

On the (Epic) List: Catalogues of Heroes and Literary Form from Homer to *Omeros*

In an overview article of recent publications on heroes and the heroic, Ralf von den Hoff notes that nowadays heroes are more present than ever. As a curiosity, he refers to the German Wikipedia entry »Held« (»hero«), which under the sub-section »bekannte Helden« (»famous heroes«) provides a list of names that ranges from Gilgamesh, Robin Hood, and Zorro to highly decorated soldiers in World War II.¹ An obvious starting point for further research would be to consider in more detail *who* exactly is on this list, and *why*. The point I would like to raise in my essay, however, is related to the very form of the list itself and the implications of this form in relation to heroes and the heroic. My current research is focused on lists and enumerations and their functions at the intersection of cultural practices and literary texts.² In this context, catalogues of heroes are particularly fascinating material. What happens when, in literary texts, heroes become part of lists or catalogues? What does the form of the catalogue »do« to the concept of the heroic? These questions are crucial because inherent in any catalogue of heroes, there is a paradox that creates an uneasy tension: the individual hero's exemplarity and singularity are suspended by the catalogue form in which many heroes are set side by side. Can a list of many heroes ever be a means of communicating heroism? To what extent is the heroic conceptualised differently in and through catalogues of heroes?

Before we can turn to these questions in more detail, some definitions are called for. Importantly, the terms »list« and »catalogue« are not synonymous – rather, »list« is the hypernym and »catalogue« one of its manifestations, a special kind of list.³ Lists operate by means of enumeration: several (usually three or more) distinct elements are employed in direct succession and in loose, if at all, syntactic coherence to both the other elements and the surrounding narrative material. As a formally distinctive unit, the list is

¹ See von den Hoff 2015. For the entry in question, see »Held«, Wikipedia, <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Held> (accessed Dec 21, 2018).

² This article has been written as part of the research conducted in the project »Lists in Literature and Culture« (LISTLIT), funded by the European Research Council Starting Grant 2016 no. 715021.

³ But see Kyriakidis 2007, xiii, who maintains that the two terms are synonymous.

characterised by a set of items assembled under some conceptual principle.⁴ With respect to the catalogue in ancient epic, Benjamin Sammons likewise accentuates the discreteness of the individual entries, which are »formally distinct and arranged in sequence by anaphora or by a simple connective, but are not subordinated to one another, and no explicit relation is made between the items except for their shared suitability to the catalogue's specified *rubric*«. ⁵ As a special kind of list, the catalogue is more elaborated in the structure of its entries, which can sometimes span several lines and contain little narrative vignettes embedded in the larger structure.⁶

Historically, it seems that catalogues were first and foremost an oral feature, perhaps linked to *itineraria* or lists of envoys (*theoroi*).⁷ Their oral background ties in well with linguists' work on lists – in our spoken language, we are very prone to listing, notwithstanding that we may think of lists nowadays as a primarily written genre.⁸ In ancient sources, the catalogue is not defined coherently. Numbering is one important feature (which goes back to a passage in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus asks Telemachus to »count« him the suitors so that he can decide how to deal with them).⁹ Aristotle mentions the Catalogue of Ships in his *Poetics*, in the context of a perfect plot. He applauds Homer's crafting of the *Iliad* because the work has a beginning and end as well as one clear storyline, which Homer »diversifies« (*dialambásei*). The Catalogue of Ships is then given as one example of such a means of diversification (1459a36).¹⁰ Aristotle points to an important function of catalogues: they

⁴ Cf. Belknap's definition: »At its most simple, a list is a framework that holds separate and disparate items together. More specifically, it is a formally organized block of information that is composed of a set of members. It is a plastic, flexible structure in which an array of constituent units coheres with specific relations generated by specific forces of attraction« (2000, 35–36). See also Mainberger 2003, 7.

⁵ Sammons 2010, 9 (emphasis in the original).

⁶ Minchin 1996 distinguishes between simple lists (bare enumerations of items) and the catalogue as the more elaborate form. Sammons 2010, 10–11 follows Minchin.

⁷ Reitz 2009.

⁸ Schiffrin 1994; also Lord 1991, 221–24 on the significance of catalogues in oral epic poetry.

⁹ *Odyssey* 16.235–37 (*katálexon*). See Reitz 2006, also for references to scholia.

¹⁰ »That is why, as I said earlier, Homer's inspired superiority over the rest can be seen here too: though the war had beginning and end, he did not try to treat its entirety, for the plot was bound to be too large and incoherent, or else, if kept within moderate scope, too complex in its variety. Instead, he has selected one section, but has used many others as episodes, such as the catalogue of ships and other episodes by which he diversifies the composition« (1459a29–35; based on the translation by Halliwell 1995). Aristotle's description here does not go well with an earlier passage in which he maintains that the

may provide diversification, but in doing so they merely embellish the plot, they do not advance it in any way. For the time and space of the catalogue, the narrative development is on hold.

Based on the model of Homer, epic catalogues typically feature people (names of warriors and troops), often in combination with geographical details. Yet epic poetry also abounds with other, shorter catalogues, for instance of animals, plants, or objects. Catalogues of names, however, are clearly the most prominent and the most important kind, as the many catalogues of heroes that exist demonstrate.

The heroic, as I am going to demonstrate in the course of this essay, complicates the catalogue form, or rather, is complicated by it. Heroes are typically created in processes of attribution between an individual and a society or group. The heroes' actions and behaviour are extraordinary and transgressive, often confrontational.¹¹ Their exceptionality requires that heroes must be set in relation or contrast *to* something (either something likewise exceptional, e.g. the holy, divine, superhuman, or, on the contrary, something mundane, trivial, or anti-heroic). Heroes always serve purposes; they can inspire and motivate people because of their exemplarity and exceptionality. Since heroes must constantly renegotiate their exceptional role, the heroic is inherently fraught with tension.¹² The form of the catalogue brings to the fore this tension from a different angle. Based on selected examples of catalogues of heroes that range from Antiquity to the twenty-first century, I am going to demonstrate to what extent catalogues of heroes have been transformed since Homer, and to what extent the listing of heroes can destabilise the very core of the heroic: instead of individual greatness – which is weakened by being included in a list –, it is the greatness of the mass that creates a different sense of heroism as a group phenomenon.

Ancient Catalogues: Homer and Apollonius Rhodius

Possibly the oldest and certainly the most famous catalogue of heroes in literature is the so-called Catalogue of Ships in the second book of the *Iliad*.

perfect plot (which has beginning, middle, and end) should be of such a size that it is »eusynoptic«, that is, »easily taken in by the eye in one view« (1450a44).

¹¹ I rely here on the useful definition offered by the members of the Collaborative Research Centre »Heroes, Heroizations, Heroisms« based at the University of Freiburg. See von den Hoff et al. 2013.

¹² Von den Hoff et al. 2013, 8.

Over 265 lines, the passage presents us with the contingents of ships that have followed Agamemnon's call, in the tenth year of the Trojan war, to set out to Troy. For each contingent, the number of the ships is given as well as their leaders and the region or settlement from which they are coming. There are twenty-nine contingents in total, and forty-four names of leaders (plus two that are absent). The catalogue is framed by two invocations of the muses: in the first, the speaker asks the muses (who know all things) to tell him »who were the captains of the Danaans and their lords« (*Il.* 2.487); after the catalogue is finished, he implores them again to tell him who was the best among the heroes (*Il.* 2.760–62).¹³

The catalogue has spurred heated debates and continues to frustrate readers and scholars alike. For instance, scholars have debated why the catalogue begins with the Boeotians and with two heroes (Thersander and Peneleos) that have little to no relevance for the rest of the *Iliad*. The argument that the catalogue as a whole is a later interpolation still looms large. Overall, the order seems erratic, and the map of Greece that underlies the catalogue is neither coherent nor logical in terms of which regions are mentioned, and in which order.¹⁴ These issues, however, shall not concern us here. I would like to emphasise two aspects instead that are of key importance with respect to the tradition of the epic catalogue: the listing of names, and the model Homer provided for all later epics to come.

As obvious as it may seem, the fact that we are presented with proper names is highly significant. As Kyriakidis notes, »to enter a proper name in a list is to aim at placing that name within the world of that particular work. [...] it becomes a literary entity«.¹⁵ Proper names are definite; they denote a particular human being, whereas common nouns have a wide range of connotations and are indefinite; this view was well-established in Antiquity.¹⁶ All of the men named are heroes; for Homer, just as for Hesiod, there is no distinction between different kinds of heroes.¹⁷ The act of naming had a commemorative function: it allowed the audience to recognise names, to be reminded of myths and their places, to identify themselves and their families

¹³ Translation: Murray 1924.

¹⁴ See Kullmann 2009 for a detailed discussion of the Catalogue as an amalgam of poetics, myth, and history. See also Visser 1997, who stresses that the Catalogue is based on different sources and influences (myth, historical geography; oral composition) yet always focused on the context of the Trojan War.

¹⁵ Kyriakidis 2006, 101.

¹⁶ E.g. Varro, *De lingua Latina* 8.80, quoted in Kyriakidis 2007, xii.

¹⁷ Gonzáles 2010.

with a name and/or a region, and thus to be inscribed into tradition. If that was indeed the function, then it is clearly more important to be included in the first place, and perhaps comprehensiveness was then more of an issue than an internal weighting of the heroes and their qualities. The approach is quasi-encyclopaedic and fulfils primarily social functions.

The potential of the catalogue form to evaluate and problematise the heroic is exploited by Apollonius Rhodius in the *Argonautica*. His catalogue of the Argonauts (1.23–233) both follows the Homeric model and goes beyond it. Apollonius's catalogue is modelled upon Homer (both the Catalogue of Ships and the later Catalogue of the Trojans in *Iliad* 2.816–77) and carefully structured: it offers a geographical tour, starting and ending at the beach of Pagasae in Minyan Greece. While Homer offers a catalogue of a whole fleet, here we get the crew of one ship. The geographical circle structure is complemented by another principle of order: a bi-partite structure that cuts the catalogue into two halves. The first half begins with Orpheus, the second with Heracles, both of whom stand out. According to Clauss, the two-fold structure reflects »two opposing types of hero who achieve the goals of their respective quests with antithetical approaches«.¹⁸ Orpheus's heroism is rooted in the power of music (*Argonautica* 1.28–31), Heracles's through extraordinary physical power (*Argonautica* 1.124–29). The heroes that follow upon Orpheus all draw their heroic qualities from what Clauss calls »communicative skills«¹⁹, while those mentioned in association with Heracles exhibit likewise physical strength. The underlying question the catalogue raises, then, is how Jason, the Argonauts' leader, will prove his heroic qualities – will Orpheus be his model, or Hercules, or is he going to be different altogether?

The prominent position of the catalogue in Book 1 has the function of an overture; it sets the tone for the rest of the work. Apollonius's reconfiguration of the catalogue is indebted to another function the form affords: its ability to trigger narratives. The verb *katalégein*, from which our »catalogue« derives, means both »to order« and »to narrate« and thus is similar to the German pair *erzählen* and *aufzählen*. The catalogue of the Argonauts is marked by the interdependence of narration and enumeration: inherent in the list of names and its order, there is a narrative complication, a plot implied, i.e. the plot that enfolds in the ensuing books of the *Argonautica* in which both Orpheus and Heracles prove their worth. This worth – their heroic worth – manifests

¹⁸ Clauss 1993, 30.

¹⁹ Clauss 1993, 32.

itself in rather different ways. The physical strength of Heracles is questioned in view of Orpheus' artistic and communicative skills. Implicitly, heroism is put on a scale; it is not an unchangeable, fixed quality that is of the same nature to all of the Argonauts but one that manifests itself in different forms: it underlies individual variation and is negotiable, a matter of choice even. Not all catalogues, however, have a narrative-inducing function. And yet, since they form part of a larger narrative (the epic poem) they are inevitably read in light of what comes before and after and therefore acquire narrative meaning nonetheless. Thus another function of epic catalogues is that they can throw into sharp relief a character or an event and thus heighten the tone or atmosphere or meaning of a passage. A good example of this technique is the catalogue of the Nereids in the eighteenth book of the *Iliad* (18.35–50).²⁰ The Nereids accompany Thetis, who rushes by to support her son's mourning for Patroklos. The nymphs are of course not heroes. However, they are outstanding in a different way, and similar to the catalogues of heroes they are enumerated and identified by their names. Thirty-three of them are named; they bear names such as Glauce, Cymothoë, Amphithoe, Nemertes, Apseudes, Callianassa, and Amatheia. The procession of the Nereids – both as a list and as an element of the plot – stress Thetis's nobility and status and mark her entrance. At the same time, the communal mourning foreshadows Thetis's own mourning for Achilles (in the ensuing conversation, Achilles voices his readiness to die in order to revenge Patroclus's death). The passage thus proleptically refers to Achilles' death. The Nereids cry, as Minchin argues, because of their »sorrow of anticipation«.²¹ The high density of names in their rhythmic euphony (alliterations, assonances) is suggestive of religious, cultic implications.²² The catalogue emphasises Achilles' heroic qualities and his place in the order of the world of heroes. It thus has a commenting and evaluative function that intensifies the narrative on an affective level. The individual names do not in themselves account for any heroic, or

²⁰ In Minchin's terms, this passage is a list, not a catalogue (1996).

²¹ Minchin 1996, 17.

²² E.g. Kühlmann 1973, 57. Here we may note that as a rule of thumb, the more names there are in a line, the less does each name and person stand out. At the same time, the distribution of names – their density – also affects the reception of the catalogue and the passage in which it occurs. A densely written passage may be perceived as an acceleration of the narrative tempo, while a spaced-out catalogue can function as a retardation (see Kyriakidis 2007, xvii). Apollonius Rhodius, for instance, generally constructs his catalogues less densely than Homer.

in this case, divine, qualities; due to their concentration – as a catalogue in its entirety –, they exert their meaning.

A Christian *heros*: The Catalogue in Vida's *Christiad*

Ever since Homer, catalogues of heroes have been legion in epic poetry. This also applies to the epic sub-genre of biblical epics, which came into being in late Antiquity. Bible epics retain the traditional elements of epic poetry but have as their subject matter biblical material. Instead of the muses, there are invocations of God and Christ or the Virgin Mary, and worldly glory is replaced by divinely endowed one, or postponed to the afterlife. A striking case in this context is Marco Girolamo Vida's poem *Christiad* (1532/35, dedicated to Pope Clement VII). Over six books, the *Christiad* tells of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Christ is the epic hero, and throughout the poem he is explicitly called *heros*.²³ In view of such a protagonist who cannot be equalled by other (necessarily lesser) heroes, the epic catalogue of the poem offers an alternative heroic panorama: the twelve tribes of Israel that come to Jerusalem in order to celebrate Passover (2.333–529). The main function of the catalogue is to praise Christ: Vida claims that the number of Jews travelling to Jerusalem is so large because of Christ and his fame – they all came to see him:

Non alias illuc aditum est maioribus umquam
et numero et studiis. Nec tantum sacra petebant,
quantum audios Christi uisendi traxerat ardor. (2.333–35)

They had never come in greater number or with greater zeal. But they did not so much want to go to the holy feast; rather, the passionate desire to see Christ had drawn them there.²⁴

Thus it is the greatness of the one *heros* that is heightened by the mass of people that are catalogued. Vida too combines proper names with geographical details, developing his very own map of Israel. Because of the fixed number of tribes (twelve) and the Old Testament models Vida could draw on (lists of

²³ The oblique form *heroa* is rare and only occurs in 3.2; 4.667 and 5.917 in the context of the crucifixion. For the other references to Christ as *heros*, see e.g. 1.74.236.276.399.947; 2.149.651.739; 4.492.608.643.856. See the edition and commentary by von Contzen et al. 2013.

²⁴ Text: von Contzen et al. 2013; translation: based on von Contzen et al. 2013 and Gardner 2009.

places, rivers, and mountains in Israel),²⁵ this is an example of a catalogue of heroes that subsumes the individual under the group to which they belong:

Orti autem a magno primi ingrediuntur Iuda,
per multos ductum reges genus. Haec tribus usque
et numero et uirtute caput super extulit omnes
tantum alias superans, quantum leo cuncta ferarum
semina inexhaustis animis et uiribus anteit.
Litorea innumeri Gaza uenere Sabeque.
Engada deseruere racemiferosque recessus,
urbis Adulaeae sedes humilemque Raphean.
Hic Lyde atque Selis, uentosaque Iamnia et Hippa (2.336–44)

First there were those who were descendant from the great Judah, a people that was led by kings over many generations. Until today, this tribe outshines all others due to its number and its virtue like a lion outshines all beasts due to its inexhaustible courage and strength. Innumerable people came from the coasts of Gaza and from Sheba. They left Engedi and their remote vineyards, the seats of the city of Adullam and the valley of Raphain. Here there were the people from Lod and Shilhim, from the windy Jammia and Hippa

Protinus hinc subeunt populi Simeone creati,
qui Saroen, Molodamque uiri, Sicelechidaque oram
felicem frugum laetosque uligine campos,
qui Sipabota colunt, Asanesque biuerticis arces,
quique Atharin quondam generosos palmite colles,
Remmona qui cultisique erectam in collibus Ain, (2.384–89)

Right next there were the people who were descendant from Simeon, people who lived in Sharuhén, Moladah, along the fertile coast and the fields of Ziklag, lush from their humidity, in Sipabota, on the citadels of Ashan with its two summits, (who lived) also in Atharim, which once had hills full of palm trees, in Rimmon and Hai, which was built on hills full of fields

Even though the tribes go back to the twelve sons of Joseph and are thus linked to individuals, these individuals are not introduced in any detail or granted a special position. What counts is that there are twelve tribes and

²⁵ The order of the tribes is as follows: Judah, Simeon, Issachar, Dan, Asher, Zebulon, Naphtali, Levi, Manasseh, Gad, Ruben, and Benjamin (which does not follow any of the orders that occur in the Bible). Vida most likely relied on the distribution of the land to the twelve sons of Joseph in the Old Testament (Num 32; 33,50–56; 34; Dtn 3,12–20; esp. Jos 13–19; 22; Ez 47,13–48,29) as well as on Pliny the Elder's descriptions of the Holy Land (5,13–15) and Jerome's *De situ et nominibus locorum hebraicorum*.

that they inhabit different parts of the Holy Land. (Vida thus implicitly stresses the Jews' claim of Israel as their land by right.) Group identity is what counts here – and, by consequence, allows for staging Christ as the focal point of the processions.

Before the beginning proper of the catalogue, Vida too inserts an invocation. Befitting his Christian subject matter, this invocation is not addressed to the Muses but to the *aligeri coetus, gens aetheris alti* (2.316), the »wing-bearing people of the high heavens«, who, Vida says, lightly touch Mount Olympus with their feet. Here Vida reveals the second, or perhaps true, function of the catalogue: his own poetic immortality. He imagines himself being carried away to the stars, in a winged waggon, and receiving a laurel crown from heaven as a reward for his *carmen* (2.326–31). Thus the catalogue of heroes – which does not really feature heroes but is meant to praise the one true *heros* of the poem, Christ – on a meta-poetic level also installs a different kind of hero: the poet, whose glory is set in direct relation to the skilfulness and aesthetic intricacy that pertains to the catalogue form.

Even though Homer had already marked his catalogue with an invocation, Vida's explicitness in stressing that poetic fame can be based on the catalogue is a new development that also points to a shift in the function of both the catalogue form and the concept of the hero and heroism. This shift did not originate with Vida; his epic, rather, can be set in relation to a development that we find already in Ovid and in medieval examples of epic catalogues.

Complicating the Heroic: Catalogues Against the Grain (Ovid; *Widsith*; Chaucer; Milton)

As we have seen, catalogues of heroes exhibit the paradox that the sheer mass of names that are being enumerated weakens individual achievement. There are, however, two further complications. One concerns the question of comprehensiveness. Catalogues, even if they aspire to comprehensiveness, regularly fail to do so. It is not possible to enumerate – and thus to remember – *all* great men and women. In the Nereids passage from above, the catalogue ends with a vague reference to »the other Nereids«. When Homer begins his Catalogue of Ships, he remarks that it would have been too much to name every common man, which is why he only provides the names of their leaders (*Iliad* 2.489–90). Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* is astutely aware of this tension inherent in the form of the catalogue. In the episode on Perseus, he lists everyone who has been turned to stone after looking at the Gorgon, and then concludes: *nomina longa mora est media de plebe uirorum /*

dicere (5.207–8; »It would take too long to tell the names of the people from the rank and file«). Instead, names become subsumed under numbers:

[...] bis centum restabant corpora pugnae,
Gorgone bis centum riguerunt corpora uisa. (5.208–9)²⁶

Two hundred bodies survived the fight; two hundred bodies saw the Gorgon and turned to stone.

Individuals are turned into numbers; their defeat by looking into Medusa's eyes has disqualified them from being remembered. Ovid not naming Medusa's victims heightens their status of victimhood; they are not worthy to be remembered because they were killed. Those who have survived the fight are not named either; they too do not seem to deserve remembrance. This passage is significant also because it impressively demonstrates the poet's power who can decide at will whom to name and whom to gloss over and thus let fall into oblivion. This is indicative of the third complication of heroic catalogues: the tendency, discernible in *Vida* and also in *Widsith*, our next example, to connect claims of poetic fame with the catalogue form.

For medieval literature, it can be difficult to ascertain whether a text qualifies as an »epic« poem, not least since the form, especially in vernacular writings, diverges from the classical tradition. The most famous Old English heroic epic, *Beowulf* (tenth century), is striking for its lack of a catalogue. The poem features a number of shorter enumerations, but none that would qualify as an epic catalogue. Other Old English texts, however, do contain catalogues, some even to such an extent that they have been termed »catalogue poems«.²⁷ One of these poems, called *Widsith* after its protagonist and speaker, is essentially a series of catalogues. It begins by introducing Widsith as an experienced traveller; no one has been to more places and people on earth (ll. 1–3). Then Widsith begins to speak – and the first part of his speech is a long list of famous and good rulers, ranging from Hwala to Hrothgar (the Danish king for whom Beowulf fights against Grendel). Each line is built in such a way that the ruler precedes the people he ruled over. In Old English, no articles are required so that – with some variation – often the ruler is simply followed by the Genitive of the people ruled:

²⁶ Text: Tarrant 2004.

²⁷ Howe 1985.

Ætla weold Hunum, Eormanric Gotum,
 Becca Baningum, Burgendum Gifica.
 Casere weold Creacum ond Cælic Finnum,
 Hagena Holmrygum ond Heoden Glommmum.
 Witta weold Swæfum, Wada Hælsingum,
 Meaca Myrgingum, Mearchealf Hundingum.
 Peodric weold Froncum, þyle Rondingum,
 Breoca Brondingum, Billing Wernum. (ll. 18–24)²⁸

Attila ruled the Huns, Eormanric the Goths, Becca the Baningas, Gifica the Burgundians. Caesar ruled the Greeks and Cælic the Finns, Hagena the Holmrygas and Heoden the Glomman. Witta ruled the Swabians, Wade the Hælsingas, Meaca the Myrgingas, Mearchealf the Hundingas. Theodric ruled the Franks, Thyle the Rondingas, Breoca the Brondingas, Billing the Wernas.

The second part of the poem consists of a travelogue. Widsith recounts how he as a 'follower' spent time at an impressive list of courts (from the Swedes to the Franks to the Irish to the Greeks and the Persians; he claims also to have been with Caesar) and that he received many gifts as a reward for his skills as a singer/bard. He closes with a reflection on his cataloguing. The final people he enumerates, Wudgan and Haman (l. 124), he claims, »were not the worst of comrades / even though I should name them last« (ll. 125–26).²⁹ Thus he is aware of the internal logic of any catalogue – inevitably those that are mentioned first seem to be more important than those that come last. The final lines draw attention to the poet's influence; he alone can make men immortal through his words:

Swa scriþende gesceapum hweorfað
 gleomen gumena geond grunda fela
 þearfe secgað, þoncword sprecap
 simle suð oþþe norð sumne gemetað
 gydda gleawne, geofum unhneawne,
 se þe fore duguþe wile dom aræran,
 eorlscipe æfnan, oþþæt eal scæceð,
 leoht ond lif somod; lof se gewyrceð,
 hafað under heofonum heahfæstne dom. (ll. 135–43)

So the people's entertainers go wandering fatedly through many lands; they declare their need and speak words of thanks. Always, whether south or north, they will meet someone discerning of songs and unniggardly of gifts who desires to exalt his reputé and sustain his heroic standing until everything passes away,

²⁸ Text: Krapp/van Kirk Dobbie 1936. Translation: Bradley 1982.

²⁹ ne wæran þæt gesiþa þeah þe ic hy anihst / þa sæmestan, nemnan sceolde (ll. 125–26).

light and life together. This man deserves glory; he will keep his lofty and secure renown here below the heavens.

Similar to the Catalogue of Ships, we have here a panorama of places and noble rulers all of whom seem to be equal in their claim to fame. By their inclusion in the list, they are remembered for their powerful and, by implication, good rulership. Yet this ending introduces a new aspect that casts into doubt the commemorative function of the catalogue. Widsith suggests that the minstrels' songs have to be taken with a grain of salt: their skills, and thus the message they convey, can be purchased; fame depends on money. Even though the Christian notion of the transience of the world is alluded to, Widsith remains firm that fame will endure – thus once more stressing the significant role of the poet-singer.

In *Widsith*, then, the heroic qualities of the people that are listed are set in an implicit comparison or even rivalry to a different kind of heroism: the poet's fame, which becomes entangled with the intention of immortalising the heroes. The heroes' heroism hinges on their remembrance, for which the poet is responsible; at the same time, his own fame becomes reliant on the catalogue – the catalogue form is the stage on which the poet can play out his skills as poet. The main purpose of a catalogue is no longer to celebrate and praise outstanding individuals but the poet.

Another suggestive example of the intersections between catalogues and poetic fame is Geoffrey Chaucer's poem *The House of Fame* (late fourteenth century). *The House of Fame* is not an epic but a dream vision (and written in octosyllabic couplets), yet the enumeration of names deserves the name 'catalogue', and the content is clearly a negotiation of what qualifies as being worthy of remembrance. Moreover, Chaucer is a list-poet par excellence – in almost all of his works, he experiments with different kinds of enumeration, from genealogies to descriptions and catalogues, which he uses time and again to explore and push the margins of narrative.³⁰ In the third book, the narrator-dreamer visits the House of the goddess Fama, who decides at will whom to grant fame and whom to let fall into oblivion. Fama is sitting on a throne in a great hall (in her palace) where she receives her supplicants. The description of the hall – its decorations and the people who approach Fama – is essentially one long chain of lists and catalogues. Chaucer places special emphasis on the poets' role in creating and upholding fame. This

³⁰ See Barney 1982 on Chaucer's lists and possible influences, which comprise satire, the encyclopedic tradition, and homilies, among others.

is particularly eminent in the description of the line of pillars the hall is furnished with on the walls:

There saugh I stonde, out of drede,
 Upon an yren piler stronge
 That peynted was al endlonge
 With tigres blode in every place,
 The Tholausan that hight Stace
 That bare of Thebes up the fame
 Upon his shuldres, and the name
 Also of cruelle Achilles.
 And by him stood, withouten les,
 Ful wonder hye on a pilere
 Of yren, he, the gret Omere,
 And with him Dares and Tytus
 Before, and eke he, Lollius,
 And Guydo eke de Columpnis,
 And Englyssh Gaunfride eke, ywis –
 And eche of these, as have I joye,
 Was besye for to bere up Troye;
 So hevy therof was the fame
 That for to bere hyt was no game. (ll. 1456–74)³¹

The description is punctuated by a number of recurring elements: the material from which the pillars are made (iron, copper, sulphur), the poets' names (plus in many cases their places of origin), their subject matters, and the heroes' names the respective poet has made famous. For the ›matter of Troy‹, that is, the tradition of texts about the Trojan war, no names are given. Instead, the list of authors take precedence, ranging from Homer to the Homeric renderings of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages (Dares and Dictys, Late Antiquity; Guido de Columnis / delle Colonne, thirteenth century; Geoffrey of Monmouth, twelfth century; and the possibly fictitious Lollius). The Roman poet Lucan is mentioned, too, who carries on his shoulders ›the fame of Julius and Pompe‹:

Thoo saugh I on a piler by,
 Of yren, wrought ful sturnely,
 The grete poete, Daun Lucan,
 And on hys shuldres bare up than,
 As high as that y myght see,
 The fame of Julius and Pompe; (ll. 1497–502)

³¹ Text: Phillips/Havely 1997.

Similar to Ovid, Chaucer is tongue-in-cheek also about his own power as poet; he knows that he too can uphold fame or suppress it. Thus he closes the description of Lucan's pillar with the following words:

And by him stoden alle these clerkes
That writen of Romes myghty werkes,
That, yf y wolde her names telle
Alle to longe most I dwelle. (ll. 1503–6)

Chaucer does *not* name »alle these clerkes« who have written about Rome. This is not the only time that Chaucer goes against completeness in his treatment of lists. Several times he cuts short his descriptions and abruptly ends his enumerations: »What shulde y more telle of this« (l. 1513); »But hit were alle to longe to rede / The names, and therefore I pace« (ll. 1354–55); »Loo, how shulde I now tel al thys?« (l. 1341); »Hyt nedeth noght yow more to tellen – / To make yow to longe duellen« (ll. 1299–300); and: »What shuld I make lenger tale / Of alle the peple y ther say / Fro hennes unto domesday?« (ll. 1282–84). Every time Chaucer opts for *not* continuing a description, he decides against naming authors and heroes, thus stressing time and again that he, as author, ultimately has full control over the material and its potential fame, or lack thereof. The epic tradition of catalogues of heroes is redefined as the poet's task: there is no fame without the author. At the same time, Chaucer (re)constructs a literary canon in which he himself holds a position – his romance *Troilus and Criseyde*, after all, is set during the Trojan war. Chaucer's list is a canon *avant la lettre*, to be sure;³² yet as a canon it is essentially a list of proper names that merges different kinds of fame: heroic fame becomes subsumed under poetic fame; it is reliant on it. Yet Chaucer also stresses that the best poets are those that have written about great heroes: ultimately, heroic fame and poetic fame go hand in hand.³³

A further example of how catalogues of heroes become transformed by a poet's hands is John Milton's biblical epos *Paradise Lost* (1667). Milton is writing in full awareness of the tradition of Bible epics (and draws exten-

³² The term 'canon' in its modern sense was coined by David Ruhnken in 1768 in his *Historia Critica Oratorum Graecorum*; before that, it was used to refer to the body of sacred texts by the Church Fathers. On Chaucer's engagement with Dante (whom he counters by not presenting us with a strictly ordered universe as the *Commedia*), and the proliferation on lists in the *House of Fame*, see Ruffolo 1993.

³³ There is a similar passage in the *Book of the Duchess* where Chaucer includes in an ekphrasis (of a window) the heroes of the Trojan War as part of stories (see ll. 321–34): we are thus not given »pictures of Hector, Priam, Achilles, and so forth, but pictures of the stories of these legendary heroes and heroines« (Bridges 1989, 154; emphasis in the original).

sively on Vida's *Christiad*). Yet, once again we look in vain for a catalogue of Homeric scope in *Paradise Lost*. Milton turns around the expectations of what a catalogue of heroes should look like and do.³⁴ In the first book, the legions of Satan and their rulers who follow Satan's call are presented in the form of a relatively short epic catalogue. The introduction recalls the Iliadic beginning of the Catalogue of Ships: »Say, Muse, their names then known, who first, who last, / Roused from the slumber on that e'ry couch, / At their great Emperor's call« (I.376–78).³⁵ The ensuing procession of devils is mixed with topographical information. However, the devils cannot be located in one place only; they haunt or inhabit various places simultaneously and are venerated in diverse locations. Moloch, for instance, is said to be worshipped in Rabba, Argon, and Basan (I.397–98), while Chemos spans even more regions:

Next Chemos, th' obscene dread of Moab's sons,
From Aroer to Nebo and the wild
Of southmost Abarim, in Hesebon
And Horonaim, Seon's realm, beyond
the flow'ry dale of Sibma clad with vines,
And Eleale to th' Asphaltic Pool:
Peor his other name, when he entic'd
Israel in Sittim, on their march from Nile (I.406–13)

What is more, the devils can assume any form or shape, and often bear several names. Chemos's »other name« is Peor (I.412); Astoreth is also called »Astarte, Queen of Heav'n« (I.439) by the Phoenicians; and Baalim and Ashtaroth, being spirits, »can either sex assume or both, so soft / And uncompounded is their essence pure« (I.424–25).³⁶ The various names make it very difficult to keep track of how many devils there are in total: but a careful count reveals that there are twelve devils altogether, which is hardly a coincidence – they can be read as a travesty of the twelve apostles, which would turn Satan into a travesty of Christ (and possibly ultimately as an attack, by Milton, on Catholic practices of sainthood and the cult of the disciples).³⁷ Milton's list of devils defies the traditional parameters of catalogues of heroes. Not only does his catalogue feature anti-heroes, he also inverts its

³⁴ I have discussed this catalogue in von Contzen 2016.

³⁵ All quotations from Milton are taken from Teskey 2005.

³⁶ For Milton's likely source of the passage – Alexander Ross's *Panthebeia: or, A View of all Religions in the World* (1635), see McColley 1937.

³⁷ Erickson 1997.

very form. Milton's devils deconstruct the values of comprehensiveness and clear attributions that were associated with the form of the catalogue. There is no stable order or system of referentiality in which they can be understood. The devils' lack of coherence and stability is a key feature of their unstable identity; their formlessness a sign of their fallenness. Milton retains the formal framework of the catalogue – he provides an enumeration of proper names and also inserts geographical references –, but combines them in such a way that it becomes impossible to grasp the devils as individuals, even as identifiable anti-heroes, or to locate them. Milton's devils are shape-shifters, elusive in their form, and bid defiance to referential stability. It becomes obvious that the devils are not heroic; they are not meant to be remembered for their names and actions; rather, their instability on both the level of the content and the level of the catalogue form heightens their evil status. Milton has shifted the emphasis of the catalogue paradox (in a multitude, the individual gets lost) to the extreme: here, the devils are singled out (because they are enumerated) but at the same time they disappear in their evil openness and instability. A further element discernible in Milton's catalogue is that here the heroic not only is questioned and countered (by listing devils in the first place), but that the audience is factored in, too. The devils exert their influence because they have believers, they are venerated by people and therefore powerful. Indirectly, the audience then is also implicated in the mutual process of creating and keeping alive the evil in the world. This is different from the sense of shared identity and community Homer's catalogue may evoke, and also different from Apollonius and Vida, both of whom poeticise the catalogue form and transmit messages that are relevant for their work. Not least does Milton not subscribe to Chaucer's (or Widsith's, for that matter) claims to poetic fame through the catalogue form. Milton counters our expectations of what the catalogue form and the enumeration of heroes (and anti-heroes) can accomplish.

Contemporary Epics: The Catalogue of Heroes in a Postheroic Age

It has been argued that the modern period is characterised by the loss of the heroic as a value and benchmark.³⁸ Heroes have lost their significance, at least heroes in the classical sense. Instead of outstanding individuals that

³⁸ See Münkler 2006, 310–54 (chapter »Die postheroische Gesellschaft und ihre jüngste Herausforderung«).

are elevated and admired because they fulfil important functions for a society, we now have nations and political apparatuses that have taken away the foundation for such heroes. After the World Wars, modern societies no longer require or rely on the type of the selfless fighter who sacrifices everything – that is, his life – for his country and thus wins fame and honour. Also, changes in the way wars are wrought (the nuclear threat, chemical weapons, drones) have further taken away the possibility of individual acts of heroism.³⁹ Such acts, however, are indispensable for the creation of heroes. Instead, the cult of heroes has become a phenomenon of pop culture; characters from Hollywood films, TV series, novels, and comics have appropriated the type of the suffering, all-sacrificing hero for higher ends. These changes are further compounded in view of the ongoing globalisation of culture and in postcolonial times.

Thus it is perhaps symptomatic that in Derek Walcott's 1996 epic poem *Omeros*, we look in vain for an epic catalogue of any kind. There are a number of shorter enumerations, a list of birds (Book 2, Chapter CVI.ii), for instance, or a kind of litany by Major Plunkett addressed to the »house of umbrage, house of fear« (Book 4, Chapter XXXIII.iii), but nothing that comes even close to a list of names, or heroes. *Omeros* may have protagonists, but it does not construct heroes. Achilles, Hector, Helen, Plunkett and his wife – they are everyday people who live ordinary, if not always uncomplicated, lives. Also, the traditional features of epic poetry are reversed – only in the final chapter (LXIV) we find a retrospective invocation:

I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe's son,
who never ascended in an elevator,
who had no passport, since the horizon needs none,

never begged nor borrowed, was nobody's waiter,
whose end, when it comes, will be a death by water
(which is not for this book, which will remain unknown

and unread by him). I sang the only slaughter
that brought him delight, and that from necessity –
of fish, sang the channels of his back in the sun.

I sang our wide country, the Carribean sea [...]⁴⁰

³⁹ Münkler 2007.

⁴⁰ Walcott 1990, 320.

In a postcolonial world, the power struggles have shifted: from individual heroes to a people who comes to terms with their position both in their local culture and, by metaphorical extension, in the world.

At the other end of the world, the Australian poet Les Murray, in his 1999 epic poem *Fredy Neptune*, likewise sketches a plot in which Fredy, the protagonist, is the hero only insofar as he is the protagonist. He is an observer, rather, who witnesses the atrocities of the twentieth century and ultimately hopes for forgiveness.⁴¹ *Fredy Neptune* deconstructs individual hubris and its detrimental effects on mankind by showing it through the naïve and unobtrusive eyes of an outsider who is characterized by a ›Geworfensein‹ that makes heroic action an absurd concept of a time long gone by. The only catalogue of heroes in this epic poem is another anti-heroic one, similar to Milton's list of devils. In Kentucky, Fredy is forced to join a community of strongmen led by mad Basil Thoroblood. The men in the community are introduced in a catalogue:

So there was the butcher's block man, the only Australian;
his name was Tiny Calser, which I found out was McAlister.
There was Jesus' true servant, that worked in the gardens on his own
and was called just Iowa. There was Hortensius O Morahan
known as Hort: he was a circus trouper.
There was a fat man who slept a lot and never worked
but put the front gate back on where Tiny couldn't; he
had been hung and lived, they said; he gave his name as Sibling.

Another circus veteran was Tommy Dynamic, who never
stopped skipping and pumping and slapping on powder by the fistful.
Peyrefitte was a quicksilver smiling fellow built like scaffolding,
thin and jointy: I couldn't see how he'd be strong.
Adelphus was a burning quiet angry man,
one of only a few that ever put the wind up me
and I've never quite grasped why. That leaves Iron Rees
who was frightened of something; he said *Strength will never save you*,

and trained like a demon, and last was Bulba Domeyko. He was truly
what Thoroblood called him, the Short Giant.⁴²

⁴¹ For a comparison between Walcott and Murray in relation to the epic tradition since Dante, see Henriksen 2001.

⁴² Murray 1999, Book 3, 120.

Murray's catalogue harks back to the Homeric model of providing names with additional information and to Milton's list of openness and the suspension of authority (for instance, four of the nine characters bear two names). This list is one of, literally, strong men, who are, though, neither famous nor particularly heroic; they are an eclectically formed group of stranded men, all prone to violence and crime.

My final contemporary example is a passage from Kate Tempest, a British rapper and poet, whose poem *Brand New Ancients* has won much critical acclaim. Her heroes are everyday anti-heroes – people from the lower classes who struggle to manage their lives but who strive for something greater still. Perhaps this longing for gaining one's small portion of *kléos* is still looming large. The beginning of the poem is an invocation of the audience rather than of the Muse:⁴³

There's always been heroes
and there's always been villains
and the stakes may have changed
but really there's no difference.
There's always been greed and heartbreak and ambition
and bravery and love and trespass and contrition—
we're the same beings that began, still living
in all of our fury and foulness and friction,
everyday odysseys, dreams and decisions [...]
The stories are there if you listen.⁴⁴

For Tempest, her protagonists from everyday life are the true heroes. Her poem does not feature a catalogue of heroes in the classical sense but instead relocates the heroic as a form of the divine – as an attempt at re-establishing a mythic, quasi-heroic past – within everyone:

The Gods are all here.
Because the gods are in us.

The gods are in the betting shops
the gods are in the caff
the gods are smoking fags out the back
the gods are in the office blocks
the gods are at their desks
the gods are sick of always giving more and getting less

⁴³ McConnell 2014, 197.

⁴⁴ Tempest 2013, 4.

the gods are at the rave –
 two pills deep into dancing –
 the gods are in the alleyway laughing
 the gods are at the doctor's
 they need a little something for the stress
 the gods are in the toilets having unprotected sex
 the gods are in the supermarket
 the gods are walking home,
 the gods can't stop checking Facebook on their phones
 the gods are in a traffic jam
 the gods are on a train
 the gods are watching adverts
 the gods are not to blame –
 [...]

the gods are born, they live a while
 and then they pass away.⁴⁵

The strong reminiscence of this passage of a litany creates an incantation-like effect. Each line is built upon the antithesis between »the gods« and something trivial, quotidian. Heroism has been replaced by a pragmatic view on the world that celebrates, ultimately, the stories about heroic deeds as a pretext for our modern lives and problems. Heroism has been turned into, or reduced to, »mere« narratives; »mere« in the sense that the narrative patterns and blueprints of classical heroes no longer fulfil any immediate function for contemporary audiences and seem to have lost their meaning. On the one hand, one could argue that the precariousness of heroism as acts that require witnesses and reports – there are no heroes without someone who narrates and thus remembers them⁴⁶ –, is maximised because it is relegated to ourselves. If no one tells of our heroic deeds, we have to appropriate them ourselves. On the other hand, this could be regarded as an act of empowerment in a neo-liberal, postheroic world: hero-work is individual and requires everyone's own personal input.

Conclusions

This article has turned out to be quite a catalogue in itself: starting with Homer, we have seen how catalogues of heroes have been put to quite different ends over time. Even if the original function of Homer's Catalogue

⁴⁵ Tempest 2013, 5–6.

⁴⁶ Münkler 2007.

of Ships was indeed to strengthen social cohesion and provide cues for identification and group identity, these functions were quickly lost as soon as the Homeric epics became part of the literary canon, and the catalogue as a celebration of heroism in itself became meaningful and a model for later authors. Commemoration, then, shifted from remembering the heroes for their deeds to also, and perhaps primarily, commemorating – and celebrating – the poet and his skills and authority. The heroic strife for *kléos* is transferred to, at least partially, the poet and his literary fame. Ovid is a good example of this technique, but also the Old English poet of *Widsith* and Geoffrey Chaucer, who hammers home the poet's power in making and unmaking heroes. Catalogues of heroes can also function as a means of characterisation and emphasise another character's greatness, as in the list of Nereids who accompany Thetis and foreshadow, through her mourning for Patroclus, Achilles' death. Vida's catalogue of the tribes of Israel locates Christ firmly in his Old Testament tradition and makes him the focal point of an imaginary map of Israel. Milton, last but not least, is an example of a catalogue that undermines the traditional elements of the form and questions its claims for stable meaning and heroism. The paradox inherent in the form is never fully resolved: if you enumerate many – whose shared quality is that they are all heroes – the individual heroic deed and qualities lose out.⁴⁷ Finally, a glance at contemporary catalogues of heroes (or the lack thereof) suggests that we can discern a second major shift in their function, from heroism as a quality of some outstanding individuals to the democratisation of the heroic as an individual value that is within us and requires a reinterpretation of everyday life as inherently, or at least potentially, heroic. I close with an example of how epic catalogues, even if they have lost all their meaning, can appeal to and inspire modern audiences. In the so-called *Völuspá*, a narrative that forms part of the poetic *Edda*, we find the following list of dwarf leaders:

10. There was Motsognir | the mightiest made
Of all the dwarfs, | and Durin next;
Many a likeness | of men they made,
The dwarfs in the earth, | as Durin said.

11. Nyi and Nithi, | Northri and Suthri,
Austri and Vestri, | Althjof, Dvalin,
Nar and Nain, | Niping, Dain,

⁴⁷ See Schlechtriemen 2018 on collectives of heroes and the processes of heroization.

Bifur, Bofur, | Bombur, Nori,
An and Onar, | Ai, Mjothvitnir.

12. Vigg and Gandalf | Vindalf, Thrain,
Thekk and Thorin, | Thror, Vit and Lit,
Nyr and Nyrath, – | now have I told –
Regin and Rathsvith – | the list aright. [...] ⁴⁸

Almost none of these names have been identified or can be linked to any existing texts. Their meaning is lost, and we can only speculate to what extent these heroes formed part of a tradition in which they fought against each other or against others and stood out for particular deeds. And yet, the very list of names in all its enigma evokes something in us; the many names suggest a greatness that leaves us in amazement. These are not irrelevant individuals, they are heroes, powerful, placeholders for what must have been a thriving – and possibly violent – narrative tradition.⁴⁹ At least one name, however, stands out: J.R.R. Tolkien took the name Gandalf from this list and invented a whole new narrative universe for him in which new heroes now roam and delight their audiences – and create a different sense of belonging in communities of fans.⁵⁰

The catalogue form undoubtedly invites a close look when it comes to the transmission of heroes and the heroic. All lists oscillate between enumeration and narration; they enumerate but can also point to, and trigger, narratives. In the catalogues, heroes are reduced to their potential of triggering narratives, reminding the audience of their actions – always threatened by the sheer mass of other heroes and their narratives, with which they have to compete. The individual hero loses his (or her) greatness because he cannot stand out anymore. In direct rivalry with other heroes, they are relativized. At the same time, a different sense of the heroic emerges: that which is created as the sum of its parts, and which is therefore greater than its parts – the very fact that a sense of ›the heroic‹ is transmitted. The point of Homer's Catalogue of Ships is no longer to make the audience identify with the places and people mentioned, but it conveys a sense of the hugeness of the operation, of the strength and solidarity that only the accumulation of many heroes can evoke. Individually, a list of heroes weakens the individual heroic

⁴⁸ Quoted from Bellows 1936.

⁴⁹ Klotz closes his analysis of catalogues by stating that catalogues ultimately do not want us to count but to appeal to us on an affective level (2006, 134).

⁵⁰ And it is by no means a new argument that the epic genre has survived in the novel and survives anew in fantasy literature; see e.g. Ridsen 2008 in the Postscript.

qualities, as a totality, a different greatness of the heroic is created that gives us a sense of super-human qualities beyond the individual. And this may ultimately still function as a consolation even in our postheroic day and age.

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