Kyra Lisse

Relentlist Women: On the Lists & Catalogs of Natalia Ginzburg & Annie Ernaux

At her AWP craft talk in 2017, American essayist Rebecca McClanahan revealed that she keeps a list of seventy-two "Literary Gear Shift Moves" in creative nonfiction. " … narrate, describe, record, persuade, quote, document," she begins. "… flesh out the bones, remove the bones so we see only the skeleton of the subject, don a mask, remove the mask you have worn …" Lucky thirteen, as it happens, is "list"—which perhaps deems it, albeit quietly, the most critical move of all. For the list would not exist without it.

McClanahan is hardly the first female nonfictionist to revel in the literary list or catalog—forms, writes author Cynthia Gralla, that differ only in that the former is often vertical and the latter, horizontal ("Literary Lists Are Records of Female Desire"). She joins the good company of Natalia Ginzburg and Annie Ernaux, two twentieth-century European writers who grew up during World Wars I and II, respectively. In Ginzburg's essay "He and I" (1994), the narrator catalogs her relationship with her husband, a man who believes himself to be superior in every way. Ernaux's memoir *The Years* (2017), meanwhile, attempts to tell the story of a generation of women, often addressing, through lists, situations of marriage and divorce. Both writers use this literary gear shift to moving effect: they co-opt a traditionally female, domestic form in order to gain control over their relationships—and their cultural moments more broadly—thus creating psychological and aesthetic order and distance. They appear, in other words, to foresee and subvert a 2022 article from *The Guardian* titled "The woman's to-do list is relentless," listing and never relenting.

Ginzburg spends the majority of "He and I" inventorying her differences from her husband, many of which situate her as somehow less-than. One such instance allows her to literally organize an otherwise-messy circumstance. Indeed, Ginzburg writes:

> I am very untidy. But as I have got older I have come to miss tidiness, and I sometimes furiously tidy up all the cupboards. I think this is because I remember my mother's tidiness. … I rarely rearrange my papers because my mother didn't write and had no papers. My tidiness and untidiness are full of complicated feelings of regret and sadness. His untidiness is triumphant. He has decided that it is proper and legitimate for a studious person like himself to have an untidy desk. (428)

Here, by cataloging her untidiness, Ginzburg makes the opposite true: she becomes exceedingly tidy, just like her mother once was. As a result, she is able to formulate the conclusion that these very qualities—tidiness and its absence—are for her "full of complicated feelings of regret and sadness." More than feeling-sorting, though, the catalog allows her to recognize 1) that her tendency to leave papers in disarray comes from a lack of precedent—from having a mother who, like most women of her late-nineteenth-century day, kept *homes* neat, not pages—and 2) that her husband treats his own untidiness as a badge of honor. It is a social privilege to which he is entitled, Ginzburg seems to suggest, because he is a man. And if the list represents "a long tradition of women managing households," as literary scholar Anne Rüggemeier posits, then Ginzburg is undermining that tradition, keeping her sentences tidier than her home ("Life Writing and the Poetics of List-Making…," 187). Yet they aren't too tidy: by formatting her list horizontally, Ginzburg refuses that all-encompassing orderliness toward which the vertical list —the variety perhaps most linked to women managing households—strives.

In *The Years*, Ernaux takes a similar organizational approach. But whereas Ginzburg molds her log to fit the paragraph form, Ernaux uses that more common list form, inserting, to quote author Brian Dillon, "a sudden verticality into [a] horizontal flow of text" ("Why Literature Loves Lists"). While it may

not reject domestic upkeep in the same way that Ginzburg's does, it does generate significantly more psychological and aesthetic distance. Describing her split from her husband, Ernaux writes, "In the separation process, the inventory of furniture and appliances marked the probable point of no return. A list was made of objects accumulated over fifteen years:

- rugs 300 F
- stereo 10,000
- aquarium 1,000
- mirror from Morocco 200
- bed 2,000
- Emmanuelle armchairs 1,000
- medicine cabinet 50, etc. (131)

With this list, the 2022 Nobel Prize–winning writer employs the objective correlative, where a series of items stands in for—and makes remote—the devastation of her separation (Poetry Foundation). I.e., she does not have to feel; she need only log. Ernaux continues, "As the list of things to buy, from pots and pans to bedsheets, had once anchored our union in the long term, the list of things to be divided now made the breakup real. It drew a line through shared desire and curiosity … The inventory ratified the death of us as a couple" (131-2). It is here that Ernaux explicitly acknowledges how the list is working—how it is signaling the end of her marriage. In a mere seven-item list, she sums up the entire fifteen-year relationship, from "union" to "breakup"; and she does so without ever losing command of her language or herself. (The same is true, Dillon notes, of Joan Didion, Ernaux's American contemporary. She, too, saw possibility in list-writing because she "prized control" ("Why Literature Loves Lists").)

Purchased objects also feature prominently in "He and I." For Ginzburg, cataloging them provides an opportunity to one-up her always-arrogant husband. She begins:

> There was a time when I used to hurl plates and crockery on the floor during my rages. But not any more. … The price of those plates, and of many other things we have bought, immediately underwent a substantial reduction in his memory. He likes to think he did not spend very much and that he got a bargain. I know the price of that dinner service—it was €16, but he says €12. (429)

Where Ginzburg once physically raged against the cruel whims of her husband, she now holds herself steady, at a psychic remove, channeling her anger into an itemized contest of memory. He can insist on whatever price he wants, Ginzburg seems to say; but because she has written hers down, she wins. She "know[s]" how expensive the plates were, while he merely "likes to think" they're worth much less. It's perhaps a fitting metaphor for the relationship itself: the cost of their marriage is far higher for her than it is for him. But at least her catalog, so distant and orderly, can offer her the last—and thus most convincing—word.

Ginzburg, to be sure, has an estimable successor in Ernaux, who takes this distancing effect one step further. Not only does she slip into her classic vertical list, she also switches from first person plural (her collective "we" generation) to third person singular. "If we omit details such as the degree and duration of upheaval surrounding each [event]," Ernaux writes of another ended relationship, " … the list appears as follows:

> - the breakup with the man she called the young man, a separation she slowly, secretively, and tenaciously pursued, and which became irrevocable one Saturday in September 1999, when she watched a fish, a tench he'd just pulled from the water, thrash and jerk on the grass for minutes before it died, and which she ate with him that evening in disgust […]
> - jealousy vis-à-vis the young man's new middle-aged partner, as if it were necessary to occupy the time freed by retirement, or become 'young' again through romantic torment he'd never caused her to feel when they were together, a jealousy she groomed for weeks on end, like a new career, until the only thing she wanted was to be rid of it. (223-4)

Ernaux says it herself: the list enables her to minimize, even obscure, the "degree and duration of upheaval" surrounding her breakup and its aftermath. That being said, her prose in these entries betrays more emotion than it has previously. Lengthy sentences reveal secrecy, "disgust," and jealousy-induced "romantic torment." But that's where the third person steps in. By representing herself in this point of view, Ernaux makes the hot cold; she snuffs out any possible flames that her vertical list alone could not. Indeed, Rüggemeier points out that when a writer turns "auto-biography into autre-biography," she only heightens the effect of the list form. And, in turn, she places all the more "distance between the writing and the experiencing self " (189). It is worth noting, too, that the third person singular calls particular attention to Ernaux's gender. A *woman* is mourning the loss of her relationship; a *woman* is isolating its many painstaking variables by making this list.

Then again, the literary list aims to capture and harness more than just the personal or singular. The form is ultimately public-facing, an artifact of a certain time and place—a fact that Ginzburg's catalog proves true on multiple occasions. Early in the essay, Ginzburg discloses that she fears figures of authority, while her husband admires them. She offers evidence of their difference: "During the Montesi trial, because of his respect for established authority, we had very violent arguments" (424). Here, Ginzburg is referring to the 1953 murder of Wilma Montesi, a then-twenty-one-year-old Italian model. It was alleged that one or more members of an elite men's club were responsible, but after a contentious three-year trial, all involved parties were acquitted. With this statement, Ginzburg intimates that her husband was on the side of the Italian legal system, while her allegiances lay with the woman drowned at the hands of men. As such, she situates the list not only as a record of history, but also as a champion of unavenged women. It allows her a sense of social agency she would not otherwise possess.

Another of Ginzburg's references serves the same history-logging purpose. Yet it does so obliquely, elliptically, from a safe distance. She first supposes her inability to throw things away to be "a kind of Jewish caution"; she then recounts a time before she and her husband were married, when they

were walking along the Via Nazionale in Rome. "I already felt that I was very old and had been through a great deal," Ginzburg recalls, " … and he seemed a boy to me, light years away from me" (430). She is talking around the fact that her first husband was killed in the Holocaust, and that she herself had survived much danger and poverty as a European Jew during World War II (422). Her non-Jewish husband-to-be, on the other hand, seemed to her but a boy—and so she felt a great distance from him. Here as before, Ginzburg's catalog of personal memories reflects a very collective event. (That she and her husband were strolling along the Via Nazionale—the National Road—feels fitting.) But the nature of the form also spares her from having to relive the gravity of that event; for, as Rüggemeier puts it, "Using lists in the creative process enables the autobiographer to write her thoughts and memories down in a form that allows her to cut things out, to leave them unsaid, to merely mention them without needing to explore or to connect" (188). She thus remains as far away from the material as she once felt from her as-yet husband.

The list-as-artifact is certainly a concern of Ernaux, whose own nonfiction aims to give voice to an entire generation. " … how to represent the passage of historical time, the changing of things, ideas, and manners, and the private life of [a] woman?" she asks. "How to make the fresco of forty-five years coincide with the search for a self outside of History?" (170). Attempting to answer her own question—a question that ultimately puzzles over how to organize time and experience—Ernaux records the many images of her twenties:

> Unwed mothers … 'rubbers,' mysterious advertisements for 'intimate hygiene, discretion guaranteed,' the covers of Health magazine ('women are fertile only three days a month'), 'love children,' indecent assault, Janet Marshall strangled with her bra in the woods by the adulterer Robert Avril, the words 'lesbian,' 'homosexual,' 'lust,' and sins so abominable they couldn't be brought to confession, miscarriage, nasty pastimes … free love, ad infinitum, a volume of unspeakable things only adults were supposed to know, the sum and substance of which were the

> genitals and their use. Sex was the root of all society's suspicions. People saw it everywhere, in everything: low necklines, tight skirts, red nail polish, black underwear, bikinis, the fraternizing of the sexes … the muscles of Tarzan, women who smoked and crossed their legs, a girl's gesture of touching her hair in class, etc. It divided girls into a 'right' and 'wrong' kind. (45-6)

At first glance, this list appears to lack any and all organization. The excerpted first sentence is a sprawling eighty-six words, with lists within lists and not a main verb in sight. But it is in fact an exercise in economy (in more ways than one): Ernaux has pared a vast array of social and material phenomena down to a mere eighty-six words. She has concretized abstract twentieth-century responses to sex, sexuality, and gender. She has, in other words, wrangled Europe's "ad infinitum" into something manageable, something countable. As Rüggemeier suggests, lists "that [are] ostensibly private eventually serve not only as a proof of existence, but additionally take on the role of a witness to challenges and … political upheavals, and thus serve as an individual coping mechanism, as an assertion of self during difficult times" (191). That is, although Ernaux does not name herself in this listy political portrait, she is nevertheless a part of it, for she is bearing it witness. She is insisting that *I was there*, that *we were there*, that there was a *there* at all. She is divulging, and perhaps still working through, her generation's repression of so-called "sins" that "couldn't be brought to confession." She is speaking the "unspeakable," subverting a form that, according to Rüggemeier, women once used quietly, in men's periphery, "as a means of household management" alone (Ibid.).

Of course, the list is a paradoxical parataxis, in that it cannot possibly be infinite, or even comprehensive, try though it might—a reality toward which Ernaux gestures when she writes "etc." "Nothing seems simpler than making a list," says Georges Perec, Ernaux's contemporary and fellow Frenchperson, "but in fact it's much more complicated than it seems: you always leave something out …" Dillon concurs, adding that "the list, if it's doing its job, always leaves something to be invented or recalled, something forgotten in the moment of its making" ("Why Literature Loves Lists"). One

might regard this fact as discouraging: The ambitious list-maker will never check every box she sets out to. She will never wield full control of her list, even if the whole point of the endeavor was to do just that. Perhaps that's how the woman's to-do list feels, "relentless" as it can be. Yet there is also great possibility in *etc*. It allows readers of works like "He and I" and *The Years* to continue the catalog themselves, in their own time and place. It invites them to make their own connections, to imagine all that exists beyond and "between the lines" (Rüggemeier). And it welcomes, say, arguments about literary lists as tools for creating psychological and aesthetic order and distance from personal and public events. Sure, McClanahan may have capped her list of literary gear shift moves at seventy-two (*Essay Daily*). But she follows her last item, "[S]tart the piece over several times until you exhaust your original intent and find a more complex one," with ellipses, three small and unassuming dots that revel in being relentless.

Works Cited

Dillon, Brian. "Why Literature Loves Lists." *Lit Hub*, 2018.

Ernaux, Annie. *The Years*. Translated by Alison L. Strayer, Seven Stories Press, 2017.

Ginzburg, Natalia. "He and I." Translated by Dick Davis, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, pp. 422-430, 1994.

Gralla, Cynthia. "Literary Lists Are Records of Female Desire." *Electric Literature*, 2019.

"Montesi, Wilma (1932–1953)." Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia. *Encyclopedia.com*.

"Objective Correlative." *Poetry Foundation*.

"Rebecca McClanahan's Selected List of Literary Gear Shift Moves." *Essay Daily*, 2017.

Rüggemeier, Anne. "Life Writing and the Poetics of List-Making: On the Manifestations, Effects, and Possible Uses of Lists in Life Writing." a|b: Auto|Biography Studies, vol. 36, no. 1, pp.183-194, 2021.

Saner, Emine. "'The woman's to-do list is relentless': how to achieve an equal split of household chores." *The Guardian*, 2022.