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Novelistic Ruins: Textual Fragmentation and Contemporary British Literature

Ruínas Novelistas: Fragmentação Textual e Literatura Britânica Contemporânea

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses both the textual fragmentation and the utopian space of literary lists in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Hilary Mantel's *Bring up the Bodies*, and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* by following the lead of Terry Eagleton and Georg Lukács. It is my contention that the utopian hope, image, and response created in contemporary novels are evident in the way contradictions acquire a poetic veneer in the things and objects inventoried on lists. It is to the aid of an *ars disjunctoria* that the postmodernist novelists have returned and this return spells out as the utopian hope towards, image of, and response to, the willingness to allow the newly released parts of narrative to float, mingle, and monumentalize themselves as ruins. This utopian space created with the help of lists in contemporary novels has to do with the relative failure of formal realism and with the hardening of the conclusion, reached by Eagleton and Lukács, that to narrate is itself a moral act. The article also discusses the extent to which 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, in the elusiveness of meaning, and in the creation of a "ruinous" present. The conclusion points to how contemporary 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.

Keywords: Lists. Utopia. Contemporary Ruins.

RESUMO

A esperança, a imagem e a resposta utópicas discutidas por Terry Eagleton e Georg Lukács se tornam evidentes nos romances elencados neste artigo (*Atonement* de Ian McEwan, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* de Mark Haddon, *Bring up the Bodies* de Hilary Mantel e *White Teeth* de Zadie Smith) na maneira que os conflitos são, se não resolvidos, pelo menos revestidos de uma aparência insólita nas coisas e objetos inventariados em listas. O que eu proponho neste artigo é pensar como as listas dos referidos romances participam na ruptura da linguagem, no colapso da narrativa, no confronto de perspectivas, na fragilidade do valor e na vacuidade de sentido. Os romances contemporâneos tendem a nos dar um tipo de atalho na percepção por meio do uso de listas, enumerações e inventários, os quais suspendem a linguagem, a narrativa, a subjetividade, o valor e o sentido, em sua confusa voracidade e infinidade.

Palavras-chave: Listas. Utopia. Ruínas.

1 INTRODUÇÃO

In many ways, Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Hilary Mantel's *Bring up the Bodies*, and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* make for an unlikely grouping. While one is the work of a renowned English novelist and screenwriter, the other is the work of a lesser-known English author who claims Jane Austen to be an inspiration, while one is a historical novel and sequel to the award-winning *Wolf Hall*, the other is a debut novel that has received an astonishing chorus of praise. However, I argue that these four novels have much in common and that an analysis of each can offer insight into some of the techniques contemporary novels employ.

These novels deal with the problem of perception: how we perceive history, how we perceive fiction, and how much those perceptions depend on the notions by which we live. Not only are narratives appertaining to history and fiction handled on a thematic level in these novels, but they are a major aspect of their narrative forms as well. As the novels present characters that are forced to reconcile their previously held perceptions (of themselves, of their private and public histories, of the fictions surrounding them, of their turning their eye to the world around) with their experiences, so too are the readers' perceptions positioned and re-positioned through narrative features. These novels make a type of meta-commentary on the power of written works to affect readers' perceptions.

This is especially meaningful because these novels extensively use lists (with some bordering on the collection) and lists have at least two strengths: first, they are multi-dimensional data – that is why they call upon different planes of signification – and second, lists are metadata. Lists preferably link the reader to that to which they refer, even analog lists are some form of index or pointer. There is a real-world equivalent of a list, which consists mainly of data, not metadata: collections. The simplest of collections are mere aggregations, but there are collections that would enmesh their items in a deep web of relationships and this would allow the accretion of meaning over time. These properties serve the distinguishing purpose of a collection: to provide a relatively stable center for the single or collective understanding of a topic or subject of persistent interest in everyday life.¹

Curious enough, everyday life seems to be a major concern for the British critic and theorist Terry Eagleton. In his 2005 *The English Novel: An Introduction*, Eagleton asked himself why the novel is an ironic form and his answer was the following: "In reflecting everyday life, it also signals its essential distance from it." (15) Eagleton continued questioning the novel form and concluded 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) The critic ended 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)

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) Eagleton draws upon the work of Georg Lukács in his *Theory of the Novel* and states “the novel is the product of an alienated world. Yet it is also a utopian response to it.” (18) Still with Lukács, Eagleton asseverates that the novel “is an art form which can no longer shape the contradictions which plague it into a coherent whole.” (19) We shall see in *Atonement*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in The Night-Time*, *Bring up the Bodies*, and *White Teeth* how those contradictions are now beginning to infiltrate the very form of the novel itself by way of the lists and collections employed. Returning to Eagleton, those contradictions “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 evident in the aforementioned novels in the way the contradictions acquire a poetic veneer in the things and objects inventoried in 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 contemporary novels tend to give us is a kind of foreshortening of perception via 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 literary lists in order to prove his point and comes to a different conclusion altogether, for he refers to modernist novels. Following his train of thought, “what the modernist novel tends to give us instead [of contradictions 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 contemporary novels.ⁱⁱ

The empty signifier of a totality, indeed a totality that is arguably out of joint, is no longer possible in novels because our contemporary world is not simply out of joint, but ultimately disjointed. It is, then, to the aid of an *ars disjunctoria* that the contemporary novelists have returned. Of course, this *ars disjunctoria* spells out as the utopian hope towards, image of, and response to, the willingness to allow the newly released parts of narrative 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. In fact, this utopian space created with the help of lists in contemporary novels has to do with the relative failure of formal realism and with the hardening of the conclusion, reached by Eagleton and Lukács, that to narrate is itself a moral act.

Atonement is construed upon metafictional bases that refer not only to the direct relation between the author and his work, but actually to the means of composition used by Briony Tallis, the “author” of the book who is setting out on a “moralizing” journey. The events of this journey may be termed the fictionalization of meta-fiction juxtaposed to the making the public and private histories fiction. McEwan uses the protagonist or surrogate author to expose and justify both the narrative structure of his work and his narrative choices, which show multiple perspectives. *Atonement* follows a 13-year-old aspiring writer, Briony Tallis, in at least two different fronts. The first one, from the failure of her first childish attempt at drama, *The Trials of Arabella*, to its presentation, six decades later. The second one, from the demise of the play to Briony's decision to write a story about a confrontation she accidentally sees between her older sister and 23-year-old Robbie Turner, the family landscaper and childhood friend of Briony's siblings. The rub (conflict: misapprehension of the confrontation), the crux (the core of the problem encompasses Briony's linking the altercation with rape), and the onus (Briony's duty is to make things right after Robbie is sent to prison and later dies fighting at World War I) of the novel lies in Briony's seeing with blind eyes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ian McEwan, who emphasizes discontinuity, 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 passively contemplates. What are the passages that contemplate and shy order away simultaneously? The first passage, the only one I will address here, directs us to Briony's childish infatuation with miniatures and collections, which foreshadows the author in her mature years coping with the dangers of blinding misapprehensions and the relative failures of fiction where truth is concerned:

A taste for the miniature was one aspect of an orderly spirit. Another was a passion for secrets: in a prized varnished cabinet, a secret drawer was opened by pushing against the grain of a cleverly turned dovetail joint, and here she kept a diary locked by a clasp, and a notebook written in a code of her own invention. In a toy safe opened by six secret numbers she stored letters and postcards. An old tin pretty cash box was hidden under a removable floorboard beneath her bed. In the box were treasures that dated back four years, to her ninth birthday when she began collecting: a mutant double acorn, fool's gold, a rain-making spell bought at a funfair, a squirrel's skull as light as a leaf. (McEwan 5).

Collections promote a “re-semanticization” of things that assume imaginary/symbolic functions, recreating the world as an alternate fiction. Briony's collection (diary, notebook, letters and postcards, acorn, gold, spell, skull) reconstructs everyday life around her and gives it other meanings. This list, which is concomitantly a collection, accomplishes the following feats: First, it tangentially suspends language -- language is no longer conceived as just a closed system, but must be thought of in its practice, attaching importance to the dialogue established with the symbolic/imaginary, with the political division of the senses, which have become unstable. Second, it marks the collapse of narrative -- the things exposed are not presented following a certain order (as Briony would have wanted it herself), but are accumulated in a disjunctive and poetic condensation. Third, it makes clear that reports are unreliable -- Briony's cabinet of curiosities finds its *raison d'être* in a multiplicity of frames, niches, boxes, drawers, cases, and appropriates to itself the chaos of the world by imposing upon it systems (however arbitrary) of symmetries and hierarchies. Fourth, it points to the clash of subjective standpoints -- is fiction (diary, notebook, letters, postcards) for Briony a secret to keep to herself, or is it a secret to be told? Besides that, what is the imaginary connection between fiction and acorn, gold, spell, skull for Briony and for the informed reader? Fifth, it suggests that value is fragile and meaning elusive after all -- there is in Briony's collection a sense of openness that touches upon the inconceivable, touching the surface of what escapes the operations connected with naming, which paradoxically transforms nothingness into fullness. By collecting the leftovers in the dovetailed drawer, in a toy safe, in a cash box, they become the realm of the remains, allowing new relationships to come about in a continuous creative impulse until finally they, the remains, are written over and reach a form of atonement.

This list is a type of foreshortened utopia, a utopian space, so to speak, in the web of lists that make up this novel. In the last chapter of *Atonement* (London, 1999), Briony does not necessarily come out of a drawer/box/safe, but walks out of the closet. She confirms to us that she has been writing every chapter so far and that writing, much like keeping a collection

in her younger years, paves the way towards a kind of reconciliation: “I love these little things, this pointillist approach to verisimilitude, the correction of detail that cumulatively gives such satisfaction. ... Like policemen in a search team, we go on hands and knees and crawl our way towards the truth.” (McEwan 359) If this is true for an orderly spirit in the like of Briony, it is also true for the next young narrator/protagonist/author, Christopher Boone, whose special and beautiful mind (he happens to be autistic) is keen to hold on to every minute detail of everyday life.

Several critics have noted the way in which Christopher Boone delivers insights in a deadpan style,^{iv} but one important aspect about the fictions he creates around himself is that he maintains that he cannot lie or imagine something not true. Christopher’s logic addresses the gap between the undecidability and the imprecision of signs, as Stefania Ciocia points out, he exposes the reality that “all language is approximate and figurative to a degree.” (328) Christopher embarks on three journeys simultaneously. The first one pertains to the detective-like tale of finding out who killed Wellington (his neighbor’s dog). The second one bears on the stoical story of travelling to London to find his mother whom he thought was dead, and the third one touches upon a kind of *Bildung* -- a journey of self-cultivation, wherein fiction (orderly and chaotic), lists and collections are linked in a manner that refers to a process of both personal and cultural maturation.

The first list in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in The Night-Time*, and there are 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. This list is a collection of sorts and sees to the domains/demands of the everyday:

This is what I had in my pockets[:] 1. A Swiss Army knife with 13 attachments including a wire stripper and a saw and a toothpick and tweezers [:] 2. A piece of string [:] 3. A piece of a wooden puzzle which looked like this [drawing:] 4. 3 pellets of rat food for Toby, my rat [:] 5. £1.47 (this was made up of a £1 coin, a 20p coin, two 10p coins, a 5p coin and a 2p coin) [:] 6. A red paper clip [:] 7. A key for the front door. (Haddon 13).

This list/collection is presented to us at the exact moment Christopher is emptying his pockets at the police station as the result of a misapprehension. The policeman, having been called by a neighbor because Christopher was supposedly trespassing on her front yard, overwhelmed Christopher with questions whose pace he could not keep up with and he, in a fit of confusion rolling and pressing his forehead on the ground, finally and accidentally hit the police officer.

The everyday things listed in the excerpt above (from knife to toothpick, to puzzle, money, and key) elude clear or self-evident meaning as much as they disrupt ordinary order and produce a plethora of relations. From these new relations, rising from the mismatch amongst objects, from a displacement, from the confusion of the multifarious, is that the creative force of chaos comes. To dwell in chaos is to open oneself to a particular perception of the possibilities of representation. The task of Christopher, the narrator and writer of his story, is to attempt, in his own way, to conquer another order, which is not merely imitative. There remains a sense of merging, in the above list, between the everyday and the larger-than-life, a desire to know where things come from -- not really a search for old origins, but rather a play with beginnings. What Haddon 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.

The novel itself is in a constant state of recovery of the energies spent in chaos, and the narrator/protagonist/author must return to discomfort to regain his power to intervene, an intervention only possible in all its intensity in spaces averse to familiarity. There is savagery in disorder, a past-present-future that makes it the territory *par excellence* of the author (Haddon or Boone) surrounded by bits and pieces of information in a constant flow and flux, like the dizzying list below:

And there were signs saying **Great Western** and **cold beers and lagers** and **CAUTION WET FLOOR** and **Your 50p will keep a premature baby alive for 1.8 seconds** and **transforming travel** and **Refreshingly Different** and **IT'S DELICIOUS IT'S CREAMY AND IT'S ONLY £1.30 HOT CHOC DELUXE** and **0870 777 7676** and **The Lemon Tree** and **No Smoking** and **FINE TEAS** and ... (Haddon 145-6).

It is not reassuring to the reader or comfortable to the narrator the fact that not much later on (pages 169-70) the signs on the streets of London, and not merely the signs in a London train station, will heighten the sense of chaos. That is true because added to the technique of the list (in this case a rather coherent list of things one finds in train stations), the narrative will puzzle and perplex Christopher himself and the reader with the art(ifice) of typography.

Haddon/Boone does not refer here to dystopia or to a dystopian space. The hellish setting that the train station and the streets of London have become for a special mind like Christopher's (and any other mind for that matter) turns out to be a coming to terms with imposed order, apparent (dis)order, and sheer chaos. I am not discussing modes or generic

instances of utopias or dystopias, 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, the smaller, disjointed, irreconcilable objects (beer, floor, money, baby, travel, chocolate, numbers, tree, cigarette, tea) seem sensible, but refer to the more individual dimension of experience. The list brings together elements of different registers, banal and unusual, removing them from their original context, subtracting from them their use value, freeing them from the logic of functionality, and enables them to weave in their own way a world of singular secret affinities. The narrator/protagonist/author paradoxically establishes a world of absences that implicates him even more graphically in the discourse of the lists and its formal utopianism. Such a state of affairs is still human(e) and possible in the midst of the impact of the process of staggering “torture” (a bombardment of bits and bobs), but its overwhelming excess over “ordinary” experience ultimately points to the elusiveness of meaning. The foreshortened perception that moves through lists, enumerations, and inventories, which suspend language, narrative, subjectivity, value, and meaning in their dizzying voraciousness and infinity, is comparable to prime numbers: “Prime numbers are what is left when you have taken all the patterns away. I think prime numbers are like life.” (Haddon 12) To a mathematician and poet like Christopher, truth, to be conceivable, relies upon the conception and exertion of secret affinities.

Mantel’s novel, *Bring up the bodies*, reveals a complex and decadent relationship between individuals, between the actors of history and the actants submitted to political forces, as well as between their everyday life of scheming alongside cajoling and the novel itself.^v Thomas Cromwell, the narrative focalizer, has his eye on Anne Boleyn’s movement from fortune to fall, a move that is a significant turnabout for King Henry VIII’s queen, who, like Cromwell and the king himself, is surrounded by unedifying fictions. The bodies found in the title and in the indirect relation to the Latin expression *Habeas Corpus* definitely preside over the following plethora of lists: all sorts of books circulating in that Tudor court (66), the book called Henry (66-7), the inventory from the abbey at Worcester (72), the borders between truth and lies (159), the king keeping about himself a collection of men of base degree (191), a term in Parliament narrated as a list of frustrations (178), the inventory for Cromwell’s residence at the Rolls House at Chancery Lane (202), the borderless body of the king (296), and the enumeration related to the poet’s (Wyatt’s) truth (346).

Most of the inventories and enumerations found in the novel, far from containing and mirroring the hierarchy of existence, play a central role in a culture of systematic disorientation. They point towards a different reality; they no longer refer back to the

reassuring, sensible world of the divine order, but look instead to the aberrant, disjointed world of then and now. Relationships are both mis-shaped and re-shaped by collective greed and ambition, familial prejudice, and individual vendetta-like arrogance, lives lay waste and bodies are disposable, they are all made simultaneously victims of the abject filth around them, and victimizers who, in their turn, reproduce more violence and murder. The compound list below seems to have launched an initiative to tackle rising decay and disorder in the novel:

The substance of the case is the work of an hour or two, but when there are ninety-five names to be verified, of the justices and the peers, then the mere shuffling and the throat-clearing, the nose-blowing, the adjustment of robes and the settling of belt sashes – all those distracting rituals that some men need before they speak in public – with all that, it is clear the day will wear on; the queen herself is a still presence, listening intently from her chair as the list of her crimes is read out, the dizzying catalogue of times, dates, places, of men, their members, their tongues: into the mouth, out of the mouth, into divers crannies of the body, at Hampton Court and Richmond Palace, at Greenwich and Westminster, in Middlesex and Kent; and then the loose words and taunts, the jealous quarrels and twisted intentions, the declaration, by the queen, that when her husband is dead, she will choose some one of them to be her husband, but she cannot say which. (Mantel 371).

This travestied justice simply goes through the motions (distracting rituals) listing alleged crimes whose pieces of supposed evidence are accumulated in the dizzying catalogues of times, dates, places, bodies and whose factual or material existence is fabricated to the point of becoming a dissociative narrative disorder.

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 culture or politics or justice. They are rather torn from their mundane, everyday significance, mystified, made free once more and end up assuming a meaning that is both mysterious and irrational: what is made mysterious is reality, the many-sided phenomenon that a transcendental irony destroys by fire. In the case of Mantel's lists in *Bring up the Bodies*, Cromwell seems to be quite aware of this transcendental irony: "they will turn the page over, and write on me." (404) That, in short, is what I have been calling formal utopianism.

There is much in the work of Zadie Smith to encourage the designation of "formally utopian": the central plot of *White Teeth* refers to the creation and solving of a series of puzzles, and Smith uses the enigma of the puzzle as an explanatory/exploratory metaphor. Her fidelity to this metaphor indicates that it worked for her, but it does not necessarily mean that the use of puzzles, lists, and metaphors simply describes her work as a writer. Diversely

populated and largely ex-centric, Smith's novel can also be seen as an exquisitely singular portrait of the peripatetic imagination of deterritorialized families and the need for a reterritorialized center or answer to the puzzles, or even space for imagining alternate communities. In brief, *White Teeth* explores the dysfunction within all families with humor and humility. When *White Teeth* was published in 2000, readers heralded it as a novel whose depiction of multicultural London was wide-ranging, comprehensive, and populated with diverse catalogues, enumerations, lists.^{vi}

With many protagonists, harried “Every(wo)man,” Smith offers her readers lists, comprehensive catalogues of the late twentieth century by channeling the voices of celebrities and thinkers, 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 her novel, each spectrum of Smith’s archive-novel is filled with the questions concerning the origin of faith, the mystery of human consciousness, and the relative failures of the idea of science. Before I concentrate on four crucial lists/collections of disparate things, it is worth to mention, *en passant* and amid several other enumerations, catalogues, and accumulations, the following astounding lists: the cultural malaise of not belonging (131), white teeth as the sign of a common human heritage (174), the wrong-doings of the first descendants of the great ocean-crossing experiment (189), the Raggastani (one who adopts elements of two languages and cultures, 200), the *Laborare est Orare* inset (252), the imitations of studied Chalfenism (288), collecting bits and bobs of the past (343), the orientalist (428), and the historiographic metafictional digressions (202, 209, 211, 219, 325) that subscribe, to some extent, to the epigram to the novel: “What is past is prologue.”

The list/collection may be thought of as the living world, which changes with the accumulation of elements and with the addition of new relationships, enhancing reformulations. The first list records Millat’s (Millat is the youngest of the Iqbal boys by two minutes, a rebellious boy, he joins a Muslim group) belongings and their loss therewithal:

When Millat came home that evening, a great bonfire was raging in the back garden. All his secular stuff – four years’ worth of cool pre- and post-Raggastani, every album, every poster, special-edition t-shirts, club fliers collected and preserved over two years, beautiful Air Max trainers, copies 20-75 of 2000 *AD Magazine*, signed photo of Chuck D., impossibly rare copy of Slick Rick’s *Hey Young World*, *Catcher in the Rye*, his guitar, *Godfather I* and *II*, *Mean Streets*, *Rumblefish*, *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Shaft in Africa* – all had been placed on the funeral pyre ... (Smith 205).

Language is leaving the narrative voice in silence, for changes are shifting outside the words. Narrative itself seems to collapse, for instead of bouncing home narrative branches out and bounces around the disparate things registered *ad libitum*. The subjective standpoints clash in terms of what is supposed to be “cool” and simultaneously point to a time before and after the so-called “ocean-crossing experiment.” Value is fragile and meaning is elusive in the list above, especially because the movement it performs is one of desire leading to despair and to desire again after the pyre consumes the things inventoried.

The second list I want to focus on relates to Marcus’s (Marcus is a scientist who has genetically engineered a mouse to grow cancerous tumors. His work inspires a great deal of disapproval from many groups, including an animal rights group, Millat’s KEVIN, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses) belongings and his room:

Marcus’s room was purely devoted to Marcus and Marcus’s work. A study. Like in Austen or *Upstairs, Downstairs* or Sherlock Holmes ... There were four filing cabinets, open-mouthed beasts spitting paper; paper in piles on the floor, on the shelves, in circles around the chairs ... spare mouthpieces, pipes ranging from the standard U-bend to ever more curious shapes, snuff boxes, a selection of gauzes – all laid out in a velvet-lined leather case like a doctor’s instruments. Scattered about the walls and lining the fireplace were photos of the Chalfen clan, including comely portraits of Joyce in her pert-breasted hippy youth, a retroussé nose sneaking out between two great sheaths of hair. And then a few larger framed centerpieces. A map of the Chalfen family tree. A headshot of Mendel looking pleased with himself. A big poster of Einstein in his America icon stage – nutty professor hair, ‘surprised’ look and huge pipe – subtitled with the quote *God does not play dice with the world*. Finally, Marcus’s large oaken armchair backed on to a portrait of Crick and Watson looking tired but elated in front of their model of deoxyribonucleic acid, a spiral staircase of metal clamps, reaching from the floor of their Cambridge lab to beyond the scope of the photographer’s lens. (Smith 289-90).

Again, this second list clearly participates in the overall break-up of language: the whole scenario is an undecidable problem for which it is impossible to construct a single set of rules that will lead to a correct or clear-cut answer. The extent to which the two sets of people alluded to explicate the type of family the Chalfens are is the puzzle here: one the one hand, Austen, Heidi Thomas, and Holmes, and on the other hand, Mendel, Einstein, Crick, Watson, and God himself. It is also clear how narrative collapses in this excess of meaning, something that inevitably leads to the feeling that competing and anomalous ideas are confronted and that gauging their worth or usefulness is not only a Herculean but is also a Protean task.

The third list that I will briefly analyze is associated with Magid (the eldest Iqbal son by two minutes, he is a formal young man, polite and kind) and his witnessing of the mouse:

Magid was proud to say he witnessed every stage. He witnessed the custom design of the genes. He witnessed the germ injection. He witnessed the artificial insemination. And he witnessed the birth, so different from his own. One mouse only. No battle down the birth canal, no first and second, no saved and unsaved. No pot-luck. No random factors. No *you have your father's snout and your mother's love of cheese*. No mysteries lying in wait. No doubt as to when death will arrive. No hiding from illness, no running from pain. No question about who was pulling the strings. No doubtful omnipotence. No shaky faith. No question of a journey, no question of greener grass, for wherever this mouse went, its life would be precisely the same. It would not travel through time (and Time's a bitch, Magid knew *that* much now. Time is *the* bitch), because its future was equal to its present which was equal to its past. A Chinese box of a mouse. No other roads, no missed opportunities, no parallel possibilities. No second guessing, no what-ifs, no might-have-beens. Just certainty in its purest form. And what more, thought Magid – once the witnessing was over, once the mask and gloves were removed, once the white coat was returned to its hook – what more is God *than* that? (Smith 419).

This whole list serves as a meta-commentary on the Iqbal twins (Millat and Magid) and on their ordeals related to the following conflicting pairs: identity and heredity, religion and science, six degrees of separation (a small world) and six degrees of freedom (the theoretical - - fraught with irony if directed to the mind in culture -- freedom of movement of a rigid body in three-dimensional space). Both conjunctive (the repetition of “no”) and disjunctive (expressing a shattering or schizophrenia in terms of the items listed through *via negativa*), the list above reaches the zenith of contradiction or paradox: amidst uncertainty, a certainty in its purest form, and alternatively, amidst darkness, the purest visibility. In short, this eloquent list serves as a trajectory of past tenses producing imperfect futures and as a directory of memoirs of the blind (un-seeing what was not necessarily shown).

The fourth list gravitates around the space of/for Britishness:

because fortunately after years of corporate synaesthesia (salt & vinegarblue, cheese & oniongreen) people can finally give the answers required when a space is being designed , or when something is being rebranded , a room/ furniture/ Britain (that was the brief: a new British room, a space for Britain, Britishness, space of Britain, British industrial space cultural space space); they know what is meant when asked how matt chrome makes them feel; and they know what is meant by national identity? symbols? paintings? maps? music? air-conditioning? smiling black children or smiling Chinese children or [tick the box]? world music? shag or pile? tile or floorboards? plants? running water? they know what they want, especially those who've lived this century, forced from one space to another like Mr De Winter (né Wojciech), renamed, rebranded, the answer to every questionnaire nothing nothing space please just space nothing please nothing space. (Smith 443).

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, Smith's catalogues multiply, apparently *ad libitum* and sometimes *ad nauseam*, 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. The past-present-and-imperfect-futures above is a checklist of the “monstrous” or “monsterly” things to come: fiction stranger than fiction, fiction funnier than fiction, fiction crueller than fiction, again a past tense leading to a future imperfect. (Smith 393) This last and ultimate collapse of language, narrative, standpoint, value, and meaning is conveyed through a poetic, bordering on the epical, and highly ironic, list that ends in a tautology/teratology: nothing nothing space > just space > nothing space. Is that supposed to mean that space rebranded or renamed is not space? I would answer yes and no, for the traditional narrative space of novels in the past has been reformulated in contemporary novels as the spatial interstice of the list/collection, the non-space spacing or the seeing without showing of a formal utopianism.

Through accumulation and paradox, the poetics of the list 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, what I have been calling formal utopianism, is not merely a farrago of morsels and fragments (even though it is clearly textual fragmentation), not merely transitory insights into this fragmentary jigsaw, which is our contemporary world, not merely the celebration of a mosaic with missing pieces. Disjointedness in lists is ultimately the collection of techniques by which contemporary novelists began to represent the unrepresentable side of a more particular and circumstantial view of life.

Formal realism has to do with a technique -- how instead of what --, and 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 propose 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. I must add that in our contemporary world this recognition is spelled out as a celebration, perhaps even as the celebration of an irony. Novels are a sense-making enterprise, especially in their lists, inventories, and accumulations. The novels discussed here are simultaneously a sense-making enterprise and a kind of ruin, in Jacques Derrida’s sense of the word in *Memoirs of the Blind*, for the ruin is that remembrance open as an eye or as the hole in the skull cavity, which allows us to see without showing anything, nothing at all.

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ⁱ More on lists, see Eco (2009), on the ordering of things, see Foucault (1970), and on collections, see Baudrillard (1996).

ⁱⁱ I keep part of the methodology of my article published in 2014, mainly Terry Eagleton and Georg Lukács, and use different objects of study.

ⁱⁱⁱ Very illuminating readings of McEwan's novel are: Finney (2004) and Hidalgo (2005).

^{iv} The critical reception of Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is diverse in the way the articles shed light on different areas of the novel: Blackford (2013), Wooden (2011), Ray (2013) and Carter (2007).

^v There is not much in terms of academic critical reception of Mantel's novel, but I direct the readers to Roders (2014).

^{vi} *White Teeth* has enkindled a plethora of readings, but I will cite only the articles that have some connections with the present discussion: Watts (2013), McMann (2012), Trimm (2015) and Sell (2006).

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1) concepção e planejamento.	X
2) análise e interpretação dos dados.	X
3) elaboração do rascunho ou na revisão crítica do conteúdo.	X
4) participação na aprovação da versão final do manuscrito.	X