a driver, unperturbed and silent, lap rugs, and a thermos full of hot kvass" (ibid., 48–49).

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., xv–xviii.

characters presents important names for our delectation; coming as it does at the beginning of the book, the list presents *Mawrdew Czgowchwz* embryonically, statically, giving us the main actors—and, if we read carefully enough the various descriptions that follow the characters' names, the main events as well—before the curtain rises.<sup>358</sup> The list of characters is a phenomenon rarely encountered in the Anglo-American novelistic tradition; McCourt's use of it here functions as a distancing device, a further signal that *Mawrdew Czgowchwz* will be a departure from the normal bill of fare.<sup>359</sup> Here it is a snapshot, an opening verbal *tableau vivant* that, with the beginning of the novel proper, will erupt into frenetic, clashing activity. Finally, it is a democratic moment in the novel as well, a paratext that the reader can peruse or not, a vital element that can nevertheless be ignored, skimmed, or desultorily read at the reader's pleasure, and that can be returned to, reconsulted, revisited.

Much of McCourt's prodigious catalogic energies are engaged in listing various objects, clothes, accoutrements, and possessions: the stuff of real life with which he packs his already-overstuffed narrative. For example, the Winter Solstice party at Magwyck that occupies chapters 2–3 comes replete with its own guest-list, allowing the reader to survey—just as does the

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<sup>358</sup> For a rough cinematic equivalent, see the prologue to Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film *Le Mepris* (*Contempt*), in which Godard himself reads the credits over the opening shot, a long take showing the film's cinematographer, Raoul Coutard, filming a long tracking shot of secretary Francesca Vanini (Giorgia Moll) to the haunting strains of Georges Delerue's score. It is possible to hear various emotional inflections in Godard's voice, which delivers names of cast and crew sometimes matter-of-factly—as with the name of Carlo Ponti, the film's producer, whom Godard hated (modeling the producer-dictator of *Contempt*, Jerry Prokosch [Jack Palance] partly on him) but whose name is read calmly, without affect or condescension—sometimes with emphasis (note especially the tone of pride and satisfaction as he reads his own credit, “C'est un film de Jean-Luc Godard,” for me one of the most thrilling moments in all cinema). The same sense of momentous events about to occur, of a curtain rising on the “swelling scene,” obtains in both film and novel.

<sup>359</sup> Koestenbaum (*ibid.*, vii) emphasizes the novel's aberrant qualities, speaking glowingly of the novel's “formal deviation” and noting, catalogically, that “it strays from fiction into dithyramb, rant, cavatina, stunt, exercise, letter, self-portrait, manifesto.”

Countess Madge, who is the party's host—the invitees as they settle down for the feast: “These were . . . [the Countess's] niece, Lavinia O'Maurigan Stein; Lavinia's husband, Jonathan Stein; Dixie, Alice, Ralph, Mawrdew Czegowchwz, Dame Sybil, Gaia della Gueza, Contessa Cassia, Carmen, Halcyon Paranoï (at the foot), Tangent Percase, Consuelo Gilligan, Merovig Creplaczx, the three remaining Secret Seven, Arpenik, and Jameson O'Maurigan. The place set just at the Countess's right awaited the eventual, wending Pèlerin Deslieux.”<sup>360</sup> Coming as it does in the first paragraph of chapter 3, the list mirrors the list that begins the book: rather than jumping *in medias res*, we are given a prologue to the action, a list of names that will appear therein and which are offered for our perusal preparatory to the main event. Note that at this point in the narrative, many of the names mentioned are still little more than names; only a few of the characters have been fleshed-out during dramatic scenes, by means of action and dialogue, and most carry little more signification than whatever little one can attach. It is clear, then, that McCourt's inclusion of this list of names has reasons other than providing a gripping opening to the chapter: as noted before, language, particularly the process of enumeration, is central to his strategies—it is the medium of language and not its message, to borrow from McLuhan, that is his primary interest here.

The description of the holiday feast later in the chapter enjoys a similar catalogic expansiveness; here, however, the accumulation of names of foods takes on a richly evocative cast, until the boards of Magwyck—and the shopworn planks of literary realism—begin to groan under the weight of so many delicacies:

Dinner had commenced with potage *santé*. Next, shad roe and sweetbreads Tara, with an iced Bohemian hock. Next, soufflé Gautier (iced Moët, clotted cream, egg yolks, and powdered garlic flowers suspended in pignoli-scented egg-white froths, laced with Cointreau, and presented baked in separate mandala-shaped

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 50.

ramekins). Next, saddle of mutton with roast brown potatoes, mixed sprouts, turnips, parsnips, leek rings, carrots, and cauliflower tops (“Irish ratatouille”), mint sauce, various gravies, and a brash claret. Next, pumpkin soufflé and Vermont rough cider off the wood. Next, Wicklow sausage, black hog-blood pudding, blue and white Stilton, sage Derby, Cheshire, Caerphilly, and Guinness tapped out of the barrel. Last, gateau Czgowchwz, Armenian coffee, and a selection of private-reserve O’Meaghre Donegal liqueurs—the Countess Madge’s yearly fealty gift from some gracious and talented cousins-distillers in the Emerald regions overseas. An elegant sufficiency having been had (by common consent), conversation began to develop in earnest.<sup>361</sup>

The sumptuousness of the Countess Madge’s feast is reflected in the intricacy and lavishness of its description. Note in particular the nested mini-catalog listing the contents of the soufflé Gautier: the narrative, carried along by the currents of enumeration, thus breaks into sub-catalogs, further detailing the already-minutely-detailed—the recipe as natural adjunct to the menu. Some of the entrées remain obscured by their names: there is no corresponding list of ingredients for, say, gateau Czgowchwz, and one is left to imagine its contents and its taste. The narrator’s remark at the end—“An elegant sufficiency having been had”—comments self-reflexively on the profusion of items in the catalog of foods: the feasters are stuffed, their satiety mirroring the reader’s having been overstuffed with the names of the dishes. (Later Paranoï will describe the reheating of dishes for the late Pierrot as an “Ensemble anamnesis,” further underlining the quantity of food, as well as the communal atmosphere of the dinner: the serving of leftovers as a way of restaging the dinner all over again, bring Pierrot into the fold and “reinforcing communal delight.”<sup>362</sup>) Thus McCourt gets, as it were, to have his cake and eat it too by offering both text (the menu) and commentary (Paranoï’s remark), both catalog and gloss.

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 50–51.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 51. In contrast we have Tangent Percase’s opinion of the Neriacs’ lemming-like devotion to their fading star, “oblivion-as-mendacious-memory” (52), thus pointing out what might be called McCourt’s communal ethics: good communities delight in the creating together of a kind of shared polity and shared communal memory, while bad communities slavishly devote themselves to the maintaining of an idol and a party-line.

Having noted the postprandial conversation's having begun "in earnest," McCourt now turns, in the next paragraph, to the conversation itself: or rather, not to a description of the conversation, with speakers' names followed by quoted dialogue, but instead to a rapid-fire cross-cutting between various talking heads—as Koestenbaum notes in his introduction, "Several chapterettes are structured around split-screen lists, various characters' activities enshrined in parallel dependent clauses"<sup>363</sup>—each sentence beginning with the name of the speaker followed by their speech-action, but not by the words said. The effect is similar to that of watching a film with the sound muted; one can see the speakers but, fascinatingly, tantalizingly, cannot hear what they are saying:

Halcyon Paranoy opened the bidding, posing questions. These were general, seeking to canvass group attitudes. They were parried in kind, by cross-fire generalities, at that end of the table. Tensions evolved, as they will. Consuelo, feeling somewhat awash, bobbing between Halcyon and Tangent Percase on one side and Creplaczx and the remaining Secret Seven on the other, sent a folded message across- and up-table to G-G [Gaia della Guezza], soliciting no reply. G-G frowned, dragging on a long Sobranie, and made a few mnemonic notes. Arpenik slanted her own wary, *Caspian* opinions across the table to Ralph and Alice. Mawrdew Czgowchwz and Dame Sybil concurred. G-G, glancing vis-à-vis, advised Merovig to press less. Cassia fell out (predictably) with Carmen over a minuscule mimic detail while recalling a Neri fiasco. The remaining Secret Seven ratified contentions at random, playing politics. Lavinia leaned toward Jonathan, who seemed elsewhere.<sup>364</sup>

As noted above, the passage is less a faithful depiction of a conversation than a translation of one into another key. At times, visual details are given in place of aural ones, vectors and directions of speech rather than words: the passage of Consuelo's "folded message . . . across- and up-table to G-G," Arpenik's "slant[ing]" of her opinions "across the table to Ralph and Alice," and Gaia della Gueza's "glancing vis-à-vis" in silent entreaty to Merovig Creplaczx "to press less." We are given a conversational deixis, a diagram of the speakers and their spatial relations to one

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<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

another, in place of the conversation itself. Speech acts are named, but not detailed: Parano's "questions," which—perhaps because they are delivered rapidly—are likened to an auctioneer's opening of "the bidding," the "cross-fire generalities" that answer him, "Tensions," Consuelo's passed note, G-G's "no reply" (we are not even told what she thinks, only that she makes "a few mnemonic notes"); when more detail is given—as with Arpenik's "*Caspian* opinions" (Arpenik is Armenian, bordering on the Caspian Sea, but whence the italics?), or Cassia's disagreement with Carmen over the "Neri fiasco," or the Secret Seven's "playing politics"—we are still far away from learning anything of use. Thus McCourt both beckons while holding turning aside; the reader is present at the party but cannot participate, as if outside looking through the window, nose pressed against the glass.

This elegant, intricate obfuscation continues a few paragraphs later, after Pierrot's belated arrival:

Despite the Countess Madge's outright interdict, Pierrot was besieged while savoring his meal. Tangent Percase demanded to know whether Arpenik's repeated, "feeling" pronouncements did not seem to the "disinterested audient" to contradict what Dixie and the remaining Secret Seven had made known to the company. Pierrot, on the soufflé, asked Tangent what he and Consuelo thought. Percase offered his opinion, the Gilligan woman hers. "How do you suddenly arrive at *that*—or THAT?" Carmen interrupted, proceeding to outline the *real* story, while Cassia, attempting to press her sotto voce reservations upon G-G, was airily misunderstood. Mawrdew Czegowchwz and Dame Sybil concurred, happily. Merovig brooded the more. Pierrot's meal went forward amid a general rehash *tutti* of opinion and information, habitual attitudes and idiosyncratic expression.<sup>365</sup>

Much like the "Eumaeus" episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*—in which a tired, old, nervy narrator's voice describes, meanderingly and at great length, the first encounter between Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, and whose enervated, winningly awful prose style is almost certainly a

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 51–52.

model for McCourt here<sup>366</sup>—the Magwyck solstice dinner offers a rambling, periphrastic account of itself: or, in its own words, “a general rehash *tutti* of opinion and information, habitual attitudes and idiosyncratic expression.” Note its many tiny sublimities: phrasemaker Percase’s “disinterested audient,” one of the book’s many snappy, self-reflexive highlightings of its own *über*-dexterous verbal wit (Percase is McCourt’s mouthpiece, the book’s author *manqué*); Carmen’s typographically-rendered rising voice (first italics for emphasis, followed by allcaps for outrage); Czegowchwz’s and Dame Sybil’s concurrence, repeated from the previous passage, the adverb *happily* a delicious motivic fillip. So winning is McCourt’s raconteurial persiflage that it is hard to care much about what he leaves out: the surface—bright, shimmering, sharp, shining—is all, and is enough.

As the Magwyck Solstice party continues, so, too, do the catalogs, as McCourt continues his parallel descriptions of subsequent actions. Dinner finally over, the company repairs to the Countess Madge’s music room:

Mawrdew Czegowchwz and Dame Sybil Farewell-Tarnysh retired to the music room with Merovig Creplaczx, Arpenik, Dixie, Contessa Cassia, Pierrot, and the Countess Madge. The Countess took up the psaltery, but did not play. She continued mumbling odd old fragments of ritual responses. Merovig did play: a thing of his own: strophic, nocturnal, sarabandic, fugal. Coming back indoors, Carmen took out her knitting and sat Calypso-like in a cozy cocoa baignoire fauteuil opposite the door. Mawrdew Czegowchwz and Dame Sybil listened

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<sup>366</sup> That McCourt knows Joyce well—and, more importantly, knows how to imitate well: *Mawrdew Czegowchwz* is, hands down, the only Joycean text that manages to live outside Joyce’s shadow—is obvious from even a brief look at *Mawrdew Czegowchwz*’s Hibernian stylistic vellelities; as Koestenbaum (*ibid.*, viii) notes, “Mccourt shares [with Joyce] Irishness and a commitment to verbal condensation, musical language, and myth. McCourt retroactively queers Joyce by crossbreeding *Ulysses* with such camp novelettes as Firbank’s *Valmouth*.” I would add that for McCourt myth is a starting point, a jumping-off into lighter, funnier territory: the apotheosis of Mawrdew Czegowchwz at the Old Met in chapter 1, say, or her breakdown-cum-depth-regression during her performance of *Tristan und Isolde* in chapter 4—which, improbably, turns out all right in the end—leave behind the Wagnerian heaviness of Joyce’s mythopoesis for the stuff of comedy, dreams, and enchantment: “Thus McCourt, immodestly modeling his work on modernist epics, miniaturizes them, or turns them into air” (*ibid.*).

(standing) to Cassia's ironic kvetch on the subjects of finance, politics, gossip, and fiction (its demise). Dixie and Arpenik exchanged knowing notions relative to the concoction of herbal soups, antelope stews, aphrodisiacs, and flower wines.<sup>367</sup>

Note again the list of names used to show the group's action. McCourt's enumeration and naming of the guests one-by-one signifies what could perhaps be called his *retarding function*: the counterbalance to the forward movement of the narrative, the use of catalogs and lists to hobble the story, to introduce stumbling-blocks, verbal density, and slowness to the text. The repeated naming of characters also heightens the choral, communal qualities of the novel: a primary focus of *Mawrdew Czegowchwz*, constantly reinforced by McCourt's use of catalogs of names, is the group of friends, admirers, fans, and devotees surrounding the opera singer. Themes emerging from this treatment are group dynamics, the relation of subordinate members to the center of the group and to each other, and the affective psychological states resulting from group participation (as well as its opposite, solitude). Note the extraordinarily lovely description of the composer Creplacz's composition as "strophic, nocturnal, sarabandic, fugal," with its alternation of ending *ics* and *als*; note too the heterogeneous jumble of Dixie and Arpenik's witches' brew of "herbal soups, antelope stews, aphrodisiacs, and flower wines": in each case McCourt lovingly, longingly lingering over each of the four items in the mini-lists, each tetrad held up for inspection and delectation. There is also the less-exalted list of "Cassia's ironic kvetch on the subjects of finance, politics, gossip, and fiction (its demise)," McCourt gleefully holding up these conversational truisms for ironic dissection; the last item, in particular, a

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 53. The Countess Madge's "odd old fragments of ritual responses" are surely spoken, *sotto voce*, in Irish, later catalogically described by McCourt (58), imitating the expansive genealogies of Irish epics and heroic poems, as "the tongue of Fergus, Finn MacCool, and Maev, of Cuchulainn, of O'Logaire, of Deirdre and Naoise." Cf. Joyce's list of Irish heroes, looked at above in chapter 2, in the "Cyclops" episode of *Ulysses*, another point of stylistic imitation and departure for McCourt.

favorite stalking-horse of cultural doomsayers then and now, triumphantly put to the lie by McCourt's sly inclusion of it in his vibrant, wholly alive fiction.

As the party winds to a close the guests trim the Christmas tree, and the description of the ornaments and lights is a riot of catalogic detail:

All the while they drank champagne and feasted, the deep, green expanse of the tree in the parlor, redolent of splendor, love, eternity, and good fortune, enjoyed countless sallies, yielding in its patient way to rococo ornamental decking. From steamer trunks Wedgwood had carted upstairs from storage, cornucopian varieties of those spun-glass, metal, and paper constructs the Yuletide requires were gingerly removed, then placed in depth under depth of challenging needle evergreen. Every last arboreal niche was invested by someone with a textured network-within-networks of light and color: apt schematic evidence of an opulent season.<sup>368</sup>

It is almost as if the tree itself were animate, complicit in its own bedecking and in the creation of the festive atmosphere: it is “redolent of splendor, love, eternity, and good fortune,” its smell—like the taste of Proust's madeline—evoking both tender affective states and the positive concepts which underlay them. The steamer trunks are symbolic of McCourt's verbal art: both are endlessly effusive, ceaselessly disgorging all manner of “cornucopian varieties” of delightful objects—words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters in the case of McCourt's style, the beautiful ornaments of “spun-glass, metal, and paper” in the case of the trunks. The passage is repeatedly self-reflexive, the “in depth under depth of challenging needle evergreen” and “textured network-within-networks of light and color” operating metonymically for *Mawrdew Czegowchwz* itself: like the chiaroscuro caused by the evergreen needles of the tree, or the interwoven colors of the Christmas lights, the novel is densely textured, inwrought, tessellated, and complex. The narrator notes that the interplay of colored lights provides “apt schematic evidence of an opulent

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 60.

season,” thus bodying forth and proclaiming its evident embarrassment of verbal riches, its own textual opulence.

McCourt’s exquisite surplusage—to borrow and, in borrowing, turn on its head Mark Twain’s pejorative term—extends to all corners of his universe, which is animated throughout by the kinds of verbal richness looked at above. This all-pervasiveness extends to his use of catalogs, which is constant throughout *Mawrdew Czgowchwz*, turning up in many different ways and places, as in Halcyon Q. Parano’s dashed-off witticisms: “Parano, in *The Czgowchwz Monthly Newsletter*, declared: ‘Magody, lysody, hilarody, simody, travesty, mimicry, and mad chicane scatter broadcast on the pavement as Czgowchwz goes before the eyes and ears of the world in nervous Pathé urgency.’”<sup>369</sup> Some of the words in Parano’s description don’t seem to be words at all, or, at least, not English words: *magody*, *lysody*, *hilarody*, and *simody* don’t appear in any of the English dictionaries I’ve been able to consult—not the *Oxford English Dictionary*, not Webster’s, nor a host of others.<sup>370</sup> Thus Parano’s glossolalia pushes over into incomprehensibility, verbal excitement into babble; we return to earth only with “travesty, mimicry, and mad chicane” and “nervous Pathé urgency,” which, while making sense, nevertheless share the overexcited, almost manic feel of the nonsense-words that come before. There is a febrile, unstable energy in Parano’s words that is exacerbated by the catalogism: a frantic, near-breathless attempt to name the unnameable, to find fit words to describe the indescribable. This is not to say that Parano’s verbal reach exceeds his grasp; rather, it is to say

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<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>370</sup> Google searches turn up some hits on non-English websites: *magody* appears on a number of Polish sites, while *simody* seems to be a Russian first name. The words are perhaps derived from Greek, on analogy with *melody* (*melos*, “sweet” + *oidos*, “way”: thus, the “sweet way around, a melody, tune”): *magody* might derive from *mega*, “big” + *oidos* (thus, something like “big song, loud song”), *lysody* from *luo*, *luein*, “to dissolve, release” + *oidos* (thus, something like “a freeing song, relief”), and so on. But these conjectures, however fun, are tenuous and thin at best.

that Paranoy's prose—and, by extension, McCourt's, for whom Paranoy is an emblem—is, wonderfully, “too much of a good thing,” to use the common phrase: it happily suffers the defects of its virtues, defects which in turn are not faults but sources of further verbal enchantment and delight, a superabounding tide of words that drives all before it like a conquering flood, a glorious logorrhea.<sup>371</sup>

Or witness this snapshot of Consuelo Gilligan waiting to attend the Magwyck Solstice party, her thoughts becoming increasingly wild as a winter storm gathers strength outside: “Consuelo brooded, restless, perplexed. Having long since noon lost track of the tumbling arc of the winter sun, she suffered the gloaming storm, meditating on the frangibility of one's vows to the one sex or the other or the other, passing thence to the *pluribo-ubiquity* (proposing the word, she ratified it at once) of a snowflake among snowflakes; thence to cold conceptual rigors, speculating on monologistics; thence to haywire syntax; thence to lacecraft . . .”<sup>372</sup> Consuelo's “cold conceptual rigors” derive, in both language and tone, from Leopold Bloom's bedtime thoughts in the “Ithaca” episode of *Ulysses*, where Bloom, trying to absolve Molly of her guilt for cheating on him with Blazes Boylan (and trying, in turn, to work past, as “a conscious reactor against the void of incertitude,” his own hurt feelings at having been cuckolded), muses, among other things, on “The preordained frangibility of the hymen: the presupposed intangibility of the thing in itself: the incongruity and disproportion between the selfprolonging tension of the thing proposed to be done and the selfabbreviating relaxation of the thing done. . . .”<sup>373</sup> Note how once

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<sup>371</sup> Paranoy later speaks of “space-time's torrent deluge” (*ibid.*, 25), an apt phrase to describe McCourt's own verbal flood.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>373</sup> Joyce, 1986, 17.2210–11, 2212–15. The passage goes on at length, ending—as Stephen's leavetaking of Bloom ended with the latter's feeling “The cold of interstellar space” (1246)—with a near-total affective heat-death, as Bloom's emotions cool and he thinks of “the futility of triumph or protest or vindication: the inanity of extolled virtue: the lethargy of nescient matter:

again McCourt turns to images of intricacy, patterning, and design, first with the falling snowflakes themselves, and then to linguistics (“monologistics” and “haywire syntax”) and, finally, to the subtleties of “lacecraft,” the images once again self-reflexive, forcing our attention once again back to McCourt’s own gloriously aberrant grammar, his own deliciously difficult—and, like the snowflakes, unique—textual *moiré*.

Another of McCourt’s lists of personages comes during the first chapter, in which the thronging crowd attending Czgowchwz’s debut at the Old Met is named, one by one, as they take their seats at the opera house. McCourt employs a long take that sweeps up seemingly all of the audience, a panoramic God’s-eye view that, seemingly, will not end, repeatedly, pleasurably delaying the curtain’s rise:

Meanwhile, up at Sherry’s, they were pouring in. Neri arrived with the Principessa Oriana Incantevole and Rinuccia Bagateli, that likable drudge whose bovine dispassion and languid tempi were as famous among her detractors as was the rather opulent and even timbre of her instrument among her many immigrant votaries. Neri was grimly, wickedly noblesse oblige, sipping astringent scarlet Camparis and signing autographs for lame geriatrics, pillars of Society and Culture. In a noisy corner Leah Lafin and Moe Mohr, twin stars in the best-seller bookworld, were discussing and signing stray copies of, respectively, *The Last Word* and *Having Had*. Dolly Farouche and members of the Broadway circuit were being raucous together on the stairs. Banquo Canelli, Alzira Toscanova, and Zaguina Milanese, with assorted attendants and Maisie Halloran, were at a long table. Thalia Bridgewood stood apart with her retinue. Margo Channing Sampson and her Bill were obvious. Movie stars, concert stars, opera stars, fallen stars sparkled on and off. “There were,” as Paranoy reported, “moments of stillness, and moments of near-sin.” The standees above and below rattled, enmeshed. The Secret Seven and the Countess Madge moved quietly into their box. Jameson O’Maurigan, nephew to the Countess; his twin sister, Lavinia O’Maurigan Stein; her husband, Jonathan; and Dame Sybil Farewell-Tarnysh joined friends in the Dress Circle. At three minutes past eight the lights went down. Many luckless stragglers stumbled outrageously to their seats through thickets of righteous disapproval.<sup>374</sup>

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the apathy of the stars” (2225–26). Consuelo’s storm-tossed thoughts would seem to touch on the cosmic, final chill felt by Bloom.

<sup>374</sup> McCourt, 2002, 17–18.

Some of the names given in the catalog above are completely throwaway, extraneous to the presentation of the action, such as the mention of the “twin stars” Leah Lafin (perhaps from *La fin*, “the end”?) and Moe Mohr (“more”?), who seem to have little reason for being numbered among the argent revelry than to provide the creator, McCourt, the opportunity for a few lame jokes (the inversion of their titles to render the phrase *Having had the last word* nonsensical is particularly grating, and to be all the more treasured for that). Similarly nonfunctional are “Banquo Canelli, Alzira Toscanova, and Zaguina Milanese, with assorted attendants and Maisie Halloran,” who provide only scene-dressing: extras in *Mawrdew Czgowchwz*’s cast, they provide little more than a bit of local color and linguistic eccentricity before disappearing forever. “Margo Channing Sampson and her Bill” are another teasingly fun addition, a not-too-sly, “obvious” mixing by McCourt of the “real” world of his fictive Gotham with the “fake” world of Hollywood movies.<sup>375</sup> But the crossover between worlds is not stressed, and Margo and Bill never appear again in the novel; the effect is less a peeling-away of the “fourth wall” of mimetic realism than an irruption into the novel by the author himself: an irrepressible shout-out, a checking-off of a favorite item from a private list. As with so many catalogs, and so many of McCourt’s catalogs in particular, mini-lists get caught up in the general flow, as if spontaneously generated by the monster parent-catalog of which they are a part: hence the constellation of stars—“Movie stars, concert stars, opera stars, fallen stars sparkled on and off”—and its swift career from the pantheons of the blessed (movies, concerts, and opera) to the purlieus of the damned: the fallen stars, who, interestingly, are given no former *métier*, having presumably

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<sup>375</sup> The two, of course, are characters in Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s 1950 film *All About Eve*, played, respectively, by Bette Davis and Gary Merrill. *All About Eve* is a touchstone in the community of queer cinephiliacs: witness the extraordinary long poem *Phoebe 2002: An Essay in Verse*, by David Trinidad, Jeffrey Conway, and Lynn Crosbie. A still from the film appears prominently, like some treasured scrap of memorabilia, on one of the photocollage pages beginning the first section of McCourt’s *Queer Street* (Mccourt, 2004, 2).

dropped, meteorically or slowly, from their place in whatever firmament. Last come Czegowchwz's intimates, many of whom, such as the O'Maurigans, are being introduced here for the first time, and who take their seats in the countess' box concurrently with the "luckless stragglers" taking their seats below, another of McCourt's numerous cross-cuts within a scene. Thus McCourt prepares for Czegowchwz's entrance lavishly, in the grand style, our reading of the opera audience paralleling the audience's own hushed expectations of the star's debut.

Some of McCourt's best catalogia is reserved for descriptions of old New York, the vanished Gotham of the 1950s in which he places *Mawrdew Czegowchwz*, and whose lost monuments, like Enrico Caruso's suite in the hotel described in the first paragraph of the novel. Some of McCourt's evocations of old New York are short: brief thumbnail descriptions that occupy only a moment of the narrative; some are much longer: essay-like, they swell with anthropological and sociological detail, cherished exhibits in McCourt's textual memory museum that hijack the narrative proper, arresting the narrative flow and becoming, for a moment, the stuff of history, and possibly of autobiography as well. His description of Arpenik's café Armenia, where many of the characters of the novel repair to eat, talk, kvetch, kvell, commiserate, and congregate, is an example of the former type; only a few lines long, it nevertheless is possessed of a quietly moving emotional force, a gravity of feeling and sentiment that far outweighs its length: "'Armenia' was Arpenik's. It is gone now, like the Met, another lamented casualty in the erasure-parade of Gotham's most meaningful precincts. The fabulous menu—featuring imam bayildi, madzoon, bulgur pilaf, ekmek kadeyev—could be matched nowhere else in streamlined Midtown. Mawrdew Czegowchwz ate there once a week."<sup>376</sup> Note how the menu-catalog serves a dual function: first, denotatively, as a simple object described by

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<sup>376</sup> McCourt, 2002, 81.

the narrator's reminiscence; second, connotatively and metaphorically, the menu items signifying not just themselves but the lost exotic riches of the café (and of old New York) as well. The foreign, non-English delicacies of the "fabulous menu" contrast in their foreignness with "streamlined Midtown," against whose simplified, aerodynamic background they glitter darkly, suggestively. Mawrdew Czegowchwz's weekly dining there only heightens Armenia's worth: throughout the book, the singer's presence confers specialness, worth, greatness—Armenia was great, then, not just for its delicious foreign fare, but because it was the home of a god on earth, a place where mortals could come into contact with the divine.

Another part of old New York that bordered, as it were, on Elysium, and that offered a glimpse of greatness to its inhabitants, was the opera line outside the Old Met, on which one stood to gain admittance to a night's performance.<sup>377</sup> The line outside the Old Met is a mobile, organic, festive, carnivalesque mirror to the ephemeral musical glories within; in the novel it is presented as an art form belonging to, and created by, the operatic spectators themselves, a necessary accompaniment to the tasks of connoisseurship, critique, and delectation that await inside.<sup>378</sup> At the beginning of chapter 4 McCourt gives an extended treatment of the opera line, a work of cultural excavation and memorial reconstitution, a paean to the line and to those who stood thereon:

Paranoy once called the Old Met opera line the "ne plus ultra of 'plus ça change.'" Like the more heroic, if not necessarily more valiant, bread lines, soup lines, and picket lines of the venerable prewar urban populist network, the postwar opera line *stood* for something. What this same something was, was *style*. Elegant stylists animated the line. Entire two- and three-week winter and spring vacations came to be spent along the waiting wall, now and again with bed and breakfasts thrown into the package by the Ansonia, the older inner sanctum; the

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<sup>377</sup> Cf. Koestenbaum (*ibid.*, ix), who writes, "To wait on line requires surrender—daily duties subordinated to the quest for operatic attendance."

<sup>378</sup> A more demotic, lower-middle-class—and, by most accounts, much less stylish—modern-day parallel would perhaps be the Dionysian tailgate parties before sporting events.

flashier, grander, murkier Plaza; or the hidden fortress, the Chelsea. Now and then the Hotel Earle . . . Frequent waspish verbal collisions between style and fashion—style’s own slower-witted stepchild—became the general attractive outdoor participation sport. Participation package tours were bought and sold coast to coast to broadcast listeners. Worthies, stationed the seasons through, backs to the wall or backs now and then to the passing, staring, shopping ordinaries, codified stylish behavior. Thus the more the nightly billing changed, the more the pliant, stoic endurance evidenced by these waiting stylists remained the secular discipline it had set out to be.<sup>379</sup>

While the passage above does not contain many catalogs or lists—only the short comparison of the opera line to the “bread lines, soup lines, and picket lines of the venerable prewar urban populist network,” or the short list of hotels, “the Ansonia, the older inner sanctum; the flashier, grander, murkier Plaza; or the hidden fortress, the Chelsea. Now and then the Hotel Earle,” would really suffice—it is explicitly catalogic, as it attempts to exhaust, encyclopedically, various attributes of the opera line. As befits a fictional portrayal, McCourt’s description is far less sociological and scientific—no figures given, no numbers quoted, no graphs or charts, no demographics or other information—than literary and poetic: it is an attempt to understand from within rather than without, to recreate with suggestive language rather than merely to analyze or dissect. McCourt continually underscores the ludic, festive aspects of the line, memorably describing the standees’ activities as both “the general attractive outdoor participation sport” and as “the secular discipline”: a pleasant combination, then, of both play and work, a taxing bacchanalia, an ascetic-aesthetic “discipline” firmly rooted in the “secular” world of “sport.” The perseverance of the “Worthies” on-line is both “pliant” and “stoic,” able to adapt to changes in the “nightly billing” while at the same time keeping true to some inner conceptual rigor of style,

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<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 70–71.

substance, and quality—the very originality and exuberance that qualifies them for election as Worthies in the first place.<sup>380</sup>

McCourt's description of the line continues, ending with a flourish, an *a fortissimo* remembrance of the opera line's heyday that shades, at its end, into an elegy for the opera line, the Old Met, and for old New York itself:

Now and again “the spastic quasi-dactylic squabbles of vagrant hairburners, unsought decorator woud-be's, washout theatricalists, and nowhere display types rent the seams of decorous patience” (as Parano observed sourly time and time again), but for the best part of the era there was evident, along the length of shopfront and marquee esplanade that made up the precinct of the standing line at that original Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, a kind of solid, committed bearing that gave a dimension far beyond throwaway swank to the politic style of that same town around it, which since the demolition of the Old Met has forever and for ill been lost, forgotten, even forsworn. Parano himself decreed: “The end of the Old Met marked the decisive end of Gotham as it was, when it was truly fabulous.”<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> It is worth noting that the original Stoics were so named for their habit of hanging out on the porches—or *stoa* in Greek—of buildings in the marketplace, offering, like so many opera queens, their cynical, world-weary comments to all and sundry of the passers-by: McCourt's 1950s stoic stylists, who turn their backs—both literally and figuratively (the latter, that is, morally and culturally)—upon the “passing, staring, shopping ordinaries,” are thus apt inheritors of their Hellenistic progenitors. Cf. Green, 64. Chauncey, 1994, 351, notes the sartorial splendor of the many homosexuals who stood on line, allowing us to restore the queer subtext McCourt so often encodes as something else (above as “elegant stylists”): “Opera and dance performances also drew large numbers of gay men. The Metropolitan Opera, on Broadway at Fortieth Street, was ‘standard meeting place,’ according to one man. Another man whimsically recalled that ‘since there were no known instances of police raids on [such distinguished] cultural events, all stops were pulled out as far as costume and grooming. The hairdos and outlandish clothes many gays wore were not to be equaled until the punk rock era.’ *The cultural significance of such events has always been determined as much by the audience as by the performers on stage*” (my italics).

<sup>381</sup> McCourt, 2002, 71. A similar note is struck by Margaret Webster, the first woman to direct opera at the Old Met: “It was a beautiful house, rich (why not?), civilized, lovely, living. I used to think it could perform an opera all by itself if you simply turned the lights on and started to play the overture. It was beautiful to be in, to listen, to sing—and also to speak in, if you knew how. Nobody believed that, because it looked so big. But I have seen and worked in modern steel-and-concrete structures, large and small, in the United States, Europe, South Africa, Australia. Whatever ever acoustical science may say to the contrary, they do not have the responsiveness or the natural resonance of the old wood-and-brick buildings—and of course they do not have the humanity. It is as hard to warm them as it would be to produce a velvet tone from

Of course, no circle of the elect could be complete without its opposite, the ranks of those who do not belong, here briefly cataloged by Paranoy's interpolation as "vagrant hairburners, unsought decorator woud-be's, washout theatricalists, and nowhere display types": thus the Worthies define themselves once again in opposition to what they are not, to the failures, has-beens, and never-weres. But these double-*demimondaines*—double in that they are imperfect members of the already-louche *demimonde* of the gay Worthies McCourt celebrates—these aspirants to the inner circle of the operatic elite, are nevertheless part of the line: their "spastic quasi-dactylic squabbles" may lack the polished periods of a Paranoy or a Percase, but they are still part of the scene, still guests, however waspishly dishonored, at the party. Their shortcomings are lovingly analyzed by McCourt: the *uber*-bitchy use of nouns such as *hairburners* (slang for a gay male hairstylist) and *theatricalist* (the diminutive ending suggesting the amateurishness of their histrionics), and adjectives such as *unsought* and *nowhere*, placing them firmly beyond the pale of the Czegowchwzian pantheon. As the passage becomes elegiac, note its modulation in tone: gone are the snarky putdowns, replaced by phrases—such as "the best part of the era," "the precinct of the standing line," "a kind of solid, committed bearing," and "a dimension far beyond throwaway swank"<sup>382</sup>—that raise the level of the narrator's reminiscence from the gossipy to the refined, from a catty scrapbook tell-all to a marmoreal, *nous-n'irons-plus-au-bois*—nostalgia. The narrator's tone shifts yet again with the triad of "been

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a plastic violin. The destruction of the old Met was a betrayal for which no economics can compensate, a vandalism which nothing can excuse" (Webster, 234).

<sup>382</sup> *Precinct*—which derives from the Latin *praecinctum* (*prae*, "early" + *cinctum*, "circled, cinched"), the past participle of *praecingere* "to gird, encircle"—gives to the standing line an air of holy, sacrosanct inviolability, presenting the opera line as a magic circle drawn tight against the forces of chaos and darkness without: cf. Milton's "Precincts of light," describing Heaven, in *Paradise Lost* 3.88 (Milton, 300n7, where John T. Shawcross glosses *precinct* as "encompassed in early times," thus underscoring the chronological dimension of the word: not just holy, then, but venerably, anciently so).

lost, forgotten, even forsworn”: not only have the glories of the Old Met been lost and forgotten, they have even been willfully forgotten by an act of collective forgetting that is as much willed as it is necessary—they have been forsworn by a city looking forward to other, newer, tawdrier pleasures. McCourt-Paranoy’s use of “fabulous” as the final word of the passage has the same effect: not only were the Old Met and old New York fabulous in the sense of “wonderful, beautiful, delightful,” they were fabulous in the sense of “mythic, beyond the human, divine”—redolent of fable and mystery, of a before-the-Fall mythology of plenitude and perfection. It is this vanished world that McCourt eulogizes and, in so doing, re-creates anew.<sup>383</sup>

Other of McCourt’s embarkations on the waters of cataloging come, not in the minute detailings of the stuff of the everyday or in vast, panoramic crowd scenes, but in the more abstract, rarefied—at times mystical, otherworldly—narration of the Czgowchwz myth at large, frequently referred to as the “dream time” of her acolytes and adherents. Some of these moments are unaccompanied by catalogs and lists but are nevertheless catalogic, concerning themselves with questions of memory, time, inclusiveness and exclusiveness, election and preterition, and recording and preserving, as in the following passage, which narrates the day-to-day curatorial activities of Czgowchwz’s fans as they struggle to enshrine her memory: “It became a question

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<sup>383</sup> It should be noted that not all of McCourt’s work rises to such refined Apollonian heights. McCourt the reviewer is delightfully bitchy, mixing the syrups of nostalgic remembrance with a dash of the bitters of acerbic wit. Cf. McCourt, 1985, a review of comic singer Anna Russell’s autobiography: “I remember Anna Russell with fondness as a luminary of a period in New York’s musical life when everything, at every syntactical level—serious and comic, and most especially the attractions on the lyric stage and recital platform—was so vastly superior to anything being tossed for bones these days into nearly any arena”; or McCourt, 1997, at the end of his skewering of a fawning biography of Cecilia Bartoli: “I have been paying less attention to the world of opera in the 90’s than formerly, but if it is indeed true, as attested in this book, that Ms. Bartoli and Luciano Pavarotti are the world’s most popular opera singers—if this can be proved by the calibrations of record sales, decibel-count applause monitors and volume of Web-site traffic—then I must say that in itself speaks volumes. They are entitled ‘Decline and Fall.’” Here we see a crankier McCourt, the reviewer privileging disdain for the current scene over nostalgia and longing for lost time.

of taste, of what to eschew, of how rare to distill, of a taxing if delicious *épluchage*. In the preserving of certainties, day by day, meticulous, fanatic care was of the essence. The Countess Madge O’Meaghre Gautier said it well: ‘As the pearl is achieved through the stimulus of finely comminuted particles of silicon and is destined to be worn about the soignée necks of some of the better carcasses in town, we take Czgowchwz out of the thrall of time and cultivate a legend.’ Czgowchwz was all in all, and all the while, a person to be preserved.”<sup>384</sup> “[A] taxing if delicious *épluchage*”—the French word signifying a “plucking” or “weeding”: that is, a picking out, a choosing of what to save from the dross<sup>385</sup>—could stand as a leitmotif for McCourt’s work as a whole, which devotes itself tirelessly to the choosing, noting, dissecting, and reporting of the marvelous and sublime, undertaken by a host of devoted critics, from Paranoy’s lapidary, mandarin pronouncements to the adoration of the multitudes.<sup>386</sup> As the narrator muses at the

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<sup>384</sup> McCourt, 2002, 16. In his introduction to the Dalkey Archive edition of Severo Sarduy’s novels *Cobra* and *Maitreya*, McCourt, 1995, xi, returns to the subject of demanding artistic partisanship: “There is no more ardent (or taxing) enthusiasm than that of the newly converted,” which enthusiasm he describes as “illumination through shock,” thus providing a perfect gloss on the passage above. It’s worth pointing out that the etymology of *enthusiasm*—from the Greek *entheos* (*en*, “in” + *theos*, “god”), “full of the god, inspired, possessed”—hearkens directly back to the belief in divine possession as the root of all heightened human activity: a notion fully at home with McCourt’s radiant depiction of *La diva Czgowchwz* and her otherworldly effects on her worshipers. On “the thrall of time,” cf. Yohalem: “Mccourt escapes time not only by recapturing the Old Met that no longer exists outside memory, but also by gilding his memories in so literally fantastic a manner that only mind could contain them.”

<sup>385</sup> It also has the obsolete medical sense of “cleaning a wound, a removal of infected tissue.” It is fascinating to note the word’s semantic congruence with the Greek verb *krino*, *krinere*, defined by Pound, 30, as “to pick out for oneself, to choose”: fandom, then, in McCourt’s world, is not uncritical, lemming-like adoration, but a taxing discipline, an act of discrimination, judging, weighing, evaluating—in short, criticism.

<sup>386</sup> McCourt has a respectful, if often wryly bemused, attitude to the latter throughout his work: witness the long shaggy-dog reminiscence of the Countess Madge in chapter three, who remembers during her Winter Solstice soiree the previous Summer Solstice’s party, during which the drunken guests parodied in “a travesty rendition,” loudly and at length, a performance of Morgana Neri’s, only to be raided by the NYPD. The guests are saved by “an earnest, black-eyed . . . Neapolitan rookie, who explained the situation to his superiors. ‘Itz opral!’” (Mccourt, 2002, 54): the working-class Italian cop’s “pithy address,” here rendered in phonetic *faux*-demotic

beginning of chapter two: “True stars impel; they need never campaign. What discovery each Czgowchwz stalwart would make—of such mythic inherence, of such erotic dimension, of a duration outside the world’s measure—was to be made in dream time. Thus, to continue the tale of Czgowchwz is to surrender to that impulse that dream logic, dream effect, dream narrative, and dream figures play on, to reveal all there is to reveal in that insistent mode, valence, sequence, and style the Czgowchwz dream saga commands.”<sup>387</sup> The parallelism of the two short lists—“dream logic, dream effect, dream narrative, and dream figures” and “mode, valence, sequence, and style”—imparts an incantatory rhythm to the narrator’s account: there is a sense of revelation, underscored by the repetition of “reveal,” of the numinous “impulse” that underpins both Czgowchwz’s artistry and her fans’ adoration, a sense of mysticism, hierophany, ritual, myth. Following epochal Modernists such as Richard Wagner—whose leitmotifs in his masterwork, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, continually provide a musical accompaniment to the dramatic action onstage, the score thus providing a poetic coloring and background to the words of the libretto—and James Joyce—who in *Ulysses* constantly shades the tone and timbre of the novel’s style to mimic the psychological events unfolding in his characters’ minds—McCourt fuses his narrator’s voice with the actions thus described, the narration mimicking, chameleon-like, the events it relates in the act of relating them. McCourt’s particular twist, and his

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slapstick, coming to the rescue of the well-heeled carousing bluebloods at Magwyck. See also *ibid.*, 14, for the “Police lines—composed entirely of Mott and Mulberry Street Italian rookies humming this or that Verdi/Bellini/Puccini/Ponchielli/Mascagni/ Leoncavallo/dalla Piccola tune, glad to a man to be relieved of the Fifth Avenue detail,” in which the nice short catalog mimics the hydra-headed cacophony—the virgules inscribing graphically the breaks and discontinuities of the jarring songs—of the competing arias. For more on class mixing in old New York, cf. Koestenbaum: “Despite [*Mawrdew Czgowchwz*’s] erudite references, it has a utopian class-catholicity, like a dream vision of Manhattan before real-estate inflation ruined it. McCourt’s New York is a zone, now vanished, where the elite may have ruled, but where a host of others gamboled in the high-end froth” (*ibid.*, xii).

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

improvement on his Titanic forbears, is to provide a ruminative, self-reflexive running commentary on the action he narrates: thus *Mawrdew Czgowchwz*, a novel of aesthetic delectation and impassioned commentary, provides its own hermeneutic voice, its own self-aware, probing, expository, and explanatory self-critique.

Another of McCourt's mythological "dream-time" passages comes at the beginning of chapter 5, which recounts the beginnings of Mawrdew Czgowchwz's comeback after having been cursed by Morgana Neri—which curse, enacted during Czgowchwz's singing the title role in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, causes the Czech singer to recover her buried, former self: the Irish Maev Cohalen, daughter of an Irish Fenian revolutionary and an itinerant Czech philosopher. McCourt again stresses the mythic—in the sense of Greek *muthos*, "spoken, related orally"—dimensions of Czgowchwz's fame, elevating it from a merely supernatural tale to a communal event, an oft-told tale passed back and forth—like the stories of the pagan gods and heroes, or like the tales of the early miracles of the Christian church—among a handful of adoring followers:

The wondrous saga of the second Czgowchwz return, in the psychic pinnacled season, that return from regions all too few have ever charted, is many sagas' interweaving. The vast unraveled display of all the versions, points of view, convictions, and testimonies of so many compulsive seekers after Czgowchwz truth suggests the spectacle of some ticker-tape parade's litter-choked aftermath, supposing the triumphant Czgowchwz comeback's wake papered with incessant strips of pertinent leading-clue material: depositions, letters, reports, ad hoc, ad lib, ad nauseam, ad infinitum . . . (But no sentence in fact or fiction could convey the discrete truth, or for a certain fact get nearer to that shifting mystery than any words get to the true fulfillment of that unique resolve the Shadow in the recess of the mind resolves.)<sup>388</sup>

McCourt gloriously overwrites the tale of Mawrdew Czgowchwz's return, turning it into a "wondrous saga," the product—like the anonymous mass of French Arthurian romances which

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 111.

proliferated ca. 1200–50, or like the Icelandic sagas before them—of a corporate, pluralistic, ever-changing conflux of “all the versions, points of view, convictions, and testimonies of so many compulsive seekers after Czigowchwz truth.” The narrator likens the hypothetical comprehensive version of the Czigowchwz story to some “vast unraveled display,” which in turn is likened to a “spectacle of some ticker-tape parade’s litter-choked aftermath”: again the urban carnivalesque aspect of the story is stressed, with narrative compared to holiday street pageantry and festival—the Czigowchwz saga as the variegated, particolored trash left behind after a parade.<sup>389</sup> The number of possible interpretations of the myth—of spin-offs, commentaries, glosses, exegeses, variants, and the like—is seemingly infinite, as McCourt suggests with his mini-catalog of “pertinent leading-clue material: depositions, letters, reports, ad hoc, ad lib, ad nauseam, ad infinitum . . .”, the ellipses at the end a typographical mark of infinity, of an unbroken series stretching beyond the boundaries of human record. The contours of the Czigowchwz saga, its conditions of production, are both spontaneous (“ad hoc, ad lib”), while at the same time endless (“ad nauseam, ad infinitum”), perhaps, as “ad nauseam” suggests, to the point of frustration or exhaustion: a breakdown of one’s critical, historical faculties under the sheer weight of the Czigowchwz dream-saga data. Thus McCourt textually enacts the rigors of

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<sup>389</sup> Parades run throughout *Mawrdew Czigowchwz*, such as the impromptu one that triumphantly concludes the diva’s Metropolitan debut at the end of chapter one: “Then, shrouded in chinchilla, she walked without further ceremony out the great wide gap in the opera-house wall, and up Seventh Avenue through the all-but-deserted Rialto alone, followed at a distance by her retainers, like a star (McCourt, 2002, 22–23). Cf., too, the Saint-Patrick’s-Day parade earlier in the chapter (ibid., 13): “The March 27 afternoon was chilly. The Irish swept endlessly up Fifth Avenue as if replenished hourly by fresh shiploads of immigrants,” an ironic evocation of the seeming inexhaustibility of the street procession. Finally, cf. ibid., 121, which shows Jameson O’Maurigan riding in a taxi headed north on Central Park West, “watching block after flashback block . . . reel past the window on his right, revealing ‘pageants in series, chain-connected in casual review, identically managed: children under supervisio plotting anarchy, behaving. Animals on leashes; running free; ferreting. Single figures seeking more.’ (He noted down what he saw.)”

fan-worship and star-idolatry while in the process of analyzing them, the short catalog both delineating and replicating the dimensions of Czgowchwz's fame. At the end of the passage, McCourt's textual serpent swallows its own tail, noting parenthetically that "no sentence in fact or fiction could convey the discrete truth" of the Czgowchwz saga, the historical kernel that lies between the shifting, overlapping screen of interpretations. One can get no closer to this chimerical, irreducible grain of truth, the narrator notes, "than any words get to the true fulfillment of that unique resolve the Shadow in the recess of the mind resolves": as befits his mysterious, mystical subject, McCourt uses truly Orphic language to describe the difficulty of understanding Czgowchwz's comeback in any terms other than the seraphic, contradictory language already offered.

Czgowchwz's comeback is attended by a media explosion, as various organs of the popular press swing into high gear to chronicle the diva's return to sanity and to the stage. Her return is preceded, however, by a complete media blackout, the better to whet the appetite of her fans, and to prepare, through total silence, for her triumphant return:

In four swift days she was back. In the interim, severest strictures, self-imposed, kept Czgowchwz vigilants entirely out of public view. WCZG went off the air. No telephones were answered. A stop-gap system of tight-security messenger services (the Secret Seven's device), complete with prearranged doorbell signals, deft coding formulas, and special knowledge of zigzag back-street routes and rendezvous, kept sacral data out of the profane clutch. Even so—or more so—were Dolores, Gloria Gotham, The Talk of the Town, the dwindling but no kinder Neriacs, the Bagatellieri, vultures on the Rialto, and Knickerbocker desolates disposed to speculate. The closure of Cashel Gueza and of Arpenik's; Parano's disappearance from the city room; Percase's cancellation of a week of classes at the New School; Ralph's sudden laryngitis; Laverne Zuckerman's sudden, phoned-in cancellation of Amneris . . . the unanswered phones; the obvious avoidances: everything conspired to creates unspeakable impressions.<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 128.

Note McCourt's repeated heightening of the action by his use of a vocabulary suggesting religious, mystical, and otherworldly dimensions to the Czgowchwz story: the mention of her "vigilants," connoting not only vigilance and diligent attention (and, perhaps, by analogy with *militants*, a degree of partisanship and aggression as well), but also religious observance and theophanic expectation;<sup>391</sup> the use of secrecy to keep "sacral data out of the profane clutch," a favored tactic of mystagogues then and now, and a convenient, neat dividing of the world into the Czgowchwz camp and those without, the saved and the unwashed, the lambs and the goats; and the "unspeakable impressions" created by the rash of Czgowchwzian closures and disappearances, dark forebodings that hint at events beyond the mundane. In typical McCourtian fashion, the larger catalog detailing the media blackout contains within it several mini-catalogs, such as the list at the end of the various vanishings of the Czgowchwz elite; or, better (because funnier), the Keystone-Cops antics of the Secret Seven, replete with laughably amateurish secret "doorbell signals" (more sacral data, more inwrought language—and thus self-reflexive, commenting on the novel's own difficult system of signs—spawned by the Czgowchwz phenomenon), "deft coding signals," and a private, haptic, knowledge of Manhattan's secret byways and backstreets.<sup>392</sup> In the self-contained world, then, of Czgowchwz and her adherents,

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<sup>391</sup> *Vigil* derives from Latin *vigilia*, a watch held the night before a feast-day, another festive motif.

<sup>392</sup> On the Secret Seven's cartoonish machinations, cf. the suggestive comments of de Certeau, 39–40, on the "everyday practices" adopted by citizens in late-capitalist societies to resist the hegemonies of state power and surveillance: "Dwelling, moving about, speaking, reading, shopping, and cooking are activities that seem to correspond to the characteristics of tactical ruses and surprises: clever tricks of the 'weak' within the order established by the 'strong,' an art of putting one over on the adversary on his own turf, hunter's tricks, maneuverable, polymorph mobilities, jubilant, poetic, and warlike discoveries. . . . These practices present . . . a curious analogy, and a sort of immemorial link, to the simulations, tricks, and disguises that certain fishes or plants execute with extraordinary virtuosity. The procedures of this art can be found in the farthest reaches of the domain of the living, as if they managed to surmount not only the strategic distributions of historical institutions but also the break established by the very

silence toward, and non-communication with, the outside world are in themselves a kind of language: both a private language of secrecy and obfuscation for those within, and an interpretive challenge to the uninitiated without, the muteness of the Czigowchwizians speaks volumes, and provides abundant material (cataloged exhaustively by its creator) for commentary and reflection.

As noted above, once Czigowchwz officially announces her return, the media reacts feverishly. McCourt describes this activity with catalogic zest, zealously listing the numerous inanities proffered by the sensationalist, scandal-mongering newspapers:

The Sunday supplements and national newsweeklies, as dedicated to sensation as survival, featured in many cover stories (“That Mawrdew Czigowchwz Question,” “The Czigowchwz Identity,” “The Quest for the Czigowchwz Truth,” “The File on Mawrdew Czigowchwz”) their angles and approaches. Patchy, potted biographies of the diva. Ditto of her (suddenly) vividly remembered mother, pictured raising money haranguing Edwardian and Yankee throngs at Speaker’s Corner, on Boston Common, in Union Square, and on the docks at Liverpool. Ditto (the worst) of her father, replete with ferociously inaccurate *précis* of his thought, studded with asinine rewrite-desk translations from the Czech, the German, the Russian, and the French of many of his seminal aphorisms, consistently omitting any reference at all to his single great work in English, the short, shattering *Were It But So* (“No one will understand it”). One read quantities of rehash filler copy on the Easter Rising of 1916, of maudlin Fenian rant, of reverent pieties on Czech nationalism, of damning recollections of the Prague defenestration of 1948.<sup>393</sup>

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institution of consciousness. They maintain formal continuities and the permanence of a memory without language, from the depths of the oceans to the streets of our great cities.” On this resistant poetic *praxis* specifically in urban centers, see, generally, *ibid.*, 91–100, and especially 102: “For the technological system of a coherent and totalizing space that is ‘linked’ and simultaneous, the figures of pedestrian rhetoric substitute trajectories that have a mythical structure, at least if one understands by ‘myth’ a discourse relative to the place/nowhere (or origin) of concrete existence, a story jerry-built out of elements taken from common sayings, an allusive and fragmentary story whose gaps mesh with the social practices it symbolizes.” Thus the Secret Seven’s hidden routes work against the linear grid of Manhattan’s streets, establishing within them a covert, adaptive anti-map, a shared communal topology that confers both privacy and agency, shielding them from the prying eyes (here, those of the newsmedia) without.

<sup>393</sup> McCourt, 2002, 136–37.

McCourt's sarcasm is exquisite, the narrator's mere quoting of the stale canards of pulp journalism—as in “That Mawrdew Czegowchwz Question,” the headline's hyperinflated use of the relative pronoun *that* suggesting a controversy (the “Question” in question) that doesn't truly exist; or “The File on Mawrdew Czegowchwz,” suggesting some panoptic, tell-all revelation, the “true dirt” or “real skinny” on the singer: a hack journalist's hybridization of J. Edgar Hoover and J. J. Hunsecker.<sup>394</sup> The text appears seemingly all at once, erupting from some tawdry netherworld that simultaneously travesties and pays homage to Czegowchwz: the “Patchy, potted biographies” of the diva and her parents—the latter works indicated by the repeated use of “Ditto,” as if the narrator, committed to shoveling through the dreck, had grown impatient, disgusted with his material—the photographs of Maev Cohalen agitating in the centers of a once-vital populist demagoguery (“Speaker's Corner, on Boston Common, in Union Square, and on the docks at Liverpool”), and the polyglot “seminal aphorisms” of Jan Motivyk in “Czech, the German, the Russian, and the French,” all springing forth as if fated, with the effortless inevitability of a morning's sunrise. Even little-known historical events get caught up, like so much plankton, in the sweeping maw of the “rehash filler” pounded out for copy, such as the “Prague defenestration of 1948,” which seems at first to be a historical joke on McCourt's part—more well-known Prague defenestrations occurred, respectively, on 30 July 1419 and 23 May 1618, the latter event part of the religious upheaval of the Thirty Years' War, in which Catholic members of the Bohemian Estates were forcibly thrown from the windows of Hradschin castle<sup>395</sup>—but, on looking closer, refers to an actual historical event: the possible murder, claimed a suicide by Communist authorities, of Jan Masaryk, a former foreign minister of

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<sup>394</sup> The latter, of course, a fictional, filmic character—although based on muckracking *arbiter elegantiae* (and inventor of the gossip column) Walter Winchell—acidly portrayed by Burt Lancaster in Alexander Mackendrick's 1957 film *Sweet Smell of Success*.

<sup>395</sup> See the famous account in Wedgwood, 78–80.

Czechoslovakia, found dead beneath his bathroom window on 10 March 1948.<sup>396</sup> Thus McCourt deviously mines history for fictional ends, bringing obscure true events amid other, better-known ones (such as the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916) and a flurry of celebrity-addled media trash.

McCourt's enumeration of this trash continues with a further list of the photographs accompanying the tabloid articles. Each sentence in the list begins with the word *Pictures*, the resulting anaphora interspersed with inane parenthetical commentary, written by the hyperventilating journalists in order to overexcite their credulous public:

Pictures colored presumed concatenations in false verisimilitude. Pictures of Czgowchwz. Pictures of Neri (circa 1940). Pictures of the Secret Seven, hands blocking all their faces. Pictures of Creplaczx. Pictures of the Countess Magdalen O'Meaghre Gautier ("said to be herself a total wreck!"). Pictures of the front door of Magwyck. Pictures of Wedgwood ("And what did the *butler* see?") taken from the top of the garden wall one warming afternoon as he sat at his private ease playing solitaire pontoon on the O'Meaghre dolmen. Pictures of Arpenik's reastaurant ("where those elite meet to eat"). Pictures of "a certain visitor" (Gennaio) rushing into the black 1947 Packard to be driven home. Pictures of Gennaio's consultation rooms in Morningside Heights. Pictures of the stage door of the old Metropolitan House ("Will she ever cross this threshold again?").

Wasn't it always this way.

What was ceremony *for*?

Jameson suffered greatly.

So many otiose speculations . . .<sup>397</sup>

The telegraphic, aphoristic first line of the passage—which begins ambiguously, "colored" at first seeming to be an adjective referring to "pictures" (i.e., color photographs), instead of the verb it actually is—could be a lesson in reading the deceptive photographs and other images of the media age. Rather than standing as proof of an event, a factual ground giving evidence of something actually having taken place, newspaper and magazine photographs give a spurious

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<sup>396</sup> Monroe, 299, n. 26. US Secretary of State George C. Marshall stated on 11 March that the situation in Czechoslovakia, which had fallen to a Communist coup in February, was "very, very serious," and referred specifically to Masaryk's death as part of a Communist "reign of terror" (Abrams, 108).

<sup>397</sup> McCourt, 2002, 137.

realism (“false verisimilitude”) to the “presumed concatenations” concocted by newspaper editors and media moguls, whose business interests are served by selling news to a credible, easily duped public. The fake narratives made possible by these meretricious combinations gain even more believability from the addition of captions, which point the reader in a predetermined direction: thus, a picture of the Countess Madge is made to serve the narrative that she is a “total wreck” at Czgowchwz’s collapse, and photographs of Wedgwood help perpetrate the stereotype of the all-seeing, always-discreet butler. McCourt, however, is not content merely to dissect and satirize the machinations of the media: hence the wonderfully superfluous detail of Wedgwood’s snatched-at pleasure “one warming afternoon as he sat at his private ease playing solitaire pontoon on the O’Meaghre dolmen.”<sup>398</sup> For a moment the narrative is suspended, the “private ease” of the off-work domestic extending to the story itself: a quiet moment of reflection and pause, of pleasure and an almost pastoral *otium*. (The mention of Magwyck as “the O’Meaghre dolmen” further heightens this effect, the rounded, echoing vocalic “o”s and the sacral origin of the word—dolmens were used as tombs in the Neolithic era—reinforcing the feeling of a holy time and place, a space magically tucked away from the larger world outside.) After a flurry of inane mediaspeak—the best being the vapid question “Will she ever cross this threshold again?” (we already know she will), dripping with false solicitude, a titillation of the newspaper public’s sentiments—the paragraph breaks off into what first seem like anonymous, uncredited musings, and which may be the thoughts of young, Czgowchwz-smitten Jameson O’Maurigan. The first two short sentences, be they the narrator’s or Jameson’s, encapsulate the opposing poles of fame and the media’s manipulation of celebrity. “Wasn’t it always this way” is world-weary, dulled, drained of affect and feeling, a numb response to the inanities of the daily press; “What was

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<sup>398</sup> *Pontoon* is another name for the card game of blackjack.

ceremony *for?*” is more alive, probing, and serves to widen the charmed circle of Czgowchwz’s daemonic stardom, allowing even the penny-a-line hacks their place in the worship of her mysteries: they may not write as well as Paranoy or Percase, or love as truly as Madge and Ralph and the rest of the Secret Seven, as Arpenik and Jameson and Pierrot et al., but they, too, in their own erratic way, are impelled (“True stars impel”) by Czgowchwz’s gravity; while they do not occupy the inner circles of her light and favor, they, too, nevertheless revolve around her, satellites orbiting her incandescent star.<sup>399</sup>

Catalogs and lists continue to proliferate as the text chronicles the continuation of Czgowchwz’s return. After a resoundingly successful re-debut in Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, she gives (the same day!) a nighttime recital at Carnegie Hall. On her way there she is regaled with the usual street carnival of adoring fans, some “bringing little bunches of flowers with them, bringing Bohemian crepes, bringing miniature needlework masterpieces and what not else”; going inside the hall, she bestows her magic autograph upon hundreds of clamorous fans, “signing pictures, programs, books, and odd scraps of paper.”<sup>400</sup> The text even gives the program for the recital—mimicking the list of *dramatis personae* that begins the book—presenting the song-titles and composers in list form, including the encores, “carefully listed by Paranoy.”<sup>401</sup> The recital includes many standard pieces of the *lieder* repertoire—such as Franz Schubert’s “Im Abendrot” and “An die Musik”—as well as newer, more modern pieces, such as Cole Porter’s

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<sup>399</sup> The chattering press gangs are back at their old tricks later in chapter six (*ibid.*, 148), when the media officially announces Czgowchwz’s return to the Met: “It hit the afternoon editions. ‘A CZGOWCHWZ DOUBLE-HEADER.’ ‘SHE’S COMING BACK A NEW STAR.’ ‘FOR THESE TICKETS THEY COULD KILL.’ CZGOWCHWZ/COHALEN RETURNS.’ . . . The Talk of the Town the next week ran to four columns of succinct reportage on the whole saga, for all the world as if nobody in Gotham had followed it day in day out (the way they certainly had).” Note the irony at the end, the narrator neatly skewering the journalists’ faux naiveté.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 158, 159.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

“Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye” and George Gershwin’s “Summertime.” (McCourt’s fictional composer, Merovig Creplaczx, weighs in as well with his “Vocalise,” a further collapsing of the boundaries of fiction and fact.) The recital acts as a kind of cultural and geographical atlas as well, its final two songs—Antonin Dvořák’s “Songs My Mother Taught Me” and the anonymous “My Own Sweet Child in the West”—sung, respectively, in Czech and “Hibernian Gaelic”: Czegowchwz’s two *langues natales*, and thus fitting capstones to her newly-integrated historical and linguistic inheritance. Not to be outdone, Czegowchwz stages a third, nightcap, performance in the hall’s Grand Ballroom, which is decked out lavishly for the occasion: “Gay ornament of every sort beggared description. There hung contrived *pavillon* arrangements of drapery. There were in splendid evidence such borealis illuminations as had not been seen in town since the more flamboyant backstage bashes in the days of the Scandals’ and the Follies’ zenith.”<sup>402</sup>

Most of the singing at the Grand Ballroom, however, is not done by the exhausted Czegowchwz, but by the full panoply of her friends and admirers, giving McCourt an opportunity to show the diva’s community happily, exuberantly performing *ensemble*:

The songs, so many and various, included: G-G’s set of torchy numbers, “The Man I Love,” “Why Was I Born?,” “The Right Time,” and “He Was Too Good to Me,” accompanied by a combo featuring Consuelo Gilligan blowing a mournful alto saxophone; Dolly Farouche and Trixie Gilhooley duetting in “Sisters,” “Friendship,” “A Couple of Swells,” and “Anything You Can Do”; Laverne Zuckerman—moaning low—in renditions of “How Deep Is the Ocean,” “I Cried for You,” “Stardust,” and “As Time Goes By” (the way she had once sung in neighborhood cabaret on Jamaica Avenue); the Countess Madge and Jameson wailing away in “Make Believe,” “You’re Just in Love,” “If I Loved You,” and “Strange Music.” Cassia sang “Lazy Afternoon,” “Suddenly” (stunningly), “Life upon the Wicked Stage,” and “Get out of Town.” Consuelo sang “When Love Beckons on Fifty-second Street,” “I Happen to Like New York,” “It’s a Wishing World,” and “My Old Flame.” Mother Maire Dymphna sang—as she had done forty years since—“A Little of What Y’Fancy Does Y’Good,” “A Long Way

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 161.

from Tipperary,” “Faery Song” from *The Immortal Hour*, and an astonishing rendition of Musetta’s Waltz Song, in perfect Italian.<sup>403</sup>

Thus, for once, the singer Czgowchwz relinquishes center stage and, exhausted from the day’s strenuous singing, is fêted by her friends. Koestenbaum notes “McCourt’s is a cartoon universe in which everyone wants to be (or to be near) the diva. There can be only one Mawrdew Czgowchwz: stardom posits one person’s extraordinariness at the cost of everyone else’s ordinariness. Mawrdew, however, grants magic to anyone in Gotham who joins her cult; thus stardom, democratic, admits all to its list.”<sup>404</sup> I would add to this that Czgowchwz’s stardom allows her adherents to, for lack of a better phrase, *maximize their human potential*: her followers, more than merely basking in the star’s reflected light, are warmed by her heat as well, which nurtures them, spurring them on to ever greater heights of achievement and joy.<sup>405</sup> Thus Laverne Zuckerman, who enters the novel as Juilliard student and Czgowchwz protégé, playing the servant-woman Brangane to Czgowchwz’s fiery Isolde, becomes a star in her own right, taking over from Czgowchwz the role of Amneris in Verdi’s *Aida*—“I never *thought* of her that way!” Czgowchwz exults over Zuckerman’s interpretation, and relinquishes the role forever,

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., xi–xii.

<sup>405</sup> Cf. in this connection the case of Valerio Vortice, who begins as Czgowchwz’s stage designer, and becomes the designer and director of *NOIA (Mind)*, the Creplaczx opera that will conclude Czgowchwz’s final musical triumph in the book, the seven-day “First Annual Czgowchwz Endeavor Life Trust Festival of Music and Dance” in the town of Neaport on the island of Manitoy. Vortice’s intentions are pure: “Valerio Vortice refused payment for undertaking the design and direction of the work, announcing “*Prezzo di moneta? Onorario? No. Per l’amore!*” (ibid., 166: the translation reads “[For] the price of money? For honor? No. For love!”). Similarly, Tangent Percase, the wealthy New School dilettante, agrees to fund the building of the Mawrdew Czgowchwz Theater out of his own pocket, saying simply “I am merely doing what I *must* do,” and reasoning, when confronted with the difficulty of the project: “To do a thing, one *does* it! I choose to build this theater. Please accept my scheme; my love. I’ve always accepted yours!” (ibid., 184). Thus two of the minor characters of the novel enlarge their respective roles through their Czgowchwz love.

“from that out”<sup>406</sup>—and here, at the Carnegie Hall soiree, sexily singing (“moaning low”) old jazz and Broadway standards “the way she had once sung in neighborhood cabaret on Jamaica Avenue”: thus completing, like Czgowchwz, her own circle, returning in her moment of triumph to her origins in an act of recuperation and remembrance. Thus the Countess Madge and Jameson O’Maurigan, aunt and nephew, cement their troubled relationships with Czgowchwz by “wailing away” at a few torchy love songs, Jameson trying, vainly, to expiate his unrequited love for the diva. Even Czgowchwz’s midwife, Mother Maire Dymphna O. A. O. H.—who has been fetched from Ireland to aid in the singer’s recovery, and whose faux-Catholic acronymic title suggests, in its preposterous vocalic ululation, not so much a holy office as a moment of sexual climax, of orgasmic release—gets a turn, singing the somewhat salaciously-titled (at the very least, un-nunnish) “A Little of What Y’Fancy Does Y’Good,” followed by the plaintive “A Long Way from Tipperary,” a moving song of the exile and estrangement felt by an Irish boy away from home in the big city of London (and thus emblematic of both Czgowchwz’s and her midwife’s absence from Ireland in New York); the “Faery Song” from Rutland Boughton’s opera *The Immortal Hour*, which begins “How beautiful they are, / the lordly ones,” a fitting tribute to the Gotham elites who have befriended Czgowchwz;<sup>407</sup> and, finally, a waltz sung “in perfect Italian”: yet another remarkable feat of mimic ventriloquism in this choral novel of airs and voices, this polyphonic, heteroglossic text that mixes geography and identity, memory and desire.

The Czgowchwz comeback climaxes with the instituting of The First Annual Czgowchwz Endeavor Life Trust Festival of Music and Dance in the small, sleepy town of

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>407</sup> The song continues, its second verse containing the following lines, which wonderfully gloss Czgowchwz’s breakdown and subsequent recovery of her past self in America: “But where is my secret / name in the land of / heart’s desire?”

Neaport on the island of Manitoy, a fictional retreat somewhere on the Maine shore. The seven-day festival will culminate with the debut of Merovig Creplaczx's opera *NOIA (Mind)*, commissioned expressly for the festival, and dedicated to Mawrdew Czgowchwz and starring Czgowchwz and her new lover and musical partner, the companion *oltrano* Jacob Beltane.<sup>408</sup> Creplaczx throws himself feverishly into writing the work, sustained in his labors by the ministrations of Arpenik and her magnificent kitchen: "Arpenik began arriving at Bank Street daily with provisions: delicately brewed infusions whose varied herbal essences were meant to nourish the alchemic gestation of telling musical subjects; and more substantial solid-food preparations, strong on cardamom, thyme, garlic, and fresh tarragon, wrapped in vine leaves and in silken envelopes of sheerest pastry; quantities of raw spinach and fresh goat's-milk cheese; bowls of stewed lamb, onions, and prunes; ramekins of bulgur pilafs and eggplant sautés; pots of perfect madzoon—all these intended to nourish the orchestration."<sup>409</sup> Arpenik's smorgasboard becomes a textual feast for the reader, a savory list that creates its own "alchemic gestation"—or, rather, gustation—through its suspension of time: a narrative peristalsis, a sampling of verbal and culinary delights. Percase's building of the Mawrdew Czgowchwz Theater on Manitoy unleashes a flurry of listmaking, the narrative breathlessly cataloging the actions of the beelike workmen:

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<sup>408</sup> Beltane himself undergoes a fair amount of McCourt's catalogic description, as when he lists various facts and vital statistics—the list growing progressively more bizarre as the playful Beltane embellishes, prevaricates, and outright censors, his "record"—for Czgowchwz to tell to her friends: "You may tell them that I am seventy-three inches in height; that I weigh 169 pounds by your way of reckoning, naked, and sopping wet; that I am by providence a warlock; that I love lovely and loving animals. I believe in the vanquishment of despair—*labor omnia vincit*. I believe in the earth, in its seas, its guardian the moon, and in all the stars in heaven. But, forsaking all others, I love you. Don't tell them my age" (Mccourt, 2002, 180–81). Later, laughingly accepting Czgowchwz's description of him as a "malapert upstart," Beltane adds to the list: "*Soit* [I am]. Popinjay. Gigolo. The Pretender. The Rake. The Parvenu. The Enigma. The Kid" (ibid., 198).

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 165.

In a fade-out fade-in whiz, the Mawrdew Czgowchwz Theater was erected that summer on the island of Manitoy. The Percase fortune, wielded in the fist of a townish aesthete suddenly turned stringent overseer (“Some atavistic sortilege metamorphosing dilettante into buccaneer”—Paranoy, in the broadside “Facets of the Fabulous”), commandeered battalions of builder-artisans, massive crews of diggers, platoons of carpenters, prides of technician-designers, day in, day out, sabbath and weekday, around the clock, in all weathers (“We tolerate no smallest degree of foozling”—Percase) until the impossible surrendered into proven fact.<sup>410</sup>

Note again McCourt’s use of cinema, the “fade-out fade-in whiz” deftly collapsing the summer months in a blur of activity. The list of frenetic building activities accomplishes much the same thing: the sense of a rush of work, on nonstop effort, is created by the piling-up, Babel-like, of the different workers. Even within the mini-list McCourt achieves differentiation, as with his “prides of technician-designers,” which collapses the human and the animal, zoomorphizing the men into a pack of proud, regal beasts; the “battalions of builder-artisans” and “platoons of carpenters” that accomplish a similar feat, utilizing martial metaphors to stress the large-scale, breakneck, even militaristic scale—underscored by Percase’s turn as drill sergeant, forbidding even the “smallest degree of foozling”—of the opera-house’s construction—Percase as a happier King Nimrod, Babel hammered into harmony at last. It is tempting to view the building of the theater as a comment on the process of writing itself, a similarly intense labor conducted “day in, day out, sabbath and weekday, around the clock, in all weathers,” the slow accumulation of words, like so many bricks piled one atop the other, forming sentences, paragraphs, pages, and chapters, “until the impossible surrender[s] into proven fact” and the work is done. Thus McCourt once again self-reflexively comments upon his own feat of master-building, his own logodaedalic construction.

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<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 187.

The week of the festival—described by the narrator as “a chain of gorgeous occurrences”<sup>411</sup>—finally arrives, and the various musical events, described often with lists and catalogs, unfold as it were in an atmosphere of time-suspended enchantment, the Czgowchwz magic circle drawn fast, radiant, resplendent, and alive with wonder. All kinds of Rabelaisian excess ensues—“Eating, drinking, sailing, swimming, dancing, fucking, attending, the eleven hundred carnavaled”<sup>412</sup>—and the narrative at times threatens to collapse under the weight of its own logorrhoeic catalogia:

The “anonymous” recital given by the Aion Music Consort set the tone. The music they offered had been composed for bouts of revelry—music of jongleurs, clowns, masters of revels, and lords of misrule, polyphonic whimsies, the coy complaints of lovers, sardonic reflections on Folly’s perennial course, chantings of lust and dalliance, bounding across centuries in celebration of a European Neverworld, fabulous, young, ornate, and imperishable.

Krummhorns, sackbuts, viols, recorders, rebecs, virginals, continuo, and piping oltrano voices, under the baton of Percival Penpraz, seduced the happy auditors, proclaiming joy in consort. The voices of Czgowchwz and Beltane made tender, sinuous, bold, and delicious love, singing one over another, suddenly under, then tumbling over and over, then ultimately converging on some same single tones—resonating, vibrating, arching, plummeting.<sup>412</sup>

McCourt’s escape into the “European Neverworld” of the Middle Ages recalls Carl Orff’s symphonic song-cycle *Carmina Burana* (1935–36), which, like the Aion’s music for “bouts of revelry,” comprises the entire gamut of quintessential medieval emotions—“the coy complaints of lovers, sardonic reflections on Folly’s perennial course, chantings of lust and dalliance.”<sup>413</sup> The

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 188–89.

<sup>413</sup> Orff’s *Carmina Burana* derives from a medieval (ca. early thirteenth century) collection of Latin poems of the same title, found in the abbey of Benediktbeuren in the nineteenth century. Despite its origins as a popular work under the Nazi regime, the *Carmina Burana* has gone onto worldwide acclaim and recognition, even attaining, in many circles, the status of cliché. The opening and closing piece of the work, “O Fortuna, imperatrix mundi” (“O Fortune, ruler of the world”) is almost metonymic with thunderous, apocalyptic, dark (even satanic) moments in Hollywood cinema, having been used—first in John Boorman’s *Excalibur* (1981), and later in Oliver Stone’s *The Doors* (1991) and *Natural Born Killers* (1993), and a score of other films and

music is all about youthful vigor and lush complexity: “fabulous, young, ornate, a”nd imperishable,” its “polyphonic whimsies” collapse the intervening centuries into a present continuum of sensuous excess. McCourt lists the instruments used to bring the music to life—“Krummhorns, sackbuts, viols, recorders, rebecs, virginals, continuo, and piping oltrano voices”—the more *recherché*, exotic instruments, such as the krumhorn and rebec, mixing with the commoner viol and recorder: it is not so much the exact meaning or sound of each particular instrument that matters here—few of McCourt’s readers have heard a krumhorn, or could be expected to describe the sound of one—rather, it is the words themselves, their unfamiliar and evocative sounds, that combine to create a sense of otherworldly, far-off mystery and splendor. Note McCourt’s use of adjectival tetrads to describe the voices of the two *oltrani*, Czegowchwz and Beltane, whose vocal effusions make “tender, sinuous, bold, and delicious love . . . resonating, vibrating, arching, plummeting” in ecstatic counterpoint.

Other productions during the festival week are less sublime, and even border on the ridiculous, as with the fifth night’s entertainments, “Improvisations, parodies, travesties, and a supper dance for the entire company of artists and audience”; here McCourt reveals an extremity of artistic idolatry and aesthetic devotion, campily devoted to the connoisseurship of the bad, while indulging in a recurring type of literary catalog, the list of imaginary artistic works:<sup>414</sup>

The farrago soiree, next, was best remembered for the spontaneous creation and “production” of the mock operas *Savonarola* (after Verdi), *Morphine* (after Massenet), *Plotziful* (after Wagner), and *La Farfalla di New York* (after Puccini). Dame Sybil’s faultless pastiche accompaniment underpinned the erratic, batty

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film trailers—as the soundtrack equivalent of a heavy aerial bombardment. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carmina\\_Burana\\_%28Orff%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carmina_Burana_%28Orff%29) gives a fascinating, although incomplete, list of “O Fortuna”’s various appearances in pop culture.

<sup>414</sup> See, for example, the works, both completed and projected, by the young Lord Chandos in Hofmannsthal, 117–21; or the compositions of Adrian Leverkühn in Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*. The genre can be said to extend back as far as Thomas Browne’s masterful *Musæum Clausum, or Bibliotheca Abscondita* (1684).

numbers the singers improvised, first in hasty “rehearsals,” then again, after a breather, in “performance.” Beltane’s collaboration with Dame Sybil in the *Savonarola*—the frantic scena, aria, curse and cabaletta, “*Tutt’ è vanità e smut!*” ending in a celestial oltrano top F—drew gasps, cheers, hoots, and cackles. The doleful Czgowchwz offering, “*Le chemin assez connu*” from *Morphine*, sung faultlessly one tone flat throughout, took more than one giggling listener wobbling briefly back to the Neri Era. Achille Plonque’s bombastic, insipid, delightful “*Ach, er hat mir gewesen*” from *Plotziful* touched a few sensitive nerves, but succeeded. In finale, Laverne Zuckerman’s overwrought “*O mio un bel sogno*” from *La Farfalla di New York*, sung gloriously one tone sharp, and acted out verismo with a cigarette, caused yelps of glee and demands for encores.<sup>415</sup>

The passage is one of McCourt’s most hermetic, most opera-oriented, reading as a bemused, chiding love-letter to the art form, and an inspired send-up of its practitioners and audience. The four faux-operas are parodies of well-known works by famous composers: *Savonarola* of Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (which also includes a curse); *Morphine* of Massenet’s *Manon* (which includes an aria “*Je marche sur tous les chemins,*” and whose most famous Manon, the California-born Sibyl Sanderson, was Massenet’s protégé and lover and who died aged thirty-eight from liver failure brought on by alcoholism and morphine addiction);<sup>416</sup> *Plotziful* of Wagner’s *Parsifal* (in which, like most of melodramatic Wagner, there is a lot of plotzing, or “burst[ing], as from strong emotion”); and *La Farfalla di New York* (literally, *The Butterfly of New York*) of Puccini’s *La fanciulla del West* (*The Girl of the Golden West*, here metamorphosed into Czgowchwz’s social butterfly, a delicate, beautiful creature in golden Gotham). McCourt’s parodic, monstrous creations nevertheless carry a great deal of aesthetic delight, as demonstrated by the “gasps, cheers, hoots, and cackles” evoked by Beltane’s performance, or the comic nostalgia aroused in Czgowchwz’s “giggling” listeners, or Achille Plonque’s “bombastic, insipid, delightful”—delightful *because of*, not in spite of, its very bombast and insipidity—singing: thus McCourt

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<sup>415</sup> McCourt, 2002, 189–90.

<sup>416</sup> Hansen.

stresses (an *echt*-camp move) the value of stylistic overreaching and the sublimity of bathos and dreck. The point is especially carried by the narrator's fastidious, dispassionate voice, which scrupulously dissects the musical *bêtises*, noting, for example, "Dame Sybil's faultless pastiche accompaniment" and "The doleful Czegowchwz offering . . . sung faultlessly one tone flat throughout"—thus underscoring, through its privileging of "faultless" technical skill above woeful subject matter, that even terrible art can be gorgeous if it is purposefully made so and enthusiastically executed.

The week is a resounding success, culminating with the debut of *NOIA* and marking the apogee of Czegowchwz's meteoric career; the diva has become apotheosized, raised to the starry heights of the immortals and assured a future of seemingly limitless abundance: "Years of diverse bounty lay ahead for the diva—in opera, on the recital platform, in the film world, in conjugal life. She would delight millions on the screen. She would bear another child—to Beltane. She would sing for years and years. She would approach perfection."<sup>417</sup> To celebrate the triumphant debut of *NOIA*, an Autumnal Equinox Bazaar and Costume Ball is held, the preparations for which are once again narrated in linked paragraphs, each paragraph detailing the actions of a member of Czegowchwz's entourage. For example, Gaia della Gueza presides over the creation of a pleasure-boat armada worthy of Cleopatra or of Handel's *Water Music*; like some modern-day Themosticles, she seems to will the fleet into being, the action described, as so often, catalogically: "Gaia della Gueza, with her apprentice craftsmen, hastened to the boathouse at dawn on the very day, to graft elaborate, disguising façades—plywood and gauze canopies, baroque poops, and festooned decks—onto scores of drab little workaday rowboats. They fashioned gondolas, sampans, floating norimons, toy triremes, frigates in miniature, model

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<sup>417</sup> McCourt, 2002, 195.

Egyptian barges, and Polynesian reed rafts in riotous designs and colored them with paints that glow in the dark. (The regatta’s participants, selected by lot over WCZG, were allowed the luxury of devising their own costumes.)”<sup>418</sup> Again, the form of the catalog allows for all kinds of fantastical abundance, the list of regatta boats mirroring the text’s extravagant panoply of language, character, and plot. The description recalls Enobarbus’s famous speech to Maecenas and Agrippa in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*; like the splendors of the Egyptian queen, the Czgowchwz regatta possesses a seemingly “infinite variety,” a richness conferred upon it by the catalogs’ fabulous enumerations. Like Czgowchwz’s cult, drawn from the New York’s cultural and ethnic stewpot, the mock fleet hails (at least in its inspiration) from all the ports and waters of the world, from Greek trireme to Japanese norimon to “Polynesian reed rafts in riotous designs,” yet another figuration of the text’s attempts at exhaustive totality. Once again McCourt has interlaced within his cataloging a witty *ars poetica*, both aesthetic manifesto and guide to reading the novel, with the “elaborate, disguising façades” commissioned by della Gueza to transform the “scores of drab little workaday rowboats” standing in for the alchemical play of art on so-called real life, the transfiguring, redemptive vision proffered by Czgowchwz and shared by the text that narrates her. This alchemy can be of the moonlit, dreamy sort, as with della Gueza’s fantasy armada, or it can be mundane, earthy, sensuous, as with the description of the Irish revelers that rounds out the parallel descriptions of the preparations for the ball: “Groups representing every county in Eire came, loquacious crowds sporting green-plaid kilts and Tara brooches, tuning their skirling bagpipes, dancing the Stack o’ Barley, reciting their bardic tales, singing ballads, laughing-weeping, drinking the beer kegs bone dry.”<sup>419</sup> Again we have the novel in miniature—the hyphenated “laughing-weeping” particularly conveying a sense of generalized,

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<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

cyclical human experience, the shuttling back-and-forth between two opposite, yet congruent, poles of experience—this time from the ludic perspective of the wild Irish; again we have loquacity, celebration, drunkenness, and song, and, with the inclusion of “bardic tales,” narrative: impassioned composition, vatic storytelling, and crystalline form, hallmarks of McCourt’s style and of *Mawrdew Czegowchwz* itself.

The final great catalog in the novel describes the revelers at the costume ball. It bookends the *dramatis personae* that begins the book: here the guests and their costumes are described simply, with supplementary information given by the narrator in asides, sometimes parenthetically, sometimes as short digressions. The ball is the grandest moment of celebration for Czegowchwz and her friends and fans, and is the last great crowd scene, the last time in the novel in which the characters assemble and pass, as if at review, before the reader:

The variegate costumes: the Countess Madge as Norma; Ralph as Falstaff; Alice as mad Amneris; Carmen as Black Swan Odile; Dixie as Fafner; the remaining Secret Seven as Mime, the Forest Bird, and Nothung; Dame Sybil Farewell-Tarnysh as *Astrafiammante*, the Queen of the Night, in sequins; Gaia della Gueza as *Thaïs*, in paste jewels; Cassia Verde-Dov’è as demented Donna Elvira; Consuelo as Dido, lachrymose, all in black; Arpenik as Anoush, Oriental; Paranoys as Don Giovanni, bent on conquest; Percase as Prospero, wielding a long wand; Dolores as Cio-Cio-San, drunk and lost; Gloria Gotham as the Girl of the Golden West (or else Annie Oakley); Trixie Gilhoooley as the Lady of the Camellias—“Such a swell tragic story!”; Dolly Farouche as the Lady in the Dark; Rotten Rodney Bergamot as *Héloïse*, the nun, wearing black fishnet hose; Grace Jackson-Haight as Lady Bountiful (benign); Boni de Chalfonte as Capability Brown (smug); Roxanne Sauvage as Azucena—looking the part; Achille Plonque as Achilles (causing certain eyes to roll); Laverne Zuckerman as Puck (causing eyes to pop right out); Annamae as the Lost Chord, revealing . . . ; Leah Lafin as Moe Mohr together as Gothic gargoyle bookends, giggling, impish; Jameson O’Maurigan as the Roman actor Mnester, his two masks set front to back; Jonathan and Lavinia as Bacchus and Ariadne; Creplaczx as proud Orpheus; Thalia Bridgewood as Jack the Ripper; Valerio Vortice as Caligula . . . Others came as other heroes and villains.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 200–01.

The reader might be tempted to once again play the McCourtian game of decoding the relationship between character and attribute; as with the *dramatis personae*, which invites numerous hermeneutical sallies and attempts at interpretation, the list of names and costumes is too long, too rich, not to provoke some sort of playful guessing. There are, as usual, certainly rewards for this approach: some characters fit their disguise perfectly (as with “Arpenik as Anoush, Oriental,” the stalwart cook taking on the attributes of Tigranian’s heroine), while others (such as “Paranoy as Don Giovanni, bent on conquest,” the critic’s hyperverbal dexterity reconfigured as Mozart’s great antihero’s erotic *furor*<sup>421</sup>) are cast in a new light by the contrast between costume and wearer. “Creplacz as proud Orpheus” is another tight fit between character and persona, the laurelled composer casting himself as the divine Greek musician; “Jameson O’Maurigan as the Roman actor Mnester, his two masks set front to back,” however, is richly ambiguous, his Janus-like masks recalling Jameson’s tortuous love for Czegowchwz, pursued despite its hopelessness, as well as his celebration at Czegowchwz’s return—another example of McCourt’s “laughing-weeping” at work in the text. But whatever interpretive gloss we may put on the various members and their “variegate costumes,” the sheer weight of the catalog, its number of symbolic and referential possibilities, defeats us. The point is not to strive for some interpretative key that would unlock the different symbolic mysteries posed by each costume; rather, it is to allow the list of names to wash over us, to revel in its associations but to do so lightly, as an entertaining *divertissement*. Indeed, McCourt builds into the list moments that interrupt the process of enumeration and description, calling into question the act of

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<sup>421</sup> In this connection, cf. Leporello’s aria “Madamina, il catalogo è questo,” a list of Don Giovanni’s sexual conquests, kept in a “sizeable volume” and read by Leporello to the seducer’s latest target, Donna Elvira: “Little lady, this is the list / of the beauties my master has loved, / a list I’ve made out myself: / take a look, read it with me. // In Italy six hundred and forty, / in Germany two hundred and thirty-one, / a hundred in France, ninety-one in Turkey; / but in Spain already a thousand and three.”

listmaking, as when he presents “the remaining Secret Seven as Mime, the Forest Bird, and Nothung”: Mime, the cruel Nibelung dwarf from Wagner’s *Siegfried*, is easily visualizable—or, failing this, one can turn to the stage history of Wagner’s opera, and look at the various costumes and outfits that have brought the character to life—but how are we to interpret the costumes of the Forest Bird (Siegfried’s helper in acts 2 and 3 of the opera) or of Notung (Needful), Siegfried’s sword, which he shatters into pieces during the opera’s climax? “Achille Plonque as Achilles (causing certain eyes to roll)” performs a different yet similar function. Here the fit is all too easy, the relationship between character and disguise pat, reductive, a bad joke: McCourt seems to warn us thereby from making these sorts of one-to-one comparisons, which yield up nothing more than bland similarity. This feeling is reinforced at catalog’s end, “Others came as other heroes and villains,” which opens the list out, freeing it from the stuffiness of particularity, from the exhaustion of total inclusiveness; the narrator seems to shrug, admitting the impossibility of recording all the guests in all their finery. We are ultimately left with only words on a page, their inability to fully signify highlighted by McCourt’s exhaustive use of catalogs and lists, his simultaneous delight in, and questioning of, the problematics of representation and enumeration.

5. “What ruinous mosaic. . .”: The Postmodern Catalogs  
of Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973)

In August 1971, aides to United States President Richard M. Nixon began keeping what came to be known, infamously, as his “enemies list”: a detailed list of American citizens—many of them intellectuals, many of them media figures, many of them Jews—who were deemed to be of liberal political sympathies, and who were known or suspected to be working against Nixon’s reelection in 1972. White House Counsel John Dean, who later testified to Congress about his role in this and other crimes committed by the Nixon administration, wrote in a memorandum of 16 August 1971 that “This memorandum addresses the matter of how we can maximize the fact of our incumbency in dealing with persons known to be active in their opposition to our Administration. Stated a bit more bluntly—how we can use the available federal machinery to screw our political enemies.”<sup>422</sup> After laying out various operational procedures for this effort—one of Nixon’s many extra- and illegal attempts to undermine his political opponents—Dean suggests that Nixon’s staff “develop a small list of names—not more than ten—as our targets for concentration. . . . I feel it is important that we keep our targets limited for several reasons: (1) a low visibility of the project is imperative; (2) it will be easier to accomplish something real if we don’t over expand our efforts; and (3) we can learn more about how to operate such an activity if we start small and build.”<sup>423</sup> The militaristic language of the memo is telling, reflecting the severe paranoia of Nixon and his aides, as well as that of America at large, wearied and angered

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<sup>422</sup> Kutler is an excellent, recent collection of sources and documents relating to Watergate, the break-in, coverup, and political crisis that terminated Nixon’s presidency and was the ultimate, unintended consequence of the enemies list. Dean’s memo appears on page 30. For a reproduction of the memo, see: <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/94/Dean-enemies-1.jpg>.

<sup>423</sup> Kutler, 30.

by the protracted Vietnam War, where other “targets for concentration” were being busily acquired, other projects of “low visibility” were being formed and prosecuted.<sup>424</sup>

Despite Dean’s stricture that it be kept small, the enemies list grew quickly, doubling from Dean’s original suggested limit of ten to a typed list, compiled by Nixon’s chief counsel Charles W. Colson, “in priority order” of twenty people, and which was delivered to Dean in a memorandum of 9 September. The list (of which Dean has claimed that Nixon was ignorant)<sup>425</sup> is a landmark document in the political history of the United States, in which the darker, paranoid impulses of Richard M. Nixon were wedded to an overzealous junior legal staff that followed to the letter Nixon’s larger strategy of what is now called the “unitary executive”—in which the Executive Branch, or President, acts unilaterally, without the standard checks and balances provided by Congress and the Supreme Court. Its targets are listed mainly for their anti-Nixon political activism, all of it following wonted legal and democratic paths such as organizing, collecting money, and advocacy. Colson’s marginalia spits out considerable bile against its targets: indeed, there is a thuggish, criminal vitality to its language, as when the memo

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<sup>424</sup> The *New York Times* for 16 August 1971 reports that American “B-52 bombers have been making unannounced strikes against enemy supply lines in the southern half of the demilitarized zone this month for the first time since the 1968 halt of the bombing campaign against North Vietnam. . . . United States military spokesmen, asked about the report today, issued a statement that did not mention B-52 strikes but acknowledged that air operations were taking place in the zone. They refused to elaborate” (“U.S. Raids in Zone Reported”: note the byline’s serendipitous use of “Zone” for the DMZ separating North from South Vietnam—the Zone, of course, being also the term for post-WWII Europe in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*). Another *Times* story for 16 August 1971 reports the United States’ warning of Hanoi about North Vietnam’s increased military activity in the DMZ: “A statement from United States headquarters said: ‘Any enemy activity along the DMZ which threatens the safety of allied forces is viewed with deep concern by commanders who have the responsibility to exercise their inherent right of self-defense for their troops’” (“U.S. Warns Hanoi”). The United States’ clandestine involvement in Cambodia continued apace throughout 1971, with a reported 25,052 aerial bombings of targets by the U.S. (Kiernan and Owen).

<sup>425</sup> Television interview with CNN, 20 November 2005, a partial transcript of which is online at [http://bcm.bc.edu/issues/winter\\_2005/ft\\_presidents.html#dean](http://bcm.bc.edu/issues/winter_2005/ft_presidents.html#dean) (accessed 6 September 2008).

reads, following the entry for Ed Guthman, Editor of the *Los Angeles Times* and third on the list, “It is time to give him the message”; or when the memo recommends for the advertising firm of Maxwell Dane, Doyle, Dane and Bernbach, “They should be hit hard starting with Dane”; or when it states, ominously, for Leonard Woodcock, president of the United Auto Workers, “No comments necessary.”<sup>426</sup> The memo delves into explosive racial politics later perfected by Lee Atwater and Karl Rove, noting that Congressman John Conyers “Has known weakness for white females,” which deftly, grotesquely, tropes Conyers’s alleged sexual predilections as a hidden vice, a kind of moral sickness (with the not-so-hidden subtext of the sexually rapacious Negro).<sup>427</sup> There is also the reflexive hatred against progressives and the media, as in the frequent use of the compound adjective “radic-lib” for presumed “radical liberal” causes, or the paranoid description of Daniel Schorr, a CBS news correspondent, as “A real media enemy.” (Schor would later read the list upon its public release, unaware that he was listed until he read his name.)<sup>428</sup>

Between the list’s first incarnation on 9 September 1971 and the master list presented in John Dean’s testimony to the Senate Select Committee to Investigate Campaign Practices, or the Senate Watergate Committee—convened to investigate the Watergate break-in and its political motivations—on 28 June 1973, the enemies list had swelled tenfold, from twenty to over 200

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<sup>426</sup> Facsimiles are available at the Wikimedia link given above in n1: for the full text, see Genovese, 140–41. The terse, cryptic language of Colson’s marginalia breathes the same air as Pynchon’s paranoid fictions: notable is the sense of politics as secret hermeneutics, the intervention of a political administration in the lives of its subjects via coded threats and unambiguous-though-deniable covert activities.

<sup>427</sup> For the poisonous afterlife of Nixon’s divisive politics, see Perlstein.

<sup>428</sup> Schorr called it “The most electrifying moment, I think, of my most entire career. . . . I think I tried not to gulp. I tried not to the gasp. . . . I read it without a comment. I just tossed it right back. I wanted to collapse”: from Schor’s interview with *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on 29 May 2001, online at [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june01/schorr\\_5-29.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june01/schorr_5-29.html).

names.<sup>429</sup> The enemies list can thus be seen as a metaphor for the times and its various anxieties, an embodiment in the political sphere of several pervasive cultural concerns that confronted, not just Americans, but many societies in the postindustrial West during the upheavals of the 1960s and '70s: a kind of governmental metastasis, with the machinery of the Executive Branch, addled by Nixon's clinical paranoia, arrogating unto itself new powers, new rights, even new personnel, many of them criminal; as a kind of "mission creep" similar to that which took place during the United States' seeming endless engagement in Vietnam, which went from the deployment of advisors and materiel under Kennedy to full-fledged war under Johnson, and which continued and even increased under Nixon's various withdrawal strategies during the '70s (Vietnamization, the widening of the air war); even as the progressive disordering and becoming entropic of a complex system, with Coulson's originally bounded and stable system-in-equilibrium (the original list of ten names) becoming large and unwieldy with the progressive addition of more names, more noise. The enemies list is an example of informational or data entropy, with a relatively bounded, delimited set of data snowballing to ten times its size as the energies released by this operation—the imperatives of data acquisition and classification; the confirmation biases and false positives engendered by personal antipathies and secret behavior; the inertia of a system, whether physical or political, when set in motion—overwhelmed its original boundaries.

Nixon's enemies list bears striking similarities with the lists and catalogs in the novels of Thomas Pynchon (1937–), which, more than any other works in the canon of American postmodern fiction, exemplify the genre's trend toward hyperverbality: toward the erratic, the copious, and the extreme, toward lengthy lists and catalogs, descriptions and quotations. Pynchon is an arch-employer of the catalog, using it frequently to festoon his erudite, researched,

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<sup>429</sup> Dean's testimony was exactly four months after the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* on 28 February of the same year.

recondite fictions, most prominently in his encyclopedic epic novels *V.* (1963), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *Mason & Dixon* (1997), and the recent *Against the Day* (2006).<sup>430</sup> In each of these lengthy works, Pynchon returns again and again to a relatively stable set of themes and preoccupations, many of which are shared by other postmodern novelists and thinkers: posthumanist critiques of Enlightenment epistemology and rationality; an insistence on viewing the individual as a product of social processes, forces, discourses, relationships, and hierarchies; the role of the individual in a mass, technologically-mediated society that is under increasing bureaucratic control while simultaneously subject to the forces of social entropy and change; the prevalence of paranoia, uncertainty, fear, even mass terror, among populations living under such regimes; the legacy of *translatio imperii*, of European and American colonialism and global hegemony, particularly that pursued by modern corporations, cartels, and cabals; the oppositional stance of minorities, countercultures, and dissidents under technocratic capitalist states; and the ever-present threat of both local and global apocalypse, symbolized variously by the genocide of the African Herero in *V.* or the all-out slaughter of World War Two in *Gravity's Rainbow*.<sup>431</sup> Like many other American postmodernists, Pynchon uses catalogs both to symbolize and enact the chaotic, broken preterite—a favorite Pynchonian term, used in the religious sense of “left

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<sup>430</sup> Mendelson is the first and fullest treatment of Pynchon's encyclopedism. For an opposing view, see LeClair, 39, “*Gravity's Rainbow* is usually called an encyclopedic novel because of the multiple sources, codes, and structures of its information, but the subject of that information—alienation—is so overdetermined that the novel exceeds the synecdochic balances of an encyclopedic narration. *Gravity's Rainbow* is a catalog, a huge compendium which, like a parts catalog, is constrained by its subject.” For a more moderate view of Mendelson's encyclopedic hypothesis, see House, 41–44.

<sup>431</sup> Best and Kellner, 29, describe the metanarrative of Pynchon's work as “the rise of a nascent form of global capitalism based on a military–industrial complex, new technologies, a proliferation of consumer goods and services, information and entertainment, bureaucracy, and expanding systems of power and social control. Thus, *GR* yields a parable of the birth of the postmodern adventure in the matrix of a simultaneously decomposing and evolving modern society, reaching its apotheosis in world war and the atomic bomb.”

behind, unblessed by divine Grace” for the secular end of identifying the have-nots, the underclasses, the rebels, fools, and eccentrics who throng the margins of Pynchon’s dystopian fictions<sup>432</sup>—status of the world in which his characters live, be it London during the Nazi Blitz or the Western wilderness of eighteenth-century America.

Pynchon’s catalogs also embody the dizzying flux of information available in the technology- and data-glutted novels, as in the following celebrated example of Tyrone Slothrop’s desk—first analyzed by Edward Mendelson in his essay “Gravity’s Encyclopedia”—in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.<sup>433</sup> Slothrop, a young American officer desultorily assisting the British war effort during the Blitz, has shown a strange affinity for predicting the blast-sites of the new, terrifying German V-2 rockets (in typical Pynchonian fashion, Slothrop gets an erection when the deadly, penile-phallic rocket nears its target); a British agent named Teddy Bloat (note Pynchon’s postmodernist’s addiction to silly names, and the self-conscious nod to his own bloated, tumescent, turgid prose) is sent to spy on him. Bloat’s own jumbled kit bag of “odd necessities” prefigures, by a kind of textual-motivic replication common throughout Pynchon’s work, the mess of Slothrop’s desk: the stalwart, dull Brit carries a “midget spy-camera, jar of mustache wax, tin of licorice, menthol and capsicum Meloids for a Mellow Voice, gold-rim prescription sunglasses General MacArthur style, twin silver hairbrushes each in the shape of the flaming

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<sup>432</sup> The classic study on preterition in Pynchon is Mackey, who notes, “At the level of its rhetoric *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a sustained piece of preterition. It displays on its rhetorical surface a linguistic paranoia which answers to the ‘deep’ paranoia of its plots and personae” (20). On preterition in Pynchon, see also Moore, 126–37: “Pynchon concludes that the linkage between bureaucratic organization, the earlier predator ethic of capitalism, and the original piety of the Puritans creates one side, the blind side, of the contemporary dichotomy between Them and Us” (131);

<sup>433</sup> See Mendelson. Slothrop’s desk likely owes its genesis to Pynchon’s own writer’s desk in his “cavelike” rooms in the Los Angeles suburb of Manhattan Beach, one of the places where he composed *Gravity’s Rainbow*: cf. Weisenburger, 1, who tantalizingly records visitors’ memories of the author’s room: “On the desk were deposited, *in strata*, various letters, miscellanea, and those quadrille sheets [on which Pynchon wrote the MS of his novel].” The italics are mine.

SHAEF sword, which Mother had Garrard's make up for him and which he considers exquisite."<sup>434</sup> Much as, say, Homer's Catalog of the Ships reveals a sense of Greek cultural identity through its enumeration and description of Hellenic place names, so the brief catalog of Bloat's possessions reveals a sense of Britishness, of Bloat as an *homme-moyen* John Bull, a stolid protector of queen and crown. One of Pynchon's favorite themes is the interpenetration between humans and objects—how humans can be mechanistically reduced to a set of competing responses to various stimuli, how objects can be strikingly lifelike, mystically imbued with inner power—and it is fascinating to see how much Teddy Bloat is identified by his possessions, how much they reveal of his character: the military man's tendencies toward conformity and emulation, revealed by the mustache wax and MacArthur sunglasses, as well as by the “twin silver hairbrushes,” whose description shades from an objective, third-person narration to an interiorized *style indirect libre*, with the self-satisfied tone of “which Mother had Garrard's make up for him and which he considers exquisite” revealing Bloat in his prissy, mama's-boy's simplicity; the further note of self-adornment and self-effacement in the “menthol and capsicum” breathmints, whose brand name, “Meloids for a Mellow Voice” is one of a thousand tiny eruptions of the language of mass media and advertising into the novel, a subtle, omnipresent reminder of the interlocking spheres of commercialism, state power, surveillance, discipline, and manipulation that surround Pynchon's pawn-like characters; and the “flaming SHAEF sword,” whose Teutonic image—a flaming sword surmounted by a rainbow—conjures up the visions of Germanic mythology co-opted by the Nazi regime (like those of Wagner's *Ring*), as well as presents Bloat as an ironic medieval Germanic hero: a parodic vision of martial heroism that fits Bloat, the pallid spy, perfectly.

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<sup>434</sup> Pynchon, 1973, 17. This source will be abbreviated as *GR* hereafter in the notes.

Bloat's kit bag, with its "Be Prepared," Baden-Powell jumbledness, is a faint prelude—in its revelation of character through the enumeration of personal effects—to the catalogic vastness of Slothrop's desk, whose chaos reaches past mere disarray to embrace entire strata of forgotten garbage and detritus. It is a paper ruin (ruins abound in Pynchon),<sup>435</sup> or, alternately, a paper museum, a carelessly archived yet nevertheless revealing mound of data that corresponds, however imperfectly, to the secret files kept by the anonymous, ubiquitous They: a shadowy cabal of military industrialists, corporation executives, government officials, scientists, and even paranormal researchers, that directs, unseen, the action of the novel.<sup>436</sup> Here, as Bloat peruses the

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<sup>435</sup> On ruins in Pynchon, especially *Gravity's Rainbow*, see Daniele, 109–38. See also Chambers, 179, who notes "the constant flow of ruins rendered through clearly drawn images, verbal repetition, catalog, and parallelism."

<sup>436</sup> This paranoia occurs everywhere in the book: take, for example, the frantic thoughts of Franz Pökler, a German rocket scientist forced to work for the Nazis: "he was seeing it from Their side—every quirk goes in the dossier, gambler, foot-fetishist or soccer fan, it's all important, it can all be used. Right now we have to keep them happy, or at least neutralize the foci of their unhappiness" (*GR*, 420). Classic studies on paranoia in Pynchon are Bersani, who notes that "Pynchon is less interested in vindicating his characters' suspicions of plots than in universalizing and, in a sense, depathologizing the paranoid structure of thought" (148); Braudy, who writes of the novel's "war-time nightmare of organization," and notes that "The Cold War period took the World-at-War omni-organization of World War Two and projected it into the skies of political science fiction. Paranoia became no longer a mental aberration or a modernist cowering before the modern world, but an articulated national policy" (625); Mackey, who ties it into the related Pynchonian concept of preterition (on which, see more above); Schroeder, who traces paranoia back to Pynchon's and America's Puritan roots; Moore, 116–48, who locates *Gravity's Rainbow* within "what we may pseudo-journalistically call the New Paranoia" (116) of the American 1960s and '70s; O'Donnell, who notes that "Paranoia . . . ranges across the multi-discursivity of contemporary existence. . . . [it is] an intersection of contiguous lines of force—political, economic, epistemological, ethical—that make up a *dominant reality* (or *episteme*, or *paradigm*, or *habitus*, or *structure of feeling*) empowered by virtue of the connections to be made between materiality, as such, and the fictional representations or transformations of that materiality which come to affect its constitution. . . . [C]ultural paranoia is not content but method: a way of seeing the multiple stratifications of reality, virtual and material, as interconnected or networked" (181–82).

vastness of Slothrop's desk, the young American soldier is revealed in all his quotidian specificity, the pile of trash that is his desk speaking, like a burned-out midden heap at an archaeological dig, of its possessor's habits, thoughts, and history:

Things have fallen roughly into layers, over a base of bureaucratic smegma that sifts steadily to the bottom, made up of millions of tiny red and brown curls of rubber eraser, pencil shavings, dried tea or coffee stains, traces of sugar and Household Milk, much cigarette ash, very fine black debris picked and flung from typewriter ribbons, decomposing library paste, broken aspirins ground to powder. Then comes a scatter of paperclips, Zippo flints, rubber bands, staples, cigarette butts and crumpled packs, stray matches, pins, nubs of pens, stubs of pencils of all colors including the hard-to-get heliotrope and raw umber, wooden coffee spoons, Thayer's Slippery Elm Throat Lozenges sent by Slothrop's mother, Naline, all the way from Massachusetts, bits of tape, string, chalk . . .<sup>437</sup>

Slothrop's desk is initially a portrait of waste, or, to borrow from Mendelson's reading, of entropy, another common Pynchonian theme.<sup>438</sup> Here Slothrop's desk enacts the second law of thermodynamics—which stipulates that states of equilibrium and balance inevitably tend toward dissolution and chaos, and that states of high energy necessarily give way to energy's dispersion and waste—its contents deliquescing into a primordial chaos of nescient matter, “a base of bureaucratic smegma” (the sexual metaphor is reminiscent of Pynchon's frequent equation of

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<sup>437</sup> *GR*, 18. Weisenburger, 24–25, note the list's proleptic quality, and that “Among this list of objects on Slothrop's desk are items, allusions, and brand names left in his wake throughout the novel.” The list thus acts as a *vorspiel*, or prelude, to various important Slothropian motifs that will follow.

<sup>438</sup> Entropy appears throughout Pynchon's work, and constitutes a major meme or motif of his writing. It appears first as the ruling metaphor of the short story “Entropy,” first published in the *Kenyon Review* in 1960, and in which a riotous late-night party (the first of many in Pynchon's work, here embodying initially ordered system as specified in the second law) loses steam as the night progresses and the partiers become increasingly drunk and tired; later in *The Crying of Lot 49* during an explanation of Maxwell's Demon that connects physics with the novel's dominant themes of communication and miscommunication: “Entropy is a figure of speech, then . . . a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow” (Pynchon, 1999, 85); and culminating, as we have seen, in *Gravity's Rainbow's* epic depictions of garbage, ruins, waste, and death. See LeClair, 21–25, for Pynchon as an author of what LeClair calls the “systems novel” (21), and how this interacts with Pynchon's more-general postmodern qualities.

paper and text as erotic, pornographic) that speaks of Slothrop's endlessly repetitive hours spent oiling the wheels of the machine of war. Slothrop's waste is overwhelmingly media-based, textual: the shavings of erasers and pencils, the "very fine black debris" from the typewriter ribbons, the paperclips, "nubs of pens, stubs of pencils of all colors" all bespeak an incessant scribal labor for the purpose of military intelligence, the ministrations of a human cog in the bureaucratic machine. (This in turn metafictionally comments on Pynchon's own literary labors composing *Gravity's Rainbow*, one of many self-reflexive nods throughout the text.) At times the catalog achieves a rare, unexpected poetic quality, as in the mention of "the hard-to-get" hues of "heliotrope and raw umber" among Slothrop's pencils, the "wooden coffee spoons" (garbage that serves as a marker of time and consumption of resources, as with T. S. Eliot's Prufrock: "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons"), or the "Thayer's Slippery Elm Throat Lozenges" (another bit of commercial advertising) "sent by Slothrop's mother, Naline, all the way from Massachusetts," their provenance underscoring Slothrop's distance from home.

The description of the desk then moves from these lower strata to the middle and upper ranges of Slothrop's slough:

a layer of forgotten memoranda, empty buff ration books, phone numbers, unanswered letters, tattered sheets of carbon paper, the scribbled ukulele chords to a dozen songs including "Johnny Doughboy Found a Rose in Ireland" ("He does have some rather snappy arrangements," Tantivy [another British serviceman spying on Slothrop] reports, "he's a sort of American George Formby, if you can imagine such a thing," but Bloat's decided he'd rather not), an empty Kreml hair tonic bottle, lost pieces to different jigsaw puzzles showing parts of the amber left eye of a Weimaraner, the green velvet folds of a gown, slate-blue veining in a distant cloud, the orange nimbus of an explosion (perhaps a sunset), rivets in the skin of a Flying Fortress, the pink inner thigh of a pouting pin-up girl . . . a few old Weekly Intelligence Summaries from G-2, a busted corkscrewing ukulele string, boxes of gummed paper stars in many colors, pieces of a flashlight, top to a Nugget shoe polish can in which Slothrop now and then studies his blurry brass reflection, any number of reference books out of the ACHTUNG library back down the hall—a dictionary of technical German, an F.O. *Special Handbook* or

*Town Plan*—and usually, unless it’s been pinched or thrown away, a *News of the World* somewhere too—Slothrop’s a faithful reader.<sup>439</sup>

The “forgotten memoranda” (a nicely bad pun) inaugurate a higher level of textual detritus: rather than the shavings and butt-ends of pencils, the raw material of textual production, here are discarded texts themselves, the end result of printing, the document, reverting to the stuff of which it is made. Slothrop’s textual waste all shares a once-vital, now past, occasional urgency, from the economic necessity of the coupons that came from the “empty buff ration books,” to the scribbled “phone numbers,” traces of sudden meetings and spontaneous assignations, promises to meet again, to the “unanswered letters,” a failure to communicate, and “the scribbled ukulele chords to a dozen songs,” a sly dig at hapless hero-*manqué* Slothrop’s lack of prowess, and a touching glimpse of Slothrop’s own values: amid an aerial siege and world war, these hasty notes are what he finds worth preserving, their future promise of music’s pleasurable release.<sup>440</sup> The various jigsaw pieces reveal a further, self-reflexive level to the catalog: here Pynchon, in the middle of a virtuoso descriptive passage, a shifting, kaleidoscopic web of textual referents and objects, introduces the theme of fragmented representation directly into the narrative—each artifact glimpsed in the reaches of Slothrop’s desk reveals a facet of the American soldier’s life, so does each stray jigsaw piece metonymically conjure up the vanished whole, the lost plenum of which it is a ruinous reminder. But this picture, however cumulative, is imperfect: like Slothrop’s “blurry” reflection in the brass shoe-polish top, then, the fragmentary catalog of his desk can only imperfectly reveal Slothrop as a character. Despite the catalog’s pretensions to wholeness, and despite the spying Bloat’s survey and taxonomy of its contents, there are things left out, things left unrepresented. And while the narrator is relatively sure about Slothrop—his

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<sup>439</sup> *GR*, 18.

<sup>440</sup> This is one of the many parodic Orphic images that run throughout the work: see Hume and Knight.

conclusion, after scanning the reading material in the upper reaches of Slothrop's mess, that "Slothrop's a faithful reader" is another chilling example of the novel's bureaucratic voice, another sop of data thrown to the all-seeing delectation of the shadowy techno-conspirators—further perusal of Slothrop's desk will show otherwise: here, however, the forensic catalog of the desk and its junk flirts with the empirical certainties of the detective novel and *policier*, with Bloat ironically standing in for one of Poe's or Conan Doyle's intrepid investigators.

If Bloat's analysis of the contents of Slothrop's desk yielded a mass of ambiguous data, each element tantalizing in its concrete specificity but resisting incorporation into an overarching interpretation or portrait, then Bloat's discovery of Slothrop's map of London is even more baffling. As Bloat photographs Slothrop's desk he notices the map, which is covered all over with the "gummed paper stars" seen above: "The stars pasted up on Slothrop's map cover the available spectrum, beginning with silver (labeled "Darlene") sharing a constellation with Gladys, green, and Katharine, gold, and as the eye strays Alice, Delores, Shirley, a couple of Sallys—mostly red and blue through here—a cluster near Tower Hill, a violet density about Covent Garden, a nebular streaming on into Mayfair, Soho, and out to Wembley and up to Hampstead Heath—in every direction goes this glossy, multicolored, here and there peeling firmament, Carolines, Marias, Annes, Suzans, Elizabeths."<sup>441</sup> Looking at Slothrop's constellation of women, Bloat at first doubts that there is any pattern to what he sees: "But perhaps the colors are only random, uncoded. Perhaps the girls are not even real." He then notes that Slothrop's map is inscrutable: "If there's a reason for putting up the paper stars every few days the man hasn't explained it—it doesn't seem to be for publicity." The map's cohesion, and Slothrop's motive in making it, called into question, Bloat recalls Tantivy's theory of the map: "Some sort

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<sup>441</sup> *GR*, 19.

of harmless Yank hobby. . . . Perhaps it's to keep track of them all. He does lead rather a complicated social life,' thereupon going into the story of Lorraine and Judy, Charles the homosexual constable and the piano in the pantehnicon, or the bizarre masquerade involving Gloria and her nubile mother, a quid wager on the Blackpool-Preston North End game, a naughty version of 'Silent Night,' and a providential fog. But none of these yarns, for the purposes of those Bloat reports to, are really very illuminating. . . ."<sup>442</sup> Tantivy's long-winded, shaggy-dog "yarns"—*yarn* an etymological pun at texts, textuality, and the weaving-together of stories—are unsatisfactory as interpretive narratives: like Bloat's own efforts to interpret Slothrop's map, they are stopped in their act of interpretation, steered away from growing certainty into ambiguity, plurality, and disillusionment.

The possibility of positive hermeneutics, of a direct understanding of a text or phenomenon, is a complicated one for both Pynchon's characters and for readers of his texts, fractured, rendered multiple and contradictory by such moments of interpretive instability. As Joseph Tabbi writes:

Never content with the broken surface of conscious awareness, Pynchon's characters desire to penetrate to the holy Text, to unearth hidden forms and thus uncover a meaning, even if that meaning should lie in a conspiracy beyond human agency. . . . For such hybrids, the "external" world becomes increasingly internalized, experience becomes increasingly traduced by language, and interpretation becomes paramount. And because the exegesis of meanings restricts itself to a textlike object, the search for an "inside" is flattened out and experience itself becomes a matter of discourse, political gesture, language games, and so on. Here interpretation becomes *Auslegung*, the hermeneutic analysis of texts, rather than *Verstehen*, an understanding rooted in all kinds of "signs in which psychic life expresses itself," many of which cannot be formalized in textualist terms.<sup>443</sup>

Added to this is the multiplicity of the catalog of women's names, its manipulation of uncertain data (the imprecise yet suggestive "violet density" and "nebular streaming"), and the movement

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

<sup>443</sup> Tabbi, 2002, 43, quoting, in the final sentence, Ricoeur, 73.

from singular to plural, from the lone Gladys and Katharine to the stately group of “Carolines, Marias, Annes, Suzans, Elizabeths,” both a list of anonymous, prototypically English first names and a mock-roster of English queens. When, a few pages later in the book—during the first section of book 1, “Beyond the Zero” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* is composed of four large, titled parts, or books, each made up of sections of various lengths) that features Tyrone Slothrop, and which forms an ironic introduction to Pynchon’s antihero<sup>444</sup>—Slothrop’s reasons for keeping the map are finally revealed, they are, not surprisingly, completely unrelated to Bloat’s earlier conjectures: “The stars he pastes up are colored only to go with how he feels that day, blue on up to golden. Never to rank a single one—how can he? Nobody sees the map but Tantivy, and Christ they’re *all* beautiful . . . in leaf or flower around his wintering city, in teashops, in the queues babushkaed and coatwrapped, sighing, sneezing, all lisle legs on the curbstones, hitchhiking, typing or filing with pompadours sprouting yellow pencils, he finds them—dames, tomatoes, sweater girls—yes it is a little obsessive maybe but . . .”<sup>445</sup> The narrative becomes distended by Pynchon’s catalogic enumeration of the places where Slothrop meets his girls and of details of the girls themselves: Slothrop’s map is thus a private cosmology (“Nobody sees the

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<sup>444</sup> As often with Pynchon’s awful-sounding, punning character names, Slothrop’s name is a “speaking name” that carries symbolic overtones: *Tyrone* derives from Greek *tyro*, “neophyte, beginner,” conveying the American soldier’s greenness, inexperience, and general haplessness; *Slothrop*, while a nice jab at New England Puritanism (Slothrop is a descendent of William Slothrop, an early settler of Massachusetts), also conveys a sense of the hero’s slothfulness, laziness, lassitude, and torpor, amply evidenced in his desultory peregrinations throughout the novel. Hurley is an exhaustive, authoritative compendium of Pynchon’s character names. Slothrop recalls two other *soi-disant* heroes whose inexperience and lack of prowess relegate them to a secondary status among a throng of protagonist-competitors: Jason in the *Argonautika* and Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, to which both (especially Melville) *Gravity’s Rainbow* is related in form (the epic journey), content (meandering adventures), and style (Apollonius’s *recherché* vocabulary and esoteric knowledge, Melville’s exuberant smashing of novelistic boundaries). A short study comparing *Gravity’s Rainbow* to *Moby Dick* is long overdue.

<sup>445</sup> *GR*, 22.

map”) of feelings and memories, and unrelated to the military-political interest—the stars’ coincidence with the strike zones of German V2s—that Tantivy and Bloat have in it.

A further description comes a page later: here the map is presented as a memorial, salvific, even apotropaic, device, one designed both to fix fleeting memories in place and to ward off a random future death:

Still Slothrop keeps his map up daily, boobishly conscientious. At its best, it does celebrate a flow, a passing from which—among the sudden demolitions from the sky, mysterious orders arriving out of the dark laborings of nights that for himself are only idle—he can save a moment here or there, the days again growing colder, frost in the morning, the feeling of Jennifer’s breasts inside cold sweater’s wool held to warm a bit in a coal-smoke hallway he’ll never know the daytime despondency of . . . cup of Bovril a fraction down from boiling searing his bare knee as Irene, naked as he is in a block of glass sunlight, holds up precious nylons one by one to find a pair that hasn’t laddered, each struck flashing by the light through the winter trellis outside . . . nasal hep American-girl voices singing out of the grooves of some disc up through the thorn needle of Allison’s mother’s radiogram . . . snuggling for warmth, blackout curtains over all the windows, no light but the coal of their last cigarette, an English firefly, bobbing at her whim in cursive writing that trails a bit behind, words he can’t read. . . .<sup>446</sup>

Rather than a precise set of coordinates that, having been ascertained, mapped, and quantified, Slothrop’s starry progress is imprecise, subjective, haptic: rather than transcribe a fixed, unmoving situation, it celebrates “a flow, a passing,” that is, the flux of temporality, experience, life. The juxtaposition of official, hierarchical, fixed, and rigid systems with unofficial, non-hierarchical, unfixed, and loose systems runs throughout all of Pynchon’s novels, from the European colonialists and New York ’50s hepcats of *V.* to the various state factors and anarchists of *Against the Day*. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the two antinomies are represented by the warring factions of Them and the Counterforce, the international rocket cartel and the ragtag band of dopers, losers, mystics, fools, and renegades who halfassedly struggle against it. Pynchon’s apocalyptic, messianic dialectics, in which the powers of order, repression, and state rule are

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<sup>446</sup> Ibid., 23.

subverted by the powers of chaos, liberation, and acephalic, ad hoc organization. Note the number of inscrutable, difficult-to-interpret messages that Slothrop receives: bombs dropping like “mysterious orders arriving out of the dark laborings of nights,” *orders* carrying not just the sense of “directives” but of holy orders as well, heightening the sense of Slothrop as hero-elect; the “flashing by the light through the winter trellis outside” a window in one of his erotic reveries; the “English firefly” of the trailing cigarette glow, which inscribes “cursive writing . . . words he can’t read” in the postcoital darkness. Slothrop’s memories of the women have a tactile, jumbled quality, an almost Proustian immediacy, filled as they are with the random detritus of his everyday wartime London life: the privations of winter cold, a cup of tea, records and singing, blackout curtains, cigarettes. Note how the detail of the cigarette’s unreadable hieroglyphs recapitulates the general arguments made throughout the section: the difficulty of interpretation, the obduracy of private systematization, the omnipresence of hermeneutical error.<sup>447</sup>

In both mega-catalogs such as that of Slothrop’s tides and strata of desk-bound junk, as well as the plethora of mini-catalogs that festoon the work, *Gravity’s Rainbow* shows Pynchon’s cataloging in a number of guises, and as having a number of features, that are similar to other

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<sup>447</sup> The motif of unreadable, indecipherable, or otherwise inscrutable writing or signs—and, with it, the concomitant motif of divination, of a mystical revelation of an animate universe, “a Soul in ev’ry stone” in the penultimate line of the book (*ibid.*, 760)—is a favorite of Pynchon’s: cf. *ibid.*, 5–6: “the politics of bacteria, the soil’s stringing of rings and chains in nets only God can tell the meshes of”; 16: “palimpsests of secret flesh”; 16 (and again at 484): “a *croix mystique*”; and so on. To these details must be added Pynchon’s numerous references to codes, complex scientific and technical processes, abstruse theories and equations, and the like: *Gravity’s Rainbow*, then, a novel, like *Moby Dick* or *Heart of Darkness*, about a grand, doomed quest, foregrounds throughout its own restless energies of signification and interpretation, and the difficulties attendant thereupon. Cf. Hoffmann, 200, who writes, “the endless deferral and ‘dissemination’ of meaning, which create ever more possibilities of signification, offers Pynchon the chance . . . to dramatize this deferral of meaning in terms of plot structure by projecting dissemination into the existential quest of the protagonist.”

catalogic authors studied in this present work: the same generous, maddening use of *copia* and enumeration is at play; the same metatextual self-referentiality; the same breaking of the fictive space of the novelistic form, the same retarding of the forward-proceeding mimetic narrative. Pynchon's catalogs are also, in line with those of Joyce, Schuyler, and McCourt, virtuosic set-pieces of astounding technical skill and stylistic fineness that are paradoxically deployed as attempts to question the very high-mimetic traditions of writerly skill, a fine style, and virtuosity: that is, they are intensely readable fictions that comment on the impossible difficulties of reading anything—that even seek, to use Barthes' term, to explode the very concept of the *lisible*, rendering everything forever after *scriptible*.<sup>448</sup> Writing on Pynchon's catalogic virtuosity, George Levine notes:

The virtuosity of Pynchon's prose is a confrontation with the finite, the determined world. It becomes at times a kind of litany aspiring to the infinite sequence, implying always that there's more where that comes from. And it implies that nothing is predictable in the particular, despite Pointsmanesque conditioning and perverse paranoia. With such ambitions, the prose must also be self-consciously amoral, as though the ultimate morality is in a truly Whitmanesque embrace of everything, of coprophilia, sadism, masochism, gangbangs and daisy chains, genocide, incest, sodomy, fellatio, transvestitivism, torture, physical decay, murder, pie-throwing, decomposition, toilet bowls. But not only these. It is a prose that seems almost desperate in the tricks it will invent to keep from its own finitude, to find some sort of life in the very decadence and de-animation of which it is a symptom.<sup>449</sup>

Following Levine, Pynchon's catalogs act as archaeologies of the various mortifications of the twentieth century, taxonomies of dehumanization that are both relentless in their attempts to provide witness to twentieth-century atrocities while simultaneously mocking the very things it catalogs, trying "to find some sort of life" in the sorrows and horrors it enumerates. Like the elaborate retarding devices Shakespeare lards into *Hamlet*—the discourse on playacting, the

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<sup>448</sup> Barthes, 1974.

<sup>449</sup> Levine, 116.

gravediggers, the foppish Osric—only to further pleurably delay the “bloodboltered shambles in act five,” or the gratuitous chapters on the arcana of whaling in *Moby-Dick*—all of which, by weighing down the narrative, serve to keep the Pequod and the text, narratologically speaking, afloat—Pynchon employs catalogs to whistle past the graveyards of the modern era, and to both confront and avoid other looming mortalities.

Whether short or long, Pynchon’s catalogs allow for a dilation of the text and of narrative time, often for the point of an exaggerated emphasis, a verbal augmentation through enumeration, a kind of rhetorical copiousness or pouring-forth, an incantatory prolongation of a moment of action or observation, or an effect of style. As befits the apocalyptic (and postapocalyptic) tone and subject matter of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, many of these catalogs are devoted to anatomies of various sites of destruction, inventories of wreck, ruin, and debris, like this description of Slothrop’s visits to V-2 bombsites: “often he’d show up in time to help the search crews—following restless-muscled RAF dogs into the plaster smell, the gas leaking, the leaning long splinters and sagging mesh, the prone and noseless caryatids, rust already at nails and naked threadsurfaces, the powdery wipe of Nothing’s hand across wallpaper awhisper with peacocks spreading their fans down deep lawns to Georgian houses long ago, to safe groves of holm oak . . . among the calls for silence following to where some exposed hand or brightness of skin waited for them, survivor or casualty.”<sup>450</sup> The catalog of detritus in the passage above—in which the excellent detail of the “noseless caryatids” stands out, the statues having lost their proboscides from the blast or from time, or both, and now lying among the rubble like the abandoned images of forgotten gods—transitions into a lyrical, Nabokovian idyll, focus shifting from the detritus to the “wallpaper awhisper with peacocks spreading their fans down deep

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<sup>450</sup> *GR*, 24.

lawns”: an opening-out from destruction and death into the imaginative world of the past, a summery prewar England “long ago,” far removed from Slothrop’s present. Note the presence of the two hands in the passage, the anthropomorphized “Nothing’s hand” that stands in for the agentless, destructive power of the bomb, and the “exposed hand” of the bomb’s victim, the second item the necessary counterpart and corollary of the first.<sup>451</sup>

A similarly-cataloged scene of devastation greets Ned Pointsman on one of his periodic, futile attempts to catch stray dogs for vivisection; he is watched by young Jessica Swanlake, whose feminine consciousness filters the scene: “The rubble waits him, sloping up to broken rear walls in a clogging, an openwork of laths pointlessly chevrons—flooring, furniture, glass, chunks of plaster, long tatters of wallpaper, split and shattered joists: some woman’s long-gathered nest, taken back to separate straws, flung again to this wind and this darkness. Back in the wreckage a brass bedpost winks; and twined there someone’s brassiere, a white, prewar confection of lace and satin, simply left tangled. . . . For an instant, in a vertigo she can’t control, all the pity laid up in her heart flies to it, as it would to a small animal stranded and forgotten. . . .

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<sup>451</sup> Pynchon is fond of such unifications of seeming opposites: cf. *ibid.*, 30, where a psychic medium speaks disparagingly of “The illusion of control. That A could do B. But that was false. Completely. No one can *do*. Things only happen, A and B are unreal, are names for parts that ought to be inseparable. . . .”; see *ibid.*, 88, for a countering view, put into the mouth of Pavlovian scientist Ned Pointsman, who believes in the strict ordering of phenomena into dualistic categories, and dismisses the holistic theories of psychologist Pierre Janet: “[S]ometimes the man talked like an Oriental mystic. He had no real grasp of the opposites. ‘The act of injuring and the act of being injured are joined in the behavior of the whole injury.’ Speaker and spoken-of, master and slave, virgin and seducer, each pair most conveniently coupled and inseparable—The last refuge of the incorrigible lazy . . . is just this sort of yang-yin rubbish. One avoids all manner of unpleasant lab work that way, but what has one *said?*” Hands themselves are a common symbol in Pynchon, signs and testimonies of the animate, feeling universe in which his characters move: witness *ibid.*, 26–29, where Pynchon, ironically detailing Slothrop’s heroic ancestry, notes “the hand of God emerg[ing] from a cloud” on the 200-year-old gravestone of Constant Slothrop and, later, describes a V-2 dropping on London as “*the great bright hand reaching out of the cloud. . . .*”; or the book’s final vision of cosmic justice in “the Hand to turn the time,” which motivates, unseen, the actions of the phenomenal world.

[T]he poor lost flimsy thing . . . waiting in the night and rain for its owner, for its room to reassemble around it . . .”<sup>452</sup> The passage concentrates not only on the mini-catalog of broken objects at its center—the “flooring, furniture, glass, chunks of plaster, long tatters of wallpaper, split and shattered joists” inside the house’s shell—but on the affective states attached thereto, the humanizing image of the “long-gathered nest,” the sly-winking “brass bedpost,” and the white brassiere, which Jessica’s troubled thoughts animate as “a small animal stranded and forgotten,” shocked by the sudden dislocations wrought by its habitat’s destruction. Pynchon’s analytical enumeration of the scattered bits of the shattered home mimics the instantaneous flinging-apart of the cosmos of the room to the chaos of disorder, the permeability to “this wind and this darkness”,<sup>453</sup> but enumeration acts as a repristination as well, as a nod to the vanished wholeness of the pre-bomb house, a salvific, uncanny reunification toward which the brassiere’s impossible, anthropomorphically-projected longing pathetically points. As Marc W. Redfield writes, “The great formal care Pynchon brings to highly lurid scenarios is worth noting: such passages are repeating thematic imperatives on the level of style. If Pynchon’s characters, not to mention his readers, often find it impossible to distinguish between overdetermination and randomness, the patterned and the patternless, the intended and the accidental, then it follows that at no point should language be more painstakingly honed than when it is used to invoke the

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 43. For the filtering of the narrative point-of-view by the consciousness of the protagonist currently being narrated, cf. Kharpertian, 108, who argues that “[T]he narrator . . . emerges as a protean figure whose own perspective becomes ambiguously identified with the perspective of these characters. Coupled with numerous alterations in mood and tone, such continual destabilizations of narrative viewpoint parody conventional novelistic narration and create, in effect, a text of dizzying intricacy.” *Intimacy* would perhaps be a better final word here, as Pynchon’s deft chameleonic narration, to a degree beyond that of other practitioners of the *style indirect libre* such as Joyce or Woolf, interpenetrates the characters’ subjective mentalities with the seemingly objective outside worlds surrounding them.

<sup>453</sup> Recall that the root meaning of *analysis* is “to dissolve, to break into constituent parts” (Greek *ana-*, “apart” + *luo*, *luein* “to break up, dissolve”).

proximity of semiotic chaos.”<sup>454</sup> Again Pynchon hints at a possible time of healing past the present time of wreckage and despair, a utopian future time that realizes itself in the most unexpected and unlikely of places: here, a young woman’s chance moment of confused empathy with an inanimate object, an unjustified and unjustifiable *pietà*—and all the more touching for being so—a pouring forth of all the “pity laid up in her heart.”

At times Pynchon’s rhetorical copiousness rises to a high pitch of sustained pathos, aided by the enumerative, narrative-suspending qualities of his catalogs, as in the following early *tour-de-force* scene detailing a winter’s late-night religious service in the packed interior of a rural Anglican church. The scene’s protagonists are, as above, Pynchon’s young lovers Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake, who, as noted before, attract to themselves a fair amount of the author’s sympathy, their foredoomed affair presented throughout as precious, warm, and necessary: here, as with the brassiere, this authorial sympathy bleeds into the background characters, with the fraughting congregation portrayed as an emblem of suffering humanity, a fragile ship of souls hurtling through the war’s dark night. The scene begins with what Dwight Eddins calls “a catalogue of preterite effluvia” as Pynchon describes “the smell of damp wool, of bitter on the breaths of these professionals, of candle smoke and melting wax, of smothered farting, of hair tonic, of the burning oil itself, folding the other odors in a maternal way, more closely belonging to Earth, deep strata, other times”:<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>454</sup> Redfield, 155, writing of a scene in Pynchon’s *V*. While he does not discuss Pynchon’s catalogs per se, Redfield’s idea of Pynchon’s work as evincing a “postmodern sublime” is suggestive, particularly his quoting of Jameson, 1984, 79–80 (later expanded as Jameson, 1991), on the location of the postmodern sublime in “the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism. . . . It is therefore in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that in my opinion the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorized.”

<sup>455</sup> Eddins, 122; *GR*, 129–30.

[L]isten: this is the War's evensong, the War's canonical hour, and the night is real. Black greatcoats crowd together, empty hoods full of dense, church-interior shadows. Over on the coast the Wrens work late, down inside cold and gutted shells, their blue torches are newborn stars in the tidal evening. Hullplates swing in the sky, like great iron leaves, on cables that creak in splinters of sound. At ease, on standby, the flames of the torches, softened, fill the round glass faces of the gauges with apricot light. In the pipefitters' sheds, iced, rattling when the gales are in the Straits, here's thousands of old toothpaste tubes, heaped often to the ceilings, thousands of somber man-mornings made tolerable, transformed to mint fumes and bleak song that left white spots across the quicksilver mirrors from Harrow to Gravesend, thousands of children who pestled foam up out of soft mortars of mouths, who lost easily a thousand times as many words among the chalky bubbles—bed-going complaints, timid announcements of love, news of fat or translucent, fuzzy or gentle beings from the country under the counterpane—uncounted soapy-liquorice moments spat and flushed down to sewers and the slow-scumming estuary, the morning mouths growing with the day tobacco and fish-furred, dry with fear, foul with idleness, flooded at thoughts of impossible meals, settling instead for the week's offal in gland pies, Household Milk, broken biscuits at half the usual points, and isn't menthol a marvelous invention to take just enough of it away each morning, down to become dusty oversize bubbles tessellating tough and stagnant among the tar shorelines, the intricate draftsmanship of outlets feeding, multiplying out to sea, as one by one these old toothpaste tubes are emptied and returned to the War, heaps of dimly fragrant metal, phantoms of peppermint in the winter shacks, each tube wrinkled or embossed by the unconscious hands of London, written over in interference-patterns, hand against hand, waiting now—it is true return—to be melted for solder, for plate, alloyed for castings, bearings, gasketry, hidden smokestack linings the children of that other domestic incarnation will never see.<sup>456</sup>

While not a catalog or a list in the strict sense of these terms—in the way that, say, Homer's *Catalog of the Ships* is a catalog—the above passage, which details, furiously and idiosyncratically, “the War's evensong, the War's canonical hour,” is nevertheless strikingly catalogic, given over to enumeration and display in its multiple mini-lists: a metacatalog then, one that strings together the disassociated bits of English wartime privation into a stunning, volcanic overflow of thoughts, feelings, and images. The focus shifts from the description of the choir and its singing, which has occupied the previous two pages of the narrative, to a description of the “Wrens” outside by the shore and their ironworking; embedded within this digression is a

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<sup>456</sup> *GR*, 130.

further shift of narrative focus, another touching example of Pynchon's authorial empathy, the short list of the ironworkers' children's toothbrush-mumbled words: their "bed-going complaints, timid announcements of love, news of fat or translucent, fuzzy or gentle beings from the country under the counterpane," which the narrator notes are "lost easily a thousand times." In this, as with the example of the animate brassiere from before, Pynchon displays his usual attunement to the improbable and impossible, throwing a floodlight of attention on what amounts to cryptic minutiae, children's words that are not only trivial but also unrecorded: thus the narrator paradoxically lays claim to the unknowable, and purports to transmit the evanescent ineffable. In a narrative manner much employed by his college English professor at Cornell University, Vladimir Nabokov, Pynchon employs each temporary point-of-view as a removable backdrop for the following point-of-view, the action gliding smoothly from church to ironworkers to children, and thence to a mini-catalog of bad wartime food—"the week's offal in gland pies, Household Milk, broken biscuits at half the usual points . . . menthol"—and ending in an *echt*-Pynchonian vision of "true return," with the domestic toothpaste tubes that started the sweeping digression being recycled, in an act of wartime thrift, into materiel: "melted for solder, for plate, alloyed for castings, bearings, gasketry, hidden smokestack linings the children of that other domestic incarnation will never see." (The children's "counterpane" doubles as an emblem for the process of fiction itself, and recalls Robert Louis Stevenson's whimsical children's poem "The Land of Counterpane": just as the narration of the children's brushing their teeth is a welcome, tender break from the grimness of the rest of the passage, so Pynchon seems to suggest, narration makes possible a temporary break from bleak reality, a childlike hiding under the covers that is as much an act of avoidance as of creation.)

This metacatalog allows Pynchon to use the detail of the toothpaste tubes as a kind of narratological Archimedian tipping point, a (literally) throwaway bit of scene dressing that allows him to leverage the entire war, rendering its bewildering vastness comprehensible.<sup>457</sup> But lest we see anything hopeful in the recycling of the toothpaste tubes into instruments of war, Pynchon underscores his point in the conclusion to the passage, in which the narrator confronts directly the question of the “War”: “Yet the continuity, flesh to kindred metals, home to hedgeless sea, has persisted. It is not death that separates these incarnations, but paper: paper specialties, paper routines. The War, the Empire, will expedite such barriers between our lives. The War needs to divide this way, and to subdivide, though its propaganda will always stress unity, alliance, pulling together. The War does not appear to want a folk-consciousness, not even of the sort the Germans have engineered, *ein Volk ein Führer*—it wants a machine of many separate parts, not oneness, but a complexity. . . . Yet who can presume to say *what* the War wants, so vast and aloof it is . . . so *absentee*. Perhaps the War isn’t even an awareness—not a life at all, really.”<sup>458</sup> Pynchon’s catalogic logorrhea, then, is an attempt at restoring the lost wholeness that the War—always capitalized in Pynchon, both a reified abstract concept and a sentient, malevolent force—has sundered, and an attempt at linking together, however whimsically, aspects of human experience that the “vast and aloof” machinery of war,

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<sup>457</sup> A similar process of refinement occurs in *Mason & Dixon* (Pynchon, 1997, 88–89), during a depiction of black South African slaves washing their Dutch masters’ laundry; as above, a bit of domestic minutiae stands metonymically for an entire society and its web of social relations, serving as both emblem and condemnation: “Fruit Peels lie squash’d and slippery in the Gutters that run down to the Canals, where the Slaves are out in the Storm, doing their Owners’ Laundry, observing and reading each occurrence of Blood, Semen, Excrement, Saliva, Urine, Sweat, Road-Mud, dead Skin, and other such *Data* of biography, whose pure form they practice Daily, before all is lixiviated ’neath Heaven.”

<sup>458</sup> *GR*, 130–31. For more on paper—another of Pynchon’s favorite stalking horses—see the famous passage at *ibid.*, 28, describing the Slothrop family’s paper business, and seeing in their product a (wholly American) unholy Trinity: “paper—toilet paper, banknote stock, newsprint—a medium or ground for shit, money, and the Word.”

bureaucracy, and state power would consign to the realm of the underground and unknowable.<sup>459</sup>

As Eddins writes, “In the very act of privileging moments of communion, Pynchon reminds us of their very fragility and transience in the face of massive dehumanizing forces.”<sup>460</sup>

Other of Pynchon’s catalogs are not so darkly serious as the one above. Nor are they all made to answer the major themes of the novel, as the one above, with its digression into the War and its machinations, is made to do. *Gravity’s Rainbow* has been both celebrated and excoriated for its looseness, its embrace of the narratologically erratic, its embodiment of what Henry James, in his preface to *The Tragic Muse*, called “large, loose, baggy monsters.”<sup>461</sup> Quite a lot of the novel’s space is taken up with what are the equivalent of novelistic games, long passages with only a seemingly tangential relation to the main narrative, and that often come dangerously—that is, wonderfully—close to being filler. It should be no surprise, then, that Pynchon’s catalogs should proliferate in exactly these spaces, that they should, like exotic, useless plants, thrive monstrously in the hothouse redundancy of the lush, fecund soil of Pynchon’s prose divagations.<sup>462</sup> Take, for example, Slothrop’s improbable descent into the

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<sup>459</sup> Baudrillard, 111, sees a similar technological-bureaucratic dehumanizing in J. G. Ballard’s *Crash* (1973, the same year as *Gravity’s Rainbow*): “[T]echnology is the mortal deconstruction of the body—no longer a functional medium, but the extension of death—the dismemberment and cutting to pieces, not in the pejorative illusion of a lost unity of the subject . . . but in the explosive vision of a body delivered to ‘symbolic wounds,’ of a body confused with technology in its violating and violent dimensions.”

<sup>460</sup> Eddins, 15.

<sup>461</sup> James, 5. The immediate context of this oft-cited phrase is illuminating when considered as the antithesis of Pynchon’s aesthetic, especially that of the sprawling, chaotic *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “[W]hat do such large, loose, baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically mean? We have heard it maintained, we well remember, that such things are ‘superior to art’; but we understand least of all what that may mean, and we look in vain for the artist, the divine explanatory genius, who will come to our aid and tell us. There is life and life, and as waste is only life sacrificed and thereby prevented from ‘counting,’ I delight in a deep-breathing economy and an organic form.”

<sup>462</sup> For further discussion of Pynchonian monstrosities, both of character and language, see Caesar, 168, who writes, “Monstrosity becomes a form of language by which the novel speaks of

toilet—more plumbing—of a Roxbury nightclub, retrospectively narrated by Slothrop in a drug-induced haze to a group of psyops soldiers who are probing his mind in an attempt to judge his usefulness to Them. Slothrop's story becomes increasingly deranged as the drug takes hold, and Pynchon uses this narrative fact to indulge in what becomes a multipage poop joke, with the submerged Slothrop analyzing, with an unimaginable clinical precision, the various original foodstuffs that have created the strata of caked-on feces that encircle him. While not for the faint of heart, nor for the stercoraceously disinclined, the passage is worth quoting at length as an example of Pynchon's deliciously convoluted extended descriptions, his rapturously inflated rhetoric, and his delightfully dirty toilet humor:

The light down here is dark gray and rather faint. For some time he has been aware of shit, elaborately crusted along the sides of this ceramic (or by now, iron) tunnel he's in: shit nothing can flush away, mixed with hardwater minerals into a deliberate brown barnacled of his route, patterns thick with meaning, Burma-Shave signs of the toilet world, icky and sticky, cryptic and glyphic, these shapes loom and pass smoothly as he continues on down the long cloudy waste line, the sounds of "Cherokee" still pulsing very dimly above, playing him to the sea. He finds he can identify certain traces of shit as belonging definitely to this or that Harvard fellow of his acquaintances. Some of it too of course must be Negro shit, but that all looks alike. Hey, here's that "Gobbler" Biddle, must've been the night we ate chop suey at Fu's Folly in Cambridge cause there's bean sprouts around here someplace and even a hint of that wild plum sauce . . . say, certain senses *do* seem to grow sharper . . . wow . . . Fu's Folly, weepers, that was months ago. A—and here's Dumpster Vilard, he was constipated last night, wasn't he—it's black shit mean as resin that will someday clarify forever to dark amber. In its blunt, reluctant touches along the wall (which speak the reverse of its own cohesion) he can, uncannily shit-sensitized now, read old agonies inside poor Dumpster, who'd tried suicide last semester: the differential equations that would not weave for him into any elegance, the mother with the low-slung hat and silk knees leaning across Slothrop's table in Sidney's Great Yellow Grille to finish for him his bottle of Canadian ale, the Radcliffe girls who evaded him, the black professionals Malcolm touted him on to who dealt him erotic cruelty by the dollar, up to as much as he could take. Or if Mother's check was late, only afford.<sup>463</sup>

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things which have no name, and indicates a category of experience which has no other pattern but its own strangeness.”

<sup>463</sup> *GR*, 65.

Note Pynchon's habitual bent toward secret messages, hidden ciphers, and hermeneutic acts: as Eddins notes (albeit of a different passage), "All that has lived upon the surface is gathered inward with infinite patience toward the Center of sentience and fused into a sacred unity."<sup>464</sup> Here the piled-up shit appears to Slothrop as "patterns thick with meaning, Burma-Shave signs of the toilet world"—the former containing a barely-forgivable pun on "thick," the latter a silly goof on the language of commercial advertising; it is not merely "sticky and icky" but "cryptic and glyphic" as well: not simply disgusting and to be avoided, then, but packed with significance and begging to be interpreted. Slothrop's descent into the toilet's porcelain underworld is narrated in the same wide-awake tone of Candidesque faux-naïveté that will adhere to him throughout the novel, a tone perfect for Pynchon's continual unfolding of revelations and wonders, signs and symbols (however, as here, absurd). While wholly adventitious, Pynchon's toilet catalog allows him, as do the catalogs looked at above, to pause the forward movement of the book in order to spotlight one of its minor characters: here, the unfortunately named Dumpster Vilard, never to be seen again in the novel, but who here occupies, for the brief space of Slothrop's scrutiny of his deposited bowel movement, center stage, and upon whom Pynchon unleashes a flood of empathetic interest, detailing a seemingly endless litany of the young Harvardian's sorrows: his haplessness at higher mathematics, his gauche, drunken mother, his bad luck with the Radcliffe girls, and even his touching difficulties with sadomasochistic sex, for which he must always pay, but which he cannot always afford to his satisfaction.<sup>465</sup> Like the

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<sup>464</sup> Eddins, 118.

<sup>465</sup> Sm is another of Pynchon's recurring themes, used most often to embody—as with Captain Weissmann's sexual enslavement of the young German private Gottfried—human debasement before power at its uttermost, and the harnessing of eroticism to repressive political agendas; but also, in contrast, as a fun, deviant practice, a kinky playacting that liberates its practitioners from the shackles of the mundane everyday, as with Pirate Prentice and one of his ex-lovers: cf. *GR* 36: "You *are* a pirate," she'd whispered the last day—neither of them knew it was the last

“black shit mean as resin” that Dumpster Villard has deposited on the pipe wall, Pynchon’s cloacal exegesis seemingly “will . . . clarify forever,” repeating into infinity an ever more precise set of facts and stories about its subjects. Thus some of *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s key concerns—signification, hermeneutics, the fictiveness and socially constructed aspects of narrative and meaning, and, finally, waste, the overpowering sense of language and communication as disposable trash, noise, shit—are embodied in a comic-grotesque Gargantuan form. Such scenes are typical of the novel, which abandons connected sequential narrativity for a series of picaresque sketches and short chapters, each advancing the plot linearly but separated by gaps and fissures in the chain of events.

A frequent target of Pynchon’s catalogs is military language, which *Gravity’s Rainbow*—like other World War Two novels of the postwar period, such as Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961)—relentlessly mocks, anatomizing its sterility in long chains of deadened euphemisms, as in this list of Allied war bureaucracies, which the text bitterly satirizes as “named areas of the War, colonies of that Mother City mapped wherever the enterprise is systematic death”:

P.W.E. laps over onto the Ministry of Information, the BBC European Service, the Special Operations Executive, the Ministry of Economic Warfare, and the F.O. Political Intelligence Department at Fitzmaurice House. Among others. When the Americans came in, their OSS, OWI, and Army Psychological Warfare Department had also to be coordinated with. Presently there arose the joint, SHAEF Psychological Warfare Division (PWD), reporting direct to Eisenhower, and to hold it all together a London Propaganda Coordinating Council, which has no real power at all.<sup>466</sup>

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day—‘you’ve come and taken me off on your pirate ship. A girl of good family and the usual repressions. You’ve raped me. And I’m the Red Bitch of the High Seas. . . .’ A lovely game. Pirate wished she’d thought it up sooner.”

<sup>466</sup> *GR*, 76.

Note the tone of reification in the introductory line, as if the abstract concepts of war and the city have become, through the very real complexities of the war effort in Britain, real, breathing entities, proper nouns capitalized as if in sympathy with the parade of acronyms that follows. This capsule history of the SHAEF Psychological Warfare Division (PWD) demonstrates another key theme of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the combining and recombining—indeed, the organic growth—of vast, multinational groups and organizations, whether corporations or government entities or cartels. Rather than isolating each bureaucracy, the catalog stresses their interdependence of each entity, as each group “laps over,” like a fluid escaping the boundaries of a vessel, onto the other, and as the chain of systematized social experimentation and control widens to embrace all aspects of British society: the media, the economy, psychology. So pervasive is this controlling, mediating presence that it has ushered in a new set of political relations, in which trained specialists oversee the lives of ordinary citizens: “Who can find his way about this lush maze of initials, arrows solid and dotted, boxes big and small, names printed and memorized? . . . that’s for the New Chaps with their little green antennas out for the usable emanations of power, versed in American politics (knowing the difference between the New Dealers of OWI and the eastern and moneyed Republicans behind OSS), keeping brain-dossiers on latencies, weaknesses, tea-taking habits, erogenous zones of all, all who might someday be useful.”<sup>467</sup> Thus the pullulating bureaucratic life of the war has spawned its own society, one

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<sup>467</sup> *GR*, 76–77. Cf. *GR*, 14, of Pirate Prentiss: “Into the dossier it goes, and eventually the Firm, in Their tireless search for negotiable skills, will summon [Prentiss] under Whitehall. . . .” For a theoretical look at the kind of society portrayed in *Gravity's Rainbow*, see Ellul, 186, who gives a concise overview of the aspects of an autocratic-technocratic corporatist society: “[T]he corporate economy and the planned economy come singularly close together, to the degree that both systems (a) take a firm hold on the economy, (b) manage it on the basis of exact mathematical methods, (c) integrate it into a Promethean society which excludes all chance, (d) centralize it in the frameworks of nation and state (the corporate economy today has no chance of success except as a state system), (e) cause it to assume an aspect of formal democracy to the

subject to rapidly growing surveillance and control: the text's catalogs enact, through the lethal choking-off of affective language by impenetrable acronyms and reified abstract concepts, this oppressive supersaturation of society with state power.

Against these catalogs analyzing the deadened, official language used by agents of power, *Gravity's Rainbow* places its great Rabelaisian catalogs of people and groups. Many of these catalogs are devoted to the text's preterite, which term, as we have seen, Pynchon uses for the victims of power and of the war: the staffage, the have-nots, the losers; the oppressed, the dying, and the dead. Here is one of the text's longest, grandest catalogs, a panoramic view of emigrants displaced by the war's chaos:

The Nationalities are on the move. It is a great frontierless streaming out here. Volksdeutsch from across the Oder, moved out by the Poles and headed for the camp at Rostock, Poles fleeing the Lublin regime, others going back home, the eyes of both parties, when they do meet, hooded behind cheekbones, eyes much older than what's forced them into moving, Estonians, Letts, and Lithuanians trekking north again, all their wintry wool in dark bundles, shoes in tatters, songs too hard to sing, talk pointless, Sudetens and East Prussians shuttling between Berlin and the DP camps in Mecklenburg, Czechs and Slovaks, Croats and Serbs, Tosks and Ghegs, Macedonians, Magyars, Vlachs, Circassians, Spaniards, Bulgars stirred and streaming over the surface of the Imperial cauldron, colliding, shearing alongside for miles, sliding away, numb, indifferent to all momenta but the deepest, the instability too far below their itchy feet to give a shape to, white wrists and ankles incredibly wasted poking from their striped prison-camp pajamas, footsteps light as waterfowl's in this inland dust, caravans of Gypsies, axles or linchpins falling, horses dying, families leaving the vehicles beside the roads for others to come live in a night, a day, over the white hot Autobahns, trains full of their own hanging off the cars that lumber overhead, squeezing aside for army convoys when they come through, White Russians sour with pain on the way west, Kazakh ex-P/Ws marching east, Wehrmacht veterans from other parts of old Germany, foreigners to Prussia as any Gypsies, carrying their old packs, wrapped in the army blankets they kept, pale green farmworker triangles sewn chest-high on each blouse bobbing, drifting, at a certain hour of the dusk, like candleflames in religious procession. . . .<sup>468</sup>

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exclusion of real democracy, and (f) exploit all possible techniques for controlling men." It is notable, however, that Ellul's analysis largely leaves out the kind of resistance and inspired play as theorized by de Certeau and others, and seen in such abundance throughout Pynchon's work.

<sup>468</sup> GR, 549–50.

In one long list Pynchon encapsulates the demographic chaos and population shifts of the postwar period, in which millions, uprooted already by the war, were further flung about by the political accommodations made between the victorious Allied powers at the war's end. "Nationalities" hits again the note of reification, with a touch of irony: so many of the nations embodied by the emigrants have perished in the war, leaving their former citizens nationless wanderers in a Central Europe whose political contours have been redrawn. This is Pynchon's human army, the vast leaderless horde of the preterite and the dispossessed, a sharp contrast to the sleek mechanized armies of the Axis and Allies. Note the level of individual detail present in the panorama, as the narrator occasionally alights on "wintry wool in dark bundles, shoes in tatters, songs too hard to sing" or "white wrists and ankles incredibly wasted poking from their striped prison-camp pajamas," each of these recovered details further speaking to the wretchedness—a wretchedness both physical and spiritual, bodily and moral—of the stateless wanderers.<sup>469</sup> As in the scene in the Anglican church looked at above, the narrator's tone here is one of exquisite pathos and sympathy, expressing a seemingly boundless kinship with the suffering vagabonds; yet there is a feeling, too, of summation, of finality, as if Pynchon's recoding angel were, despite its empathy, simultaneously dispassionately marking down the fates of so much human wreckage. *Gravity's Rainbow* takes many such "long views," in which the

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<sup>469</sup> "[S]ongs too hard to sing" evokes the speaker's outcry in Psalm 137.4, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?", which adds to the imagery of exile here, clothing the uprooted Europeans in the symbolic robes of the ancient Israelites. The "striped prison-camp pajamas," in turn, inevitably evokes images of the Holocaust, bringing Pynchon's symbolic-referential arc full circle. The "pale green farmworker triangles" appear to be another, subtler reference to the Holocaust (although the triangles on the farmers' shirts are not directly compared to the yellow triangles worn by Jews under Hitler's regime): note, too, how the triangles become transmuted into explicitly religious imagery, glowing at dusk "like candleflames in religious procession," like the gold ikons clutched by peasant worshippers in the great devotional paintings of Ilya Repin.

plight of the forlorn and the lost is viewed simultaneously in great detail but from a vast distance: like the Angel of the Dawn in the proem to George Eliot's *Romola*, we see the narrative from a great height, directly removed from the problems on the ground, yet nevertheless present through the tenacity of the text's catalogic vision.

The level of detail deepens as the catalog continues, with the narrator switching from naming each nationality with a glance at their clothes and possessions, to a taxonomic listing of their various possessions, one-by-one, the mute objects working through metonymy to show forth the desperation of their possessors:

[A]t some hour of the morning they will fall out by the side of the road, a moment's precipitate out of the road chemurgy of these busy nights, while the invisible boiling goes on by, the long strewn vortices—pinstripe suits with crosses painted on the back, ragged navy and army uniforms, white turbans, mismatched socks or none, Tattersall dresses, thick-knitted shawls with babies inside, women in army trousers split at the knees, flea-bitten and barking dogs that run in packs, prams piled high with light furnishings in scarred veneer, hand-mortised drawers that will never fit into anything again, looted chickens alive and dead, horns and violins in weathered black cases, bedspreads, harmoniums, grandfather clocks, kits full of tools for carpentry, watchmaking, leatherwork, surgery, paintings of pink daughters in white frocks, of saints bleeding, of salmon and purple sunsets over the sea, packs stuffed with beady-eyed boas, dolls smiling out of violently red lips, Allgeyer soldiers an inch and a quarter to the man painted cream, gold and blue, handfuls of hundred-year-old agates soaked in honey that sweetened greatgrandfather tongues long gone to dust, then into sulfuric acid to char the sugar in bands, brown to black, across the stone, deathless piano performances punched on Vorsetzer rolls, ribboned black lingerie, flowered and grape-crested silverware, faceted lead-glass decanters, tulip-shaped Jugendstil cups, strings of amber beads . . . so the populations move, across the open meadow, limping, marching, shuffling, carried, hauling along the detritus of an order, a European and bourgeois order they don't yet know is destroyed forever.<sup>470</sup>

Note Pynchon's use of scientific terminology at the beginning of the passage, which further abstracts the human sufferings being depicted, presenting them as "a moment's precipitate out of the road chemurgy of these busy nights": a quintessence of mortality, then, expressed from the

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<sup>470</sup> *GR*, 550–51.

war's crucible, and a further reiteration of the theme of life's unknowably intricate processes. The catalog proper performs the simultaneous-but-different operations of presenting individual elements in almost microscopic detail, while subsuming each element in the paratactic onrush of the catalog's enumeration. Almost all of the objects and possessions are understandably beat, wrecked, ruined, with the few that are not—the talismanic “paintings of pink daughters in white frocks,” say, or the “deathless piano performances punched on Vorsetzer rolls,” each of which are impossibly delicate records (one visual, one aural) of a vanished past—appearing all the more precious through contrast. The catalog includes not just these fine items, but data relating to professions as well—“kits full of tools for carpentry, watchmaking, leatherwork, surgery”—to leisure and playtime—the dolls and painted lead soldiers—even to gem-coloring customs, such as that of boiling agates in honey, which is here presented like some much-loved private family recipe or secret technique, descended from the now-lost time of “greatgrandfather tongues long gone to dust.”<sup>471</sup>

The poignancy and detail of each cherished object prepare us for the narrator's closing comment, which recapitulates what the catalog has demonstrated throughout, that these items are not merely items in themselves, but are individual terms of a higher function, “the detritus of an order, a European and bourgeois order” that has been devastated by the war. Not simply personal possessions, the cataloged items take on further significance, as totems and talismans of the bourgeois European imaginary: commodities and comforts that failed to keep the war at bay, they are now flung, like their owners, into the chaos of a new, unstable polity. Daniela Daniele

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<sup>471</sup> The mini-description of the agate-coloring process is another example of Pynchon's scientific imagery: note, as with the “invisible boiling” of the war, which has produced so much lost human “precipitate,” this too involves boiling, and a separation of the cast-off dregs from the finished product—Pynchon's tragic, preterite vision encompasses both lost humans and charred, carbonized sugar. For a reworking of Pynchonian carbonization as a narrative and thematic trope, see Tom McCarthy's recent novel, *C*.

notes that “heterogenous and cosmopolitan cultures” such as the ones depicted in this catalog, are “expressed at the narrative level through the omnivorous language of linguistic collision better known as Postmodern pastiche. This composite form derives from Surrealist collages and assemblages, and gives voice to discarded or ignored figures such as castaways and fugitives—trash rejected by advanced technocracy. In these multifarious shapes, the text gathers the multiple voices of the crowd as opposed to the technocratic discourse of army leaders. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the rational-scientific idiom of technological power is undermined by the myriad of idiolects and esoteric practices of the people of the ruins.”<sup>472</sup> This catalog of lost bourgeois dream-commodities is such a textual collection, a group of objects rendered esoteric by the vagaries of war and exile: as if one of the Parisian shop-windows lovingly photographed by the surrealist progenitor Eugène Atget had been broken into, and its contents scattered in the street, the catalog shows the newly homeless state of the objects once owned by a now-wandering people whose former *habitus* has become only a memory.<sup>473</sup>

It is against this swirling backdrop of people and objects that Pynchon places Tyrone Slothrop, who at this point in the novel is wandering, unmoored and away from Them, through the shadowy wonderland of the postwar Zone.<sup>474</sup> As Slothrop hurries past the emigrants, the text presents a short “Partial List of Wishes on Evening Stars for This Period,” which presents the American private’s worries and hopes in a condensed, digested form. The naiveté and simplicity

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<sup>472</sup> Daniele, 124.

<sup>473</sup> In this connection it is tempting to link the catalog with any elegiac catalog of lost, no-longer-used, broken, or otherwise outmoded objects, such as the great mini-catalog of finery enumerated by the character of the Last Survivor in the Anglo-Saxon heroic poem *Beowulf*: “No trembling harp, / no tuned timber, no tumbling hawk / swerving through the hall, no swift horse / pawing the courtyard. Pillage and slaughter / have emptied the earth of entire peoples” (Heaney, lines 2262–66).

<sup>474</sup> Daniele, 122, quoting J. G. Ballard’s preface to *Crash*, describes the Zone as “a Neo-Surrealist space for mental maneuvering, an ‘inner space [. . .] where the inner world of the mind and the outer world of reality meet and fuse.’”

of Slothrop's wishes contrast sharply with the mute, yet exquisitely detailed, wretchedness of the emigrants:

Let me find that chicken coop the old lady told me about.  
 Let Tantivy really be alive.  
 Let this fucking zit on my back go away.  
 Let me go to Hollywood when this is over so that Rita Hayworth can see me and  
     fall in love with me.  
 Let the peace of this day be here tomorrow when I wake up.  
 Let that discharge be waiting for me in Cuxhaven.  
 Let Bianca be all right, a-and—  
 Let me be able to take a shit soon.  
 Let that only be a meteor falling.  
 Let these boots hold out at least to Lübeck.  
 Let that Ludwig find his lemming and be happy and leave me in peace.<sup>475</sup>

Slothrop's short, anaphoric prayer is at the opposite catalogic pole from the panoramic visual catalogs that immediately precede it. Rather than show action and pathos through objects, as the long catalogs did, Slothrop's prayer shines out in its naked urgency, its stark, distilled quality. It is all about need, the need of the body to eat and to shit, the need for shelter and good boots, and, finally, the need for fantasy, the very real need humans as language-wielding animals feel to imagine other worlds that are not this one, other fates and other beings-in-the-present that are not ours. Here Slothrop's consoling fantasies are of his friends' safety—sadly, both Tantivy, an early chum, and Bianca, one of his lovers, are presumed dead (although we never learn their fates for sure)—and of Hollywood, of an escape into the world of dreams and sex, as embodied by Slothrop's star crush, Rita Hayworth. The pathos of this dream, as well as that of the never-to-be-awarded discharge—Slothrop is far too valuable to Them to be sent home—is mirrored in Slothrop's hope that the light he sees above him is indeed just a "meteor," and not one of the many V-2 rockets raining down across Europe: Slothrop hopes for a merely meteorological phenomenon, not the world-shattering explosion of the German rockets. The prayers are

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<sup>475</sup> *GR*, 553.

Slothrop's private worry-beads, thought but unspoken, and for the most part unrealized: humble, haptic, personal, they are their own tiny monument to preterition and loss, to the human wreckage created by the machinery of war.

A similar preterite catalog comes later in the text, in a section dealing with one Lyle Bland, Slothrop's uncle and, it turns out, a critical link in Their plot to monitor and use him. Bland experiences a mystic revelation, and comes to understand that the earth is not an inorganic "big dumb rock" but a "body and psyche," a living organism of fantastic complexity and interdependency.<sup>476</sup> Bland, a Mason, has seen a truth vouchsafed to few in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and the text pauses to consider the fate of the preterite many who lack such visions:

The rest of us, not chosen for enlightenment left on the outside of Earth, at the mercy of a Gravity we have only begun to learn how to detect and measure, must go on blundering inside our front-brain faith in Kute Korrespondences, hoping that for each psi-synthetic taken from Earth's soul there is a molecule, secular, more or less ordinary and named, over here—kicking endlessly among the plastic trivia, finding in each Deeper Significance and trying to string them all together like terms of a power series hoping to zero in on the tremendous and secret Function whose name, like the permuted names of God, cannot be spoken . . . plastic saxophone reed *sounds of unnatural timbre*, shampoo bottle *ego-image*, Cracker Jack prize *one-shot amusement*, home appliance casing *faring for winds of cognition*, baby bottles *tranquilization*, meat packages *disguise of slaughter*, dry-cleaning bags *infant strangulation*, garden hoses *feeding endlessly the desert* . . . but to bring them together, in their slick persistence and our preterition . . . to make sense out of, to find the meanest sharp sliver of truth in so much replication, so much waste. . . .<sup>477</sup>

It seems at first as if Pynchon were slyly offering a crash course in Cultural Semiotics 101 as a way of resisting Them and Their sway, a quick, cynical way of immediately decoding the detritus of popular culture to reveal the relations of power and dominance that lie beneath. Like

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<sup>476</sup> Otherwise known as the Gaia hypothesis, this theory was popularized by the British scientist James Lovelock in the early 1970s, when Pynchon was writing *Gravity's Rainbow*. Cf. Eddins, 115, who describes this passage as "the most explicit and conscious revelation of Earth as 'holy center.'"

<sup>477</sup> *GR*, 590.

some of Walter Benjamin's work or the Barthes of *Mythologies* (only angrier, more despairing), the narrator instantly deconstructs the known signifiers of consumer objects, showing the dark truths hidden behind the sleek surfaces. Thus the hygienic, cosmetically-purposed "shampoo bottle" is deciphered as a tool of vanity, a means of stoking one's "ego-image"; "baby bottles" conjure up not nourishment but "tranquilization" (which is indeed one of their uses); the "meat packages" suggest the "disguise of slaughter" that is necessary to keep mass-produced food palatable to blissfully ignorant carnivores. But the overall tone of the passage suggests that such a miraculous hermeneutics is ultimately impossible, except in random moments of insight; worse, the narrator undercuts such intuitive readings as "Kute Korrespondences"—one of the text's multiple parodies of the cloying faux-spelling conventions of midcentury American corporate language—a designation that ironizes the possibility of sorting data into intelligible patterns, and questions the possibility of using one's intellect to arrive at truth.<sup>478</sup> In a postmodern appropriation of the proverbial needle in the haystack, the narrator notes, as if in despair or weariness, that it is difficult "to find the meanest sharp sliver of truth in so much replication, so much waste": the *mise-en-abyme* of signifier and signified, the endless pullulating metastasis of language and image—of the *logos*—makes such a visionary arrival impossible while simultaneously tantalizing Pynchon's audience with its very possibility.<sup>479</sup> (Or, as the beginning of the next paragraph of *Gravity's Rainbow* reads, "Lucky Bland, to be free of it.")<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> A more hopeful vision of messianic, impassioned hermeneutics—this time tending toward greater freedom and liberation—comes from the Schwarzkommando leader Enzian's coked-up reveries while on a mission: "We have to look for power sources here, and distribution networks we were never taught, routes of power our teachers never imagined, or were encouraged to avoid . . . we have to find meters whose scales are unknown in the world, draw our own schematics, getting feedback, making connections, reducing the error, trying to learn the real function . . . zeroing in on what incalculable plot?" (*GR*, 521).

<sup>479</sup> I've stolen the phrase *visionary arrival* from Snow, xiii. On this theme in Pynchon's work, see Kharpertian, 106–07, who notes, "The epistemological implication [of Pynchon's fiction] is

Indeed, *Gravity's Rainbow* is so awash in replication and waste—or “noise,” to borrow from communications theory—that large chunks of the text, rather than pursue the already attenuated plot and its bizarre congeries of characters, give themselves over to replicating this static, the fuzz and garbage of the oversaturated media age of the American 1960s and '70s. At one point Slothrop finds himself at “a brightly lit and busy combination bar, opium den, cabaret, casino and house of ill repute, all its rooms swarming with soldiers, sailors, dames, tricks, winners, losers, conjurors, dealers, dopers, voyeurs, homosexuals, fetishists, spies and folks just looking company”<sup>481</sup>—another of the text’s throwaway catalogs, which embody, in their length and abundance, *Gravity's Rainbow's* commitment to excess. While trying to lose himself among

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that the virtue of the quest is not in the product of signification but in the perpetual process itself. Pynchon points to metaphor as a fertilizing method that frees perception and communication from the sterility of conventional, orthodox strategies.” See also Tabbi, 1995, 13, who notes, “A semiotic marker, excess can be said to represent a surplus of signification that always separates the real from its symbolization, the work of art from the master narratives it occasions.” Later (ibid., 78), Tabbi writes of Pynchon’s stylistic surplusage as “a semiotic shadow, a ‘delta t’ that falls between the inscribed word and ‘the thing it stands for’ [GR, 510] . . . this un-ironic critical distance is necessary in [Pynchon’s] writing if he is to avoid the apocalyptic collapse of word into world.” I would side with Tabbi in disagreeing with McHoul and Wills, 163, who describe Pynchon’s playfulness here as “a deconstruction of hermeneutics and teleology”: as Tabbi, 1995, 13, notes, “Pynchon . . . has suffered on both counts, the political and the aesthetic, from readings that routinely regard the absence of determinate meaning in his novels as their only significance,” i.e., that Pynchon’s hermeneutics is not merely deconstructive, but constructive, as well, and that this constructiveness—both in the sense of “making” and of “positive action”—has a number of political and social implications for his work.

<sup>480</sup> GR, 590. Cf. a similar moment earlier in the narrative, the introduction of Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck, a bit player in Their conspiracy, to Slothrop. Dodson-Truck expatiates on the possible significance of the name of the “Hawaii I” radio: “‘There’s a poetry in it, engineer’s poetry . . . it suggests *Haverie*—average, you know—certainly you have the two lobes, don’t you, symmetrical around the rocket’s intended azimuth . . . *hauen*, too—smashing someone with a hoe or a club . . .’ off on a voyage of his own here, smiling at no one in particular, bringing in the popular wartime expression *ab-hauen*, quarterstaff technique, peasant humor, phallic comedy dating back to the ancient Greeks. . . .” (GR, 207). A few lines later Slothrop is charmed by Dodson-Truck’s irrepressible geekiness, “an innocence, maybe a try at being friendly in the only way he has available, sharing what engages and runs him, a love for the Word” (GR, 207): note how Slothrop characterizes Dodson-Truck’s monomania as a charming pedantry, an inability to *not* obsess over the ever-ramifying possibilities of signification and interpretation.

<sup>481</sup> GR, 602.

the crowd of revelers, Slothrop's paranoia kicks into overdrive, and he hears, with all the force of vatic possession, the voice of Them, as if They had been beamed directly into his skull:

And tonight, of all nights, after a week of not bothering him, the police decide to come after Slothrop. Oh yes, yes indeed NNNNNNNN Good Evening Tyrone Slothrop We Have Been Waiting For You. Of Course We Are Here. You Didn't Think We Had Just Faded Away, No, No, Tyrone, We Must Hurt You Again If You Are Going To Be That Stupid, Hurt You Again And Again Yes Tyrone You Are So Hopeless So Stupid And Doomed. Are You Really Supposed To Find Anything? What If It Is Death Tyrone? What If We Don't Want You To Find Anything? If We Don't Want To Give You Your Discharge You'll Just Go On Like This Forever Won't You? Maybe We Want You Only To Keep On. You Don't Know Do You Tyrone. What Makes You Think You Can Play As Well As We Can? You Can't. You Think You're Good But You're Really Shit And We All Know It. That Is In Your Dossier. (Laughter. Humming.)<sup>482</sup>

The transmission from Them reads as a terrifying, hilarious catalog of Slothrop's dejected psyche, a litany of self-doubting masochism: Freud's Angry Father manifested as a droning radio-announcer's Voice of Doom.<sup>483</sup> The eight capital *N*s signify the transistor radio's squawk, the sonic mark of the passing over from objective reality—itsself always already a problematic term in *Gravity's Rainbow*—into Their realm, which is coextensive with the ruinous map of Slothrop's degraded self-image. Not surprisingly, They speak loudly to Slothrop, each word of Their hateful imprecations capitalized, a typographic mark of Their arrogation of temporal, worldly power. The voice of Them acts as a mental equivalent of the text's general movement, in plot and incident as well as language and theme, toward dehumanization and mortification, here shown in the interpellation of Slothrop's already unstable psyche and identity by an adversarial Voice of Law of the Father that denies him legitimacy, agency, even humanity.<sup>484</sup> Note how the

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<sup>482</sup> *GR*, 602–03.

<sup>483</sup> Cf. a similar moment at the end of the “Oxen of the Sun” episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

<sup>484</sup> The classic account of interpellation is Althusser, 174: “I shall suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all) or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing and which can be imagined along the lines of the

repeated second-person voice—“You Didn’t Think. . .,” “You’ll Just Go On Like This Forever. . .,” “You Can’t”—works both a literal transcription of Their address to Slothrop and as an act of intepellation. They are not merely speaking to Slothrop: They are inscribing Their will on him and in him (a fact made real by Their experiments on Slothrop in his infancy and youth), They are imbricating Slothrop in a pattern of state power and surveillance combined with vast corporate wealth and resources and a crusading zeal to dominate and destroy.

As Dwight Eddins writes, “To suspect that a shadowy, powerful network with totalitarian intentions is manipulating historical process, even down to the level of individual mind control, is to experience the impingement of an unspeakable impotence and vulnerability, as well as anguished uncertainty about the truth of the suspicion. It is an anxiety that leads Pynchon’s successive protagonists on urgent quests in which the ‘real’ stakes are nothing less than an adequate sense of reality.”<sup>485</sup> The claustrophobic world described by Their voice reveals Slothrop’s mock-heroic quest as fake, a ruse designed to trap him within Their vast machinations: indeed, Slothrop has so internalized Their voice as to make this transmission—which is, after all, only his mental projection, refracted by the text’s kaleidoscopic, fragmenting style—possible.<sup>486</sup> Like some Enlightenment dream made possible by Churchill’s warned-against “lights of perverted science,”<sup>487</sup> Slothrop’s mental microcosm mirrors the macrocosm of

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most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’” Thus Slothrop’s own subjectivity, itself already tenuous and contingent, is drowned out by the Their more powerful ideological message.

<sup>485</sup> Eddins, 14.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.: “Pynchon’s universe is a Gnostic trap in which the human victims scuttle back and forth between an inhospitable vacuity and a suffocating paranoia. In a profound sense this is Hobson’s choice, since either possibility brings with it a demoralizing alienation from the natural order of things, and pervasive feelings of cosmic insecurity.”

<sup>487</sup> In a speech delivered to the House of Commons on 18 June 1940. Like the rest of the leaders of the Axis and Allies, Churchill makes only fleeting appearances in *Gravity’s Rainbow*: never directly (Slothrop sees his photograph on a poster at *GR*, 373), always referentially, and

Their world, in which all possibilities have been accounted for, and all contingencies, all matter, all life itself, are made to work for Them; or, as Timothy Melley writes, “Pynchon . . . fuse[s] the idea of surveillance by an actual agent, human or divine, with a more structuralist vision of identity as a product of one’s location, position, or function in a social network.”<sup>488</sup> True to the destabilizing paradigms of postmodernity, outside has become in-, inside out-, and the human subject—a product of competing discourses mediated through mass technology—has become confounded with the dictates of the inanimate, reified State. The catalog here—and the ones throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*—acts as a taxonomy of the mental states of abjection and despair inculcated under such regimes, and stands to them as a faithful mirror (however distorted), witness, and indictment. *Pace* Alfred Korzybski, here the map—Their map—is the territory, and this is what the territory looks like: nullified, violated, broken, powerless, dead.

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frequently as the subject of mockery or parody (as at *GR*, 450, where we see “caricatures of Churchill, Eisenhower, Roosevelt . . .”), and, even once, darkly, at the end of the wintertime religious service looked at above on pp. 13–16, where he appears in the priest’s dreams as one of a list of historical butcher-kings, “a Herod or Hitler”: “‘You forgot Roosevelt, padre,’ come the voices from the back, the good father can never see them, they harass him, these tempters, even into his dreams: ‘Wendell Wilkie!’ ‘How about Churchill?’” It must of course be remembered that Churchill was an early and ardent advocate of the total air war that reduced the cities of the Third Reich to smoking craters, another early, shocking example, like the Soviets’ and Nazis’ deathcamps and the United States’ atomic leveling of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of modern science married to centralized state policy, resources, and mobilization in wartime.

<sup>488</sup> Melley, 96. Interestingly, *ibid.*, 102, notes that “[T]he sense that power might be centralized—that some “They” might be pulling the strings . . . is always a real possibility—never confirmed by Pynchon himself, but forever suspected by his characters.” This would seem to fly in the face of Pynchon’s obsessively overdetermined iterations of They and Their power, most notably the narrator’s (or narrators’) strong insistence that They exist: a slight flaw in Melley’s generally splendid analysis. On another note, Pynchon’s use of the parodic, mock-heroic quest-for-knowledge motif is strikingly similar to many paranoid narratives of the period, including James Grady’s *Six Days of the Condor* (1974) and Philip K. Dick’s *A Scanner, Darkly* (1977), and, especially, cinematic versions of the quest, epistemological thrillers such as Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* and Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation*, both released in 1974, a year after *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

Which brings us, appropriately, back to Richard Nixon, with whom this chapter began. Nixon famously appears in the fourth-to-last scene of *Gravity's Rainbow* as “Richard M. Zhlub, night manager of the Orpheus Theatre” in modern-day Los Angeles.<sup>489</sup> Zhlub is in the act of speaking to an unnamed interlocutor (the narrator of the section), who is busy interviewing him as the two drive through the chaotic mess of the Santa Monica Freeway. The narrator indulges in a typical bit of Pynchonian mysticism and freak-flag-flying appreciation of the '60s-'70s counterculture: “No, one hesitates to say it, but the Santa Monica is a freeway for freaks, and they are all out today, making it difficult for you to follow the Manager’s entertaining story. You cannot repress a certain shudder of distaste, almost a reflexive Consciousness of Kind, in their presence. They come gibbering in at you from all sides, swarming in, rolling their eyes, through the side windows, playing harmonicas and even *kazoos*, in full disrespect for the prohibitions.”<sup>490</sup> The phantasmagoric minicatalog that ends this passage—in which, like in a medieval painting, the freaks’ actions are shown synchronically, with everything happening at once—is familiar; more interesting by far, however, is the passage’s continuation:

“Relax,” the Manager’s eyes characteristically aglitter. “There’ll be a nice secure home for them all, down in Orange County. Right next to Disneyland,” pausing then exactly like a nightclub comic, alone in his tar circle, his chalk terror.

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<sup>489</sup> *GR*, 754. *Zhlub* is, of course, a play on *schlub* (“A worthless person, a ‘jerk’, an oaf”), which the *OED* records as first having been used in print in 1964 by the inimitable Ed McBain in one of his 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct potboilers, *Ax*: “‘Kaplowitz,’ I say, ‘are you a janitor or a schlub?’” It is interesting to speculate that the word’s later sense of “a disheveled, slovenly, slobby person” (unrecorded by the *OED*) may in part derive from Nixon’s infamous unkemptness, as best witnessed in his televised debates with John F. Kennedy in 1960.

<sup>490</sup> *GR*, 756. A similar vision of the California freeways as Dantean-Boschian hells can be found at the end of Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, in which the narrator rockets out of Sin City for the comparative safety of the City of Angels and its madmen and – women. A much more pacific, clement vision of the California freeways can be found in the final pages of Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* (Pynchon, 2009), in which a long string of cars driving slowly in file on a dangerously foggy night becomes both an image for the dying countercultures and, by extrapolation, endangered humanity toiling toward a possible, inscrutable oblivion.

Laughter surrounds you. Full, faithful-audience laughter, coming from the four points of the padded interior. You realize, with a vague sense of dismay, that this is some kind of a stereo rig here, and a glance inside the glove compartment reveals an entire *library* of similar tapes: CHEERING (AFFECTIONATE), CHEERING (AROUSSED), HOSTILE MOB in an assortment of 22 languages, YESSES, NOES, NEGRO SUPPORTERS, WOMEN SUPPORTERS, ATHLETIC—oh, come now—FIRE-FIGHT (CONVENTIONAL), FIRE-FIGHT (NUCLEAR), FIRE-FIGHT (URBAN), CATHEDRAL ACOUSTICS. . . .

“We have to talk in *some* kind of code, naturally,” continues the Manager. “We always have. But none of the codes is that hard to break. Opponents have accused us, for just that reason, of contempt for the people. But really we do it all in the spirit of fair play. We’re not monsters. We know we have to give them *some* chance. We can’t take hope away from them, can we?”<sup>491</sup>

This passage contains themes similar to those explored above, themes that dominate *Gravity’s Rainbow*: the use of state surveillance to quell dissent, even to the point of incarceration (the “nice secure home . . . down in Orange County”); the Manichean, Them-versus-us dualism of the text; the presence of “codes” that must be hermeneutically interpreted (if not deconstructed and appropriated outright); and the feeling of hopelessness, of a stacked deck, of Their airless imperium coexisting across geographic and interior space (“We can’t take hope away from them, can we?”). The middle paragraph, in which the narrator lists the titles of Zhubb’s audio tapes—played, like the ersatz “laugh tracks” of bygone studio television days, to simulate the active participation of a live audience responding to a speaker or speakers—further the text’s theme of dehumanization through technological mediation, the destruction of Western liberal-democratic-humanist concepts of the human by the nexus of totalitarian politics and economic, technological, and social engineering. Here is a portrait of the politician-as-cyborg, a blending of a stereotypical political hack—venal, mendacious, unthinking—with the period’s dreams and anxieties about technological possibility: here, the pre-digital-age archival powers of magnetic

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<sup>491</sup> GR, 756.

tape.<sup>492</sup> The joke is that Zhubb needs this processed playback of approving voices and applause, that he cannot generate such support spontaneously: like a broken machine, he will endlessly repeat and loop this behavior, seeking an impossible yet endlessly awaited outcome, forever.

That the library of tapes is absurd is not exactly the point, although Pynchon has some fun with the tapes' titles: the always-already foreign-language-speaking HOSTILE MOB, say, or the recorded machine-gun fire and nuclear detonations (the ultimate applause?). The point is that politics—and, by extension, civilized life in the postmodern *polis*—has degenerated to such a point that technological mediation is needed at all points to keep the dying human subject alive, however necrotically.<sup>493</sup> Gone even is the false, coerced polity of twentieth-century Fascism, in which mass emotion was created and manipulated through industrial technology and Modernist aesthetics, then replicated and disseminated via mass media. Rather than act as an intermediary through which the State amplifies its power, technology has replaced the citizenry entirely, narrowing down an entire range of political activity—debate, protest, petition, congress—into a series of stereotyped and hollow simulacra of participation. Zhubb's job as movie-theater owner

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<sup>492</sup> For other cyborg politicians of the period, see Presidential candidate Sergeant Raymond Shaw in Robert Condon's 1959 novel *The Manchurian Candidate* (and in John Frankenheimer's 1962 film), who through hypnosis becomes the unthinking, robotic agent of Communist China; or the android leader of the United States of Europe and America, Der Alte ("the old man"), in Philip K. Dick's 1964 novel *The Simulacra*; the suspected android replicant of Earth President Gino Molinari in Dick's 1966 *Now Wait for Last Year*; the superstar comedian and ideologue (and android) Buster Friendly in his 1968 breakthrough, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*; and, finally, the robot Abraham Lincoln and Edwin Stanton in his 1972 novel *We Can Build You*.

<sup>493</sup> This theme is taken up in Martin Scorsese's harrowing 1983 film *The King of Comedy*, in which Robert DeNiro plays the sociopathic would-be comic Rupert Pupkin, who rehearses and records his ersatz late-night routines with the assistance of multiple cardboard mock-ups of celebrities, a wall-sized photograph of an adoring audience, and, of course, multiple laugh tracks and sound fragments (including recordings from other comics and television shows). What separates Pupkin from many budding entertainers is, of course, his disappearance into his role, or, better, his utter failure to distinguish the gap between performer and performance, man and persona. (That this distinction is increasingly difficult, indeed, perhaps impossible, is, of course, Scorsese's exact point.)

further the joke: a comic devolution of the leader of the free world to the proprietor of the twentieth-century's cave of dreams and shadows, the movie house. The stage has been set, at least fictionally, for the presidency of Ronald Reagan—in 1973 Governor of California (another context not to be overlooked when viewing Pynchon's automatic politicians)—and its particular blend of ideology, policy, and media, as well as our own, later, presidencies, the increasingly virtual American presidency and American power, and our own contemporary Enemies' Lists, still hiding, like Nixon's in 1973, in the shadows and crannies of Their power. Pynchon's catalog of Zhubb's tapes reads as an uncannily prescient comment on our own mediated communities—in and for which *Gravity's Rainbow* is a prominent master-text and metonymic symbol—increasingly virtual and surveillable, increasingly delimited and patrolled.

## 6. Georges Perec's Melancholy Catalogs

“What a style! Nothing but nouns!”—attributed to Guillaume Apollinaire, speaking about Jules Verne<sup>494</sup>

“When, in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Jules Verne enumerates the names of fish for four pages, I feel like I'm reading a poem.”—Georges Perec, “J'ai fait implorer le roman,” recorded by Gilles Costaz<sup>495</sup>

The writings of French novelist, essayist, and experimental author Georges Perec (1936–82) offer a final look (for the purposes of this dissertation) at twentieth-century catalogs. Perec is a literary cataloger *par excellence*, perhaps the supreme literary cataloger after Homer and Whitman: throughout Perec's work catalogs and lists—a “universe of lists”<sup>496</sup>—proliferate with a singlemindedness that borders on the demonic, erupting into the narrative with seeming inevitability of a natural process, the catalog a textual mark or trace of an inborn proclivity toward aberrant documentation, archival extravagance. This is not to crudely psychoanalyze Perec, or to reduce his writings to the same slapdash treatment; rather, it is to attempt to describe the affect of his texts (and their effects on readers), which embrace catalogs and lists seemingly without the more normative, verisimilitudinal, “motivated” use of catalogs and lists in other authors—and which texts, indeed, catalog and list the phenomenal world to a degree that is actually unsettling, bespeaking as it does a maniacal attention to detail coupled with a near-total disregard for Realistic and Modernistic narrative conventions: what Barthes described in Jules

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<sup>494</sup> “Quel style! Rien que des substantifs!” Unwin, 17, notes that “The remark is now regularly quoted without a reference, and its precise attribution remains uncertain. . . . Although Apollinaire is known to have been a great admirer of Verne, there is no specific record of this revealing judgment.”

<sup>495</sup> Magné and Consenstein, 76; Perec's remark originally appeared in October 1978 in *Galerie des arts* 184. Magné and Consenstein go on to note that “In his various interviews, Perec quotes this example many times, which is manifestly one of his preferred.”

<sup>496</sup> Hartje, Magné, and Neefs, 30.

Verne as “an obsession for plenitude,” of the *logos* run wild in the act of writing.<sup>497</sup> That is, Perec habitually employs catalogs of such length and complexity as to surpass, say, Joyce in the further reaches of *Ulysses*’ “Cyclops” episode, or Schuyler in the deepest throes of “The Morning of the Poem”’s tidal outpourings of nostalgia and loss, or McCourt in his most-populated scenes of ecstatic connoisseurship and critique. Perec outdoes them all, and without breaking a sweat; indeed, there is a cool nonchalance, not *sprezzatura* but a less sparkling, colder, almost mechanical tone that contrasts sharply with the more explosive, exuberant, alive qualities of the writers looked at before.<sup>498</sup> Perec can thus be seen as, simultaneously, catalogs’ master practitioner and embalmer, their latest incarnation and final sepulcher.

Like the other authors looked at in this study, Perec’s writings are very much a part of his times, both in the sense of being historically invested, alive to the events and currents of his day, as well as—and, for the purposes of this work, far more interestingly—a product of those times, of their political, economic, social, and representational regimes. If Perec’s copiousness, his overabundance of catalogs and lists, is a type of literary maximalism similar to that of novelistic forerunners like Joyce and Pynchon, it is of course distinctly his own, a response in tune with

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<sup>497</sup> Barthes, 65. The Barthes essay cited here, “The *Nautilus* and the Drunken Boat” (from *Mythologies*) has many things to say regarding Verne’s aesthetic that are also quite applicable to Perec, concerning which, see more below.

<sup>498</sup> For this coldness, cf. Jameson, 1991, 149, which reads as if Jameson were channeling the final pages of H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*: “It is as though the text [of Perec’s novel *Life A User’s Manual*] and its dead models look back on all the agitation of human history from the standpoint of a geological epoch in which human life had become extinct on the planet.” Cf. Harry Mathews’s comments on the coldness of Perec’s “extravagant visions”: “These visions, which almost burst the fabric of Perec’s fiction, remind us how fragile that fiction is. Perec knew perfectly well that even if he committed himself utterly to remaking the world through writing, his new world would be no less doomed than the one into which he had been born; and he leaves the reader with no illusions on that score. His books end in emptiness” (144). Mathews uses the term “Gargantuan” (*ibid.*) to describe Perec’s style, evoking both Rabelais’s poetics of copiousness and exhaustiveness, as well as Susan Stewart’s concept of the gigantic: for the latter, cf. Stewart, 70–103, and more below.

other post-WWII European responses to the seeming triumph of market capitalism, the plethora of material goods unleashed after the end of wartime and postwar scarcities, the flood of American products (both material and cultural) in the middle of the so-called American Century, and, particularly, the European intelligentsia's often bemused, often hostile, negotiations with these events. In her discussion of the gigantic, Susan Stewart offers a model of historically-situated gigantism that provides a lens through which to view Perec's writing:

Under capitalism the abstractions of economy produce an abstraction of [political and social] spaces; within this abstraction, merchandise (goods/objects) and the social relations that form in contiguity to these commodities can develop. Preindustrial culture locates the gigantic within the surrounding natural landscape. The romantic sublime nostalgically re-creates this location as it simultaneously merges it with the production of interiority (the vastness of the natural world mirrored in the vastness of the individual perceiving consciousness) and the mediation we see at work in the pastoral. But within the rise of industrial capitalism the gigantic becomes located within the abstraction of an exchange economy. The gigantic is moved from a presocial world of the natural to a social world of material production.<sup>499</sup>

Perec's works portray a world in which the accumulation of capital, its transformation of the material and political world, and its embodiment, not only in industrial forms such as factories, skyscrapers, and automobiles, but in increasingly mass-produced throwaway luxury items targeted for domestic consumption and near-instantaneous obsolescence—paperback books, transistor radios, cheap reproductions of art, readymade clothes—have so altered preexisting social and political norms and trends so as to quite sever the existing bourgeois settlement from the history of its coming-into-being. As Marx and Engels lamented in *The Communist Manifesto*, “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois era from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are

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<sup>499</sup> Stewart, 79–80.

swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober sense, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”<sup>500</sup> Perec delineates a world in which Marx and Engel’s final stage, that of sober reckoning with life’s “real conditions,” has not yet occurred, the bourgeois subject’s reason still blinkered by a proliferation of goods and engendered desires: the airy, spectral transubstantiation of reality described by them has in Perec a corresponding weightiness, an ineluctable gravity formed by the sheer mass of products and the social, cultural, and mental states created thereby—as if all that was solid and melted into air recondensed precipitously as a solid again, a heavy rain of things and attitudes about things that then inundated the post-industrial, developed West.

Perec’s writings, then, are a commentary, meticulous and far-reaching, on both the compulsiveness and the exhaustion of cataloging, his omnipresent lists of domestic minutiae enacting the fervid drive, economic and textual, of accumulation, possession, obsession. Like the work of many French artists and intellectuals of the 1960s, his novels are imbued with a Marxist critique of late capitalist bourgeois materialism, their inventories of the detritus of mass consumption displaying an uncanny sensitivity to, a deft and subtle inhabiting-from-within, the simultaneous fascination and ennui, longing and tedium, engendered by fetishized commodities in their owners.<sup>501</sup> The title of Perec’s first novel, *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (*Les Choses*),

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<sup>500</sup> Marx and Engels, 70–71. What was eerily prophetic of Perec’s historical moment one hundred years later is even more uncannily prescient of our own times of worldwide financial market manipulations and collapse, virtual economies and their proliferation of identities, and exponentially quickening mediations via seemingly magical technologies.

<sup>501</sup> Think, for example, of the visual catalogs of household goods and other middle-class paraphernalia in Jean-Luc Godard’s films *Contempt* (the anatomy of the doomed couple’s apartment in the film’s middle), *Sympathy for the Devil* (the inset shots of books, records, and other media). As Ross, 38, writes, “The postwar screens of Europe were filled with an illustrated catalog of the joys and rewards of American capitalism; all the minutiae of domestic life in the

proclaims objects as the true protagonists of the narrative. Anonymous—*Things* is both anything and nothing, an uncertainty heightened by the diffidence of the subtitle, which announces that this is a story, not *the* story, of the 1960s—the belongings of the young couple (who, as human characters, are the ostensible focus of the narrative) are the true actors in the drama of anxious ownership and uneasy habitation that unfolds. The description of the couple's cluttered apartment that opens the book sets the tone for the rest, presenting the rooms and their objects as they are, singly and in relation to one another, without the presence of their *soi-disant* owners:

It would be a living room about twenty-three feet long by ten feet wide. On the left, in a kind of recess, there would be a large sofa upholstered in worn black leather, with pale cherrywood bookcases on either side, heaped with books in untidy piles. Above the sofa, a mariner's chart would fill the whole length of that section of the wall. On the other side of a low table, and beneath a silk prayer-mat nailed to the wall with three large-headed brass studs, matching the leather curtain, there would be another sofa, at right angles to the first, with a light-brown velvet covering; it would lead on to a small and spindly piece of furniture, lacquered in dark red and providing three display shelves for knick-knacks: agates and stone eggs, snuffboxes, candy-boxes, jade ashtrays, a mother-of-pearl oystershell, a silver fob watch, a cut-glass glass, a crystal pyramid, a miniature in an oval frame.<sup>502</sup>

The description of the couple's apartment goes on like this for nearly ten pages, avoiding any great mention of the couple at all—their personalities, history (separate and together), thoughts—only giving a few oblique glances into their life together, a life that, not surprisingly, revolves around (indeed, is seemingly composed entirely of) their possessions.

Thus we read of the couple's frustrations and thwarted desires only concerning goods and services that they cannot afford to buy:

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United States, its objects and gadgets and the lifestyle they help produce, were displayed as ordinary—that is, the background or trappings to convincing, realistic narratives." Perce's innovation is to liberate objects from their background and to bring them to the fore, as objects alive with their own psychic life, the sediment or residue of their owners' projected desires.

<sup>502</sup> Perce, 1990, 21.

But beside them, all around them, all along the streets where they could not but walk, existed the fallacious but nonetheless glowing offerings of antique-dealers, delicatessens and stationers. From Palais-Royal to Saint-Germain-des-Prés, from Champ-de-Mars to the Champs-Élysées, from the Luxembourg Gardens to Montparnasse, from Ile Saint-Louis to the Marais, from Place des Ternes to the Place de l'Opéra, from Madeleine to the Monceau Gardens, the whole of Paris was a perpetual temptation. They burned with desire to give in to it, passionately, straight away and forever. But the horizon of their desires was mercilessly blocked; their great impossible dreams belonged to utopia.<sup>503</sup>

Perec uses the names of the sites and neighborhoods of Paris to evoke its complete, dazzling world of luxury enticements, the place names figuring as signs of an august, remote world of wealth and abundance—the indomitable stolidity of which is figured forth in the buildings and streets of bourgeois Paris, and proffered, tantalizingly, in the shops and stores in those buildings and streets—a “utopia” at which the couple can only gaze in longing. Or, to cite another early example, we read of the couple’s exhaustion and growing ennui from living with so many objects: “They found consolation where they could, congratulated themselves on the excellent neighbourhood they were in, on the proximity of Rue Mouffetard and the Jardin des Plantes, on the quietness of the street, on the stylishness of their low ceilings, and on the magnificence of the trees and the courtyard through all the seasons; but indoors in all began to collapse under the heaps of objects, of furniture, books, plates, papers, empty bottles. A war of attrition began from which they would never emerge victorious.”<sup>504</sup> Thus Perec presents even serious crises in the couple’s life as both entirely caused by and existing only in relation to objects, whether their own possessions or things they want to possess but cannot. The power of these objects, their fascination and attractive capabilities, is represented, not by a description of their qualities—their look or use, for example—but rather through an enumeration of their names alone, the bare catalog or list figuring forth the material goods of a bourgeois capitalist society in its prime.

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<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

Perec's translator and biographer David Bellos notes in his introduction to *Things* that the book was written "to fill the blank space created . . . by the juxtaposition of four works of importance to him," one of which is Barthes's *Mythologies*, which provides an excellent sidelight onto contemporary French critiques of consumer culture and the bourgeois dispensation in general. In describing the nineteenth-century novelist Jules Verne's use of catalogs, as well as constant use of interior settings and themes of enclosure, security, fullness, and so on, in the novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, Barthes notes that under bourgeois art

the world is finite, the world is full of numerable and contiguous objects. The artist can have no other task than to make catalogues, inventories, and to watch out for small unfilled corners in order to conjure up there, in close ranks, the creations and the instruments of man. Verne belongs to the progressive lineage of the bourgeoisie: his work proclaims that nothing can escape man, that the world, even in its most distant part, is like an object in his hand, and that, all told, property is but a dialectical moment in the general enslavement of Nature. Verne in no way sought to enlarge the world by romantic ways of escape or mystical plans to reach the infinite: he constantly sought to shrink it, to populate it, to reduce it to a known and enclosed space, where man could subsequently live in comfort: the world can draw everything from itself; it needs, in order to exist, no one else but man.<sup>505</sup>

It is tempting—indeed, incredibly so—given both Perec's acknowledgement of Barthes's *Mythologies* as an inspiration for *Things* and the similarity of his description of his project as filling up a "blank space" between works important to him, and Barthes's description of the bourgeois artist's task of "watch[ing] out for small unfilled corners" in daily life that can be filled up with objects realistically depicted, to see Barthes's comments here, if not as a direct inspiration for Perec's politics, aesthetics, and style, then certainly as a companion text to Perec, one that speaks of the same ideas, and in a similar way, as Perec's descriptions of consumer commodities threatening to overcome their owners—a text that, if Perec had read it, as it would seem likely that he had, would likely have, at the very least, drawn a smile of recognition from

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<sup>505</sup> Barthes, 65.

the writer. Barthes describes Captain Nemo's *Nautilus*, not simply as a marvelous ship, proud technological scion to the amazing advances in mechanics and engineering during the nineteenth century, but as a sign and symbol of the entire bourgeois regime past, present, and future: from its privileging of capital and private ownership over shared use and common ownership; to the world of things spewed forth from bourgeois-owned factories and mills; and to the gradual triumph of manmade objects and environments over natural ones, what Barthes winningly describes as "the general enslavement of Nature." Perec's catalog-infested fictions describe the same world, only at a later place on the long capitalist-bourgeois arc of history, that of the middle of the twentieth century. Where Perec differs from Barthes's arch, ironically outraged critique, is that Perec, while sharing Barthes's dismay, is also an enthusiast of the poetics of capitalist excess, of the banality of consumerist goods, and of the surprising affective relationships human beings enjoy with the mute objects we handle in everyday life. His novels are at once both critique and celebration, his catalogs and lists both tributes to, and excavations of, mass culture and its plethora of toys.

Perec's literary catalogs and lists also have their origin in Perec's life and work, both as an amateur theorist and practitioner of information-retrieval systems, archives, and data collection, and particularly in his professional work for almost two decades as an archivist (*documentaliste*) working for the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) in a neurophysiology program funded in large part by the United States' military.<sup>506</sup> Perec's biographer and translator David Bellos outlines some of the conceptual and pragmatic difficulties faced by Perec and the scientists he worked for: "For instance, should an article reporting experiments on the hypothalamus of cats be indexed under 'CAT: brain (hypothalamus), or

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<sup>506</sup> Yet another example of Perec's contact—and that of the European intelligentsia's generally—with postwar America's ascendant political, cultural, military, and economic hegemony.

under ‘HYPOTHALAMUS, cat’, or under ‘BRAIN: hypothalamus (feline)’? What is the least time-consuming way of linking, in a stack of say ten thousand articles, all those that contain references to both the hypothalamus and to cats?”<sup>507</sup> Perec diligently, doggedly (if sometimes imperfectly) toiled at these questions, in addition to his literary work: much like the scientist-author Vladimir Nabokov, whose lepidopterological work fueled his theories on aesthetics, as well as the writing of his novels, it is fair to speculate that Perec did not substantially differentiate between the two genres of intellectual labors. His efforts came to greatest fruition when he was tasked with the rapid and accurate indexing of the hundreds of journals consumed by his team of scientists in the course of their work: Bellos relates that Perec turned to the Flambo system of index cards, which “have twenty-one numbered divisions printed along the top edge, with twin slits cut beneath each division so plastic tags can be inserted. . . . It gives 8<sup>21</sup> separate specifications [of combinations of data], 8 to the twenty-first power, which is a very large number indeed. If the problems of categorization and hierarchising are solved competently for the field in question, Flambo allows rapid and detailed interrogation of a database of considerable size.”<sup>508</sup> Bellos notes that Perec’s indexing work was both laborious and successful, and earned him some modicum of respect in the otherwise quite stratified, hierarchical world of the lab, but what is most important is how this labor not only sprang from Perec’s innate inclinations to classify and sort the phenomenal world into intelligible systems, but how both seemingly disparate activities, scientific taxonomy and avant-garde experimental writing,

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<sup>507</sup> Bellos, 253.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*, 254–55. Bellos does not mention it (the biography, published in 1993, can be excused for not knowing), but Perec’s work anticipates in paper and ink our current informational regime of the integrated digital database, such as MySQL, first released in 1995: while the economies of scale and capabilities of transmission, storage, retrieval, and archiving are far greater with current digital media, Perec’s multiply-indexed card-catalog system anticipates our current era of full-text digital searches, tag clouds, and the like.

combined in a single output, whose literary half—Perc's novels—are the subject of this final chapter.<sup>509</sup>

A good place to start a discussion of Perc's catalogs is his essay "Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of Arranging One's Books," collected in John Sturrock's engaging miscellany *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1997), an omnibus of Perc's short prose.<sup>510</sup> The "Brief Notes" displays many of the characteristics of Perc's work: a didactic tone that sometimes shades (winningly, self-parodically) into pedantry; a preoccupation with facts, things, data, the enumeration of which often precludes analysis, opting instead for raw phenomenality, a system of objects and their relations that often excludes human agency, even human presence;<sup>511</sup> a focus

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<sup>509</sup> Bellos, 258, notes: "[Perc's scientific indexing] work was never acknowledged in print, and thus it will never be possible to establish an exhaustive bibliography of the work of George Perc, which ought to include these modest, scholarly, but not insignificant appendices. One item that can be included is the bibliography of André Hugelin's 1967 treatment of electrocortical activity connected to sleep and wakefulness, for it is not less a part of Perc's oeuvre than the index of *Life A User's Manual*. If proof were needed, one has only to read the opening pages of *A Man Asleep*, which constitute a 'translation' in subjective terms of the process that Hugelin's thesis describes with electrochemical objectivity: what happens between the eyelid, the retina and the cerebral cortex as one falls asleep." Cf. further the entire chapter in *ibid.*, 250–67. Harris, 56, relates Perc's work to his time's interest in data classification and questions of authenticity, epistemology, and reality: Perc "is exemplary in an era characterized by, on the one hand, the receding of reality into algorithms or codes, and on the other, a resultant investment in or discourse about 'the real.'"

<sup>510</sup> As if in fulfillment of Winters's notion of the imitative fallacy, Sturrock cannot help borrowing Perc's language of lists and catalogs in describing Perc's output: "he was the author of one large book, half a dozen short, or very short, books, and a whole catalogue of sundries: radio plays, film and television scripts, book and art reviews, essays, articles and two gatherings of crossword puzzles" (Perc, 1999, ix). David Bellos summarily dismisses Sturrock's miscellany in his own Perc omnibus, *Thoughts of Sorts* (Perc, 2009, 142), noting that many of its pieces "have also been translated (I use the term loosely) by John Sturrock": sadly, Bellos's translatorial waspishness is unleavened by either facts or arguments that would justify his rather sweeping judgment.

<sup>511</sup> Cf. Maleuvre, 237–38, writing of an object-centered school of literary realism that began with Balzac and ended with Perc: "Though omnipresent, the object nevertheless remains strange and apart . . . the object, no longer to be colonized, takes on the aloofness of a triumphant enemy. . . . The world of objects serves as a precipitate for the world of the novel at large, one in which the subject supposedly pervades the world (though a private, intimate vision of it) and yet finds the

on texts and textuality, here manifested by Perec's comments on texts as objects and on the materiality of books; an archival vision, part Derridean *mal d'archive*, part Benjaminian acquisitiveness, absorption, and self-satisfaction, part Canettian-Sebaldian horror at the fragility of the archive, at the archive's vulnerability—mirroring the vulnerability of its human ministrants—to disorder, chaos, dispersal, and ruin.<sup>512</sup> Perec uses short lists throughout the essay to illustrate various points, as in his matter-of-fact “Ways of Arranging Books,” a brief taxonomy of various classification systems available to a book-owner:

ordered alphabetically  
 ordered by continent or country  
 ordered by colour  
 ordered by date of acquisition  
 ordered by date of publication  
 ordered by format  
 ordered by genre  
 ordered by major periods of literary history  
 ordered by language  
 ordered by priority for future reading  
 ordered by binding  
 ordered by series<sup>513</sup>

Perec notes immediately after this list that “None of these classifications is satisfactory by itself. In practice, every library is ordered starting from a combination of these modes of classification, whose relative weighting, resistance to change, obsolescence and persistence give every library a unique personality.”<sup>514</sup> Thus Perec demonstrates the two contending poles of catalogs: the

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world scattering centrifugally away from him. [This] attention to objects reveals an alienation of objects from the human. It is as though objects began to appear in the novel when, objectively, they severed connections with the human, became unrecognizable, and started acting of their own accord, in a world of their own.”

<sup>512</sup> These, of course, are only analogues: Perec's stance toward the archive is similar to these but uniquely his own.

<sup>513</sup> Perec, 1999, 152–53.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, 153. In the essay “Some of the Things I Really Must Do Before I Die”—an early example of the now-fashionable “life list,” or “bucket list”—Perec (*ibid.*, 124) lists the opportunity to “Arrange my bookshelves once and for all” as third in a list of thirty-seven items

impulse toward totality, toward complete representation, here exemplified by the list of classification schemes, and the breakdown of order under the weight of enumerated data, here enacted by Perec's admission that such schemes are provisional, and that actual libraries cannot keep perfectly to a single scheme, but haphazardly, organically mix several schemes together.<sup>515</sup>

Perec sums up these competing impulses of catalogs and listmaking at the end of the essay, evoking Borges's "The Library of Babel" in an attempt to describe the dream, tantalizing and impossible, of achieving a perfectly ordered, perfectly intelligible system:

Like the librarians of Babel in Borges's story, who are looking for the book that will provide them with the key to all the others, we oscillate between the illusion of perfection and the vertigo of the unattainable. In the name of completeness, we would like to believe that a unique order exists that would enable us to accede to knowledge all in one go; in the name of the unattainable, we would like to think that order and disorder are in fact the same word, denoting pure chance.

It's possible also that both are decoys, *a trompe l'oeil* intended to disguise the erosion of both books and systems. It is no bad thing in any case that between the two our bookshelves should serve from time to time as joggers of the memory, as cat-rests and as lumber-rooms.<sup>516</sup>

Perec takes as the cataloger's sign the mania of Borges's librarians, who in the famous story wander through an endless labyrinth of unintelligible books, searching for a hypothetical "key" text that would translate the unreadable gobbledygook of all the rest. It is worth noting that Perec omits the darker, more disturbing elements of Borges's fable: the madness of the librarians, who go insane from their fruitless search; bloodshed and murder as the librarians turn on one another;

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ranging from easiest (taking a bateau-mouche is first) to the most impossible (meeting Vladimir Nabokov, dead for four years at the time of composition, is thirty-seventh), under the heading of "things a tiny bit more significant [than nothing], things that involve decisions, things which I tell myself that, were I to do them, would perhaps make my life easier": note again Perec's studied nonchalance, his nod toward both the desirability of ordering his books and the ultimate futility and impracticality of doing so.

<sup>515</sup> Perec is, of course, speaking of nonprofessional, nonacademic libraries: "A library I call a sum of books constituted by a non-professional reader for his own pleasure and daily use" (*ibid.*, 148).

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, 155 (*italics in the original*).

suicide, as hopeless librarians annihilate themselves to escape their labors, casting themselves over balconies and railings into the abyss below, a fall perhaps echoed in Perec's felicitous "vertigo of the unattainable"—a vertigo not of the senses but of the intellect alone, the mind overloaded with its task, a *mise-en-abyme* into which thought plunges like a stone plummeting down a well. This fall mirrors negatively Perec's hoped-for, but unattainable, "unique order . . . that would enable us to accede to knowledge all in one go," which portrays an order so clear as to render knowledge instantaneous, a rush to which we "accede" passively, that breaks over us with the speed and inevitability of sunlight falling on the earth. It is impossible not to see in the plight of Borges's librarians the similar plight of the cataloger, torn between the demands of thoroughness and the impossibility of completion, the risk of glibness and superficiality—or, worse, exclusion, the missing of a vital element that would render the aggregate a whole luminous with significance—and the near-certainty of pedantry and exhaustion. Chris Andrews, who likens Perec's cataloging to his love of puzzles and puzzle-making, notes, "The cognitive function of the list, categorisation, is usually the first step in puzzle-solving: you group all the pieces of the same color before seeing how they fit together. The collecting or listing phase is relatively straightforward: units are categorized according to a single, obvious criterion. The constructive phase is anxiety-ridden: multiple constraints have to be satisfied simultaneously, and and it is hard to rest until everything falls into place. The list stays the anxiety felt in the face of total disorder, while puzzling induces an anxiety which increases in intensity as perfect order is approached."<sup>517</sup> Themselves formal puzzles of intricate depth and complexity, Perec's catalogs

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<sup>517</sup> Andrews, 794–95. *Ibid.*, 795, uses the trope of the network to provide a necessary middle-ground between catalog and puzzle: "The model of the network may seem exempt from the association with anxiety which links the list to the puzzle, for it implies that the writer may range with a relative freedom through the fictional space marked out by his or her precursors, and the reader choose his or her own path through the reticular system of each text. But just as puzzle

can thus be seen as mediating between the production of anxiety and its allayment, an attempt to account for a totality that is necessarily fragmentary and contingent, anxiously aware of its own limitations while nevertheless proceeding toward a longed-for, endlessly deferred closure.

Catalogs feature prominently in another short work of Perec's, his aleatory, flaneuristic, lyrical take on fashion and the fashion industry, "Twelve Sidelong Glances." In the style of "Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of Arranging One's Books" and of many other of Perec's essays, "Twelve Sidelong Glances" consists, not of the excruciatingly taxonomic details common to Perec's novels—such as *Life A User's Manual*, which exhaustively diagrams the inhabitants and spaces of a typical Parisian multistory apartment house—but of seemingly random, disconnected "takes" on a subject: not an anatomy of fashion, then, but a series of snapshots, colorful tableaux enlarged through the microscope of Perec's attention for our view. Perec's skeptical, quizzical, ever-critical Marxist-inflected view of fashion obtains throughout, never more so than in the opening "glance," which is entitled "The ready-to-wear manufacturer" and reads like the unadorned text of a merchandising catalog, a list of goods to be purchased at a particular emporium:

Jacket, rounded neck, jacquard design (215fr) over flannel dress in pure wool (420fr); skirt in Liberty wool, sunray pleats (295fr), jacket, openwork design backed with tweed (360fr) over woollen sweater, jacquard design neck (185fr).

Plus fours in pure wool material (250fr), jacquard jacket, shawl neck (225fr), over matching tanktop (165fr); tartan skirt, pure wool (230fr), woollen jacket, pattern forming sailor collar (250fr).

Tartan skirt cut on the cross, flap pockets, in pure wool (235fr); V-necked waistcoat, buttoned front (195fr); check flannel skirt, sunray pleats (280fr), jacket, Peter Pan collar in pure wool (265fr).

Dress in printed muslin, round collar, plain silk cuffs, sunray pleated skirt (400fr).

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pieces may be cut to fool the solver, paths may be traced to disorient the explorer, and the freedom to strike out overland is no guarantee against getting lost. The network may turn out to be a labyrinth."

V-necked jumper, viscose, graduated horizontal stripes (175fr), matching scarf (65fr), over acetate mix culottes (300fr); flowing rayon dress (370fr) under long viscose cardigan with geometric pattern.<sup>518</sup>

Perec's list of disembodied outfits, seemingly stripped of immediate context (is this a clothing catalog? The contents of a *prêt-à-porter* shop? The thoughts of a ready-to-wear manufacturer?), take their place amid a long line of French exposés of the capitalist uncanny, among such earlier examples of this tradition as Émile Zola's *Au bonheur des dames* (1883) and the Parisian shopfront-window photographs taken by Eugène Atget from the 1880s to the 1920s: as with Zola's phantasmagoria of factory-made delights and Atget's ghostly photographs of ambiguously human mannequins—dressed, of course, in the latest cheap fashions—Perec's naked list of consumer goods acts as a critique of both bourgeois capitalism and the commodity fetishism it encourages. As noted by Walter Benjamin, "Every fashion is to some extent a bitter satire on love; in every fashion, perversities are suggested by the most ruthless means. Every fashion stands in opposition to the organic. Every fashion couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, fashion defends the rights of the corpse. The fetishism that succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic is its vital nerve."<sup>519</sup> Perec's dry anatomy of articles of clothing accompanied by their prices accomplishes the same effect as Benjamin's lurid disquisition on fashion and mortality: both distance the reader-viewer from the eternal present of the commodity, both draw attention to the processes by which the commodities are produced, and both act as a subtle yet powerful critique of the bourgeois dispensation under which such practices flourish.

The outfits are presented merely with the details of style, manufacture, and price given above; it is only after the list is complete that Perec offers the following explanatory paragraph:

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<sup>518</sup> Perec, 1999, 156. The list continues on for six more outfits.

<sup>519</sup> Benjamin, 79.

For one or two weeks, around last October, on an imposing number of poster-sites on the still recent bus shelters, three toddlers looking dreadfully *child-like* were showing off to good advantage the sweaters, scarves and bérets described above. Their poses, their expressions, their clothes, their relationship, both on the mythological plane of the advert and on that of what one might suppose to be reality (their existence qua models, the role they were being made to play, the role they were playing to themselves, the successive investments, psychic as well as economic, in which they were both the stake and the means) struck me as a peculiarly sordid manifestation of the world we are living in.<sup>520</sup>

Perec withholds explicit commentary on the assemblage of clothes until the section's end, creating a dialectical tension between the placidly enumerated details of the clothes themselves and the outraged, personal diatribe in the concluding paragraph. This delaying of critique both heightens Perec's swipe at the pressing of unwitting "toddlers" into the service of the fashion industry, as well as estranges the reader from the seemingly innocuous outfits presented first: Perec's detailing of the clothes, which had first been simply boring and stuffy, now takes a more ominous tone, the clothes taking on a menace, the terror of reification. Note that Perec does not advocate a solution for the quasi-pornography of child models dressed on display, nor does he envision a politics by which the cunningly hidden overlapping of class, economic, and social interests—"the successive investments, psychic as well as economic, in which [the children] were both the stake and the means"—could be rendered more equitably for the hapless tots, and the "sordid manifestation" of contemporary power relations be ameliorated. Note especially the acerbity of "sordid," and Perec's undimmed rage, not so much at child exploitation or the blandishments of advertising, but fashion itself, its purveyance of an artificial world. Like Walter Benjamin's contention that "fashion was never anything but the parody of the motley cadaver, provocation of death through the woman, and bitter colloquy with decay whispered between shrill bursts of mechanical laughter," Perec's analysis is extreme, idiosyncratic, even hermetic,

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<sup>520</sup> Perec, 1999, 157. Italics in the original.

running more toward the aphorism and gnomic truth and associative leaps of logic rather than lucid analysis and careful, detailed explanation.<sup>521</sup>

Perec returns to the catalog at the end of “Twelve Sidelong Glances,” first in part eleven, “The Pillow Book”—a transcription of passages from *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shōnagon, a lady-in-waiting to the Empress Sadako at the turn of the first millennium in Heian Japan—and again in part twelve, “Or else, finally:”:

Rather than attempting to define this improbable object, I would rather have begun to recount, under the gentle tutelage of this lady-in-waiting who died around the year 1000, the history of a few of the objects to be found on my work-table: a hand blotter, a carved stone dagger handle, a bud-vase of Britannia metal, three turned wooden boxes, a small matchbox-holder with an orange base in the shape of a truncated cone, a thin slab of sandstone, a carton bouilli penholder encrusted with tortoiseshell, a teapot shaped like a cat, a box of 144 Baignol and Farjon steel-nibbed pens, etc.

Stories like these would no doubt have been traversed by fashion, but there would be more to them than simply fashion.<sup>522</sup>

Perec’s humility here—his disavowal of “attempting to define” the “improbable object,” fashion, and his wistful longing to be under the “gentle tutelage” of the long-dead Japanese courtesan Shōnagon—is a characteristic move, the burying of technical virtuosity and singleminded zeal under a not-insincere persona of dutifulness and application, the attitude of the young apprentice. In keeping with this tone are the details of Perec’s “work-table,” the inclusion of which provides him, not only with the opportunity for a final catalog, but also with the materials of an autobiography in miniature, a self-conscious acknowledgment (but not an anxious one: Perec is rarely anxious) of the physical life of the writer and of his tools.<sup>523</sup> The objects themselves have

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<sup>521</sup> Benjamin, 63.

<sup>522</sup> Perec, 1999, 164.

<sup>523</sup> The primacy of the physical world is one of Perec’s great themes, running from the early short fiction to its obvious apogee—the recreation of an entire Parisian apartment-house and the physical world (including the past physical worlds in which they have lived and that they remember) of its inhabitants—in *Life A User’s Manual*.

their own mute beauty, from the now-purely-ornamental “carved stone dagger handle”—the broken, disused weapon’s presence among the still-useful writing implements perhaps a sly advowal from Perec that the pen is mightier than the sword—to the improbably perfect “box of 144 . . . steel-nibbed pens,” the number 144, or twelve squared, hinting perhaps at Perec’s self-reflexivity, his catalogic *mise-en-abyme* and outrageously knowing textual fecundity, the pens resting in the box like so many steel arrows waiting to take flight. The last sentence is a final note of humility, with Perec modestly admitting that his private, anti-monumental list—admittedly, the contents of his writing desk are not terribly revelatory, having undoubtedly more private significance that scholarly—will likely be “traversed by fashion,” but retaining the conviction that there will still be some perdurable part, some private, untranslatable token of a life lived, that will be “more . . . than simply fashion.”

In addition to short pieces such as the ones looked at above, the miscellany *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* contains several midlength essays, such as the title piece and the delightful “‘Think/Classify’,” that show Perec’s formal use of catalogs at greater length, and that delve more deeply into his epistemological and philosophical interests in cataloging, listing, and enumeration. In “‘Think/Classify’,” for example, he offers up another interpretive key to his work, revealing one of his central concerns as a writer in the process of ostensibly complaining about the limits of classification systems (a topic reminiscent of “Ways of Arranging Books”):

My problem with classifications is that they don’t last; hardly have I finished putting things into order before that order is obsolete. Like everyone else, I presume, I am sometimes seized by a mania for arranging things. The sheer number of the things needing to be arranged and the near-impossibility of distributing them according to any truly satisfactory criteria mean that I never finally manage it, that the arrangements I end up with are temporary and vague, and hardly any more effective than the original anarchy.

The outcome of all this leads to truly strange categories. A folder full of miscellaneous papers, for example, on which is written ‘To be classified’; or a drawer labelled ‘Urgent 1’ with nothing in it (in the drawer ‘Urgent 2’ there are a

few old photographs, in ‘Urgent 3’ some new exercise-books). In short, I muddle along.<sup>524</sup>

This sentiment appears throughout Perec’s work, articulated always with the duality previously observed: a longing for a system of perfect accessibility and comprehensiveness, a total catalog; and the simultaneous realization that the longing is illusory, always mediated through shock at the simple physical obduracy of books, objects with weight and mass that, like other objects, perfectly follow the law of entropy and become increasingly dispersed. Perec often seems perplexed by this dynamic dualism, torn between his “mania for arranging things” and “the near impossibility of distributing” his books satisfactorily. This duality expresses itself later in the essay, in a subsection entitled “The ineffable joys of enumeration,” in which Perec writes:

In every enumeration there are two contradictory temptations. The first is to list *everything*, the second is to forget something. The first would like to close off the question once and for all, the second to leave it open. Thus, between the exhaustive and the incomplete, enumeration seems to me to be, before all thought (and before all classification), the very proof of that need to name and to bring together without which the world (‘life’) would lack any points of reference for us. There are things that are different yet also have a certain similarity; they can be brought together in series within which it will be possible to distinguish them.<sup>525</sup>

Perec thus posits enumeration—cataloging—as a primal linguistic-symbolic act that “before all thought (and before classification)” differentiates objects in “the world (life)” from each other, that acts as a great sorting tool that brings objects “together in series within which it will be possible to distinguish them.” It is interesting that Perec portrays the second aspect of cataloging that I have been describing—the inability, due to the ever-shifting chain of signifiers within which any list, being verbal, is hopelessly imbricated—as a matter of volition; fascinatingly, it is a temptation to “forget something,” which is recapitulated as the desire not to “close off the

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<sup>524</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid., 198.

question” but to “leave it open.” Perec’s theory of creative forgetting appears not futile but fertile, a stimulus to further inquiry and revision, an invitation to more language despite the realization of language’s boundaries and limitations.<sup>526</sup>

Perec continues the theme of the two poles of cataloging-enumerating into the next paragraph:

There is something at once uplifting and terrifying about the idea that nothing in the world is so unique that it can’t be entered on a list. Everything can be listed: the editions of Tasso, the islands on the Atlantic Coast, the ingredients required to make a pear tart, the relics of the major saints, masculine substantives with a feminine plural (*amours, délices, orgues*), Wimbledon finalists, or, alternatively, here restricted arbitrarily to ten, the sorrows of Mr Zachary McCaltex:

Made to feel giddy by the scent of 6,000 dozen roses  
 Gashes his foot on an old tin  
 Half eaten by a ferocious cat  
 Post-alcoholic para-amnesia  
 Uncontrollable sleepiness  
 All but knocked down by a lorry  
 Sicks up his meal  
 Five-month stye on his eye  
 Insomnia  
 Alopecia<sup>527</sup>

Perec’s analysis of the reach of cataloging embraces both real and fictional phenomena, as in his final example, a list of ten “sorrows” felt by the protagonist of Harry Mathews’s novel *The Sinking of Odradek Stadium*.<sup>528</sup> The list is wildly unreal, with a phantasmagoric range of symptoms, any few of them unlikely in combination, all ten of them certainly fatal to a typical human being; slyly, however, Perec omits that this is indeed a list of fictional ailments suffered by a character in a book, and one is almost, to use Perec’s phrase, tempted—lacking the note that

<sup>526</sup> The “invitation to more language” is from Seamus Heaney’s “entry into further language,” from his preface to his translation of *Beowulf*: Heaney, xx.

<sup>527</sup> Perec, 1999, 198–99. *Alopecia* returns in *Life A User’s Manual* under a synonym, *area*, one of Cinoc’s list of lost French words: Perec, 1987, 290.

<sup>528</sup> Cf. Sturrock’s note at Perec, 1999, 198.

the English translation supplies—to go along with the catalog’s claim to reality, its attempt to represent reality through the narrative logic of enumeration. It is the ridiculousness of the combined ailments, especially when juxtaposed with the rather sober Tasso editions and French nouns preceding, that tips the scale, however delayed, on the side of fiction and play, and alerts the reader to Perec’s metaphysical-epistemological joke.

He explains himself further in the next subsection, “The Book of Records”:

The preceding list is not ordered, either alphabetically, or chronologically, or logically. As bad luck would have it, most lists these days are lists of winners: only those who come first exist. For a long time now books, discs, films and television programmes have been seen purely in terms of their success at the box-office (or in the charts). Not long ago, the magazine *Lire* even ‘classified thought’ by holding a referendum to decide which contemporary intellectuals wielded the greatest influence.

But if we are going to list records, better to go and find them in some more eccentric fields (in relation to the subject that concerns us here): M. David Maund possesses 6,506 miniature bottles; M. Robert Kaufman, 7,495 sorts of cigarette; M. Ronald Rose popped a champagne cork a distance of 31 metres; M. Isao Tsychiya shaved 233 people in one hour; and M. Walter Cavanagh possesses 1,003 valid credit cards.<sup>529</sup>

Here Perec speaks obliquely about the historical closeness between lists and power, between the sequential representation of objects and the political structures that benefit from this representation. Perec’s protest is muted, expressed in a homely aphorism—“only those who come first exist”—and a disdainful interest in pop culture, but its point is unmistakable: “lists of winners” tell only part of the story, covering up worlds of strange possibilities and radical alterity in favor of bland homogeneity, the lists of various firsts and bests. The list of outstanding records from “more eccentric fields” is Perec’s gentle attempt—like Pessoa and Benjamin and Barthes, Perec is occasionally gentle in his melancholy critique of bourgeois culture and its political accommodations—to right the balance of representation and archiving, of memory, in favor of

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid., 199.

the bizarre, the minor, and the erratic. Note the predominance of collections among the list's oddities, the hoarded bottles, cigarettes, and credit cards tiny parodies of the vast process of the accumulation, utilization, and expenditure of capital. The two achievements are similarly innocent: mock ballistics (the cork shot off without a target, a harmless parody of gun and cannon) and fetishized efficiency (the 233 people shaved, presumably without incident and certainly to no point). These tiny collections mirror in turn Perec's own zealously gathered catalogs, his intricately detailed textual compilations of the world's staggering abundance.<sup>530</sup> Like the collections—and in contrast to the hieratic lists of firsts and bests—Perec's catalogs embrace haphazardness, rejecting the closed orderings necessary to utilitarian lists: these are private, playful constructions, blissfully chaotic, motivated not by usefulness but by hermetic mnemonic promptings that are wholly Perec's own and ultimately unretrievable.

When Perec magically does find such an order, it is notably not with books but, as seen previously, with smaller objects, often ephemeral ones, as with the list of the objects on the top of his work-desk seen above, or in another work, the “Two Hundred and Forty-three Postcards in Real Colour.” The work is exactly what its title denotes: a catalog of 243 postcards arranged in no particular order. Each item in the catalog is a transcription of the message on the back of each card: there are no descriptions of the images on the obverse sides. The cards' fictiveness is

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<sup>530</sup> Cf. Calvino, 122–23: “The demon of ‘collectionism’ is always beating its wings over Perec's pages . . . a passion for the *unique*, that is, the collection of objects of which only one specimen exists. Yet a collector he was not, in life, except of words, of the data of knowledge, of things remembered. Terminological exactitude was his way of possessing things. Perec collected and gave a name to whatever comprises the uniqueness of every event, person, or thing. No one was ever more immune than Perec to the worst blight in modern writing—which is vagueness.” As Bellos and Perec's own writings have shown, Perec did in fact collect things other words: *pace* this small slip, Calvino's words here offer an astute reading of Perec's textual-linguistic acquisitiveness, the sense in his texts of the world as an eternally replenishing, fecund, and abundant *Wunderkammern* whose contents can be exhaustively named, detailed, and analyzed, and from which stories can be endlessly written. Cf. Stewart, 96, on “the list or the list's double, the collection.”

suggested by this lack of visual referent—again, not a single image is given, no pictorial ground for Perec’s jottings—and signaled by the banality, the utter awfulness (and, within this awfulness, a peculiar kind of pleasure, too), of the messages themselves:

We’re camping near Ajaccio. Lovely weather. We eat well. I’ve got sunburnt. Fondest love.

We’re at the Hôtel Alcazar. Getting a tan. Really nice! We’ve made loads of friends. Back on the 7th.

We’re sailing off L’Ile-Rousse. Getting ourselves a tan. Food admirable. I’ve gone and got sunburnt! Love etc.

We’ve just done Dahomey. Superb nights. Fantastic swimming. Excursions on camel-back. Will be in Paris on the 15th.

We’ve finally landed in Nice. Lots of lazing about and sleep. Really nice (despite the sunburn). Love.

A quick line from Urbino. Weather good. Long live scampi fritti and fritto misto! Not forgetting Giotto e tutti quanti. Friendly regards.

We’re at the Hôtel Les Jonquilles. Marvellous weather. We go to the beach. Have got to know loads of delightful people. A hug and a kiss.

We’re at the Hôtel des Quatre-Sergents. Sunbathing. Footy! Sunburn. Thinking of you all the time.

Greetings from Hellénie. Sunning ourselves. Super! We’ve made heaps of friends. Many regards.

Visiting the Channel. Very restful. Lovely beaches. I’ve got sunburnt. Love.<sup>531</sup>

The catalog drones on and on for sixteen-and-a-half more pages, a fugal sarabande of *vacances bourgeoises* insipidity: a torrid aria of sun and froth, of tans and burns, greetings and thoughts and heaps of friends. It is as if the Flaubert of *Bouvard et Pecuchet* had utilized the literary form of Félix Fénéon’s *Nouvelles en Trois Lignes* to narrate the mental landscape of Godard’s *carabiniers* Ulysse and Michel-Ange. Each item rigidly follows the same pattern: first a brief

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<sup>531</sup> Perec, 1999, 222.

salutation, almost always giving the place from where the postcard ostensibly has come; a note about the weather (almost always the sun) or about activities and relaxations; and an envoi or valediction, with a stock word or phrase of love and remembrance. Perec has reached an extreme of catalogic narrative: an impenetrable mass of verbal banalities, an archive of trivia that denies readability, that is almost hostile in its repetitive simplicity.<sup>532</sup> Passages such as this exemplify the experimental, OuLiPoian strand of Perec's writing at its fullest, in particular his incorporation of passages determined by the mechanical following-through of a predetermined literary exercise involving formal constraints upon the work. The existence of a text such as "Two Hundred and Forty-three Postcards" owes little or nothing to traditional readerly expectations concerning plot, narrative, and detail: it is a standalone gem, a tour de force like some of Perec's other literary stunts, such as *A Void*, a novel written entirely without the vowel *e*, and its companion piece *The Exeter Text: Jewels, Secrets, Sex*, a novel whose only vowel is *e*. While these longer pieces—*A Void* is a novel, *The Exeter Text* a novella—manage to make some rapprochement with the realistic novel, and offer up, however refracted and distorted by the cracked lens of Perec's experimentalism, a recognizable sequence of events featuring recurring characters in a somewhat-definable geographical space: they are *stories*, in other words. But pieces like "Two Hundred and Forty-three Postcards" maintain a radically oppositional stance

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<sup>532</sup> This is in marked contrast to the feel of much of Perec's other work, which, while often cold and aloof from its subjects—often, indeed, Olympically-Apollonically so—nevertheless extends a spirit of play, discovery, and joyous work to the reader: like the texts of Gertrude Stein, whose writing exhibits a range of formal disruptions that make reading difficult but whom the experience of reading is so often marked by pleasure, gleeful transgression, even infantile delight, Perec's writing breathes a spirit of generosity that is enhanced, not diminished, by its resistance to formal closure and the conventions of literary realism. Lejeune, 41, describes Perec as "convivial," and notes, "there is a place for me in each of his texts, a place for me to do something" (quoted in Motte, 71).

toward stories and their narratological baggage: a short tone poem, a sequence of words drained of their referentiality and substance by overuse.

Ever the literary trickster, Perec often drops such passages down into the middle of even his most realistic novels, such as in his masterpiece *Life A User's Manual*, which represents Perec's most sustained dialogue with the realistic novel, as well as his most copious and far-ranging use of experiments, games, and tricks. Consider in this light the description of the cellars of the house at 11 Rue Simon-Crubbellier, the fictional apartment house that Perec dissects, room by room and occupant by occupant, in the novel. The description of the cellars avoids nearly all mention of the house's human inhabitants, and focuses instead on an exhaustive list of the foodstuffs and other provisions kept therein. Perec does point out, however, that one cellar, owned by the Altamont family, is meticulously ordered—"clean, tidy, and neat. . . . A place for every thing, and every thing in its place; nothing has been left out: stocks and provisions to withstand a siege, to survive a crisis, to see through a war"—while the other cellar, owned by the Gratiolet family, is an utter mess: "Here generations have heaped up rubbish unsorted and unordered by anyone."<sup>533</sup> The descriptions of each cellar are quite similar to Perec's other catalogs; similar, too, is Perec's use of the catalog form to address questions of representation, narrative, and language. Here is the Altamonts' cellar:

The left-hand wall is allocated to food provisions. First, basic ingredients: wheat flour, semolina, corn flour, potato starch, tapioca, oat flakes, sugar lumps, granulated sugar, castor sugar, salt, olives, capers, condiments, large jars of mustard and gherkins, cans of cooking oil, packets of dried herbs, packets of peppercorns, cloves, freeze-dried mushrooms, and small tins of sliced truffle; wine vinegar and pickling vinegar; chopped almonds, peeled green walnuts, vacuum-packed hazelnuts and peanuts, biscuits, aperitifs, sweets, bars of cooking chocolate, bars of dessert chocolate, honey, jam, tinned milk, powdered milk, powdered eggs, yeast, pre-cooked puddings, tea, coffee, cocoa, herb tea, stock cubes, tomato concentrate, harissa, nutmeg, bird pepper, vanilla pods, spices and

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<sup>533</sup> Perec, 1987, 153, 155.

flavourings, breadcrumbs, crispbread, sultanas, candied fruits, angelica; then come tinned foods: tinned fish, tuna chunks, sardines in oil, rolled anchovies, mackerel in white-wine sauce, pilchards in tomato sauce, hake Spanish style, smoked sprats, lumpfish roe, smoked cods' roe. . . .<sup>534</sup>

and here is the Gratiolets':

The eye, becoming slowly accustomed to the dark, could end up making out beneath the layer of fine grey dust heteroclite remains coming from each of the Gratiolets: the base and posts of an Empire bed, hickorywood skis having lost their spring long ago, a pith helmet that was of purest white once upon a time, tennis racquets held in heavy trapezoidal presses, and old Underwood typewriter of the celebrated *Four Million* model, which was held to be, in its time, and owing to its automatic tabulator, one of the most sophisticated objects ever made, and on which François Gratiolet began to type his invoices when he decided he had to modernise his accounting systems; an old *Nouveau Petit Larousse Illustré* beginning with a half-page 71 – ASP *sbs* (Grk *aspis*). Colloquial for viper. *Fig. Asp-tongue* perpetrator of calumnies – and ending with page 1530: MAROLLES-LES-BRAULTS (Dept of Sarthe, Mamers County); pop. 2,000 (vill. 950); an old cast-iron coatstand still holding up a raw-wool cloak patched with pieces of different colours and even different materials: the overcoat worn by Pte Gratiolet, Olivier, taken prisoner at Arras on 20 May 1940, released as early as May 1942 thanks to the efforts of his uncle Marc (Marc, the son of Ferdinand, was not Olivier's uncle but his father Louis's second cousin, but Olivier called him "my uncle" just as he said "uncle" to his father's other cousin, François); an old cardboard globe, with quite a few holes; piles and piles of incomplete runs of papers: *L'Illustration*, *Point de Vue*, *Radar*, *Détective*, *Réalités*, *Images du Monde*, *Comédia*. . . .<sup>535</sup>

The differences between the two catalogs could not be clearer: the Altamonts' stockpiles of food are hieratic, taxonomic, ranked and ready for immediate practical use, while the Gratiolets' junkheap contains nothing at all of value, and is only the last resting-place of once-useful items that have been outmoded (the Underwood), been broken or damaged (the incomplete encyclopedia, a nice self-referential fillip), or otherwise lost their worth, and have reverted to

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<sup>534</sup> Ibid., 153. The catalog goes on for two full pages, including a virtuoso description of a "wine list in which every bottle is entered by geographical origin, name of grower, name of supplier, date of entry, optimal maturity date, and, where relevant, date of leaving" (154: the list Perec gives only the geographical origin of the wines and the name of the grower, but it is nevertheless impressively lengthy), and a shorter inventory of cleaning supplies, ending with that indispensable bourgeois necessity, "kitchen paper towel rolls" (155).

<sup>535</sup> Ibid., 155–56.

inert, useless matter. Perec's style for each catalog in turn mirrors the contents of each. The Altamonts' foods are listed by name only, with no further explanatory information, whereas many of the items among the Gratiolets' trash are lovingly elaborated upon: the wistful note of the Underwood's having been a preeminent machine "in its time," or the needless explication of Olivier Gratiolet's family relations. The tone of the Altamont's catalog is crisp, businesslike, swift; that of the Gratiolet's melancholy, digressive, nostalgic. Finally, the Altamont's ranked foodstuffs represent potential, with each item resting secure, waiting, as it were, to fulfill its purpose by being consumed, used; the Gratiolets' trash has already been used, and is here discarded, its potential having been realized and then exhausted. The two catalogs are Perec's dual theory of catalogs and lists—of enumeration—writ large, the one a model of dull efficiency, the other completely chaotic, but filled with the hidden life of objects and possessions.

Indeed, the loving, curatorial energy given to such catalogs of books, postcards, foodstuffs, and trash, in contrast with Perec's wonted aversion to aspects and techniques traditionally associated with narratives since at least Aristotle—plot, *ethos*, relatable characters, diverting events, suspense and the like<sup>536</sup>—shows Perec's marked preference for things over people: or, better, an uncanny mixing together of these two categories, unseen in literature save

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<sup>536</sup> Josipovichi, 188–89, notes Perec's disruptions of Aristotle's now-canonical elements of *mimesis*: "Interestingly, Western art as a whole is also committed to two other notions discussed by Aristotle in the *Poetics*: destiny and revelation. In Perec both of these are subverted. The effect of all those summaries of detective stories, for instance, is precisely to drain them of their inner forward momentum, and the same is true of the various stories that are recounted about the characters in the book. Their meaning emerges not from anything within them which is eventually revealed, but from their relation to all the other stories. There is thus no revelation but only pattern, and lives do not make any 'final sense' but are simply seen to take on certain shapes. . . . We realize, reading this book, how very linear the traditional novel is, and how this linearity goes hand in hand with the idea of destiny and discovery, which in turn is linked to a notion of character and anecdote."

for certain science-fiction authors—in the works of Philip K. Dick, for example. Indeed, Perec’s work provokes comparisons with Dick’s famous dictum that “*Living and unliving things are exchanging properties,*” and his corollary proposition, “*The drive of unliving things is stronger than the drive of living things,*”<sup>537</sup> for in Perec objects appear with all of the affective warmth bestowed upon them by their owners, glowing, as it were, with a kind of inner, organic life that is the sum total of their possessors’ experiences with and of them; while Perec’s human characters are always presented as rigorously, analytically, and categorically—even, at times, unsympathetically—as possible, not so much as human subjects but as the result of converging impersonal social vectors and matrices, mere side-effects of objective, scientific phenomena. As Gerald Prince notes, “Perec often represents objects and spaces with remarkable—even exhausting—precision (think of the Altamonts’ cellar, the catalogue issued by Madame Moreau’s company, or the list of some of the things found on the stairs over the years), he spends little time depicting his characters, as if things mattered more than humans and the building more than its tenants.”<sup>538</sup> I would propose a third, hybrid view of Prince’s perhaps too-Procrustean people-objects dichotomy, that is, that Perec’s writing, rather than merely suggesting the objectification of humans and the humanity of objects—something, again, that is a common

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<sup>537</sup> Dick, 243.

<sup>538</sup> Prince, 89. Harris, 68, concurs: “The objects named in these catalogues lack body or texture—what one could call emotional embodiment—the space in which they are depicted is already an abstracted outline, a frame of traces waiting to be filled in or embodied by an other, a reader. This insistently impersonal descriptive style also is evident in the fact that among the hundreds of characters inhabiting the text’s pages, there is a striking lack of facial features or expressions.” A fascinating exception to this last point are faces that have been reproduced as images, such as the face of “a young Moroccan woman” on a postcard shown by Madame Albin to Jane Sutton, “with dilated nostrils, the eyes full of animal life, the features in play as she shows her white teeth in a laugh” (Perec, 1987, 212). It is quite telling, given his general bent toward images, reproductions, and things in general, that Perec exhibits a general vagueness with the descriptions of his “alive” characters, yet describes this image of a woman as “full of animal life,” as if the two valences—alive and reproduced, human and image—had been reversed.

postmodern trope—articulates a middle ground in which the emotions and thoughts of human beings, directed toward and influenced by the phenomenal world outside and around them, mix and commingle with the physical properties of this phenomenal world and the affective states these properties evoke. Character and ethos, then, in Perec is bi-directional, labile, plastic, something possessed both by individuals and their objects: indeed, character and ethos are only possible by the interpenetration of the two, by the fortuitous coming-together and mixing of human consciousness with the life of objects. An animate reality, a kind of cyborg humanity, where possessions are prostheses, grafted not onto the body but into the mind and its perceptual apparatuses.

A similar moment expressive of the dualities of catalogs and enumeration as seen above comes in Perec's early work, *A Man Asleep*, which, as editor David Bellos notes, "deals with a depression so extreme as to verge on self-annihilation."<sup>539</sup> Much of the story consists of meaningless, repetitive actions, all undertaken by the unnamed "you" as efforts to avoid tedium, and to hold fast to a state of apathy that Bellos terms "the sleep of indifference."<sup>540</sup> Not surprisingly, reading is a way to kill time, yet, as Perec describes, the mechanical, unthinking reading done by "you" produces in turn its own stultifying boredom, a boredom Perec largely creates through the use of a long list enumerating the contents of a newspaper: "You sit at a table of a café and read *Le Monde*, line by line, systematically. It is an excellent exercise. You read the headlines on the front page, the foreign reports, the short items on the back page, the classified advertisements: situations vacant, employment wanted, sales representation, business

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<sup>539</sup> Perec, 1990, 10, where Bellos notes that "The experience is one which Perec says he went through himself around the age of twenty." Perhaps this accounts for Perec's use of the second person (*tu* in French) throughout the text, which form, Bellos notes (*ibid.*, 11), "is familiar, friendly, but also (in some circumstances) aggressive."

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

opportunities, properties and estates, land, flats (for sale), flats (new developments), flats (wanted), offices to let, commercial property, businesses for sale. . . .”<sup>541</sup> The description goes on for another full page, a standard example of Perec’s exhaustive catalogs. The next paragraph, in which Perec goes on to weigh the value of reading *Le Monde* in such a systematic way, is also typical in Perec’s explicit disavowal of the benefits of catalogs and enumeration, or, indeed, of any set of data indiscriminately consumed:

Five hundred, a thousand pieces of information have passed in front of those eyes of yours. . . . But your memory has carefully avoided retaining any of this. You read with an equal lack of interest that Pont-à-Mousson was weak and that steel was losing ground whilst the New York market remained steady, that one may have complete confidence in the experience of the oldest credit bank in France and its network of specialists, that the damage caused in Florida by typhoon Barbara would cost three billion dollars to repair, that Jean-Paul and Lucas are proud to announce the arrival of their little sister Lucie: reading *Le Monde* is simply a way of wasting, or gaining, an hour or two, of measuring once again the extent of your indifference. All hierarchies and preferences must crumble and collapse.<sup>542</sup>

That is, the sheer mass of data contained within a given issue of *Le Monde*, the “thousands of messages” produced magically from “thirty or so typographic signs,”<sup>543</sup> ultimately overwhelms any determined effort to comprehend the whole, to read the paper systematically from front to back. As before, Perec creates this readerly disorientation in the minds of his own readers through his use of catalogs and lists, whose sheer length often makes reading them a chore, thereby resisting full representation, and insisting on the scripted, written qualities of Perec’s text. Here Perec depicts reading as a kind of unthinking obsession, similar to the compulsive habits of collecting and hoarding; addressing the “you” of the text, the unnamed narrator asks “But why should you eagerly devour [these letters], why should you bother deciphering them?

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid.

All that matters to you is that time should pass and that nothing should get through to you: your eyes follow the lines, deliberately, one after the other.”<sup>544</sup> Thus Perec figures the postmodern alienation of reader from text, the trope that texts are ultimately chains of empty signifiers, that reading is a commodity like any other, and that the act of consuming texts is a compulsive fetish, internalized by generations of bourgeois readers and authors. The catalog emphasizes these themes by embodying them in a well-nigh impenetrable chunk of text that encapsulates fully the sometimes terrifying, sometimes enervating copiousness of our data.

To return to *Life A User's Manual*, it is instructive to note Perec's highly overdetermined use of catalogs and lists, how they can be found, never singly or alone, but always in groups, masses, multitudes, and how catalogs and lists proliferate at both the macro- and microcosmic levels, from narratological master trope to points of local detail (a kind of textual analogue to biology's recapitulation theory). As Peter Schwenger writes, “[T]he whole novel has the structure of a list: each room is an item on that list and a chapter in the novel; further, within each chapter the objects in the room are listed. Narratives are attached to these objects, but the narrative movement of the novel is not confined to such autonomous stories.”<sup>545</sup> For example, as befits such an obsessively cataloged text, many of the characters in *Life* are themselves catalogers, such as the enigmatic Monsieur Jérôme, a minor tenant of the apartment house who is horribly aged by his endless scholarly labors (a frequent motif in catalogic writing):

[Jérôme] came back to Rue Simon-Crubellier in 1958 or 1959. He was unrecognisable, done in, worn out, done for. He didn't ask for his old flat back, but only a maid's room if there was one free. He was no longer a teacher or a Cultural Attaché; he was working in the library of the Institute for the History of Religions. An “aged scholar” whom he had, apparently, met on a train, was paying him one hundred and fifty francs a month to make a card index of the Spanish clergy. In five years he had made out seven thousand four hundred and

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<sup>544</sup> Ibid.

<sup>545</sup> Schwenger, 109.

sixty-two biographies of churchmen in office in the reigns of Philip III (1598–1621), Philip IV (1621–1665) and Charles II (1665–1700), and had sorted them under twenty-seven different headings (by a marvelous coincidence, he would add with a grin, 27 is precisely the number used, in the universal decimal classification system—better known as Dewey Decimal—for the general history of the Christian Church).<sup>546</sup>

Like the catalogs that inhabit the text of *Life*, Jérôme’s neverending catalog grows too large, metastasizing and choking off its creator’s life, much as the text’s own catalogs frequently disrupt, indeed, ruin, our expectations of an untroubled, normative reading of the work. Jérôme’s labors are quintessentially French, at one with the work of the great French archivists of the nineteenth century, as well as polymaths like Balzac and Michelet, men who turned graphomania and compulsive inquiry into one-man text factories, churning out thousands upon thousands of pages of writing in their lifetimes. Note the exquisitely macabre detail of Jérôme’s “grin,” which suggests that the cataloger has perhaps gone mad, or at least a bit batty, the numerological coincidence in which he finds such significance a warning to all (possibly deluded) hunters of signs and their meanings. The odd, fruitless coincidence of the number twenty-seven—Jérôme arbitrary (and unenumerated) division of his priestly data set—with the Dewey Decimal system’s classification number for Christianity, ironizes the cataloger’s pathetic situation: after years of wasted effort, such chance glimmers of meaning are all the data yields—no final synthesis or analysis of the information is forthcoming, let alone any worldly remuneration for his work.

The following paragraph narrates Jérôme’s destruction of his manuscript in realization of his failure, not merely to secure publication, but to forge a meaningful whole out of the chaos he has collected:

Meanwhile, the “aged scholar” had died. Monsieur Jérôme tried in vain to interest the Ministry of Education, the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), the VIth section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, the Collège de France,

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<sup>546</sup> Perec, 1987, 204–05.

as well as some fifteen other public and private bodies, in the history of the Spanish Church in the seventeenth century—more turbulent than you might think—and tried also, but equally unsuccessfully, to find a publisher. After receiving his forty-sixth absolute and categorical refusal, Monsieur Jérôme took his manuscript—more than twelve hundred pages of incredibly close-spaced handwriting—and went to burn it in the courtyard of the Sorbonne, which incidentally cost him a night in a police station.<sup>547</sup>

The list of gatekeeper institutions that refuse to sanction or to publish Jérôme's manuscript is a succinct minicatalog of futility, the sonorous official names of the august scholarly bodies a rebuke to Jérôme unsubsidized, private, amateur literary production. Hence the terrible irony of his attempted incendiarism “in the courtyard of the Sorbonne,” that bastion of the French Academy; note, too, a further numerological irony of “his forty-sixth absolute and categorical refusal,” a point of termination as equally arbitrary—why not ten categorical refusals? If forty-six, why not a hundred?—as the arbitrary division of the work into twenty-seven subcategories. The burned or lost text, another frequent trope in the literature of lists and catalogs, does not figure here, as it so often does, as a tragedy, a sign of absence and loss; nor is this a liberatory moment, a casting-out of scholarly demons through a purifying exorcism-by-fire. Instead, it is a comic submission to fate, with Jérôme withdrawing into himself and into an obsessive reading of detective novels that parallels, in its intensity and futility, his earlier work as an author and scholar.

Perec's habit of cataloging exhaustively the most minor details and incidents of his characters' lives extends even to characters who never properly appear in the novel, who are barely mentioned but offer the narrative yet another chance—were one necessary!—for divagation, extravagance, and enumeration. For example, in chapter ninety, “Entrance Hall, 2,” we meet Gertrude, the cook of Madame Moreau, one of the apartment house's inhabitants, and

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<sup>547</sup> Ibid., 205.

learn that Gertrude once worked for the improbably named aristocrat Lord Ashtray “on his enormous estate, Hammer Hall, near London.” The introduction of Lord Ashtray is the merest pretext for the following catalog, which breathlessly imitates the style of celebrity-magazine columns “telling all” about their subjects:

Gossip writers and visitors gape before his Regency rosewood furniture, his leather settees which shine with a patina made by eight generations of authentically aristocratic backsides, his cloisonné floors, his 97 lackeys in canary-yellow liveries, and his seasoned ceilings repeating in profusion the emblem which he has associated with his activities all his life: a red cordiform apple pierced right through by a long worm, and surrounded by little flames.

The most disturbing statistics are given about this character. People say he has forty-three full-time gardeners, that he has so many windows, glazed doors, and mirrors in his property that he employs four servants solely for their maintenance, and that since he couldn't get enough replacement glass to keep up with repairs he solved the problem by simply buying the nearest glassworks.

According to some people he owns eleven thousand ties and eight hundred and thirteen walking sticks, subscribes to every English-language newspaper in the world, not to read them—his eight archivists look after that—but to do the crosswords, a pastime of which he is so inordinately fond that his bedroom is entirely repapered once a week with grids designed especially for him by his favourite cruciverbist, Barton O'Brien, of the *Auckland Gazette and Hemisphere*. He is also a keen rugby fan and has built up a private team that he has had in training for months in the hope of seeing it successfully challenge the next victor of the Five Nations tournament.<sup>548</sup>

Note Perec's immediate assumption of a communal, anonymous voice for the gossip reportage: “Gossip writers and visitors,” “The most disturbing statistics are given,” “According to some people” all make the data about Lord Ashtray secondhand, transferring the narrator's interest and agency in Lord Ashtray onto others. That the details of the gossip about Lord Ashtray are as comically absurd as his name—the lovingly enumerated “eight generations of authentically aristocratic backsides”; the suggestive family emblem, a flaming apple eaten by a worm; the glassworks, the archivists, the rugby team—adds strangeness and depth to the list, as Lord Ashtray, unconstrained by literary realism, swells monstrously outward, each of his attributes a

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<sup>548</sup> Ibid., 452–53.

comic example—why, again, *exactly* ninety-seven “lackeys in canary-yellow liveries”?—on the stock theme of the appurtenances and perquisites of the fabulously rich.

As with so many verbal maximalists of the twentieth century, Perec festoons the minor Lord Ashtray with minute details, an embarrassment of riches of imagined life, a life that doubles as the catalog of its inventor’s obsessions:

According to others, the collections and crazes are just camouflage, designed to hide the three true passions of Lord Ashtray: boxing (Melzack Wall, the contender for the world fly-weight title, is supposed to be in training at Hammer Hall); three-dimensional geometry: he is said to have been funding for the last twenty years a professor researching polyhedrons, who still has twenty-five volumes to write; and, especially, Indian horsecloths: he is alleged to have collected two hundred and eighteen of them, all belonging to the best warriors from the best tribes: White-Man-Run-Him and Rain-in-the-Face, of the Crows; Hooker Jim, of the Mohawks; Looking-Glass, Yason, and Alikut, of the Nez Percé Indians; Chief Winnemucca and Ouray-the-Arrow, of the Payute; Black Beaver and White Horse, of the Kiowas; Cochise, the great Apache chief; Geronimo and Ka-e-ten-a, of the Chiricahuas; Sleeping Rabbit, Left Hand, and Dull Knife, of the Cheyennes; Restroom Bomber, of the Saratogas; Big Mike, of the Kachinas; Crazy Turnpike, of the Fudges; Satch Mouth, of the Grooves; and several dozen Sioux cloths, including ones owned by Sitting Bull and his two wives, Seen-by-Her-Nation and Four Times, and those of Old-Man-Afraid-of-His-Horse, Young-Man-Afraid-of-His-Horse, Crazy Horse, American Horse, Iron Horse, Big Mouth, Long Hair, Roman Nose, Lone Horn, and Packs-His-Drum.<sup>549</sup>

The last of Lord Ashtray’s catalogs is incredibly similar to those used by Joyce in the “Cyclops” episode of *Ulysses*: both are hypertrophied lists of items that are imagined as being essential to a people, Joyce’s grotesque Irish list and Perec’s parodic American Indian list both inflating their subjects through the excessive enumeration of bizarre elements. As with Joyce’s list, real and imagined items clash in close proximity, with no attempt made to distinguish between the two: as such, the catalog’s status as epistemological object hovers uncertainly between that of informative taxonomy and dreamlike wish-list, torn between the competing rhetorical and textual claims of, respectively, the historically authentic (yet resonantly mythic) Crazy Horse and

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<sup>549</sup> Ibid., 453.

Geronimo, on the one hand, and the mythically true (and historically impossible)<sup>550</sup> Restroom Bomber and Crazy Turnpike, on the other. It is Perec's project throughout his fiction to highlight these liminal zones where real life and the imagination—always already hotly contested states with unstable, ever-shifting borders—interpenetrate, these Nabokovian textual spaces where the cataloging of the minutiae of the everyday proceeds apace with the enumeration of the fantastic in all its detail: each continually giving place to the other, perpetually alternating in an unsettling dance of signification. Even when characters and items, like Lord Ashtray, are patently absurd, we are nevertheless trapped in Perec's game: why, then, waste so much time on the grotesquely fictitious lord, why endow him with such intricately pullulating detail so as to mimic life? Where is the center of such a textual universe, and where the periphery: and how to speak truthfully about either one, when the very means of one's diagnosis, the catalog and the list, (hitherto-reliable records of objects and names) have metastasized into endlessly signifying machines?<sup>551</sup>

Indeed, in such a radically destabilized universe, catalogs and lists, rather than serving to systematize or order something, only increase the chaos and disorder surrounding their subjects, through an explosion of enumeration and signification that fights against the impulse toward categorization and cohesion. This is especially true in *Life* when a list is not merely the narrator's seemingly passive cataloging of objects and rooms, but when a list is explicitly presented as an

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<sup>550</sup> "Historically impossible" in that there were certainly no American Indians named Restroom Bomber and Crazy Turnpike in the nineteenth century, and it seems a safe bet that there have been none since. The names, however, reveal a glimmer of historical truth if seen through the crazy prism of French 1950s and '60s car culture and France's fascination with America, as seen in Georges Simenon's *Red Lights* (*Feux rouges*, 1953) and in Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1968) and its frequent tableaux of burning automobiles. In this light, the catalog's placing together of Crazy Horse with American Horse and Iron Horse is suggestive as a brief synopsis of American history, from Native American sovereignty to European domination to the regime of technology and mass transport, the iron horse, or locomotive, the forerunner of the automobile.

<sup>551</sup> Perec once famously described *Life A User's Manual* as "a machine for telling stories": Perec, 1979, 52 (quoted and translated in Harris, 66).

interpretative device, as in the list found in the text *New Key to Your Dreams*, which is being sold by a door-to-door salesman who is ignorant that the book is a fake, “allegedly based on the Teachings of a Yaqui sorcerer . . . but actually composed a few weeks earlier by a botany student at Madrid University”:

Apart from the anachronisms without which this key to dreams would obviously unlock nothing at all, and the ornamentations with which the Spaniard’s imagination had sought to embellish this tiresome enumeration by emphasising its chronological and geographical exoticism, several of the suggested associations turn out to be surprisingly rich:

BEAR	=	CLOCK
WIG	=	ARMCHAIR
HERRING	=	CLIFF
HAMMER	=	DESERT
SNOW	=	HAT
MOON	=	SHOE
FOG	=	ASH
COPPER	=	TELEPHONE
HAM	=	SINGLE PERSON <sup>552</sup>

Of course, the surprising richness of these associations is nowhere explained, and we are left with a hermeneutic joke: not only do the associations not shed light on each other, the dream-image in the first column resolved by its referent in the second, but, given the multiplicity of meanings and associations behind even a simple word-concept like BEAR, HAT, or SINGLE PERSON, both items point, not to each other, but outward from each other in a myriad of suggestive and surprising ways. Aside from the pairing of COPPER and TELEPHONE (copper wires were used in telephony until recently), there are simply no linguistic, semantic, or other connections between each pair, save for accident: FOG and ASH are both three-letter words, for example, and the mind wants to see a glimmer in the burnt-out ash and gray fog, but the comparison quite breaks down under any sustained scrutiny, nor are we given any further

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<sup>552</sup> Ibid., 183.

interpretive tools with which to read the pairs—a short narrative, saying how a dream bear signifies a real-life clock. Rather than interpretations of language—which interpretations would be, of course, more language itself open to interpretation, and so on—the dream-key list is obdurate, recalcitrant language itself in need of explication; or, as is likely the case, the pairings are “smooth” pairings shorn of meaning and referentiality, husks of sense that yet retain the sound of words.

This play on the confusion between meanings and on the difficulties of signification and interpretation continues with Perec’s description of the “second door-to-door man,” who

is selling a newspaper called *The Watchtower!*, the organ of Jehovah’s Witnesses. In each issue there are some longer articles—“What is Human Happiness?”, “The 67 Truths of the Bible”, “Was Beethoven Really Deaf?”, “The Magic and the Mystery of Cats”, “Learn to Love the Prickly Pear”—and some pieces of general news: “Do Before You Die!”, “Did Life Begin By Chance?”, “Fewer Marriages in Switzerland” and a few old saws of the likes of *Statura justa et aequa sint pondere*. Secretly slipped in between the pages are advertisements for articles of hygiene, offering mailing under plain wrappers.<sup>553</sup>

*The Watchtower!*’s feel-good insipidities have replaced the mock-mysterious profundities of the dream list, but nestled within their pages is another, more ambiguous message, “advertisements for articles of hygiene,” or prophylactics, the sale and use of which are not advocated by Jehovah’s Witnesses. Certainly one inclined toward making safe sexual and reproductive choices would find little of interest in the question “Did Life Begin By Chance?”, a delicious irony that Perec seals with the condom ads’ promises of “mailing under plain wrappers”: this is exactly what the ads themselves have done by hiding within the staid, strident pages of *The Watchtower!*, concealing their sexually commodified enticements under the plain brown wrappers of religious zealotry and dogma. Each of the two catalogs of the door-to-door sellers’ wares thus demonstrate further ironies and difficulties with enumeration and the making of lists,

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<sup>553</sup> Perec, 1987, 184.

the first, the dream list, showing how signification breaks down entirely under the dual pressures of opacity and multiplicity, the second, the contents of *The Watchtower!*, showing how bland officialism can conceal divergent, contradictory, even disturbing, messages.

These comic examples of catalogs' tendencies toward the aberrant and the nonsensical, however, are not Perec's only view of the subject. Indeed, a darker, far more tragic take on catalogs and their numerous attendant difficulties comes when rummaging through another of the apartment house's cellars, this one belonging to the Marquiseaux family. Among objects once belonging to the Echards (Caroline Marquiseaux's deceased parents) "sixty-odd copies of a slim cyclostyle brochure entitled *Critical Bibliography of Sources Relating to the Death of Adolf Hitler in His Bunker on April 30, 1945*" by Caroline's father, "Marcelin Echard, sometime Head of Stack at the Central Library, XVIIIth arrdt., Paris."<sup>554</sup> The officiousness of the monograph's and its author's titles are swiftly belied by the narrator's following capsule history of Echard and his scholarly work, which presents the Hitler bibliographer as a hopeless crackpot:

Of all Marcelin Echard's monumental labours over the last fifteen years of his life, only this brochure was ever published. In it, the author subjects to harsh scrutiny every press announcement, statement, communiqué, book, etc. in the French language referring to Hitler's suicide, and demonstrates that they all derive from an implicit belief based on dispatches of unknown origin. The following six brochures, which got no further than card-index form, were to comb in the same critical spirit all the English, American, Russian, German, Italian, and other sources. After thus proving that it was not proven that Adolf Hitler (and Eva Braun) had died in their bunker on the thirtieth of April 1945, the author would have compiled a subsequent bibliography, as exhaustive as the first one, listing all the documentary evidence suggesting that Hitler had survived. Then, in a final work to be called *Hitler's Punishment. A Philosophical, Political, and Ideological Analysis*, Echard, shedding the strict objectivity of the Bibliographer to ride the faster steed of the Historian, would have got down to a study of the decisive impact of this survival on world history from 1945 to the present, in which he

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<sup>554</sup> Ibid., 456. Here, as elsewhere, the Godine edition's fidelity to Perec's marvelous facility with different type fonts, including his uncanny mimicry of commercial type layout and advertising design, have been standardized: I have used introduced italics to the title of Echard's monograph, and have made a few more typographic changes throughout.

would have demonstrated how the infiltration of the highest echelons of national and supranational governmental spheres by individuals attached to Nazi ideals and manipulated by Hitler (John Foster Dulles, Cabot Lodge, Gromyko, Trygve Lie, Singhman Rhee, Attlee, Tito, Beria, Sir Stafford Cripps, Bao Daï, MacArthur, Coude du Foresto, Schuman, Bernadotte, Evita Perón, Gary Davis, Einstein, Humphrey, and Maurice Thorez, to mention only a few) had allowed the conciliatory and pacifist spirit laid out of the Yalta Conference to be sabotaged and had fomented an international crisis, a run-up to the Third World War which only the sang-froid of the Four Powers had managed to avert in February 1951.<sup>555</sup>

Note how Echard's works grow more insubstantial as time progresses, from the short fraudulent pamphlet that constitutes his only published work to notes on index cards and ending with the shadowy *Hitler's Punishment*, titled, even planned out, yet never begun—an inverse proportion tending toward futility. Lists abound in the passage, from Marcelin's original bibliography, which paradoxically attempted to unmake the canonical catalog of scholarship on Hitler's suicide by questioning, without cause or proof, its provenance and methodology; to the short list of his planned works, including the inset list of further works, the “English, American, Russian, German, Italian, and other sources” to be attacked following the dubious lights of his first work; to the psychotically paranoid list of global corporate-state one-secret-governmenters at the end, which fabulously commingles United States Ambassador to Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge with the first Prime Minister of South Korea, Singhman Rhee, Stalin's secret police chief Lavrentiy Beria with the last Emperor of Vietnam, Bao Daï, and so on *ad absurdum*. As so often with catalogs, attempts to organize the mass of data haphazardly collected only reveals the craziness of the entire project, with the hidden thesis or organizational schema elusive, erratic, and illogical, a chimera born of the play of signifiers. (Note, for example, that the connections between the disparate personages are nowhere explained, and that the compositional principle at work, as so often with catalogs, is neither hieratic nor causal, but simple aggregational, following

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<sup>555</sup> Ibid., 456–57.

the time-honored law, not of discrete organization and subordination, but of one-damn-thing-after-another.) Thus the extremely labile, plastic, and adaptable form of the catalog meets the amorphous, endless, anti-logical energy of the conspiracy theory, the result a hybrid form that derives its paradoxical strength from the worst qualities of both parents—or, for the attuned reader and intrepid literary researcher, the best qualities of both—a marriage of two unconfined, theoretically limitless phenomena.

The unruliness of language and the over-capaciousness of catalogs and lists are frequent themes throughout *A Life*, expressed in many other modes than that of Echard's endlessly imbricated conspiracy theory analyzed above. Other catalogs in the text offer similarly vertiginous demonstrations of catalogs' powers of expansion and longwindedness, their tendency toward the maniacal *idée fixe*, even the forthright plunge into madness that is Echard's ruinous, interminable scholarship. The amateur lexicographer Cinoc, for example—who keeps a private, haptic list of lost French words, less from hopes of linguistic repristation or the undoing of slow verbicide than from the dictates of some hidden, unknown impulse<sup>556</sup>—is a veritable welter of catalogia, as with the narrator's excursus on the varying pronunciations of his un-Gallic surname:

[Cinoc] provided the inhabitants of the building, and especially Madame Claveau, with an immediate, difficult problem: how was his name to be pronounced? Obviously the concierge didn't dare address him as "Nutcass" by pronouncing the

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<sup>556</sup> Indeed, Cinoc is described as "a 'word-killer': he worked at keeping Larousse dictionaries up to date. But whilst other compilers sought out new words and meanings, his job was to make room for them by eliminating all the words and meanings that had fallen into disuse": *ibid.*, 287–88. Cinoc's labors, then, are not the public, but private, his scholarly lexicography creating, not the useful tool of a dictionary or database, but the hidden archive of a museum of dead words, words removed from circulation and whose purpose is only aesthetic, ironic, and speculative. Indeed, Cinoc's methodology is never explained, which leaves open the possibility that he is not merely a passive recorder of a word's obsolescence, but an active participant in its removal from linguistic currency and relegation to disuse and oblivion, unrecorded even in the textual graveyards of dictionaries.

name “Sinok”. She questioned Valène, who suggested “Cinosh”, Winckler, who was for “Chinoch”, Morellet, who inclined towards “Sinots”, Mademoiselle Crespi, who proposed “Chinoss”, François Gratiolet, who prescribed “Tsinoc”, and finally Monsieur Echard, as a librarian well versed in recondite spellings and the appropriate ways of uttering them, demonstrated that, leaving aside any potential transformation of the intervocalic “n” into a “gn” or “nj” sound, and assuming once and for all, on principle, that the “i” was pronounced “i” and the “o”, “o”, there were then four ways of saying the initial “c”: “s”, “ts”, “sh” and “ch”, and five ways of pronouncing the final: “s”, “k”, “ch”, “sh” and “ts”, and that, as a result, depending on the presence or absence of one or another diacritic sign or accent an according to the phonetic particularities of one or another language or dialect, there was a case for choosing from amongst the following twenty pronunciations:

SINOS	SINOK	SINOCH	SINOSH	SINOTS
TSINO	TSINO	TSINOC	TSINOS	TSINOTS
S	K	H	H	
SHINO	SHINO	SHINOC	SHINOS	SHINOTS
S	K	H	H	
CHINO	CHINO	CHINOC	CHINOS	CHINOTS
S	K	H	H	557

Echard’s once-again-crazy scholarship serves only to legitimate any and all pronunciations of Chinoc’s name: rather than a narrowing-down and excluding of false data to produce the truth, Echard’s lengthy list of possible phonemic permutations and their results only widens the data-field, making a final conclusion impossible. The faux-objective taxidermy of the table, with its twenty variant spellings-pronunciations laid out like so many zoological specimens, only heightens the sense of oddness, of ratiocination gone astray, each item sitting uncomfortably near the others in an unstable relation, the totality a confusion of similar letters and sounds that occasionally—as if in fulfillment of the well-known saw relating to monkeys, typewriters,

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid., 286–87.

*Hamlet*, and infinity—conjure up something intelligible, like the adventitious “CHINOS.” Both the welter of single opinions and Echard’s twenty-part answer serve to complicate the notion of truth, even scientific, linguistic truth, with no two elements coinciding.

When asked, Cinoc only deepens the mystery of his surname’s proper pronunciation:

[Cinoc] replied that he didn’t know himself which was the most proper way of pronouncing his name. His family’s original surname, the one which his great-grandfather, a saddler from Szczyrk, had purchased officially from the Registry Office of the County of Krakow, was Kleinhof: but from generation to generation, from passport renewal to passport renewal, either because the Austrian or German officials weren’t bribed sufficiently, or because they were dealing with staff of Hungarian or Poldevian or Moravian or Polish origin who read “v” and wrote it as “ff” or who saw “c” and heard it as “tz”, or because they came up against people who never needed to try very hard to become somewhat illiterate and hard of hearing when having to give identity papers to Jews, the name had retained nothing of its original pronunciation and spelling and Cinoc remembered his father telling him that his father had told him of having cousins called Klajnhoff, Keinhof, Klinov, Szinowcz, Linhaus, etc. How had Kleinhof become Cinoc? Cinoc really did not know; the only sure thing was that the final “f” had been replaced one day by that special letter (ß) with which Germans indicate double “s”; then, no doubt, the “l” had been dropped or had been replaced by an “h”: so it got to Khinoss or Kheinoss and maybe, from there to Kinoch, Chinoc, Tsinoc, Cinoc, etc. Anyway it wasn’t at all important whichever way you wanted to pronounce it.<sup>558</sup>

Borne on by the endlessly associative logic of the catalog, Cinoc’s attempts at phonemic genealogy become a fantastic capsule history of the *Mitteleuropäische* Jewish diaspora, with an entire saga of itinerancy, oppression, tenacity, and privation expressed humbly, obliquely, as so many shifts in so many vowels and consonants, the issuing of so many identity papers, and so on, back to an infinity of which the mythic *Kleinhof*, the earliest-retrievable family surname, is not

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<sup>558</sup> Ibid., 287. Cf. Bellos, 3–7, for the remarkable linguistic transmigrations of Perec’s own surname: *ibid.*, 5, notes that “Perec turned a multilingual pun into a kind of destiny,” and it would seem his delight in the permutations of his own name informs his similarly delighted play with Cinoc’s various cognomens. Cf. also *ibid.*, 180, 630–32, for further analysis of Cinoc’s name: at 631, for example, Bellos notes that Poldevia is a fictional land appearing in Queneau’s *Pierrot mon ami*, one of the many false clues with which Perec studded his seemingly-true works.

the original starting-point but only one in a vast unknowable series of lost cognomens and lost histories.<sup>559</sup> This is a different elision of the political than that posed by Echard's fake Hitler scholarship analyzed above: here the grain of history survives as a trace of its former self, a burr heard in the shifting permutations of Cinoc's name, a buzz noted only faintly above the metamorphosis of gutturals and sibilants. Most remarkable about this transformation is Cinoc's bemused, nonplussed attitude toward it, as if his name, and the history implied therein, were just another of his lexia, to be cataloged and filed away dispassionately, without further scrutiny: Cinoc's ambivalence toward his Jewish ancestry and culture is perfectly in keeping with the catalogic weariness engendered by so many hazy historical possibilities, such an unstable family tree. Cinoc's last words on the subject, narrated indirectly, function as both a marker, in the fictional world of the text, of his ambivalence toward his family history (and, disturbingly, to historical enormities like the Holocaust, unnamed but hovering ghostly behind the narrative); and, in the metatextual world of the reader and critic, as Perec's own sly comment on his own listmaking and cataloging, a deft puncturing of the overinflated language and rhetoric in the passage above. Cinoc/Perec shrug, and we shrug with them.

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<sup>559</sup> Cf. a similar moment from *Ulysses* 17.1906–11 (Joyce, 1993, 595), on which the above is perhaps based: “Rudolph Bloom . . . narrated to his son Leopold Bloom . . . a retrospective arrangement of migrations and settlements in and between Dublin, London, Florence, Milan, Vienna, Budapest, Szombathely.” As Bellos notes, Perec's family, Polish Jews whose lives were upended by the Holocaust (his mother died in Auschwitz): *ibid.*, 8, gives Perec's thoughts on his family's upheavals in a short poem from his book *Récits d'Ellis Island* that bears similarities to Bloom's abbreviated chronicle: “Like near and distant cousins of mine, I might have been born in / Haifa, Baltimore or Vancouver / I might have been Australian, Argentinian, English or Swedish, / but in the almost unlimited range of potentials, / one thing was specifically denied me: / I could not be born in the country of my ancestors / in Lubartów or Warsaw / or grow up there, in the continuum provided / by tradition, community and language.”

The theme of historical and cultural oblivion continues throughout the narrator's description of Cinoc, especially in the story of Cinoc's lexicographical work, which catalogs the categories of words the Frenchman has ushered to their deaths:

When he retired in nineteen sixty-five, after fifty-three years of scrupulous service, he had disposed of hundreds of thousands of tools, techniques, customs, beliefs, sayings, dishes, games, nicknames, weights and measures; he had wiped dozens of islands, hundreds of cities and rivers, and thousands of townships off the map; he had returned to taxonomic anonymity hundreds of varieties of cattle, species of birds, insects, and snakes, rather special sorts of fish, kinds of crustaceans, slightly dissimilar plants and particular breeds of vegetables and fruit; and cohorts of geographers, missionaries, entomologists, Church Fathers, men of letters, generals, Gods & Demons had been swept by his hand into eternal obscurity.<sup>560</sup>

Warren Motte describes Cinoc's story as "a strange fable of language whose hero . . . occupies a small but nevertheless vital space in that most spacious of novels," and, indeed, there is a quality of parable or myth about Cinoc's story that lends further self-reflexivity to an already self-reflexive narrative, portraying Cinoc as a kind of author surrogate, a privileged creation who articulates, not so much aspects of Perec's autobiography—although he certainly does this, as Motte notes—but more central aspects of Perec's aesthetics, theories of language, history, and culture, and practices of composition as they affect the text of *Life A User's Manual*.<sup>561</sup> Cinoc figures as a kind of anti-Adam—or, further, as an anti-God or anti-demiurge, an uncreator—both bearing witness to and actively participating in the unnamings and subsequent destruction of archaic, unused words.<sup>562</sup> Perec plays wonderfully with ambiguity in the passage, with the figurative colloquial meaning of many of his banal phrases—such as "wiped . . . off the map,"

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<sup>560</sup> Perec, 1987, 288.

<sup>561</sup> Motte, 68: for Cinoc's relationship to Perec's life more generally, see *ibid.*, 68–71.

<sup>562</sup> It is worth noting that many of the targets of this work of destruction are various wielders of the *logos*, including catalogers and listers, whether of places ("geographers"), bugs ("entomologists"), dogma ("Church Fathers"), and so on: ironically, all of these workers in the arts of language and memory are "swept into eternal obscurity" by one of their own.

meaning generally “to destroy completely” but here used literally, as in “removed from a map”—augmenting the anti-lexicographer’s mage-like, incantatory powers over language.<sup>563</sup> The passage’s rhetorical inflation of Cinoc’s godlike status—he is, after all, a lexicographer, Johnson’s “harmless drudge,” a man in the employ of a large book publisher busily cranking out fresh product, updating its dictionaries for the public’s use—works on many levels, as, perhaps, a marker of Cinoc’s thoughts about his work, a touch of grandiosity inspired by his anonymous verbicides; as a particular instance of *A Life*’s privileging of themes of chaos, dispersal, and death; and as a self-reflexive moment where the text’s repeated use of catalogs and enumeration is highlighted, Cinoc acting as a vehicle whereby the text interrogates its own narrative and stylistic strategies and practices. The portrait of Cinoc as a word-mage also charmingly privileges textuality itself, the obsolete words long presumably having dropped from usage (and, hence, “died”) before there having been culled from dictionaries by trained professionals: thus Perec gets to have it both ways, writing a sustained meditation on the death of words that at the same time is a paean to language.<sup>564</sup> A melodic dirge, vociferous threnody.

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<sup>563</sup> Note in this light the passage’s delicious preterition, with exact proper names being omitted (thus mimicking Cinoc’s labors) but categories—“varieties of cattle, species of birds, insects, and snakes, rather special sorts of fish”—nevertheless persisting, a trace of now-vanished specificity; note too the persistence of qualifications and explanations—“*varieties* of cattle,” “*rather special* sorts of fish”—further trace of the lost words and their once-important nuances: a faux judiciousness, an attempt at explanation that remains vague, signifying nothing.

<sup>564</sup> As Motte, 70, notes, “In a similar manner, as words fall into desuetude, they take with them small portions of the memory of language. Considered in that perspective, the work to which Cinoc devotes himself, in both its vocational and its avocational dimensions, is strongly suggestive of the kind of work that Perec himself carries out. In both cases, one gesture gives rise to—and enables—another. Cinoc eliminates words from the lexicon, yet that very act, performed over many years, causes him to engage upon his project of lexical archaeology. The former involves systematic and deliberate forgetting, the latter an equally systematic and deliberate remembering. Moreover, as Perec stages his account of Cinoc’s work in the pages of *La vie mode d’emploi*, he recapitulates Cinoc’s gestures in significant ways. Perec offers examples of the words Cinoc ‘kills,’ in effect recalling them and inscribing that process of recollection in his novel, a process he offers to share with his reader. Similarly, when he turns toward the dictionary

As the section continues, Perec launches into an extended *ubi sunt* motif, mock-mourning the fate of the excised words, and wondering where they—and, beyond the words, their referents and, beyond these, the people who once knew about these things, used them, lived with and among them—have all gone:

Who would know ever again what a *vigigraphe* was, “a type of telegraph consisting of watchtowers communicating with each other”? And who could henceforth imagine there had existed for perhaps many generations a “block of wood on the end of a stick for flattening watercress in flooded ditches” and that the block had been called a *schuèle*? (shü-ell)? Who would recall the *vélocimane*? . . . Where had all the *abunas* gone, patriarchs of the Abyssinian Church, and the *palatines*, fur tippets worn by women in winter, so named after the Princess Palatine who introduced their use into France in the minority of Louis XIV, and the *chandernagors*, whose gold-spangled NCOs who marched at the head of Second Empire processions? What had become of Léopold-Rudolph von Schwanzenbad-Hodenthaler, whose outstanding courage at Eisenühr allowed Zimmerwald to carry the day at Kisászony?

Bernard Magné notes that the courageous nobleman von Schwanzenbad-Hodenthaler “is taken from Joyce’s *Ulysses*,” and a look at the earlier novel locates him in a passage (which, not surprisingly, is from the “Cyclops” episode) as “the Archjoker Leopold Rudolph von-Schwanzenbad-Hodenthaler,” minus the acute accent and hyphen bestowed by Perec.<sup>565</sup> The word *Archjoker* in the Joycean original should alert us to Perec’s parodic use of his material. It is likely, for instance, that these names were chosen as much for their sophomoric humor as for their reconditeness: Gifford translates the spurious nobleman’s name as “Penis-in-bath-

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of forgotten words that Cinoc is preparing, he provides three pages of such words, accompanied by their definitions, hauling them up out of linguistic amnesia and inviting us to savor them in remotivated form, as fully reinfranchised linguistic signs.” One quibbles with this last part, as these are far from “remotivated” or “fully enfranchised” words: they are rather fossilized lexia, vivid yet remote like the surviving petroglyphs or cave-paintings of a prehistoric tribe, suggestive yet mute, preserved yet dead, like a Paleolithic bug trapped in a block of amber.

<sup>565</sup> Magné, 338; Joyce, 1993, 252 (*Ulysses* 12.559–60). Perec’s city (or battlefield) of Kisászony also appears in Joyce (*ibid.*, 12.560–61) as part of the name of “Countess Marha Virbiága Kisászony Putrápesthi.” Again, Perec has altered Joyce’s diacritics, turning several acute accents into a single grave.

Inhabitant-of-the-valley-of-testicles,” a quick dip into obscenity that signals Perec’s comic intentions.<sup>566</sup> The narrator’s attempts at stoically cataloging Cinoc’s word-and-name victims thus run aground on Perec’s own willfully contrived parodies, the obvious jokes casting doubt on true words like *vigigraphe*, which seem suddenly unsure and false until they are looked up. Perec the author uses Cinoc the character to imbricate *A Life* within other texts, here, the fictional “dictionary” of narratives and styles that is *Ulysses* with verifiable words from French language, history, and culture. Considered epistemologically, the narrator’s *ubi sunt* refrain thus takes on differing moods depending on which lost word-object is being evoked, in one case plangently mourning the fate of disused, discarded words and the worlds they once embodied; in the other, metafictionally demonstrating its own textual, referential, and signifying powers through its obvious (and obviously funny) theft from Joyce.

The *ubi sunt* catalog continues its work of textual mourning, continuing as well its unstable liminality, its mixing of fact and fiction under a tone of seemingly transparent objectivity:

And Uz (Jean-Pierre), 1720–1796, German poet, author of *Lyrical Poems*, *The Art of Being Ever Joyful* (a didactic poem), *Odes and Songs*, etc.? And Albert de Routisie (Basel, 1834–White Sea, 1867). French poet and novelist. A great admirer of Lomonosov, he undertook a pilgrimage to his place of birth at Arkhangelsk, but the ship sank just before entering harbour. After his death his only daughter, Irena Ragon, published his unfinished novel, *Les Cent-Jours*, a selection of poetry, *Les Yeux de Mélusine*, and, under the title of *Leçons*, an admirable anthology of aphorisms which remains his finest work. Who would now ever know that François Albergati Capacelli was an Italian playwright born

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<sup>566</sup> The name also recalls Bloom’s bath (and masturbating therein) at the end “The Lotus Eaters” episode (*Ulysses* 5.\_\_\_\_): “[Bloom] saw the dark tangled curls of his bush floating, floating hair of the stream around the limp father of thousands, a languid floating flower.” As noted above, it is likely that Bloom’s own ruminations on family, identity, paternity, and history, both in this passage and throughout *Ulysses*, have influenced Perec’s presentation of the same themes in Cinoc’s biography.

at Bologna in 1728, or that the master caster Rondeau (1493–1543) had been responsible for the bronze door of the funeral chapel at Carennac?<sup>567</sup>

Here again Perec has placed, as an intractable dyad, a historically real personage, the poet Uz, with a fictional one, Albert de Routisie, never a living man but an early pen-name of French Surrealist Louis Aragon (1897–1982). Perec bestows upon this shady doppelgänger a Pessoa-like life, giving the fictional alias a unique biography, however short and tragic, the drowning near Archangelsk a wistful, sadly comic note akin to some of the darker metafictional imaginings of Nabokov and Sebald. De Routisie's thumbnail-sketched death is perhaps another self-reflexive moment, with the author's swift death in freezing waters an oblique commentary on how the text swallows up inquiry, and even trust—the normative trusts borne of generic conventions, reading habits and histories, a common belief in the transparency and truthfulness of texts—in its voluminous, turbulent waters of signification: like de Routisie, we are often just at the point of “entering harbour” in terms of making the text intelligible, of distinguishing true from false and then weighing the reasons and effects, the poetics, of both. But even then we are at risk of drowning in the text's profusion of signs and the questions posed by signs, one of which latter the most pressing is, Why so much extended attention to such obscure figures and facts? What is Perec's exact take on the traditional postmodern *horror linguae*, a seeming compound of Mallarmé's *La chair est triste, hélas!* and Beckett's aphorism that “Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness”?<sup>568</sup> What is the point—with Perec or with anyone

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<sup>567</sup> Perec, 1987, 288–89.

<sup>568</sup> This is, of course, more of an impressionistic symbolic compound, a mood or flavor, rather than a true genealogy of literary postmodernism, a “take” on its texture and affects rather than a true history.

else—of all these bookish-schoolboy jokes and games? Who is François Albergati Capacelli to us, or we to François Abergati Capacelli, that we should weep for him?<sup>569</sup>

Little answer is forthcoming in the continuation of Cinoc's narrative, which details the Frenchman's ragpicker-like *flânerie* among the bookstalls and libraries of Paris, the catalogs describing his voracious reading swelling as his obsession progresses:

Cinoc began to dally on the banks of the Seine, rummaging through the open-air bookstalls, leafing through penny dreadfuls, out-of-date essays, obsolete traveller's guides, old textbooks on physiology, mechanics, or moral instruction, or superseded maps in which Italy still figured as a multicoloured patchwork of little kingdoms. Later on he went to borrow books from the municipal library of the XVIIth *arrondissement*, in Rue Jacques-Binjen, having them bring down from the attic dusty old folios, ancient users' manuals, volumes from the *Library of Miracles*, and old dictionaries: Lachâtre, Vicarius, Bescherelle aîné, Larrive, Fleury, the *Dictionary of Conversation* compiled by a Society of Men of Letters, Graves and d'Esbigné, Bouillet, Onions, Dezobry, and Bachelet. Finally, when he had exhausted the resources of his local library, he grew bolder and enrolled at Sainte-Geneviève, where he started to read the authors whose names he saw as he went in, carved on the stone façade.<sup>570</sup>

While extraordinary, Cinoc's labors are quite erratic, his researches not adhering to a predetermined plan or methodology but growing randomly, haptically, as results of his desultory "rummaging" and "leafing," the two gerunds indicating undirected, process-not-product-oriented

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<sup>569</sup> Josipovichi, 188, finds the Cinoc section comic, noting, "Our laughter stems from pleasure and bewilderment. We admire the abundance but wonder: is he having us on? Did these people really exist? And how marvellously that low-style *ubi sunt* rises out of the simple description of an old man in his kitchen." While admiring Josipovichi's enormous erudition and stylistic grace, I must strongly disagree: Perec's bittersweet *ubi sunt*, like so many of his lists, is resolutely elegiac, no less so for being fantastical, a book of ghosts that is not saved from the tragic by being couched in the obscurities of recondite trivia. (A similar air is breathed by many of the longer, stranger notes in Nabokov's apparatus to his translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, such as the delightfully sad *excursus* on which Russian maiden could have inspired the "two little feet" remembered with longing by the narrator of the poem: cf. Nabokov, 1981, 2:115–40: twenty-five lovingly digressive pages on what Nabokov winningly terms Pushkin's "famous pedal digression," and which he ends, melancholically, resignedly—and only after reviewing, exhaustively, four possible female exemplars—with, "This makes at least four persons, whose presumable or possible existence in 'real life' is of no interest whatsoever" [ibid., 140]. The same combination of absorption ending in bemused defeat is exhibited in Perec's passage above.)

<sup>570</sup> Perec, 1987, 289.

actions. Cinoc's browsing among the cast-off used books is the beginning of his private dictionary, which will aim to, if not fully restore, at least rescue the trace of, the bygone words of former generations. Note the degree of Perec's catalogic miniaturism, with the motif of the list—the subdividable field of elements—endlessly recapitulated, like fractals generated from a mathematical equation, the list of Cinoc's sources—"penny dreadfuls, out-of-date essays, obsolete traveller's guides"—generating, at a further level of detail, the "superseded maps in which Italy still figured as a multicoloured patchwork of little kingdoms" that symbolize *A Life's* own variegated, piecemeal structure.<sup>571</sup>

After burrowing through the great French dictionaries, Cinoc begins reading canonical and non-canonical Western authors whose names he had read on the façade of the library of Sainte-Geneviève—hardly a bad pedagogic programme, yet certainly not an official one, either, further evidence of Cinoc's aleatory, erratic, daemonic lexicography:

He read Aristotle, Pliny, Aldrovandi, Sir Thomas Browne, Gesner, Ray, Linnaeus, Brisson, Cuvier, Bonnetterre, Owen, Scoresby, Bennett, Aronnax, Olmstead, Pierre-Joseph Macquart, Sterne, Eugénie Guérin, Gastripheres, Phutatorius, Somnolentius, Triptolemy, Argalastes, Kysarchius, Egnatius, Sigonius, Bossius, Ticinenses, Baysius, Budoeus, Salmasius, Lipsius, Lazius, Isaac Casaubon, Joseph Scaliger, and even the *De re vestiaria veterum* by Rubenius (1665, quarto), which gave him a full & satisfactory account of the Toga, or loose gown, the Chlamys, the Ephod, the Tunica or jacket, the Synthesis, the Paenula, the Lacema with its Cucullus, the Paludamentum, the Praetexta, the Sagum or soldier's jerkin, and the Trabea: of which, according to Suetonius, there were three kinds.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> There is, of course, an implied list here, that of the unnamed Italian kingdoms and principalities.

<sup>572</sup> Perec, 1987, 289. Suetonius's three *trabea* are from his now-lost book on the types of clothing, attested to by Servius in his *Commentary on Virgil's Aeneid* (*Commentarius* 7.612): "In his book on the types of clothing Suetonius says that there are three types of *trabea*: one consecrated to gods, which is all purple; another for kings, which is purple-colored, with white as well; a third one for augurs, of purple and scarlet."

Cinoc's labors are appropriately heteroclit and ungoverned, the passionate devouring of knowledge by a driven autodidact. Remarkably—and fittingly for his exploration and recording of lost words from the byways of Western thought—his work concentrates on authors that are similar to himself, would-be world-builders who attempted to set down definitive and systematic accounts: Aristotle's now-surpassed foundation of empirical science and Pliny's great storehouse of classical curiosities, the *Natural History*; Renaissance continuations of this tradition like Ulisse Aldrovandi, whose 1599 *Ornithology* founded the modern branch of knowledge that bears its name, or Sir Thomas Browne, a melancholy essayist and composer of such dark dissertations as *Hydrotaphia, or Urne-Buriall* (on burial practices ancient and modern) and *Musaeum Clausum*, a list of imaginary books, objects, and curiosities that anticipates much of twentieth-century fiction, including Borges and the authors looked at in this study. Some of the scholars are known for their tenacious systematizing and professionalism, like Josef Justus Scaliger, whose *De emendatione temporum* (1583) and *Thesaurus temporum* (1606) brought chronological order to the chaos of classical history and its artifacts; or the great classical editor and commentator Isaac Casaubon. As should by now be familiar, a few names jar with the others, their presence creating a *frisson* between the catalog's claims of authority, representation, and intelligibility, and language's capacity for play, diversion, and drift: Arronax, for example, not a real scientist but a fictional one, the protagonist of Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*; or Joseph Sterne, who, while certainly a catholic and encyclopedic author, seems ill at home with the authors of actual encyclopedias; and certainly Phutatorius—a fictional character from Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, author of the obscene *De concubinis retinendis* (*On the Keeping of Concubines*)—and Somnolentus—another minor character from *Tristram Shandy*, whose name, “the sleepy one,” speaks both to his actions in the novel and his surrogacy here for the tired

reader of catalogs—are not fit to be numbered among the pantheon of the learned. Perec’s inclusion, then, of these obviously false names among the verifiably real ones is a continuation of the two different-yet-mutually-coexistent of catalogs we have seen above: the tendency to court chaos while seeking certainty, the inclusion of false data among the true, and the resistance to closure implicit in any linguistic or memorial act. For Phutatorius to rub shoulders with his creator Sterne among a catalog of European savants is for the very boundaries between fact and fiction, knowledge and fancy, to have been called into question.

Cinoc, then, is a digger in the intellectual graveyard of Europe, fashioning from its ruins his own ruinous meta-work, his own attempt to catalog the entirety of knowledge and experience along a unifying, central axis: “Cinoc read slowly and copied down rare words; gradually his plan began to take shape, and he decided to compile a great dictionary of forgotten words, not in order to perpetuate the memory of the Akka, a black-skinned pygmy people of Central Africa, or of Jean Gigoux, a historical painter, or of Henri Romagnesi, a composer of romances, 1781–1851, nor to prolong the life of the *scolecobrot*, a tetramerous coleopter of the longicorn family, Cerambycid branch, but so as to rescue simple words which still appealed to him. In ten years he gathered more than eight thousand of them, which contain, obscurely, the trace of a story it has now become almost impossible to hand on.”<sup>573</sup> Perec’s use of the word *trace* recalls the word’s use in the writings of Jacques Derrida, who defines the word in *Of Grammatology* as “that which does not let itself be summed up in the simplicity of a present.”<sup>574</sup> Perec thus explicitly disavows any notion that Cinoc’s labors might be useful, recuperative, or even intelligible: at best, no matter how long or exhaustive, his private dictionary can only catalog the trace of a lost story,

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<sup>573</sup> Perec, 1987, 289–90.

<sup>574</sup> Derrida, 1997, 66. Admittedly, this short definition is part of a much longer disquisition on the trace, arche-writing, the *logos*, and other Derridean concepts.

one “almost impossible to hand on” in any meaningful way, whether through narrative or anatomy, tale or list. Cinoc’s work is thus presented as a paradigmatically solipsistic text, one born from its author-assembler-producer’s private manias, and answering to no normative architectonic or structural principles save that of chance and whim. A text, in other words, and not a work: a text of shifting lights and shadows, a catalog of seeming randomness.<sup>575</sup>

Yet for all of its haphazard jumble, its private logic of association—itsself a product of Cinoc’s day-to-day random searches—the brief list of words that follows the narrator’s description of Cinoc’s private dictionary can be read and interpreted, can be made—to use Perec’s words—to answer as the trace of now-nearly-forgotten histories. Take, for example, the third item on the list, “LOQUIS (masc. nn.) Type of glass trinket used for trading with Negroes of the African coasts. Small cylinders made of coloured glass,” or, similarly, another word, “LOVELY (masc. nn.) (English *lovely*, pretty.) Indian bird resembling the European finch,” both of which contain, behind the mute signifiers of the words themselves, entire unwritten histories of colonialism, from the West African slave trade to the British conquest of India.<sup>576</sup> Or consider the histories of armed aggression buried in such innocuous words as “GIBRALTAR (masc. nn.) A kind of cake” and “DOUVEBOUILLE (masc. nn.) *Mil: V:* (deformation of *US: doughboy*, private foot soldier) American soldier during First World War (1917–1918),” the first word calling up the Moorish expansion into Europe during the Middle Ages—*Gibraltar* derives from

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<sup>575</sup> Cf. Barthes, 1977; and, above all, the work of Derrida.

<sup>576</sup> Perec, 1987, 290. *Lovely* is the colonial appropriation *par excellence*, the awarding of a familiar, paradigmatic word of aesthetic delight and ownership to a species of exotic fauna, an ornithological Other, thus linguistically domesticating and taming it by effacing, under *Lovely*’s bland generality, its native Indian name and associations. My thinking about this is inspired by Greenblatt, who describes the reverse process with the word *scammels*, a kind of edible plant or animal known to Caliban in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, but which is neither defined in the text nor anywhere else, rendering the word *scammels* an aporia, a non-signifying (or all-signifying, which is the same) signifier, a word the colonialist Prospero can hear and, hearing, appropriate and use, but the specificities of which in the mind of his subject Caliban he cannot know.

the Arabic *Jabal Tariq*, or “Tariq’s mountain,” the Muslim name for the island, conquered by the Berber Tariq ibn-Ziyad in 711—the second calling forth both the horrors of the Great War and the rise of the American Empire.<sup>577</sup> Or consider the sheer linguistic fecundity of the humble “MITELLE (fem. mn.) (Lat. *mitella*, dim. of *mitra*, mitre),” which has four divergent meanings in Cinoc’s list: “*Ant: Rom*: Small mitre, type of headdress worn esp. by women, sometimes with lavish decorations. Worn by men in the countryside. *Bot*: Genus of plant of the saxifrage family, thus called for the shape of its fruit, native of the cold regions of Asia and America. *Surg*: Sling for supporting the arm. *Moll*: Synonym of *scalpella*.”<sup>578</sup> The plurivocal, multiply signifying *mitelle* presents several possible definitions, all of which, lacking the word’s usage in context over time (which Cinoc provides: these are isolated, fossilized words, not cross-sections of linguistic strata), must be considered together. Or, finally, consider the “LOUISETTE,” which, we learn, is the “Name used for a time for the guillotine, whose invention was attributed to Dr Louis. ‘Louisette was the familiar name Marat gave to the guillotine’ (Victor Hugo).”<sup>579</sup> The entry refers indirectly to Doctor Antoine Louis, who developed a prototype for the guillotine under the direction of French National Assembly deputy Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, only to have his name severed (a dubious dishonor) by the latter from his own creation. But no dictionary entry, no inquiry into the origins of a word, could adequately delve into, even name, the tens of thousands of French citizens killed by the guillotine during Robespierre’s Terror: only a trace of their lives and deaths is present here, a mild discomfort at the blandness of Cinoc’s entry.

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<sup>577</sup> Perec, 1987, 290, 291. It’s fascinating to see the rock of *Gibraltar* descend to become a cake, and to see men become *Doughboys*—which word derives, depending on which part of the *OED*’s entry for the word one chooses—from a “boiled flour dumpling” of the colonial period, from the brass, dough-shaped buttons on the uniforms of Union soldiers during the Civil War, or from the “dough” (really pipe clay) used to clean belt buckles during the same period: two dough(t)y words, then, brimming over with the yeast of signification.

<sup>578</sup> Perec, 1987, 290–91.

<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

Catalogs and lists such as Cinoc's dictionary go beyond the simple stylistic use of the catalog-list as description, ornamentation, and ekphrasis, and even go beyond the status of catalog-as-motif or catalog-as-master-trope: Cinoc's dictionary reveals the epistemological and rhetorical heart of *A Life*, and shows the processes of enumeration, research, possession, obsession, and melancholy at work in the text—and, beyond the text, in language and culture at large—at their clearest, most concentrated state. Another such catalog-list comes during chapter 51, devoted to the painter Serge Valène, who has trained the mad puzzlemaker Bartlebooth in the delicate art of watercolor painting. Earlier in the novel we are introduced to Valène as the longest-residing member of the house at 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier, a man whose memories are a fountain of cataloged nostalgia, an attempt to revive the vanished details of earlier years:

[Valène] tried to resuscitate those imperceptible details which over the course of fifty-five years had woven the life of this house and which the years had unpicked one by one: the impeccably polished linoleum floors on which you were only allowed to walk in felt undershoes, the oiled canvas tablecloths with red and green stripes on which mother and daughter shelled peas; the dishstands that clipped together, the white porcelain counterpoise light that you could flick back up with one finger at the end of dinner; evenings by the wireless set, with the man in a flannel jacket, the woman in a flowery apron, and the slumbering cat rolled up in a ball by the fireplace; children in clogs going down for the milk with dented cans; the big old wood-stoves of which you would collect up the ashes in spread-out sheets of old newspaper . . .<sup>580</sup>

Note how Valène's thoughts proceed from the lost objects of the past, felt undershoes and oiled canvas tablecloths and the like, to the lost life of the past, the cozy radio-days bourgeois dream of domestic bliss, with everything in place, from the kitschy costumes of "flannel jacket" and "flowery apron" to the gender hierarchies these represent. Valène's remembered scene is a touching miniature of a perfectly-working domestic economy, producing lawfully-gotten children (who then grow old enough for domestic chores like fetching in milk), food (mother and

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<sup>580</sup> Ibid., 61.

daughter shell[ing] peas), and, of course, waste, in the form of ashes from the fireplace (which are then carefully taken out in more refuse, the “spread-out sheets of old newspaper”). Not surprisingly, Valène’s memories become an *ubi sunt* elegy for the discarded and lost leisure commodities of the bourgeois past:

Where were they now, the Van Houten cocoa tins, the Banania cartons with the laughing infantryman, the turned-wood boxes of Madeleine biscuits from Commercy? Where were they gone, the larders you used to have beneath the window-ledge, the packets of Saponite, the good old washing powder with its famous Madame Don’t-Mind-If-I-Do, the boxes of thermogene wool with the fire-spitting devil drawn by Cappiello, and the sachets of good Dr Gustin’s lithium tablets?

The years had flowed past, the removal men had brought down pianos and trunks, rolled carpets and boxes of crockery, standard lamps and fish tanks, birdcages, hundred-year-old clocks, soot-blackened cookers, tables with their flaps, the six chairs, the ice-makers, the large family portraits.

The stairs, for him, were, on each floor, a memory, an emotion, something ancient and impalpable, something palpitating somewhere in the guttering flame of his memory: a gesture, a noise, a flicker, a young woman singing operatic arias to her own piano accompaniment, the clumsy clickety-clack of a typewriter, the clinging smell of cresyl disinfectant, a noise of people, a shout, a hubbub, a rustling of silks and furs, a plaintive miaow behind a closed door, knocks on partition walls, hackneyed tangos on hissing gramophones, or, on the sixth floor right, the persistent droning hum of Gaspard Winckler’s jigsaw, to which, three floors lower, on the third floor left, there was now by way of response only a continuing, and intolerable, silence.<sup>581</sup>

The catalogs of Valène’s memories re-create the “flow[ing] past” of the combined years through the paratactic enumeration of object after object, memory after memory, the anaphoric repetition of “Where were they . . . ? Where were they . . . ?” striking a plangent tone that raises the emotional pitch of these paragraphs to a sustained high note of mourning, loss, remembrance, and nostalgia. The “something ancient and impalpable” would be to be Valène’s life in all its past fullness, the entirety of which is ultimately incommensurable and incommunicable, but details of which can nevertheless be revealed, fragment by fragment, each lit up desultorily by

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<sup>581</sup> Ibid., 61–62.

“the guttering flame of his memory” as they flicker past momentarily in his mind’s eye—each memory “something palpitating,” like a thousand separate heartbeats, each perpetually athrob with unfulfilled desire, the bittersweet remembrance of a past *plenum* of fulfillment and possession, the sweetbitter recognition of a current vacuum of longing and lack. Like all rhetorical questions posed by the *ubi sunt*, the repeated “Where were they . . . ?”s go unanswered: the actual objects long having been dispersed who knows where, Valène’s memorial reconstruction of their names and shapes would seem a scant, ghostly, melancholic compensation.

But since *Life A User’s Manual* is an endlessly recursive system in which distant parts of the novel are made to speak to, echo, continue, and answer each other, the haunting questions posed by the *ubi sunt* are eventually answered; however, Perec being Perec, and the work being allusive, downbeat, and resistant to closure, these questions are not answered directly or with clear examples or anecdotes that would fit the details of each lost object—rather, they are answered indirectly, suggestively, open-endedly. If Valène’s ruminations in the above section of “On the Stairs” focus on lost objects that will never be found again, then two other sections of “On the Stairs”—each providing part of a “Draft Inventory of some of the things found on the stairs over the years”—list lost objects that have been found, and provide a tonal and thematic bookend to the elegiac, sorrowing catalogs looked at above. These found objects, of course, are not the same as the lost objects looked at previously: Perec the tricksome puzzler would never allow for such a hamfistedly clanging close, such a cheesy and unearned resolution. Indeed, as fits such a discursive and openended a text as *A Life*, the found objects provoke their own questions, their own feelings of longing and loss, their own fragmentary narratives of ownership and enjoyment, of a oneness enjoyed between the world of objects and the human world:

Several photos, including one of a fifteen-year-old girl wearing a black swimsuit bottom and a white knitwear sweater, kneeling on a beach,  
 a radio alarm clock obviously destined for the mender's, in a plastic bag from the Nicolas company,  
 a black shoe decorated with jewels,  
 a slipper made of gilded goatskin,  
 a box of Géraudel cough pastilles,  
 a muzzle,  
 a Russian-leather cigarette case,  
 straps,  
 various notebooks and appointment books,<sup>582</sup>

and so on, for twenty or so more items, and on again in a “second and final instalment” later in the book:

A set of “Fact Sheets” on dairy farming in the Poitou-Charentes region,  
 a macintosh bearing the name “Caliban” made in London by Hemmings & Condell,  
 six varnished cork glass-mats portraying the sights of Paris: the Elysée palace, Parliament House, the Senate Building, Notre-Dame, the Law Courtes, and the Invalides,  
 a necklace made from the spine of an alosa,

and so on again, including a short list of typographically-themed jokes (such as “There’s nothing a printer can’t justify”), a short bibliography of Mark Twain’s major works listed on “an educational postcard in the *Great American Writers* series, N° 57”:

The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County (1867), The Innocents Abroad (1869), Roughing It (1872), The Gilded Age (1873), The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1875), The Prince and the Pauper (1882), Life on the Mississippi (1883), The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), A Yankee at the Court of King Arthur (1889), Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc (1896), What is Man? (1906), The Mysterious Stranger (1916).

At this point in the narrative, catalogs would seem to have run their course, to have hit a limit of exhaustion, and to have become detached from any motivated stylistic *raison d’être*: just another catalog, a list of works by Mark Twain, an author incidental to Perec’s universe and to the life of *Life A User’s Manual*. Even the few items that bear any allusive qualities, like the “macintosh

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<sup>582</sup> Ibid., 327.

bearing the name “Caliban” made in London by Hemmings & Condell”—Caliban, of course, is the monster-victim in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Hemmings and Condell the editors of the First Folio of Shakespeare’s works (the First Folio is the first extant printing of *The Tempest*)—seem more like jokes or asides, products perhaps of Perec’s OuLiPoian machineries of constraint, than bearing interesting meanings that would be useful to investigate.

Lists like these leave us only with their suggestive strangeness, the minor sadness of objects that have lost their owners, become disused, and even when found again have ceased to have purpose. As the unnamed narrator says of the final object, “a cylindrical box, wrapped in paper from *The Gay Musketeers* toy and games shop”—and which, when opened, reveals “several hundred little bits of gilded wood an imitation tortoiseshell plastic which, when appropriately assembled, were supposed to constitute a faithful reproduction oat one-third life-size of the water clock presented to Charlemagne by Haroun al-Rashid”—that is left “on the doormat of the then empty flat occupied later by Geneviè Foulerot,” and about whose provenance nothing can be ascertained (save that it was reportedly purchased by “a ten-year-old child” who paid, surprisingly, “with one-hundred-franc notes”): “The enquiry was carried no further, and the puzzle was never solved.”<sup>583</sup> So Perec leaves us, as we must leave both him and this study, at an aporetic moment, the end of an inquiry into catalogs and lists that, like the words mournfully destroyed and lovingly preserved by Cinoc, bear “the trace of a story it has now become almost impossible to hand on.”<sup>584</sup>

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<sup>583</sup> Ibid., 467.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid., 290.

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