

The Infinity of Lists by Umberto Eco

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[Review](#)

Even the most ardent lovers of ancient literature tend to steer clear of one section of Homer's *Iliad*. This is the poem's second book, which is euphemistically known as "The Catalogue of Ships" – but is in fact dominated by a 350-line list of the various Greek forces that made up the "coalition of the willing" in the invasion of Troy. ("Fierce Ajax led the Locrian squadrons on . . . Euboea next her martial sons prepares" and so on, and on.) Most readers find it hard going, and skip it.

In *The Infinity of Lists* [Umberto Eco](#) sings the praises of Homer's "Catalogue" and of a vast range of other lists in western culture. (He hardly draws on the east, beyond referring to the numbered list of a Chinese restaurant menu.) At the very beginning of European literature, Eco argues, Homer offered us two ways of seeing the world. On the one hand, there is that open-ended list of military forces, with all its indeterminacy and hints at infinity. On the other, later in the *Iliad*, there is a description of the magnificent shield, which the god Hephaestus made for Achilles, with the whole of the cosmos (from the stars in the sky to the sheep in the fields) represented within its frame. This is "finite form", a closed and bounded world, with nothing outside it and no possibility of addition or accretion. Eco leave us in no doubt which style of representation he prefers: the boundless list.

Not that there is very much of Eco in this book. Like his recent *On Beauty* and *On Ugliness*, *The Infinity of Lists* is really an anthology – this time of textual and visual lists (from Homer to Salvador Dalí) – with some commentary from Eco interspersed, amounting to perhaps 70 out of 400 handsomely produced and beautifully illustrated pages. Little more than a short essay, it is nevertheless a characteristic product of this extraordinary writer and polymath: learned, sparkling, insightful, provocative, packed full of intriguing and arcane information (I was particularly taken with the cranium of the 12-year-old John the Baptist supposedly stored among the religious relics in a German cathedral). But, equally characteristically, it does not quite convince.

Eco has a capacious definition of the list. Different parts of the anthology focus on museum collections (museums share the sense of the infinite, because they are always adding more objects), on the pleasures of excess (Rabelais has the starring role here) and on the idea of the painted list (largely still-lives, or images of ghastly massacres, where the viewer knows that there is more, and perhaps worse, going on beyond the frame of the painting). He has trouble finding any example of a list in sculpture: "It is hard to imagine," he concedes, "a statue that conveys an 'et cetera', ie one that suggests it may continue beyond its own physical limits." But he manages to include music. Ravel's *Bolero* is his favourite candidate for a musical list: it could, after all, just go on and on for ever.

But throughout the book one particular worry nags at Eco's enthusiasm for the sheer profusion of meaning and the uncontrollable excess, which he sees as the defining feature of the list as a genre. For lists, as he admits, can also act to order, control and exclude. In fact, among students of literacy, the list is often seen as one of the main by-products of the invention of writing – and with lists come not so much an infinity of possibilities, but rule and orthodoxy. It is, for example, only when a culture can list its kings that it can enshrine a fixed view of its own history. A list of cities, territories or rivers, which Eco can find "dizzying" in James Joyce, is also one of the foundations of imperial control.

To get round this, Eco draws a distinction between "practical" lists and "poetic" lists. The practical kind, such as inventories, shopping lists or lists of dinner-party guests, has a quite different function from the poetic: no one wants a potential infinity of guests arriving to dinner, and no one wants a library catalogue suggesting that the library holds books which it does not. In fact, this kind of list is very similar to the "finite form" of Homer's shield because, in Eco's words, it "confers unity on a set of objects" and is defined by those things in the real world to which it refers. But are poetic lists always so very different from this? Indeed Homer makes it clear that his list of leaders and ships is finite, and that no others went to Troy. Eco wriggles awkwardly on this point: "Since Homer cannot say how many men there are for every leader, the number he alludes to is still indefinite."

My own nagging worries are rather different. Has Eco actually succeeded in breathing life into the list? And is he entirely serious anyway? Going back to the Homeric catalogue, even after Eco's enthusiastic analysis, I still found it very hard going. But when I discovered him, in an interview, choosing the Telephone Directory as his *Desert Island* book, I wondered whether the whole project was not, after all, slightly tongue-in-cheek. Perhaps the joke is on the reader for taking Eco's eulogy of the list seriously.