

Lists and Silence

Reading a novel requires an extended amount of silence. Finding this silence becomes a challenge today in the face of sometimes intrusive forms of mass media such as the radio, TV, and the internet. Some people learn to cope by listening to their own selection of music in their portable music players in order to shut off other noise while reading. I am not one of these lucky people; I need my silence when I read if I really want to experience the book I'm reading. But I can't always have what I need. I read novels while in a crowded fast food restaurant or in a bus on the way home to San Pablo, with chattering strangers around me.

While the experience of noise and silence conditions novel-reading for many, another kind of silence places many works at risk of not being read at all, if not consigns them outright to oblivion: list-making. The paradox of list-making as a kind of silencing is the danger and delight of the canon, from the Bible to the Great Books, to every anthology and syllabus for any survey of literature class. What is never mentioned gets pushed farther away from our attention and memory, until we can't decide whether a book is neglected because it has lost its significance or because it never was deemed worth reading by a few to begin with.

In recognizing some texts, a list ignores many others, its descriptions and prescriptions inscribed with the list-maker's biases. Jorge Luis Borges wrote his own list in "The Library of Babel" that included three of his own works and one collaboration with Adolfo Bioy-Casares, along with twenty-nine other titles. Donald Barthelme's "Syllabus," supposedly handed out to his students and published in *The Believer*, includes eighty-one titles; his only instruction was to "just read them" with no regard to any order of reading. The list was partial to fiction but includes none of his own works. Virgilio S. Almario's *Walong Dekada ng Makabagong Tulang Pilipino* [trans. *Eight Decades of Modern Pilipino Poetry*], released in 1981, which happened to be the year of my birth, and the year when almost a decade of Martial Law in the Philippines was lifted, not only included Almario's own poems but also included only one female poet in a roster of exclusively Tagalog poets. He released an updated *Sansiglong Mahigit na Makabagong Tula sa Pilipinas* [trans. *More Than a Century of Modern Poetry in the Philippines*] in 2006, three years after he was honored National Artist of the Philippines, and in an attempt at recuperation included works originally written in Bikol, Hiligaynon, Iluko, Kapampangan, English, and Spanish. Any list, therefore, has the potential to be repressive and oppressive.

Even novels themselves, from *Don Quixote* to Gina Apostol's *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata*, may encourage and problematize list-making and promote their own lists of other works, though since they are novels, we often expect them to do so in a way that is less explicit, that works harmoniously with their narrative. In an early chapter of *Don Quixote*, for example, the curate and the barber go over to the library of its eponymous hero in order to decide which books should be "burned and banished from the face of the earth." Cervantes, being a true comic and self-mocking critic, denied his own earlier work, *Galatea*, a full pardon. In this case, a list is a criticism, is an act of censorship, and its only saving grace is its *tentative* nature. Among other books considered for the pyre in that chapter of *Don Quixote* are the four volumes of *Amadis de Gaul*, poems by Ludovico Ariosto, *Bernardo del Carpio*, and works of Homer—all of them temporarily saved from burning by the conflicting tastes of the barber and the curate.

Perhaps our special attraction to lists is contiguous with humankind's discovery of numbers, conceptual tools that provide us with a sense of certainty and order. A list presents itself with a claim to authority or consciousness of the popular, from the Ten Commandments to Billboard's Top 100 to Facebook memes. In the chaos of the mass production of everything and anything, a list gives an illusion of movement away from disarray and confusion, even if it falls into the trap of arbitrariness, the numbers themselves seeming quite random in their certainty—why ten? Why one hundred? In trying to avoid this trap, contemporary lists allow room for revision. Even the classics undergo constant re-evaluation while writers continue to champion them. Nonetheless: the selections may vary, but the list persists.

In March 2010, the third edition of Peter Boxall's *1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die* was released, a book that seems to attempt to popularize academic tastes. It focuses on the history of the novel despite having the word "books" in the title. A few titles appear in the list that not many would consider novels, however. If it allows for the inclusion of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a narrative poem, and Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths*, a collection of short fiction, some might wonder why not Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* or Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's *Rashomon and Other Stories*?

There are many reasons why a title should be included in a list that invokes necessity (these are books you *must* read) and mortality (before you *die*): its unique exploration of the human predicament and existence, its contribution to our understanding of the form, and its expansion of our sense of aesthetics that considers supposed generational and multicultural differences. Boxall's source is a contentious list of experts who are mostly English writers and literature professors who insist, for example, on eight books by Ian McEwan across the three editions and neglect even one by, say, Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

A reading plan that will take Boxall's latest list seriously will have me begin—if I were to take the historical route—with *The Thousand and One Nights* and end with A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book*. A plan based on authors' last names alphabetically arranged would require me to begin with Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and finish with Stefan Zweig's *Chess Story*. But I don't think anyone could actually live with any of these two reading plans, that is, if someone would consider reading all 1001 titles before dying—as if death could actually be postponed until we're done with the list. But I suppose that many people actually dream of reading these books, as I myself do. Sometimes I just wish I could at least afford to *buy* these books. Assuming e-book prices will significantly drop—which is not really the trend based on recent reports—and that I can finally afford and settle for them with a Kindle, the premise of the Boxall book still seems absurd yet enticing—or enticing precisely because it seems absurd. If I were to begin today (assuming I had read none of the books on the list) and read at a rate of four books a month (quite doable if we're talking only of books as thick as Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and not Marcel Proust's multivolume *Remembrance of Things Past* that is counted as one book in the list), I'll be finished after 26 years. And that doesn't mean, of course, that I'd be ready to die by then.

The first edition of *1001 Books* came out in 2006, and the use of the number 1,001 had to do with its relation to both death and infinity, thanks to the allusion to Scheherazade's stories—as if each book is a story we tell Death himself in order for us to live for another story, for another book. When the second edition came out two years later in 2008, 282 titles from the earlier

edition did not make the cut in order to provide for a more “international” selection. Case in point: five of Charles Dickens’ books were among those that got dropped in order to accommodate major eastern classics such as *The Tale of Genji* and what are considered the four great classical novels in Chinese literature—*The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, *Journey to the West*, and *A Dream of Red Mansions*—the omission of which was a severe oversight in the first edition.

The selections remained predominantly Western despite these inclusions, though, and so I was very excited when a new edition was announced earlier this year. I was curious about what “corrective” action they would take this time. But instead, it was a huge disappointment: only 11 titles, all of them published in the previous decade, replaced titles that all came from the same decade. Do they really mean that the books published up to 1999 in the second edition were already somewhat “stable” in their place on the list? It is this kind of stability that frightens.

Yes, I knew that even if 1,001 was certainly a large number, the list could not possibly contain everyone’s favorites, and anyone would still have reasons to complain. Boxall, of course, knew and even hoped that the books that made and didn’t make the list would generate fresh debate about canonicity. Sadly not much debate has resulted, only disgruntled comments here and there, because, well, it was just a list and in the age of Twitter and iPad, anyone could make their own list, and none of it would really matter. No list could ever really satisfy, and consequently no list is really of any consequence. When *The Guardian* made its own “1000 Novels Everyone Must Read,” it immediately followed up with “The Ones that Got Away.” Many readers remained unhappy, expectedly, and life continued.

I was tempted to make my own list, one that aims to focus heavily on Asia, particularly Southeast Asia, the region largely neglected in Boxall’s. I decided against it, at least for now, recognizing that it would only reveal how equally limited my vision is. Let me merely state the obvious instead. My major disappointment comes from the fact that no Filipino made it to the list—not even Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere*, which I was really hoping would make it into the 2010 edition. Call it false nationalistic pride, but not every country has a novelist for a national hero, and I will not deny this bias that conditions my own reading pleasures and distaste. I believed it was about time for the novel generally acknowledged to have “inspired the first Asian revolution against Western imperialism” to be recognized. When Penguin Classics released an international edition in 2005, more than a century since it was first published in 1886, it raised my hopes. But the book didn’t make the cut. If Rizal could not make it to that list, how could other Filipino novels, whose own greatness look up to Rizal’s, ever make it? I adore Paul Auster’s metaphysical detective novels and do not have any quarrel over his *The New York Trilogy* being there, but seriously, his *Timbuktu* over, say, Eric Gamalinda’s *My Sad Republic*?

The Asian “representations” were the usual suspects—winners of awards that were given by the West such as the Nobel Prize (Kenzaburo Ōe, Yasunari Kawabata) and the Booker Prize (Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy), or those with already high western readership (Haruki Murakami, Banana Yoshimoto). The West’s imagination of the East is often largely limited to China, Japan, and India, as this list reveals, besides West Asian Turkey, thanks to Orhan Pamuk, who is also, well, a Nobel laureate, and—I just found out recently—also an alumnus of the IWP. The original language of the text and its availability in translation is also a major consideration. So if I could die guilt-free without having known Jessica Hagedorn, F. Sionil Jose, and NVM Gonzalez, all of whom wrote in English and were represented by international publishing houses based in the US at some point in their careers, why would I be bothered if I—and the world—

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 8, 2010:

Edgar Calabia Samar (Philippines), Chandrabhas Choudhury (India),

Billy Karanja Kahora (Kenya), Farangis Siahpoor (Iran)

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never knew Lazaro Francisco, Constante C. Casabar, and Jun Cruz Reyes, whose works were never translated into English until now?

Now do we really even have to recognize this *1001 Books* if it has proven to be deficient for our own specific desires and interests? I recognize that the power of any list over us lies precisely in its potential to silence us, even as we manage to forget that some of our own texts have arguably made and kept us alive throughout,—and in spite of—our history.

Being a novelist who began as—and continues to be—an avid reader of novels, I obviously have something at stake with this kind of list for the novel, this long narrative form that continues to thrive despite predictions of its demise because of our contemporary inability to pay attention long enough to finish a book or to linger on a text in silence. I admire Milan Kundera's essays on the art of the novel—even if I do not always agree with his assumptions—especially for the way he situates Franz Kafka, Witold Gombrowicz, Hermann Broch, and Robert Musil in the history of the European novel. I also appreciate the way Carlos Fuentes pays homage to his contemporaries in *Myself & Others*, regardless of nationality. In the Philippines the major contemporary critics of the novel do not necessarily write the form: Resil Mojares, Soledad Reyes, and Virgilio Almario. Jose Dalisay Jr. and Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, both published novelists, have written occasional essays on the novel, but their focus on Filipino works in English leaves me wanting more.

I hope to read books that act as a counter-silence to lists like *1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die*. I myself would like to write essays on the novel, besides writing my own novels, and let my own silences reverberate in my writing the way the Boxall list is silent on Chart Korbjitti, Duong Thu Huong, or Edgardo M. Reyes. This is to say then that despite, or precisely because of, its limitations of vision, *1001 Books* becomes worthwhile, even necessary, reading: it allows us to recognize our own silences. And to see that we ceaselessly read and write, and—on occasions like this—speak, in order to put those silences to test.

Perhaps what I am trying to say is that we read critics, especially list- & canon-making critics, not just for what they say but for what they fail to mention or choose not to say. That we listen to them for whatever we believe is sadly missed.