COUNTING THE INEFFABLE:

GEORGES PEREC AND THE VERTIGO OF LISTS

In his 1982 essay "Penser/Classer," the last piece he wrote before his death, Georges Perec offers the following reflection on the art of writing lists:

> There are two contradictory temptations in any act of enumeration: the first is to cover EVERYTHING, the second is to leave something out all the same; the first temptation would seek to close the question forever, the second would leave it open; between the exhaustive and the incomplete, enumeration seems to me to be, prior to any sort of thought (and prior to any thought of sorting), the intrinsic mark of our need to name and to collect without which the world ("life") would be unmappable. (*Thoughts* 131)

A list that strives for completeness must also confront all the miscellaneous things that it cannot account for. The "unmappable" and the "incomplete" signify a negation that is also a surplus, disrupting the list from within and gesturing toward the world without, a world that is too capacious and too chaotic to be subsumed under an abstract rubric. If enumeration gives rise to "ineffable joys," that is because the list conceals an abundance that cannot be collected or named, even if "our need to name and to collect" carries the force of an obligation.

The word *enumeration* itself exemplifies this problem. Derived from medieval rhetoric and negative theology, the trope of *enumeratio* involves composing a deliberately incoherent list in order to evoke the unnameable attributes of God. From the sixteenth century onwards, as Christopher Johnson observes, *enumeratio* begins to register a waning belief in the power of analogy to structure our knowledge of the world: the redundancies and digressions of the list serve less to instruct and delight than to dramatize its own failure to achieve closure. At the same time, enumeration is etymologically related to number: to enumerate is also to count. In programming languages such as Python and Swift, the enumerate() function loops through a data

collection by returning each of its members as an index-value pair.[1] Wolfgang Ernst observes a similar association between list-making and computation in an essay on the intertwined etymologies of the German words for telling and counting ("Zählen und Erzählen"): "The numeric order, the basis of digital technologies, has always already been performed as a cultural practice before becoming technically materialized" (147). This double sense of enumeration stretches back to the rhetorical origins of the word: Renaissance poets and rhetoricians frequently draw comparisons between metrical verse and empirical measurement, two complimentary ways of comprehending the world by number. What Perec implies by "exhaustive" in the paragraph above is not merely *capacious* but *finite* and *exact*: enumeration constitutes a set whose members can be counted.

This tension between the exhaustive and the incomplete, between the quantitative rigor of the list and its inconclusive form, also characterizes recent debates in the digital humanities about the relation between literature and new media. In a special issue of *PMLA* on the database as a literary genre, Edward Folsom invokes *Leaves of Grass* as a pre-digital example of information overload:

> Anyone who has read one of Whitman's cascading catalogs knows this: they always indicate an endless database, suggest a process that could continue for a lifetime, hint at the massiveness of the database that comprises our sights and hearings and touches, each of which could be entered as a separate line of the poem. (1572)

Folsom goes on to suggest that such a "database does not handle completion well – it is voracious and thrives on revision, addition, and supplementation." Other contributors to the special issue echo this language of the endless and the incomplete. Meredith McGill observes that the database "holds out the promise of completeness" and yet also embodies "the open-endedness of the digital medium itself, a quality that points toward a utopian future in which archival scholarship is

bound not by financial or physical constraints but by the imaginations of its creators and users" (1592). Jerome McGann contrasts the power of the database "to draw sharp, disambiguated distinctions" with the literary text that is "necessarily n-dimensional, protean, shifting," but adds that "works like poems and novels are already marked data … multiply coded" (1589–1).

Perhaps the most compelling response is from Katherine Hayles, who challenges Folsom's assertion (following Lev Manovich) that database and narrative are "natural enemies." On the contrary, she argues, they are "natural symbionts," casting narrative (and the literary more broadly) as an elusive figure that the database depends upon but is unable to capture or exhaust. On the one hand, databases are "self-describing artifacts" governed by "formal properties of closure": they must articulate their values explicitly and unambiguously in order to reliably store information. On the other, narratives "gesture toward the inexplicable, the unspeakable, the ineffable," supplementing the rigor of data with "the unknown hovering beyond the brink of what can be classified or enumerated" (1605). Hayles associates this "unknown" with the inherent polyvalence of literary texts and their potential to afford a nearly endless array of possible readings. The ineffable here is not so much a specific mode of aesthetic experience, a moment when language strives to represent the supersensible by confessing the impossibility of doing so, than the concept of the literary as a disturbance *within* the formal logic of the database. Narrative and interpretation endure in the new millennium because they are supple enough to engage with forms that defy representation, not only forms that cannot be quantified as numeric data but also the unrepresentable excess of the database itself.

This tension between the ineffable and the digital echoes a broader concern among media theorists with what Alan Liu (after Julian Stallabrass) calls the "database sublime." Liu draws upon

both Kantian and Lyotardian conceptions of the sublime in order to describe the surfeit of information produced by postindustrial (and especially digital) culture, a surfeit that is too vast to be captured in a single image and yet which for just that reason has inspired countless attempts to depict it. Invoking Lyotard's definition of the postmodern sublime as what "puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself," Liu extends this definition to include the way that new media work to dissolve both "the substrate of a work and the bodily practices of the artisanal artist," so that the unrepresentable or "transcendental" character of disembodied data becomes the general condition of aesthetic practice in the digital age.

If data are unrepresentable, however, it is not just because they lack a proper medium, but also because the very concept of data denotes something that cannot be grasped by the senses. The word derives from a Latin participle meaning literally "the things having been given," a sense preserved by the French term *les données*. As Alexander Galloway observes, a datum is not simply a fact or measurement but rather a "natural gift" or "empirical trace" that is "not so much thrown into the world, but left over, bare, remaining after the tide of being recedes" (81). For this reason, data as such are unrepresentable: they have no pre-given form and must be shaped into information in order to become perceptible. Information is a process as much as a product: "the act of taking form or putting into form" (81). Since data are fundamentally mathematical values that lack any inherent or self-evident relation to the objects they measure, any representation of data reveals more about the procedure used to generate the representation than about the data itself. Visualizing data requires "a contingent leap from the mode of the mathematical to the mode of the visual," a leap made possible by artificial rules for converting abstract numbers into legible signs. For this reason, Galloway argues, every data visualization is "first and foremost a

visualization of the conversation rules themselves, and only secondarily a visualization of the raw data" (83).

Galloway goes on to argue that the unrepresentability of data and its tendency to generate uniform images feeds into what Friedrich Kittler would call "convergence": the way in which new media appear to erase distinctions among media and medium-specific forms and genres by encoding diverse media (images, audio, film, text) as an undifferentiated stream of numeric data. Galloway puts the matter rather bluntly:

> What are the aesthetic repercussions of these claims? One answer is that no poetics is possible in this uniform space. There is little differentiation at the level of formal analysis … One can not talk about genre distinctions in this space, one can not talk about high culture versus low culture in this space, one can not talk about folk vernacular, nor about modernist spurs and other such tendencies. (Galloway 85)

To reduce the unrepresentable to "aesthetic information," whose purpose is no longer to educate or communicate but to stultify observers with the vertigo of massively complex systems, is to nullify its power to estrange. If the mathematical sublime belittles our imagination by presenting a phenomenon so vast that we cannot apprehend it as a unified image, the graphs described by Galloway do the opposite, reducing the unrepresentable surplus of the web to an infographic we can easily download and digest. Galloway echoes Lyotard's thesis that the postmodern sublime (or the database sublime) presents the unpresentable: what appears most radical about data overload, its sublime power to overwhelm, is neutralized when sublimity becomes a stock image for any dataset whatsoever. The argument is not that data is unrepresentable but that the unrepresentable itself, as a figure for surfeit data, is now a banal representation.

If new media threatens to exhaust the sublime, however, that does not mean that it exhausts aesthetic judgement altogether, or that we can no longer attend to differences among media,

genres, and forms. Patrick Jagoda observes that Galloway's claim "resembles the common critique (really, the truism) that realist representation fails to totally capture its object" (21). He goes on to argue that collections of data (specifically networks) take many diverse forms that invite close reading and medium-specific analysis (as well as receptiveness to analogies across media). The unrepresentable remains an integral concept for understanding new media and one that is irreducible to its use in network graphs that aestheticize data into a static image. Liu anticipates this position in his analysis of the data sublime: artists who strive to depict the nebulousness of disembodied information, to mediate demediation itself in the form of an image, are still constrained by the affordances of the media in which they work. One striking example is W. M. Turner's *Light and Color (Goethe's Theory)*, a painting of Moses writing the Heptateuch that figures the overflow of the divine word as a vortex of radiant light. Liu observes that this effect, "a romantic prefiguration of the data pour," takes shape through Turner's "rough yet limpid handling of oils" (229), allowing the layered opacity of paint to register traces of the formless and the transcendent. Liu takes this painting as well more recent works by new media artists as evidence that the data sublime has by no means exhausted "the ethos of the unknown": what is "unencoded, unstructured, unmanaged … in human experience." Nor has it exhausted the media that strive, impossibly but persistently, to depict this unknown: artistic media are one domain where an "experience of the structurally unknown can still be conveyed in the structured media of knowledge" (236).

How can the unknown endure in a quantified world? This is also the question posed by Perec in "Penser/Classer." Much as Whitman's epic catalogues offer literary scholars such as Folsom and Hayles a way to theorize the database through the lens of genre theory, Perec's reflections on

enumeration shed new light on this debate by drawing rich analogies between language and computation, even though (or perhaps because) those analogies rarely move beyond the hypothetical. Like media theorists and digital humanists who query the uncertain future of literature in the new millennium, Perec turns to the figure of the unrepresentable as a way of tracing the intertwined fates of literary expression and quantitative data. If the joys of enumeration are indeed "ineffable," that is partly because enumeration is inseparable from the numeric, and numbers have the potential to reach unthinkable sums. The question then becomes: is thinking also a sort of counting, a type of sorting? In Perec's own gloss, the forward slash between *penser* and *classer* implies that the relation between thinking and sorting cannot itself be sorted out (an ambiguity ingeniously preserved by David Bellos's translation, "Thoughts of Sorts"). Must one think before one sorts? Or is sorting (images, words, thoughts) a prerequisite for thinking? To think is itself to sort intuited objects under general concepts, to encapsulate and abstract. But what separates this sort of abstraction from more programmatic or procedural methods of organizing information? Is there a sort of thinking that is irreducible to the output of a thinking machine?

One answer is that there are sorts of thoughts that cannot be sorted, and perhaps even ones that cannot be thought. Much as enumeration spans the abyss of the "unmappable" and the "incomplete," thinking must inevitably confront the "unthinkable":

> It is as if the question prompted by the title, "Thoughts of Sorts / Sorts of Thoughts," questioned thinking and sorting in such a way as to make "thinking" unthinkable except in splinters, in dispersion, forever returning to the fragmentation it was supposed to try to put in order. (*Thoughts* 120)

The unthinkable embodies many of those values that Hayles associates with narrative and the literary: it is fragmentary, polyvalent, resistant to being classified under fixed categories or

abstract concepts, and for that reason never merely exemplary. But rather than oppose the dispersive force of the unthinkable to the inflexible logic of taxonomy, Perec figures the unthinkable as a fold *within* the thinkable and the sortable.[2] The sentence unravels like a möbius strip whose two sides share a continuous plane: the question of how to sort thoughts reveals thinking itself to be unthinkable (i.e. unclassifiable under the rubric of a determining concept) and, at the same time, implies that the unthinkable precedes and conditions the logical orders that try to assimilate it. Like Perec's concept of the "infraordinary," an imperceptible fabric that dwells in the interstices of lived experience, the unsortable is thoroughly intertwined with the systems that we use to map and comprehend the world, even as it threatens their coherence.[3]

The essay itself is an unsortable collection of lists culled from diverse sources: grammar manuals and dictionaries (including a section on interjectives from "a rather poor crossword dictionary"), the Universal Decimal Classification, a catalogue of the 1900 Paris Exhibition, Sei Shônagan's eleventh-century *Pillow Book*, Borges's Chinese Encyclopedia, and novels by Jules Verne, Raymond Queneau, Harry Matthews, and Italo Calvino. A single letter marks each section of the essay but the order of the letters is not alphabetical, a system that Perec critiques (in Section L: "The Alphabet") for "superimposing a hierarchy onto a sequence that is inert by definition" (*Thoughts* 126). Instead the sections take their order from the first sentence in Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller* and, like the stories in that book, they could be reordered at random without making the text any less readable. Perec describes his process as "a matter of *montage*" – an apt metaphor both because he splices together disparate chunks of text ("notes scrawled on pads or loose sheets") and because the disjunctive structure produced by this method allows the examples to form their own series of "fortuitous encounters" (*Thoughts* 136). An essay about

sorting that is nothing but unsorted fragments: the text exemplifies its own argument that literary enumeration, despite its ambition of forming a cohesive image of the world, ultimately dissolves into parataxis.

For Perec, one of the most perplexing examples of such "taxonomic vertigo" is the Dewey Decimal System. The DDS is a universal method for classifying books, encoding their primary topic as a three-digit arabic numeral and specifying subtopics with a series of fractional decimals. This system replaces an older library model that assigns books a fixed location in the stacks, usually following their order of acquisition. By contrast, the DDS gives each book a relative index and corresponding relative location that ties it to a stable yet flexible category. What makes such a system vertiginous is not just its dizzying scale but also its systematic reduction of things to numbers: a library is no longer a collection of objects but an array of indices that bear no resemblance to the things they index:

> By what sequence of miracles was it ever agreed, more or less all over the world, that
> 668.184.2.099
> refers to toilet soap (finishing processes), and
> 629.1.018-465
> refers to ambulance sirens, whereas
> 621.3.027.23
> 621.436:384
> 616.24-002.5-084
> 796.54
> 913.15
> refer respectively to electrical tension under fifty volts, foreign trade in diesel engines, prophylactics for tuberculosis, camping, and the historical geography of China and Japan! (*Thoughts* 127)

Here vertigo is a matter of style as much as of quantity. Perec heightens our sense of bewilderment by translating this array of numbers into a catalogue of disconnected topics. Jumps in syntax are also jumps in scale: the apposition between the list of numbers and the list of things underscores

the power of numeric abstraction to shrink-wrap objects of any size into a portable fraction. The use of asyndeton, the rhetorical trope of omitting conjunctions between parts of a sentence, translates the structure of the library database into a human-readable form, looking forward to the use of comma-separated lists in defining data collections such as arrays and sets. In this way, Perec forges an analogy between the rhetorical art of enumeration and the indexical art of sorting: both express the vertigo of data by removing the connectives that would otherwise shape it into an intelligible form.

This vertigo of the index finds another rhetorical counterpart in the *etcetera*, a word that innocently conceals the unsorted surfeit that every list is compelled to exclude. Perec cautions against the abstraction of the etcetera even as he concedes its necessity:

> nothing seems simpler than making a list, but in fact it's much more complicated than it seems: you always leave something out, you're tempted to write etc., but the whole point of an inventory is not to write etc. (Perec, *Thoughts* 14)

The etcetera guards against infinity while also conjuring up a hoard of unlisted things that remain barely concealed, waiting to spring into view. It is a sort of carte blanche, assuring the reader that, given sufficient time and space, the list would be complete. Confessing upfront to exclusions that can then be dismissed as negligible or irrelevant is an effective way to preempt our suspicion that something crucial has been omitted: the etcetera suggests that the elided information is accessible somewhere else, if only there were an interface capacious enough to represent it. Many of Perec's lists call attention to this elision. For example, in a list of categories of animals culled from bureaucratic records (a response to Borges's infamous encyclopedia of impossible animals), Perec inserts an etcetera between "stuffed animals" and "animals which are carriers of leprosy," adding in a footnote: "There's nothing intrinsically odd about 'etc.'; it's just its position in the list that

makes it seem bizarre" (*Thoughts* 129).[4] But that is precisely the point. The list relegates its own excess – what is too numerous to count or too random to sort – to this trailing delimiter that offers a semblance of closure, assuring us that we have read everything we need to know, that there is nothing more of import to tally. Shifting the etcetera to the middle of the list destroys this semblance. It is no longer a coda but an internal limit, a fold or *point de capiton* that reveals the incompleteness and incoherence of the set it sutures together.

Perec's work includes countless examples of lists that struggle with miscellaneous excess: all of the objects on his writing desk, everything he can see from a café window in central Paris, all the places has has slept. Undoubtedly the most bizarre of these experiments is his Rabelaisian catalogue of everything he ate and drank for a year. The title is itself a mouthful: "Attempt at an Inventory of the Liquid and Solid Foodstuffs Ingurgitated by Me in the Course of the Year Nineteen Hundred and Seventy-Four." An analog forerunner of the now almost ubiquitous practice of posting realtime images of meals to Instagram and Twitter, the inventory is one of Perec's many attempts to trace the infraordinary, the sensible fabric and granular texture of everyday life. In contrast to other texts in *L'infraordinaire* that deviate freely from the task of describing the everyday, "Inventory" is remarkably strict, comprising nothing but a list of food and drink loosely grouped by category. Imagine ten pages of paragraphs like this one:

> Two Guéméné andouilles, one jellied andouillette, one Italian charcuterie, one cervelas sausage, four assorted charcuteries, one coppa, three pork platters, one figatelli, one foie gras, one fromage de tête, one boar's head, five Parma hams, eight pâtés, one duck pâté, one pâté de foie with truffles, one pâté en croûte, one pâté grand-mére, one thrush pâté, six pâtés des Landes, four brawns, one foie gras mousse, one pig's trotters, seven rillettes, one salami, two saucissons, one hot saucisson, one duck terrine, one chicken liver terrine. ("Inventory" 477)

More interesting than *what* Perec ingurgitates (read: gargantuan portions of meat, cheese, and

cake, and over a hundred bottles of wine and spirits) is how he tries to sort this gastronomic data into meaningful categories. Should a salad with crab and Roquefort be filed under salads, seafood, or cheese? (For Perec the answer almost always seems to be cheese. Yogurt, too, is apparently a kind of cheese.) Do fruity sweets count as fruit? Yes, especially if you only eat one piece of fresh fruit a year and need to bolster your Vitamin C intake with such healthy alternatives as "one pêce de vigne in syrup, one peaches in Sancerre, one bananas flambées." And what does it mean to eat *one* peaches or *one* bananas? Perec often uses the singular article to describe plural nouns ("one stuffed dates"), presumably because stuffed dates or bananas flambées count as a a single dish, albeit a dish whose size is left speciously ambiguous. He also mixes the general and the specific in ways that undermine the authority of his tally: how can one eat "five rabbits" *and* "two rabbits en gibelotte, one rabbit with noodles, one rabbit à la crème, three rabbits à la moutarde, one rabbit chausser, one rabbit à l'estragon, one rabbit à la tourangelle, three rabbits with plums"? Such redundancies dispel the illusion of rigor promised by the title. The inventory serves less as a culinary portrait than as a critical reflection upon its own enumerative method.

The gap here between descriptive rigor and Perec's reluctant confessions (or calculated omissions) recalls a passage in *Life A User's Manual* when the seventeen-year-old Beatrice Breidal attempts, in vain, to watch her calorie count. In a parody of her namesake Beatrice Portinari, Dante's abstraction for perfect feminine beauty, Breidal is "constantly preoccupied by her weight" and subjects herself to a Spartan diet that, like Perec, she records in a diary "obviously kept for this purpose alone." Consulting her personal database, the *Complete Table of Energy Values of Customary Foods*, she draws up a list of each item together with its caloric value:

Tea, no sugar, no milk 0
One pineapple juice 66
One yoghurt 60
3 rye biscuits 60
Grated carrots 45
Lamb cutlets (two) 192
Courgettes 35
Goat cheese, fresh 190
Quinces 70
Fish soup (without bread or garlic mayonnaise) 180
Fresh sardines 240
Cress and lime salad 66
Saint-Nectaire 400
Blueberry sorbet 110
TOTAL 1,714

But if the purpose of this diary is "obvious," an act of self-accounting legitimated by hard facts, such candor also serves to veil the countless repasts that go unmarked:

> Despite the Saint-Nectaire, this analysis would be absolutely reasonable if it did not sin grievously by omission; to be sure, Anne has scrupulously entered all she ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but she has taken no account at all of the forty or fifty furtive raids she made between meals on the fridge and the larder to try to calm her insatiable appetite … In fact she is practically continuously nibbling something or other, and whilst she is now doing her self-consoling sum with her right hand, with her left hand she is gnawing a chicken leg. (*Life* 203)

Raw data is an oxymoron, as Lisa Gitelman reminds us, and the data in this table is most certainly cooked. Each food is equated with its caloric value – rather than, say, its nutritional content or gustatory savor – a value that is itself abstracted from a statistical average. (Not all quinces, after all, are exactly seventy calories). But Beatrice's palate rebels against such abstractions: her nightly binges are the consequence less of her personal foibles than of the system's failure to account for the sensuous appeal of each food and its claim on the human appetite. The discrepancy between *rillette pâté* (600) and *tea, no sugar, no milk* (0) is one of sensible quality as well as caloric quantity, the difference between an object of desire – singular, irreplaceable, affectively charged – and a

countable sum that renders any food potentially equivalent to any other.

To sin grievously by omission: we might say the same of Perec's inventory, if the omission were not so self-consciously marked. The text includes not one but three lacunae, three etceteras, disguised under the rigor of algebraic variables: "*N* cold buffets," "*n* coffees," and "*N* sundry wines". A buffet, of course, is already an unspecified quantity of food, and n is the algebraic equivalent of all-you-can-eat. Stranger still are the wines: paired with the epithet *divers* (sometimes translated as "miscellaneous," although I prefer the archaism of John Sturrock's "sundry," implying something that is sundered or set apart), the phrase is doubly ambiguous, refusing to specify not just how many but how many of what: glasses, bottles, cases? This ambiguity contrasts starkly with the wine list that precedes it, which meticulously records both variety and vintage:

> Nine Bordeaux, one Bordeaux Clairet, one Lamarzelle '64, three Saint-Emilions, one Saint-Emilion '61, seven Château-la Pelleterie '70s, one Château-Canon '62, five Chaâteau-Négrits, one Lalande-de-Pomerol, one Lalande-de-Pomerol '67, one Médoc '64, six Margaux '62s, one Margaux '68, one Margaux '69, one Saint-Estèphe '61, one Saint-Julien '59. ("Inventory" 481)

The two-digit year after each wine forms a sort of poetic refrain that harmonizes the list even as its achronological order breeds confusion. It is no less thorough than the ledger that keeps stock of the Altamont's cellar in *Life A User's Manual*: "a wine list in which every bottle is entered by geographical region, name of grower, name of supplier, vintage, date of entry, optimal maturity date, and, where relevant, date of leaving," followed by a two-page deluge of just such oenological data (*Life* 176). But Perec's own wine list seems ill-content to be reduced to a series of abstract figures. Shifting his attention from the orderly to the sundry, he echoes the moment in *Georgics* II when Virgil, after spending over two dozen lines describing nothing but vineyards, confesses that he cannot go on:

> Nor thee must I pass over, vine of Rhodes …
> Nor thee, Bumastus, with plump clusters swollen
> But lo! how many kinds, and what their names
> There is no telling, nor doth it boot to tell.

Umberto Eco cites this passage in *The Infinity of Lists* as an example of "the topos of ineffability," the reduction of "something that is immensely large, or unknown" to "a specimen, example, or indication, leaving the reader to imagine the rest" (49). The overripe grapes form a fitting analogy for the poet's own excess, both truncated and extended *ad infinitum* by a negation. Perec amplifies the trope from the ineffable to the innumerable: not just too many to tell, but quite literally beyond count. "*N* sundry wines" gives the illusion of quantitative rigor but instead opens the floodgates to an endless binge, permitting any amount of wine to be smuggled into the list untabulated. The phrase recalls what Christopher Johnson describes as the inbuilt "redundancy" of enumeration: much as engineers add a similar or identical component to any part of a complex machine that is likely to fail (n+1), poets and novelists in the baroque and neo-baroque tradition often compose hyperbolic lists that repeat previous elements for rhetorical effect. As the redundancies grow (n+3, n+4, etc.), the encyclopedic function of the list, its power to collect, order, and ratify information, threatens to dissolve into a string of unregulated particulars.

The joke, of course, is that Perec is too blotto after drinking these sundry wines to accurately record their labels. Ian Jack suggests that *sundry* "presumably mean[s] the stuff that just arrives slyly at the table in a carafe, or the stuff that one is too drunk to remember drinking." The task of composing the inventory involves ingesting substances whose deleterious effects on human memory make this task impossible, a sort of self-defeating constraint. In this way, Perec stages a tension between visceral confession and clinical detachment: the fact that he is drinking these wines as he attempts to record them undermines his position as an impartial observer. This is an

old quandary. In the *Third Critique*, Kant relegates the enjoyment of wine to the status of the merely "agreeable" [*angenehm*], a counterexample to the universal subjective validity of the beautiful:

> [A person] is perfectly happy if, when he says that sparkling wine from the Canaries is agreeable, someone else should improve his expression and remind him that he should say "It is agreeable to me"; and this is so not only in the case of the taste of the tongue, palate, and throat, but also in the case of that which may be agreeable to someone's eyes and ears. (97)

As with so many of his examples, Kant's invocation of wine at the critical juncture in the text is hardly accidental. Wine is agreeable rather than beautiful not only because its enjoyment is a matter of personal taste, *merely* subjective rather than subjectively universal, but also because the senses involved in its perception ("the tongue, palate, and throat") are more vulgar and proximal than the ears and the eyes. To judge wine means ingesting it into one's own body, abolishing the fragile distance between subject and object proper to disinterested aesthetic reflection. And wine itself dulls and perplexes our powers of judgement, making it more agreeable the more we drink.

In a similar way, the humor behind Perec's sundry wines lies in the gap between the aloofness implied by the catalogue form and the obvious impossibility of remaining distinct from or impartial towards the things we eat and drink. Everything listed is also ingested, making the cataloguer's own body as much a part of the list as the foodstuffs he ingurgitates. As with Beatrice Breidel, a failure of accounting betrays an incurable habit or insatiable appetite that is indifferent to the distinction between one portion and the next, an error in description that is also a confession of unmastered desire. What Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith call "Perec's Rabelaisian list" unleashes a sense of *copia* no less monstrous than the one Christopher Johnson finds in *Gargantua and Pantragruel*:

> To list for Rabelais is to ludically dissolve ossified categories and concepts in the face of more vital, contingent truths. It is to give voice to the dynamic profusion of material things and words, but especially to express, the undeniable, if irrational claims of the body." (1112)

But the confession is not without an air of calculation: Perec is suspiciously eager to confess his vices while staying circumspect about his virtues. He gobbles up a cornucopia of beef and pork but only one (unspecified) piece of fresh fruit. And besides an innumerable quantity of coffee ("*n* cafés"), the only nonalcoholic drinks can be counted on one hand: a tisane and three Vichy waters. Such glut is less a matter of what he eats than of how he collects and organizes the data: the imbalance between booze and healthy drinks, for example, might look very different if he had decided to include tap water. It is as if the capacious form of the inventory demands an equally intemperate diet, even if the author must resort to hyperbole. Roland Barthes argues that taking pleasure in food above and beyond its function of sustaining life makes gastronomy perverse, and this perversion takes the form of an elaborate sequence (from the first whiff of a new dish to its lingering aftertaste) that memory prolongs indefinitely.[5] If the list is a genre that tends toward excess, the food list redoubles that tendency by making excess its own visceral theme.

Like other Perecian catalogues involving his body – places where he has slept, his movements through urban space – embodiment in this context has less to do with sensory experience than with data about the body. In another essay in *Penser/Classer*, Perec describes how he staves off his fear of "losing track of myself" by keeping a detailed log of "objective" experiences: "time of waking, timetable, journeys, purchases, progress in work (measured in lines or pages), people met or just seen, details of the evening meal I had eaten in this or that restaurant, books read, records listened to, films seen, etc" (*Thoughts* 51). If such timetables and biometrics threaten to make the body docile and governable, they also constitute a reparative practice that seeks to insulate the self

from being reduced to a mere number.[6] Perec contrasts his method of logging the infraordinary with more sinister forms of enumeration: the death tolls published in weekly newspapers, for example, which quantify the impact of plane crashes and hijacked airplanes by counting lives as statistical metrics rather than grievable losses. Our compulsion "to measure the historic, significant, and revelatory" obscures the sensible fabric of daily life and its power to resist totalizing systems of abstraction. Yet the infraordinary opposes big data not through nostalgia for the lost world of things, but by appropriating the former's own programmatic logic. To record every nuance of modern life, a life that is composed as much of numbers as of objects or words, requires a method that is algorithmic as well as imperative: "Describe your street. Describe another street. Compare." Such rigor is what distinguishes Perec's peculiar form of enumeration from more capacious genres such as the epic catalogue or the encyclopedic novel. (Rabelais, for example, shows Pantagruel gobbling hordes of tripe but never deigns to give an account of exactly how *much* he eats.) A list should be exhaustive rather than merely copious: to omit details simply out of convenience is to legislate unjustly what sorts of things deserve to be remembered.

Omission is inevitable, of course, which is why Perec calls his gargantuan list a *tentative* as well as an *inventaire*. Derived from the medieval scholastics, both the English and the French forms of this word signify an experiment as well as an attempt, a provisional trial that proceeds with rigor despite the uncertainty and contingency of its result.[7] As with the two other tentatives in Perec's oeuvre – *Tentative de description de quelques lieux parisiens and Tentative d'epuisement d'un lieu parisien* – this attempt to capture his annual diet as a finite set runs aground on its own surfeit. Perec's redundancies and elisions register traces of a world that is too subtle and too complex to be counted, even if, without "our need to name and collect … the world ('life') would

be unmappable" (*Thoughts* 131). It is these glitches, more than the system they corrupt, that makes the infraordinary palpable. A bottle of pinot gris left untabulated, an extra portion of duck confit – what is stake in such omissions is not Perec's appetite but the system that records it, a system that is too riddled with error to succeed in reducing life to a statistical average or a governable sum. What is not "computationally tractable," to borrow Willard McCarty's phrase, can still be felt a disturbance, however tentative, within the order of the list, a gap between our embodied sense of being-in-the-world and the abstract models that call that world to account.[8]

NOTES

1. The Swift Standard Library defines *enumerated()* as a function that "[r]eturns a sequence of pairs (n, x), where n represents a consecutive integer starting at zero, and x represents an element of the sequence." Enumerating the first line of Perec's "Inventory" would produce the following array: [(1, "Nine beef consommés"), (2, "one iced cucumber soup"), (3, "one mussel soup")].

2. Like the unrepresentable, the unthinkable and the unsortable posit a limit to conceptual thought and linguistic expression. But for Perec these terms also describe a mathematical limit: according to axiomatic set theory, every set must presuppose an empty set as one of its members, a category that is routinely left implicit (sometimes marked by the symbol ø, sometimes by empty brackets) but nevertheless legitimizes the set as a finite totality by marking all the other things it excludes.

   Giorgio Agamben invokes this aspect of set theory in *Homo Sacer* in order to describe the sovereign logic of the exceptio and its power to render the border between inclusion and exclusion – or between law and extra-judicial force – indistinct. Both Agamben's critique of sovereignty and Badiou's use of set theory in Being and Event have become important reference points for media scholars attempting to think through the persistence of sovereign power after the rise of decentralized networks. In *Programmed Visions*, for example, Wendy Chun draws a compelling analogy between the sovereign prerogative to kill and let live and the way software divides power between compilable source and executable code, a division that encodes the historical (and typically gendered) division of labor between computers and operators at a time when both roles were still performed by humans. Also see Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (especially 11-27 on "the sovereignty of data").

3. Johnson describes *enumeratio* in baroque poetry in similar terms: even as the proliferation of redundant elements threatens the coherence of such rhetorical lists (and the world of which they are a microcosm), such redundancy "provides the necessary, material abundance out of which new thinking might emerge" (1111).

4. We might compare this anomaly to the one that Foucault discovers in Borges's original list: the category of animals "that are included in the present classification," a species that includes its own genus and so forms an infinitely recursive loop.

5. For Barthes, the *jouissance* of gastronomy is inseparable from the pleasure of the text. Prefacing a new edition of Brillat-Savarin, a writer who "desires the word as he desires truffles, a tuna omelette, a fish stew," Barthes describes the language of gastronomy as "a twofield delight": "greedy [*gourmand*] for the words it wields and for the dishes to which it refers" (261). No less greedy, Perec's inventory enjoys a palate that is as delectably polyglot as any modernist poem: besides French, there are words from English (*apple pie*, *haddock*, *Jack Daniel*), Italian (*figatelli*, *mozarella*), Spanish (*chivas*, *porto*), Russisan (*vatrouchka*, *slivowitz*, and of course *vodka*), Turkish (*tarama*, *yaourt*), and Egypt (*moulakhia*: curiously enough, the only italicized foreign word in the whole text). Not to mention his inclusion – on the cheese

platter, wedged between *boursin* and *bree* – of "two Brillat-Savarins."

6. Glossing John Sturrock's description of Perec's use of constraints as a form of "willed objectivity," David Levin Becker characterizes such a practice as "a way of foregrounding the technical in order to take enough pressure off the personal that it can express itself more or less organically" (182). In a similar vein, David Bellos associates Perecian enumeration with "the basis human impulse to hold on to things, to fend off loss by compulsive acts of recording."

   Not everyone would agree. The uptake of the Oulipo among conceptual writers, for example, has consistently downplayed the reparative and expressive potential of constraint-based writing. In their preface to "Attempt at an Inventory" in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith argue that Perec's errors and omissions undermine the ostensibly confessional nature of the list: "Slippages of accounting and excursions into the realm of fantasy move Perec's quest more into a realm of Wittgensteinian language games that of accountability or self-definition" (477). But this reading misses the point: if Perec sees list- making as a way to know and remember the self, it is because the descriptive process itself (and not the facts it records) registers the whims and idiosyncrasies of the one who describes. Slippages are where the list is most personal.

7. The tentative differs from the logic of exhaustion, which seeks to turn description into a scripted procedure that always produces the same irrefragable sum. Perec's oeuvre is full of characters who undertake exhaustive projects that never amount to more than provisional attempts. Perhaps the most famous is Bartlebooth, aptly named after Melville's scrivener, who spends decades of his life painting watercolors of fifty seaside ports and making them into jigsaw puzzles – only, in the end, to have them chemically erased. (*Life A User's Manual* famously ends with Bartlebooth's corpse slumped over a nearly finished puzzle, complete but for a single x-shaped hole, and clutches in his dead fingers the final piece which the spiteful puzzle-maker Winckler has carved into the shape of a w.) Like puzzle-making, the art of enumeration tarries with the tentative and the incomplete. It is a self-defeating attempt at systematic description, a form that cannot abide tentativeness and yet cannot function without it.

8. McCarty coins this phrase to describe the "complete explicitness and absolute consistency" required by digital models .

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