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GEORGES PEREC, INVENTORIES & AUTISM POETICS

THANK YOU:
- Anthony Easton, Sean Yeager, Elizabeth Donaldson, fellow panelists & all you early birds

This is an ILLUSTRATED READING—*Autistic Disturbances*

DISABILITY: Slide description + it's okay to be human.

We need a little CONTEXT:
Autistic Disturbances parses out autistic language, identifying vital characteristics—"autism poetics"—and checking out how those features resonate in more traditionally valued literature. The section I'm reading today, on Georges Perec's "Attempt at an Inventory of the Liquid and Solid Foodstuffs Ingurgitated by Me in the Course of the Year Nineteen-Hundred and Seventy-Four," looks in particular at the autistic practice of listmaking—what's often referred to as "systemizing"—the exercise of sorting, organizing, ordering, and collecting language and symbolic content. So, I want to start with just a few words about this, because it's actually aesthetic, even MORAL ground that's quite contentious.

To begin, I need to observe that system language and autistic speaking are entangled with social aesthetics of authority, resistance, and submission. So, there's a robust, though largely unconscious association between word ordering and oppressive fascist bureaucracy. That means that people who like lists—and let me be clear: that's pretty much every human being—are also prone to respond to this rhetorical mode with some degree of resistance, often dismissing its intellectual and aesthetic value.

My suggestion in *Autistic Disturbances* is that this kind of verbal sorting isn't at all about clear boundaries and predetermined decisions, the orderly and efficient assignment of diverse content into neatly fitting categories, but that autistic discretionary language can serve as a queering agent, a dynamic practice of testing and questioning, devoted to intricate acts of figuring.

We arrive at Perec:

Occupying five pages, Perec's "Attempt at an Inventory" is composed of 19 parts, each subdivided into paragraphs or individual sentence-like lines designed to contain and describe the writer's eating and drinking during the course of a single year. The piece masquerades as a kind of manifest, with robust visual boundaries—sections marked by dramatic drop caps, paragraphs within each section, abundant use of serial commas—all suggestive of purely materialist or economic concerns, demonstrating strict boundaries, promoting a sense of order. At a glance, likewise the content seems to fall into a natural abstract logic, with consumed items roughly grouped into like categories, cheeses, for instance, or pies and tarts. There are all the noodles in submissive companionship: "Four pasta, three noodles, one fettucine with cream, one macaroni cheese, one macaroni, fifteen fresh noodles, three *rigatoni*, two ravioli, four spaghetti, one tortellini, five tagliatelle *verde*" (90). The veal and the rabbit, likewise, each occupy their own discrete fraternal spaces.

But anything beyond the most superficial encounter with the text brings the reader into a state of confusion and conflict. Amid this neat docility, categorical disturbances abound. By what reasoning do "cold cuts, two couscous, three 'Chinese'," keep company with "pizza," "*tajine*," and "one ham sandwich" (89)? Part of the duplicity of the list as genre, as arbiter of place, emerges here within this painfully enforced structure. Perhaps the list is not a passive and pacifying construct. It might instead be that intrusive order is instigation, replete with self-subverting challenges. In "An Attempt at an Inventory," certainly, organization undermines itself. For what reason are "One

blini, one empanada, one dried beef. Three snails" brought together in their own modest little paragraph (87)? In what way are they supposed to relate to one another? And why have they been dis- articulated from the rest of the text? Even the punctuation incites, the "Three snails" segregated by a full stop from the companions with whom they share a line. The reader is brought into active (if perhaps unconscious) engagement with structure and content, like a desperate lockbreaker, trying an assortment of tools to find a key that fits.

Non sequitur is defined as "[a]n inference or a conclusion not logically following from the premisses; a response, remark, etc., that does not logically follow from what has gone before" ("non sequitur, n."). Autistic ejaculation is indiscrete because it is out of order, impolite, or, in one of non sequitur's obscure meanings, "not in harmony," but the putting forward of nonsequential abstract language also enables such fragmentation to be defined as, quite literally, discrete. The disassembling of regular structure means that language elements are made available piece by piece, each fragment its own unit. Like puzzle pieces. And the aesthetic that treats words and phrases as discrete modules, that plays with junctions and conjunctions, that elevates the interstices of language—silences and punctuation—becomes remarkable not only for the ways in which it disharmoniously discomposes, pulling language apart at the seams, putting things in where they seem not to belong, but also for the ways in which it opens language for new and imaginative recomposition, arranging, ordering, and developing pieces in fresh and original logical and aesthetic patterns. As Bev Harp's work on the autis- tic use of parentheses demonstrates, autistic use of language partitions enables both logical and

creative composition and there is often pro-found (nonobvious) verbal order and aesthetic complexity in expression that might appear rudimentary or even nonsensical. Startling juxtaposition is at the heart of ironic and satiric rhetoric, is inherent in list form and system-text. *One* blini*, one empanada, one dried beef. Three snails*.

The apparent performance of structured control implicit in Perec's list is ultimately undermined by its own promiscuity, by the way that inventoried items leak out of designated spaces, confounding expectations that like will align with like. What might seem at first to be a noncreative compendium, a model of mindless and superficial materialism, ultimately urges questions about the impossibility of order and the elusive quality of both logic and matter, despite the seeming stolidity of both. Indeed, by this (failed) attempt to inscribe and thus delimit his organic consumption, Perec's inventory reinforces the notion that the act of listmaking—symbolically naming and organizing—ultimately works against its apparently concretizing mission. The text is at once incomplete and capacious, inspiring both amusement and disgust; it wallows in the organic, foregrounds the machinery of consumption and digestion, force-feeds the inescapable fact that our bodies are not distinct and independent, discrete fortresses, uncontaminatable. Though our eating and drinking may be described, such description does not bring our chaotic appetites and our organic bodies into regulation; rather, it draws attention to the fact that human bodies are not independent entities, but passageways for the consumption and elimination of other living things.

The decontextualization of "foodstuffs"—the arrangement of comestibles in some semblance of symbolic structural order, the naming and separating out of what we eat into exclusive units—defamiliarizes the ordinary, "intuitive" relationship with food as whole, as biological and affective. There is no appetizing plate set before the reader, appealing to the senses. Rather, the act of verbal ordering, the performance of discipline, brings us into a critical confrontation with interrelationship, the inseparability of ourselves from what we consume. Systemizing, then, autistic discretion, the endless, insistent, perseverative intellectual demands of verbal list logic are not unfeeling, mechanical, disengaged. Instead, this practice functions as means of testing relatedness, calling critical attention to the way items in any list or catalogue are both divided and connected, not only among themselves, but also in respect to content beyond the list, up to and including the listmaker.

Despite its formal constraints, its deliberately modular composition, "An Attempt at an Inventory" troubles categories and resists stasis, acting out Perec's version of a jigsaw puzzle, where, as he observes, "the ultimate truth" is that "despite appearances, puzzling is not a solitary game" devoted to the restitution of imagined wholeness (Life, xviii). Instead, he writes, the "art of jigsaw puzzling" includes a "maker" who activates a dynamic relationship, using "cunning, trickery, and subterfuge" to involve the "puzzler" in a game of figuring and questioning (xvii, xviii).

> every piece the puzzler picks up, and picks up again, and studies and strokes, every combination he tries, and tries a second time,

> every blunder and every insight, each hope and each discouragement have all been designed, calculated . . . (xviii)

For Perec, recursive figuring rather than solution is the defining aspect of the puzzle. The puzzler is the "puzzler," an agent, an active force in the game of fragments. These meditations run counter to those of clinical autism theorist Uta Frith, who seems to misread Perec's remarks about puzzling to support her own thoughts about autistic cognitive limitations. "As a metaphor," she writes, "the jig-saw puzzle persisting as fragments, even when put together, symbolizes the effect of autistic detachment" (Autism: Explaining, 112). For Frith, a relationship with the fragment, the fragmented, the fragmentary is a diminished experience, inadequate. But such a view ignores the lively cognitive activity of the puzzler who "picks up, and picks up again," who "studies and strokes." The nature of the list, of system-text, of the catalogue poem, is that of Perec's vibrant puzzle, where the performance of fracturing and the performance of recomposition imply a thoughtful engagement with ideas of identity, relationship, and potential meaning. Obsessive naming and renaming, the recursive abstract revisiting of what is typically deemed experiential, the repetition of sameness—"two eggs in aspic, two scrambled eggs, four omelettes, one sort-of omelette, one bean-sprout omelette" (Perec, "An Attempt at an Inventory," 88)—is a means of testing and discovering pattern, fundamental to scientific, literary, and autistic practice.

The ordering of sign does not necessarily imply an insistence on the existence of correctness, completeness, or the absolute. As Foucault expresses it, there is an "uneasiness" generated by the discovery that we may "never

succeed in defining a stable relation of contained to container" (Order of Things, xviii). In fact, order is bound to disorder, to entropy, and to failure; the creation of a logical frame, rather than stressing the rigid and the superficial, rather than diminishing or glossing over that which does not fit, instead elevates and makes visible the unique, the unfitting, and the nonstandard.

THANK YOU.