

## THE UTOPIAN SPACE OF LISTS IN POSTMODERNIST AND CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

Luiz Fernando Ferreira Sá

Professor of English and Comparative literature

at the Faculty of Letters

The Federal University of Minas Gerais

(UFMG - FALE), Brazil,

&

Researcher at CNPq

### Abstract

*The article discusses the utopian space of literary lists in *The Studhorse Man* by the Robert Kroetsch, *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J. M. Coetzee, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, and *City of God* by E. L. Doctorow, following the lead of renowned critics like Terry Eagleton, Erich Auerbach, and Georg Lukács, among others. It is my contention that the utopian hope, image, and response created in postmodernist novels are made evident in the way conflicts are, if not resolved, at least given a poetic veneer in the things and objects inventoried on lists. The conclusion points to how novels tend to give us a kind of foreshortening of perception through the use of lists, enumerations, and inventories which suspend language, narrative, subjectivity, value, and meaning in their dizzying voraciousness and infinity.*

**Key-words:** lists, utopia, postmodern.

Why is the novel an ironic form, asks Terry Eagleton in his 2005 *The English Novel: An Introduction*. His answer is: because “In reflecting everyday life, it also signals its essential distance from it.” (15) Eagleton continues by saying that even though we have a glimpse of reconciliation in most English novels, “even if it is purely fictional, [this reconciliation] represents a kind of utopian hope.” (15) Eagleton ends his thoughts on the reconciliatory character of the English novel thus: “The novel is a utopian image—not in what it represents, which can be gruesome enough, but in the very act of representation—an act which at its most effective shapes the world into meaning with no detriment to its reality. In this sense, to narrate is itself a moral act.” (16)

Still according to Eagleton, when the novel is most truly realistic, “What it reflects most importantly is not the world, but the way in which the world comes into being only by our bestowing form and value upon it.” (17) In so being, Eagleton concludes along the lines proposed by Georg Lukács in his *Theory of the Novel* that “the novel is the product of an alienated world. Yet it is also a utopian response to it.” (18) Still with Lukács, Eagleton

asseverates: the novel “is an art form which can no longer shape the contradictions which plague it into a coherent whole.” (19) Instead of English novels, we shall see in *The Studhorse Man* by the Robert Kroetsch, *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J. M. Coetzee, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, and *City of God* by E. L. Doctorow how “those conflicts are now beginning to infiltrate the very form of the novel itself.” (Eagleton 19) Returning to Eagleton, those conflicts “reflect themselves in the break-up of language, the collapse of narrative, the unreliability of reports, the clash of subjective standpoints, the fragility of value, the elusiveness of overall meaning.” (19)

It is my contention, then, that the utopian hope, image, and response discussed by Eagleton and Lukács, despite being literary critics using somewhat different theoretical frameworks, are made evident in the aforementioned novels in the way the conflicts are, if not resolved, at least given a poetic veneer in the things and objects inventoried on lists. I will show how the lists in the said novels participate in the overall break-up of language, in the collapse of narrative, in the clash of subjective standpoints, in the fragility of value and in the elusiveness of meaning. It is also my contention that what the postmodernist and contemporary novels tend to give us instead is a kind of foreshortening of perception through the use of lists, enumerations, and inventories which suspend language, narrative, subjectivity, value, and meaning in their dizzying voraciousness and infinity.

Here I must add that Eagleton does not use the literary lists in order to prove his point and comes to a different conclusion altogether, for he refers to modernist novels. I cite: “What the modernist novel tends to give us instead [of conflicts in relation to the utopian hope, image, and response] is a kind of empty signifier of a totality which is no longer possible.” (19). This statement is far from having been exhausted and continues to bear fruit for our discerning reading of postmodernist and contemporary novels.

I believe this empty signifier of a totality which is out of joint is no longer possible in postmodernist novels because our contemporary world is not simply out of joint, but ultimately disjointed. It is, then, to the aid of an *arsdisjunctoria* that the postmodernist and contemporary novelists have returned. Of course this *arsdisjunctoria* spells out as the utopian hope towards, image of, and response to, the willingness to allow narrative’s newly released parts to float, mingle, and re-cohere. The free floating parts re-cohere in the many lists rehearsed in the above mentioned novels and the lists become themselves a utopia, so to speak. Again, this utopian space created with the help of lists in postmodernist and contemporary novels has to do with the relative failure of formal realism and with the hardening of Eagleton’s and Lukács’s conclusion that to narrate is itself a moral act.

Narrated in “moral” (“immorally”), the basic line of Kroetsch’s novel, *The Studhorse Man* (1970), becomes entangled in the story of Demeter Proudfoot and his problems relating to every writer-biographer, as well as in the life of Hazard Lepage, a man who has a stallion, Poseidon, looking for a mare for breeding. While going through one of the Canadian Plains (Alberta), Hazard experiences unusual adventures that deviate him from his goal: to breed his stallion. A happy ending is briefly entertained, but Poseidon kills his master and Eugene Utter, Hazard’s partner, takes control of business and marries his former fiancée. Not only is

there irony in how the new couple thrives on breeding horses through the urine of pregnant mares, of which scientists extract estrogen for use in the production of oral contraceptives, but also in the outcome of the novel, a true spectacle of celebration of death and life, of the simultaneous writing of the self and the other, of the forms of the world and of the shape of a more-than-real reality.

Robert Kroetsch, who emphasizes discontinuity and a direct perceptual approach, sees fiction, language, and (dis-)ordering as a process in which the reader works with the writer in an uncertain and shifting world, rather than as a finished, ordered product that the reader understands and passively contemplates. But what are the passages that contemplate and shy order away simultaneously? The first passage, the only one I will address here, a beautiful list, is directed to Hazard's library and his bulk of acquired knowledge:

Hazard dearly loved to read. His poetry and his philosophy were a leatherbound stained ancient collection called *The General Stud Book*. The Englishman who built the isolated mansion and perished within its walls had brought the volume with him from God knows what elegant manor house or dusty London bookshop. Those volumes were Hazard's history of man and his theology. Sitting, he could not help but confront the chaos on the bookshelves beside the desk: currycombs, a broken hamestrap, a spoon wired to a stick for dropping poisoned wheat into the holes of offending gophers, saltpeter, gentian root, a scattering of copper rivets, black antimony, a schoolboy's ruler, three mousetraps in a matchbox, two chisels for trimming hoofs, Cornucrescine (for making horn grow), ginger, horse liniment and liniment for his back, Elliman's Royal Embrocation, blue vitriol, an electuary, nux vomica, saddle soap in a Spode (a simple blue and white) saucer, Spanish fly— (Kroetsch 1970:11).

By tricking Borges and ticking Foucault, there remains a sense of merging between the real and the larger-than-life, particularly in the enlisting of the Spanish fly in the dusty London bookshop and in the elegant English manor house back to the rural mousetraps of Cornucrescine and horse liniment. At the basis of both activities is a desire to know where things come from; not really a search for old origins, but rather a play with beginnings. What Kroetsch seems to be doing, throughout this novel, is playing the denial camp against the desire camp, that is, he demands that we attempt to uncover the bits of reality and the blots of utopia – all the while denying that a total un(dis)covering is even possible. (Sá 2009) This first list obviously participates in the overall break-up of language, in the collapse of narrative, in the clash of subjective standpoints, in the fragility of value and in the elusiveness of meaning, therefore, this first list is a type of foreshortened utopia, a utopian space, if you will, in the web of lists that make up this novel.

If we fall back on the hope to change the world as we shape it, on the image of the world contoured in our minds, and the response to the problems attending the so-called real world, a South African novelist would be expected to be concerned with the voices of the disenfranchised, with the masks of civilization, with forms to negotiate the injustices

associated with either power or powerlessness. J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, a 1980 postmodernist novel, gravitates around the systems of oppression and resistance to them, and it very often reads the figure and figurations of Empire as a historical embodiment of such systems. The novel takes its title and premise from a poem written in 1904, by the Greek writer Constantine Cavafy. Cavafy's poem provides the title for J. M. Coetzee's novel, and it supplies the essential promise, too: that in order for something like an empire to exist, it must have something to exist against—an opposite, an "other" against which to define itself. The master, to be conceivable, relies upon the conception of the slave; good must have evil; inside must be what is not outside—and civilization needs barbarism.

The novel details the fall from grace of an unexceptional magistrate of Empire and exposes the brutality and bankruptcy accompanying colonial and imperial projects moved by the philosophies of power/knowledge and the delusions that accompany every illusion of doing the right thing. The magistrate narrator contrasts with the other two characters: Colonel Joll, an intelligence agent who works in the "influential" Third Bureau, and a young barbarian woman, blinded and abused by Colonel Joll in his "enlightened" information gathering. To the young native, the magistrate reveals the central theme of the novel: the terror of a realist(ic) imagination. "Nothing is worse than we can imagine," he whispers in an intimate moment and concludes: "do not make a mystery of it, pain is only pain." (Coetzee 1982: 34)

The first list in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and we have many inventories throughout, also participates in the overall break-up of language, in the collapse of narrative, in the clash of subjective standpoints, in the fragility of value and in the elusiveness of meaning. We might call this first list an enumeration of sorts and an empire of pain:

... my ear is even turned to the pitch of human pain. ... 'Is that not a terrible position? Imagine: to be prepared to yield, to yield, to have nothing more to yield, to be broken, yet to be pressed to yield more! And what a responsibility for the interrogator! How do you ever know when a man has told you the truth? ... The tone of truth! Can you pick up this tone in everyday speech? Can you hear whether I am telling the truth? ... I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see—this is what happens—first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth'. Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt. (Coetzee 1982:5)

But we must pause a little here to examine this doubt itself. Some of you may be thinking: here he refers to dystopia and to a dystopian space. Mind you I am not discussing modes or generic instances of utopias, what I am interested in here is a kind of "formal utopianism" and I follow the train of thought begun with Ian Watt, Erich Auerbach, Georg Lukács, and Terry Eagleton. In other words, it is precisely this illusion of a transcendence that would be made accessible through the magistrate's (and narrator's) own torture that implicates him even more graphically in the discourse of the lists and its formal utopianism. Such an illusion

is possible because of the impact of the process of torture (upon himself and the woman), its overwhelming excess over “ordinary” experience ultimately points to the elusiveness of meaning. In short, truth, to be conceivable, relies upon the conception and exertion of pain.

Next, before I succinctly analyze one list from *The God of Small Things*, Roy’s first and only novel, published in 1997, I feel the need to illustrate some of the discussed ideas with a short dialogue taken from Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*: “I don’t care anything about his house’, said Isabel.” And the answer from her interlocutor:

“That’s very crude of you. When you’ve lived as long as I you’ll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There is no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we’re each of us made of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our ‘self’? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know a large part of me is in the clothes I choose to wear. I’ve a great respect for things! One’s self – for other people – is one’s expression of one’s self; and one’s house, one’s furniture, one’s garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive.” (James 1986: 37)

Yes, they are all expressive and, according to Eagleton and Lukács, they may shape the world into meaning and they are concomitantly a moral act.

Back to Roy’s novel, *The God of Small Things* reveals a complex relationship between individuals, between individuals and the historical and cultural forces, and between the world in which they live and the novel itself. A Big God presides over the great events of the world, the “vast, violent, circular, energetic, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible public uproar that is a nation,” (Roy 1997: 19) while a Small God directs the individuals’ lives wrapped in tensions and conflicts of all sorts. A series of stunning setbacks and small tragedies affects individuals whom the Small God takes under his/her guiding protection. Facing the movements of the world or of the nation, some individuals adopt resignation, indifference, and recklessness, whilst others will be overwhelmed by forgetfulness in general and forgetfulness of who they were and still are, of the world they live in, and of the lack of (morally) edifying narratives around them.

The Small God definitely presides over the following list:

Baby Kochamma loved the Ayemenem house and cherished the furniture that she had inherited by outliving everybody else. Mammachi’s violin and violin stand, the Ooty cupboards, the plastic basket chairs, the Delhi beds, the dressing table from Vienna with cracked ivory knobs. The rosewood dining table that Velutha made.... Still to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem is only one way of looking at it. Equally, it would be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendancy, before Vasco da Gama arrived, before the Zamorin’s conquest of Calicut. Before three



purple-robed Syrian Bishops murdered by the Portuguese were found floating in the sea, with coiled sea serpents riding on their chests and oysters knotted in their tangled beards. It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala life like tea from a teabag.

That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much. (Roy 1997: 28,33)

This inventory and enumeration, far from containing and mirroring the hierarchy of existence, plays a central role in a culture of systematic disorientation; it points towards a different reality, it no longer refers back to the reassuring, sensible world of the divine order, but looks instead to the aberrant, disjointed world of today: relationships are re-shaped and given shape by collective shame, familial prejudice, and individual vendetta-like arrogance, gardens are torn asunder, homes are broken, lives lay waste, they are all made simultaneously victims of the abject filth all around them, and victimizers who, in their turn, reproduce more apathy and neglect.

Such things, summarily grouped according to laws that take into account the coherence of the things listed, are not those external accidents or imponderable and arbitrary leaps of the unconscious, they are rather torn from their mundane, everyday significance and mystified, made free once more and capable of assuming a meaning that is mysterious and irrational: what is made mysterious is “reality”, the many-sided phenomenon that a transcendental irony destroys by fire. This, in short, is what I have been calling formal utopianism.

There is much in the work of Doctorow to encourage the designation of “formally utopian”: the central plot of *City of God*, a novel dated 2001, refers to the creation and solving a series of puzzles, and Doctorow himself in comments about his writing uses the enigma of the puzzle as an explanatory metaphor. His fidelity to this metaphor indicates that it worked for him, but does not necessarily mean that the use of puzzles, lists, and metaphors accurately describes his work as a writer. Diversely populated and largely ex-centric, Doctorow's novel can also be seen as an exquisitely singular portrait of the peripatetic imagination of a man and his stream of consciousness. Everything we read in *City of God*, from the Episcopal priest in the midst of a crisis of faith to a mournful rabbi struggling to redirect the destiny of the whole Jewish tradition, from the distressing story of a ghetto survivor of the Holocaust to the lush, image-blended verses about the World Wars, presumably flows from a cursor manipulated by a New York writer in midlife called Everett.

With Everett as its protagonist, a harried “Everyman,” Doctorow offers his readers lists, comprehensive catalogues of the twentieth century, by channeling the voices of Albert Einstein, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Frank Sinatra, as well as shots and takes from several fictional beings that occupy both the main narrative and its peripheral silhouettes. Starting with the title of his novel and its Augustinian implications, each spectrum of Doctorow's archive-novel is filled with the questions concerning the origin of faith, the mystery of human consciousness, and the failure of the idea of God. I select, amid several other enumerations, catalogues, and astounding lists, the following passage:

But I can stop on any corner at the intersection of two busy streets, and before me are thousands of lives headed in all four directions, uptown downtown east and west, on foot, on bikes, on in-line skates, in buses, strollers, cars, trucks, with the subway rumble underneath my feet ... and how can I not know I am momentarily part of the most spectacular phenomenon in the unnatural world? There is a specie recognition we will never acknowledge. A primatial oversoul. For all the wariness or indifference with which we negotiate our public spaces, we rely on the masses around us to delineate ourselves. The city may begin from a marketplace, a trading post, the confluence of waters, but it secretly depends on the human need to walk among strangers.

And so each of the passersby on this corner, every scruffy, oversize, undersize, weird, fat, or bony or limping or muttering or foreign-looking, or green-haired punk-strutting, threatening, crazy, angry, inconsolable person I see ... is a New Yorker, which is to say as native to this diaspora as I am, and part of our great sputtering experiment in a universalist society proposing a world without nations where anyone can be anything and the ID is planetary.

Not that you shouldn't watch your pocketbook, lady. (Doctorow 2001:11)

With their invocation apparently borrowed from Borges's Chinese encyclopedist and their embracing of the principle according to which disjointedness is the contemporary form of the utopian hope, image, and response, Doctorow's catalogues multiply, apparently *ad libitum*, the plays on slippage and shifting, and of things-within-things, of lists-within-lists, that are present in explicit fashion, to a greater or lesser degree, in the utopian space of lists in contemporary novels.

Before concluding this article, I suggest we go over, as in a bird's eye view, the unusual collection of Keri Hulme's protagonist, Kerewin, in her novel *The Bone People* (1983):

A thin shell of pottery, lopsided, coloured brown and yellow, speckled like a thrush breast; wooden goblets with carved stems; the three pure bubbles of crystal, brittle upon the thinnest possible stalks; matt pewter; engraved silver; a clear hemisphere of aquamarine, flawed and scintillating with light on that one side; the thick, chunky cut glass that Charles, long ago prince of doomed distant Stuarts, was supposed to have owned; translucent bowls of porcelain brought back from Japan; two handsized lacquer bowls; a jade cup that held as much wine as an eggshell on a tall pedestal of fretted ivory ... no two quite the same. All rare, all strange ... especially that odd little pottery bowl that Simon used on his drinking spree. ... (335-336)

In her tower-house, Kerewin safeguards her collection of odd objects, where everything is to be seen through catalogues and inventories, lists that would make Umberto Eco, in *The Infinity of Lists* (2009), want to have included such voracious and infinite series in his book. Although the use of lists, as a rhetorical device, has its beginnings in classical antiquity, it is rather curious that Hulme's lists in *The Bone People* do not resemble the epic(al) series of

Greece and Rome, but, in a curious way, refers us back to the list I started with from the Canadian Kroetsch: all we need now is dismiss the idea and form of the novel as work, finished, a mere act of representation, and see it as a shaping force, as a vector able to disrupt the orderly arrangement of forces, be them contradictory or conflictual, in the always tense, liminal space within and between literary lists.

Through accumulation and paradox, the poetics of the list, in this final examples at least, thus reaches the acme of orthodoxy and at the same time confounds all pre-constituted logical order or ordinary realism by emphasizing an overall break-up of language, a collapse of narrative, a clash of subjective standpoints, fragility of value, and elusiveness of meaning. Disjointedness in lists, or what I have been calling formal utopianism, is not merely a farrago of morsels and fragments, transitory insights into this fragmentary jigsaw which is our contemporary world, not the mere celebration of a mosaic with missing pieces, but the collection of techniques by which postmodern and contemporary novelists began to represent the unrepresentable side of a more particular and circumstantial view of life.

On a final note, if formal realism has to do with a technique, a how instead of a what, if formal realism, according to Eagleton, insists most ardently upon “the recalcitrance of reality to our desires, the sheer stubborn inertia with which it baffles our designs upon it,” (4-5) I finally suggest that formal utopianism will focus, by means of lists, catalogues, inventories, and enumerations on the subordination of reality to our desires, hence the sheer stubborn irony with which it will continuously baffle our designs upon it. This master trope, irony, should be understood by way of Hayden White’s position in *Metahistory* (1973:37): it “represents a stage of consciousness in which the problematic nature of language itself has become recognized.” For White, irony characterizes modernist historiography, and it may as well refer to the utopian spaces of lists in postmodernist novels or to what I termed their formal utopianism. I must add that in our contemporary world this recognition is spelled out as celebration. In sum, this sense-making enterprise, and that is what postmodernist and contemporary novels are, especially via their lists, inventories, and accumulations, is definitely a moral act when seen against the backdrop of moral acts being dependent on the construction of meaning.

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