What was an early modern wish-list? Was it an object of inquiry, an instrument of the imagination, or one of cognition? Why did these catalogues (incomplete in form, and projective by nature) fascinate early modern writers? I begin with these questions to explore the status of the wish-list as a “thing” that enabled thinkers to curate new ways of interacting with their environs, both real and imagined.1 Wish-lists became instruments through which writers attempted to make intelligible a world that was fundamentally in flux, one in which new geographies were being discovered through travels and a new cosmology was displacing both earth and man from the center of the universe. In this environment of uncertainty, the wish-list propelled naturalists and travelers to search for non-existent objects and propose new epistemological systems.

These lists took multiple forms, from the desiderata of speculative knowledge and epistemic systems, to the optativa of operative knowledge and specific objects, to query lists (which directed investigation and provided methodical instruction for travelers).2 In her contribution to a recent Isis volume on list-making, Vera Keller differentiates empirical lists, optativa, and projected lists based on their stated aims and the temporalities conjured by each. The desiderata (which demanded long-term collaborative projects) were the most ambitious of such lists, since they

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“surpassed the abilities and lifetimes of individuals.” Guido Pancirolli’s Two Books of Things Lost and Things Found (1599, 1602), an extremely popular work that set the research agenda for many early modern philosophers, offers one example of how desiderata could project futures by appealing to pasts. As Keller describes elsewhere, Pancirolli’s work influenced writers as diverse as Francis Bacon and John Donne. While Keller distinguishes among different wish-lists, Justin Stagl’s combination of various kinds of epistemic catalogs under a broader category of interrogatoria implies that the boundaries were more fluid than the terminology might suggest. Even the differences Keller marks in Bacon’s writing between “desiderata as missing pieces of learning” and “optativa as wished-for-things” become unstable when we explore how individual things in the list constitute Bacon’s Instauratio Magna. Wish-lists, most broadly, propelled readers to undertake new projects and expand the scope of the conceivable.

Historians of science have demonstrated how the wish-list enables us to examine research proposals that linked the past to the future. But as Bacon’s “Catalogue of Particular Histories by Titles” (which concludes the New Organon and the Preparative toward Natural and Experimental History [1620]) intimates, it also facilitates interactions between fact and imagination. In the “Catalogue,” readers encounter a concrete list: 130 experiments and observations to be performed, limited to categories of generations, pretergenerations, and arts. The entries range from histories of the cosmos, planets, and astronomical bodies to histories of gems, stones, and non-human beings, to studies of human bodies and motions, medicines, mechanical arts, and mathematics. Yet this list immediately invites projections into the actual world and into the future, converting what we might think is a query list of discoverable objects or particular

3 Keller, “‘New World of Sciences,’” 729.
6 Keller, “Accounting for Invention,” 237. The Instauratio Magna is Bacon’s unfinished six-part project that aimed to restore learning and reorganize the sciences.
7 The New Organon is the second part of the Instauratio Magna. The Preparative was supposed to be the third part.
“optatives” into ambitious *desiderata* that demand the production of entire knowledge-systems.

The projective nature of Bacon’s catalogue also invites us to consider whether any list could express, or even generate, wishes. James Delbourgo and Staffan Müller-Wille gesture to the plausibility of such a claim, when they characterize the list as an “attempt to give finite expression to potentially limitless series of things.” Exploring literary lists, Robert E. Belknap too marks the “generative capacity” of lists: “because it can be considered shapeless it has the capacity to spark endless connections and inclusions in a multiplicity of forms.” Umberto Eco, focusing on European art, argues that the list enacts a “poetics of the ‘etcetera,’” an infinite “enumeration” that “may never stop.” And Ian Bogost develops the concept of “Latour litanies”: lacking a distinct logic, the numerous lists that Bruno Latour presents in his work “func[ti]o[n] primarily as provocations.” To demonstrate the scope of these lists as well as the “diversity of things” they capture, Bogost creates a “Latour Litanizer,” a tool that randomly generates litanies by drawing on entries from Wikipedia.

What Eco terms “etcetera,” Bogost calls “provocations,” and Belknap characterizes as “expandability,” I argue, captures the condition of Baconian lists. They “conclude” the *New Organon*, but the ideas contained in them expand to other works including the catalogue of experiments in *Sylva Sylvarum* and the list (the “Magnalia Naturae”) punctuating the *New Atlantis*. The “Catalogue” generates a model of the natural world by recording particulars through natural history and induction: it extends into nature as Baconian method invites naturalists to fulfill the author’s desire for complete knowledge. But at its most expansive, the Baconian list suggests an “etcetera” which can range from nature to the no-place that is utopia. Despite Bacon’s continual attempts to limit the role of the

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11 Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 38.


imagination in natural inquiry, his lists become instruments of speculation about a world that might be fully knowable.

As the “Catalogue” prescribes the collection of natural history (which begins with the aid of “factors and merchants [who] go everywhere in search of [the materials on which the intellect has to work]” [xx]),¹⁴ it captures tensions between this condensed form and the expansive desires for knowledge contained within it. The list includes 130 diverse entries, including “History of the Heavenly Bodies; or Astronomical History,” “History of Air as a whole, or in the Configuration of the World,” “History of Flame and of things Ignited,” “History of Fossils; as Vitriol, Sulphur, etc.,” “History of the Generation of Man,” “History of Life and Death,” “History of Basket-making,” “History of Gardening,” and categories under “Pure Mathematics” (285–91). The work promises that a collective of laborers can record facts; the list immediately suggests a query list of objects to be found in the world if one methodically follows instructions of inquiry. But items in the catalogue are already beyond the capacities of Bacon’s proposed collaborators, the “factors and merchants.” What does it mean to provide a history of “Life and Death,” or an “observation” of mathematics (288, 291)? Are these discoverable in the same way as a gem, or a new star? These entries demonstrate how a list enumerates what exceeds its grasp, while other items, such as the two examples of mathematical observations—“Power of Numbers” and “Power of Figures”—offer only an inadequate “catalogue” of the complex signification of mathematics in this period. The list registers a realm of possibility even as it exposes a desire for what does not, and perhaps may not, exist.

Hovering between the empirical and the thinkable, Bacon’s list-making participates in a rich culture of collecting and cataloguing. Different catalogues (including inventories, recipe or receipt books, and Wunderkammern) mediated between objects and environments through logics of incompleteness. Recipes were instruments of household remedy and practical knowledge, and they listed ingredients alongside prescribed instructions. Popular books of recipes such as the Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont contained lists of strange objects (including “wild boar’s teeth, skin of a dog, ‘dung of a blacke Asse, if you can get it; if not, let it be of a white

Yet until these objects were combined with stated instructions, the recipe did not fulfill its role as “a prescription for an experiment, a ‘trying out.’” As William Eamon argues, a “recipe’s ‘completion’ is the trial itself.” But lists could suggest absences without prescribing activity; incomplete catalogues would invoke different kinds of environments, from the mundane to the extraordinary. At one end of this spectrum lies a catalogue like the inventory, which listed personal items of the deceased. Although such inventories of “objects to answer debts” are usually read as objective catalogues of early modern households, these were treacherous documents. As Lena Cowen Orlin demonstrates, inventories were partial and misleading, and they did not provide accurate pictures of domestic or public spaces. At the other end lies the “peculiarly Renaissance phenomena” of the Wunderkammer—collections of marvels proliferating among the wealthy at the turn of the seventeenth century—which promised glimpses of strange locations and cultures. The singular contents of the Wunderkammer paradoxically became “‘everyday’ emblems of cultural formations that are at one and the same time different from that of England.”

These imperfect catalogues are united by an emphasis on the accessibility of objects: an ingredient required in a recipe, a household item to address a debt, a wonder to represent a culture. The wish-list, however, catalogs absent, potential, and non-existent entities. Its contents might exist, but their presence in the list rehearses absence. Wish-lists, we could argue, document potential rather than actual modes of being. And it is this logic of potentiality that places Bacon’s catalogue not only alongside

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lists produced by naturalists, but also beside those created by poets and dramatists. As Sir Philip Sidney famously claims in *The Defence of Poetry*, *poesie* dealt with the “may be and should be” rather than the “bare was” of history. Documenting objects and systems that “may be and should be,” wish-lists seem to enact a crucial aim of *poesie*: they imagine ontological crossings from the “brazen” world of nature to unverifiable “golden” worlds. While the wish-lists of *poesie* deviate in structure from the *desiderata* of natural philosophy, they echo similar desires to expand the limits of the thinkable. In the rest of the essay, I follow the invitations implicit in several literary wish-lists to ask what kinds of “golden” worlds they conjure and comment on.

Responding to Polixenes’s claims in *The Winter’s Tale* that there “is an art / Which does mend nature” (4.4.95–96), Perdita defends nature over art, offering him flowers appropriate to the season and his age (“Here’s flowers for you: / Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjoram, / The marigold,…These are flowers / Of middle summer, and I think they are given / To men of middle age” (4.4.103–108). Next, she launches into a wish-list for Florizel:

> my fair’st friend,
> I would I had some flowers o’th’ spring that might
> Become your time of day; [to mopsa and dorcas] and yours,
> and yours,
> That wear upon your virgin branches yet
> Your maidenheads growing: O Proserpina,
> For the flowers now, that frightened thou letst fall
> From Dis’s wagon! — daffodils,
> That come before the swallow dares, and take
> The winds of March with beauty; violets, dim,
> But sweeter than the lids of Juno’s eyes
> Or Cytherea’s breath; pale primroses,

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177–84. Agamben argues that actuality is not the teleological fulfillment or destruction of potentiality, but the full realization and exhaustion of impotentiality.


That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phoebus in his strength—a malady
Most incident to maids; bold oxlips, and
The crown imperial; lilies of all kinds,
The flower-de-luce being one! O, these I lack,
To make you garlands of. (4.4.112–28)

Perdita begins by cataloging actual objects she disperses as gifts, but this list ends with the registration of “lack.” It exists as a wish, captured by her words, “I would I had”; within this lies another wish, that she “might” “make [them] garlands.” Predicting what she “would” accomplish if the objects were available, she leads her audience into the realm of the potential. Although Perdita imagines the possibilities if these flowers became available, I want to draw out a different conclusion latent in her words: this wish-list rehearses an impossibility. If the “flowers o’th’ spring” will only “Become [their] time of day” during that season, and if Perdita refuses artificial methods to make them untimely available, her wish expresses an unachievable promise, an act she can never perform.

This catalogue of entities, intimately linked to nature’s changes, also gestures to broader issues haunting the play: Perdita, the “lost child” to “be found” (5.1.40), exists as the ultimate yet-unfulfilled wish of the family-romance narrative. As the play echoes the desires that animated natural philosophers to find lost objects (a desire perfectly captured by the title of Pancirolli’s work), Perdita’s catalogue invites audiences to explore what nature (and particularly the pastoral) might mean in the romance. The pastoral world of The Winter’s Tale, as in many contemporary works, serves as a space of escape and as a mode of reflection on courtly values. In the narrative logic of the romance, pastoral becomes a necessary but

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26 In The Art of English Poesy, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), George Puttenham highlights poetry’s reflection on this relation: “the poet devised the eclogue…not of purpose to counterfeit or represent the rusticall manner of loves and communication, but under the veil of homely persons and in rude speeches to insinuate and glance at greater matters, and such as perchance had not been safe to have been disclosed in any other sort” (127–28).
temporary detour before redemption at court. But Perdita’s list also offers a glimpse of the absolute difference of pastoral from court. The temporality of the play cannot accommodate nature’s seasonal creations. Perdita, who will be back in court soon, will never access these flowers. She will be “found,” and the issues at court will be resolved, but the list of flowers suspends audiences in a counterfactual instant inaccessible within the theatrical temporality.

While Perdita’s words register a moment of absence, perhaps no early modern author revels in the continual generative capacity of the list like Ben Jonson. For instance, in _Entertainment at Britain’s Burse_ (1609), composed to mark the opening of the New Exchange, Jonson repeatedly provokes audiences’ desires by cataloguing objects circulating in this socio-commercial space. The following wish-list provides a perfect example of the proliferating significations of the form:

**SHOP-BOY.**

What doe you lacke? what is’t you buy? Veary fine China stuffes, of all kindes and quallityes? China Chaynes, China Braceletts, China scarfs, China fannes, China gurdles...Concaue glasses, Triangular glasses, Conuex glasses, Christall globes,...Estrich Eggs, Birds of Paradise, Muskcads.... Beards of all ages, vizards, Spectacles! See what you lack (73–86).27

Jonson’s list directs audiences from objects of domestic use to marvels that, as James Knowles notes, graced actual cabinets of curiosities.28 It both quickens our pace (What is the next object we might encounter?) and slows us down (What does each object signify? How do they relate to each other?). The wish-list imagines how people interact in social spaces (and with each other) through their responses to objects they “lacke.”

Venturing into the home, Jonson further intertwines one’s desire for sociability with the promise of as-yet absent objects. In “Inviting a Friend to Supper,” the speaker claims:

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Tonight, grave sir, both my poor house, and I
Do equally desire your company:
Not that we think us worthy such a guest,
But that your worth will dignify our feast
With those that come, whose grace may make that seem
Something, which, else could hope for no esteem.
It is the fair acceptance, sir, creates
The entertainment perfect: not the cates.
Yet shall you have, to rectify your palate,
An olive, capers, or some better salad
Ush’ring the mutton; with a short-legged hen,
If we can get her, full of eggs, and then,
Lemons, and wine for sauce: to these, a cony
Is not to be despaired of; for our money;
And, though fowl, now, be scarce, yet there are clerks,
The sky not falling, think we may have larks.
I’ll tell you of more, and lie, so you will come:
Of partridge, pheasant, woodcock, of which some
May yet be there, and godwit, if we can:
Knat, rail, and ruff too. (1–20) 

The speaker juxtaposes “desire” and deficiency. Neither the “poor house” nor the “I” is “worthy” of the “guest,” and the speaker can only promise an elaborate list of nourishment that might “rectify” these differences. The poem registers fundamental imbalances—in nature, in social status, in knowledge—that trigger the list-making impulse. Yet despite his promises, the speaker cannot guarantee a banquet to “perfect” the setting. Phrases such as “If we can get her,” “though fowl be scarce,” and “May yet be there, and godwit, if we can,” betray the contingency of his remarks. As he sets this table, his wishes hover close to the “lie” he almost acknowledges telling. Lurking beneath this catalogue of potential items exists a question that haunts all poetry: Was it the domain of lies or a form of expression that “nothing affirms”? When the speaker states “I’ll tell you of more, and lie, so you will come,” he links acts of hospitality to

30 Sidney argues in the Defence that since the poet “nothing affirms,” he “never lieth” (53).
the rhetoric of non-affirmation, and the desire for the friend’s company morphs into a wish for “more” objects. The speaker’s poetic expression of desires grants his words a different kind of truth-value, one that is distinct from the “bare was” of empirical or historical fact. Like readers of poetry, the guest can wonder but not completely discount that the speaker’s “Inviting” will translate into an actual feast.

As these wish-lists use absent objects to invoke different environments, they raise questions crucial to the early modern literary imagination: questions of truth, of artifice, and of authority. But few examples capture the scope of the wish-list as an imaginative thought-experiment as clearly as Edmund Spenser’s invocation of travel and projection in the proem to book 2 of The Faerie Queene. Spenser embraces the impulse that led to the proliferation of desiderata: the possibility of creating complete knowledge systems in the future by recovering lost objects. The narrator laments how critics have dismissed “all this famous antique history” of Faerie Land as “painted forgery, / Rather then matter of iust memory.”31 This is worrisome, “Sith none, that breatheth living aire, does know, / Where is that happy land of Faery” (Proem 1). To counter the misperception that Faerie Land does not exist, he catalogs recent discoveries:

But let that man with better sence aduize,
   That of the world least part to vs is red:
   And dayly how through hardy enterprize
   Many great Regions were discover’d,
   Which to late age were neuer mentioned.
   Who euer heard of th’Indian Peru?
   Or who in venturous vessel measured
   The Amazons huge riuer now found trew?
   Or fruitfullest Virginia who did euer vew? (Proem 2)

The narrator reinterprets the lack of current proof of Faerie Land’s existence as a catalyst for future discovery. Using examples of recent travels (to “Indian Peru,” “fruitfullest Virginia,” or “Amazons huge riuer”), he imagines an expandable world of potential existence rather than cartographic presence. He lists places that were unknown (and deemed non-existent) but are now found, in the process granting Faerie Land a

distinct ontological significance. He also implies that this discovery will be made possible not through travel, but by entering the wandering landscape of the epic-romance. This entrance into poetic worlds destabilizes ontological boundaries between reality and fiction: asking readers to embrace Faerie Land’s potentiality, the narrator suggests that poetry’s speculative power—its ability to create worlds that “might best be” (“Letter to Raleigh,” 716)—can fulfill the most powerful desires. Poetry, rather than travel, situates, but will also remove, Faerie Land from the realm of desiderata. After all, did not “Many great Regions,” till recent times, have potential existence? Discovered geographies were once imagined objects, items in his contemporaries’ different wish-lists.