

The Theatre of Her Destiny (or She Collected Encyclopaedias)

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1

Jules Renard wrote in one of the pieces for his *Natural Histories* about how the image hunter wakes up in the morning and comes out on the landscape, thus watching it while ambling, gathering here and there the image of it all that is before his eyes, even the bones of the path, which are its shiny pebbles, and its slit veins, the wheel ruts.

The image hunter will see farm animals, then will come to the countryside, just like any other day, to hunt all the beauty of the world of senses. When Renard sees a green lizard, he writes, “Beware of painting!” Getting ahead of the *greguerías* by Gómez de la Serna, the lizard is the shudder running down the spine of the wall.

All those images would be brought to mind at night, at bedtime, in a review that will allow cataloguing and settling them¹.

2

A few days before he died, Georges Perec finished and sent for publication a text that would be published in a legendary volume, *Thoughts of Sorts*. It is an article that, in a fragmentary fashion, sometimes automatic, practically unrevised, a sketch crossed with a discourse impossible to organise, he says,

1 Jules Renard, *Historias naturales*. Madrid: Debolsillo, 2008, page 21-23. Ignacio Vidal-Folch points out in its prologue (“El bestiario de Renard”): “it has been said, excessively, that he did not write books, but pages, and more lines than pages, and when he had written enough lines to fill up a volume, he would take them to the book binder.”

Perec writes down a number of reflections, quotes and questions with respect to “How to classify the following verbs: accommodate, group, catalogue, classify, arrange, divide, distribute, list, label, categorise, number, order, re-group, share out? [...] All these verbs cannot be synonyms. Why would we need fourteen words to describe the same action? Therefore, they are different. But, how to differentiate them from one another? Some of them are opposite, although they refer to an identical concern; for instance, dividing evokes the idea of a set that has to be distributed among different elements, whereas grouping evokes the idea of different elements that must be united in a set.”²

For Perec, the image of the world as a puzzle is not far off from that human attempt to order everything by distributing it in categories and subspecies according to a single code which, on the other hand, “regrettably, will not work, never worked, will never work.” It will never work due to the utopian character of the fact, Perec points out, which does not allow nor understand the play of random, or diversity, and generates dysfunctions in the supposedly *logical order* when applied to arranging things systematically, as observed when analysing the encyclopaedic program of Monsieur Picard for the Universal Expo of Paris in 1900: narrow, frivolous, lacking direction, surprising... in its way to grasp the world and naming what is readable.

3

From Mathematics, Frank P. Ramsey tried to establish the conditions for order to appear. Ramsey’s theory proposes

2 Georges Perec, “Pensar/Clasificar”, in *Pensar/Clasificar*. Barcelona: Gedisa, 2001, page 108-126.

something like *total disorder is impossible*. This is the statement of a problem that affects form in all its possible ensembles directly. It is why the limit Ramsey faced in relation to chaos is flight forward, towards infinity. If, as the theorem states, we had an infinite number of elements sorted in a group of boxes, one of them *must* hold an infinite number of those elements...

Here we are concerned with that succession of boxes, sets that succeed one another, pages, canvasses, boxes and display cases with which Nuria Rodríguez plays at arranging the memory of objects, the images of things, saving them from the chaos of recollection, as she distributes what is the same and groups what is different *et sic in infinitum*.

4

Years before, while Perec corrected the manuscript of *Things*, his first novel, Witold Gombrowicz had just returned to Europe after an exile of 23 years and 226 days in Argentina; he would enter the following in his *Diary* towards the end of 1963, already installed in France: “Visual arts are closer to things than they are to men: a painter, a sculptor, produces objects, and literary work has ended up being tackled as an object. Critics are becoming increasingly obsessed with cataloguing. It is all about cataloguing, classifying the artist within a group or trend; critique is becoming increasingly more objective, there is more theory in it, and art critics are becoming less artists and more researchers, experts, scholars and reporters.”³

The way he points out the difference between painting and literature of that

3 Witold Gombrowicz, *Diario (1953-1969)*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2005, page 714.

time, is quite suggestive, insisting on this “making objects” (closer to things), and the critics’ obstination in cataloguing and classifying the artist in a way that means to be objectual and objective. It is interesting because Gombrowicz puts the focus on the work of the literary critic, writing on words, literature and on literature, while the art critic writes about something essentially foreign to writing, pictoric values, and such description of paintings, he says, is *a critique from outside, a critique of things*.

What Gombrowicz could not accept well, and against which he protested, was the transformation of the young French writers of the *Nouveau Roman* whom, in his view, were sadly renouncing what is human to embrace the world of things, “more and more exterior. Meaning, objective.”

Like Perec when he published *Things* in 1965?

Nuria Rodríguez does not renounce humanity. On the contrary, she embraces objects, like Jérôme and Sylvie, main characters of *Things*⁴— to place her attention in what is relative to the objects themselves in a disengaged, dispassionate way, and also its opposite: telling tiny stories *about everything*, in a narrative of infinite magnitudes, without beginning or end, in which any enumeration, however minimal, triggers irresistible temptations.

Let us forsake the outside, what is *finished*, and dive head first into poetry, going from the object of the critique to “all that which does not differentiates nor defines, but which unites and erases”, according to Gombrowicz.

4 Georges Perec, *Las cosas. Una historia de los años sesenta*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2001.

5

Guy Davenport wrote, “Between recollection and consumption of food there is a moment in which it is exhibited.” His study of still life⁵ reveals the ancestral character of the pictorial genres that received its modern name from the Dutch, in the 17th century, *stillleven*, with its motionless life model, to the *pronkstillleven*, those brimming, sumptuous baroque tables.

Food paintings allow us to see how, throughout a history of 4,000 years, the act of *exhibiting* things remains important, whether as an offering or as a symbol of the passage of time.

From the beginning, food, as treasures, has been exhibited. The most sophisticated model to explore is the central European *wunderkammer* in Rudolph II’s Hradschin Palace in Prague. Here we see the madness of collecting, the evils of archiving, and the philosophical character that contemplating *things* confers, in that miraculous space where style is born from limits: the ludicrous object, due to its particularity, and the way it is shown.

6

Manipulating the objects, *the things*, and arranging them in a specific way while reflecting upon them is only one of the possibilities. Different thoughts will establish different orders, thus exerting their exhibition operates in the same way as that act Walter Benjamin did, one night at the beginning of 1930s. The joy of dusting and reassembling the shelves of a personal library that had spent some time in boxes,

allowed “casting a glance on the relationship between the owner of the collection and his treasures” while offering a “panoramic view on the fact of collecting, more than on any particular collection”⁶.

This is the part we are most interested in, discovering the artist as a collector, *tending to her treasure*, divesting an ever incomplete puzzle: her inner journey through things, going back to objects, books, painted pages, once and again. A repeated use of the same things, or their repeated representation, perhaps, highlights their relevance within the ensemble, if only for a moment.

Her passion for so many objects, books and images borders *chaos of memories* thus returning them to chance, to fate, in the way they were acquired: “a disarray in which habit has become so familiar that it can also resemble order.” At least, as Benjamin would also write, an order that is a *state of instability on the brink of the abyss*, more or less as we learnt from Ramsey.

We find ourselves before an open collection, with no catalogue, just an imaginary inventory, a mental one of her own. This is a collection continuously *rewritten* in her paintings, alive in their presentations, and in the devices and display cabinets. This is an exhibition in which “all that concerns memory, thought, conscience, becomes a plinth, frame, pedestal, stamp of possession. Age, landscape, craft, the owner from which such sample is obtained, all of this gathers, in the eyes of the collector, in each belonging, to compose a magic en-

6 Walter Benjamin, *Desembalo mi biblioteca. El arte de coleccionar*. Palma de Mallorca: José J. de Olañeta, 2012, page 31-56. See also Álvaro Armero, *Por eso coleccionamos. Sensaciones de una pasión fría*. Sevilla: Renacimiento, 2009.

5 Guy Davenport, “Una canasta de fruta madura”, in *Objetos sobre una mesa. Desorden armonioso en arte y literatura*. Madrid-México: Turner/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998, page 15-51.

cyclopaedia. Its quintessence is no other than the fate of the object.”

Thus we reach the crux of the matter. Any collection, this one, is a magic encyclopaedia, a *marvellous* one, which is in itself an end: the scene, the *theatre of its destiny*, as Benjamin accurately noted.

7

Portraying food, the desire of collecting, and the archiving disease are all three as old as humankind, in its desire to accommodate, group, catalogue, classify, arrange, divide, distribute, list, label, categorise, number, order, re-group, share... everything. Thus, Mesopotamian tablets that list in cuneiform script, classified in families and themes would result in an inventory of that world of those times, which, in a different way would be dramatised later by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*.

His compendium, as established in the 1st century, became the founding model for encyclopaedias. It essayed a description of the world in 37 books which, not saving any space for digressions, bracing the catalogue of the known and its marvels. Later would come all dictionaries and encyclopaedias, before and after the *Encyclopédie*. In fact, the publishing disaster a certain illustrated encyclopaedia was becomes here the subject for the title of this exhibition. In Nuria Rodríguez’s words, “it is a nod to the encyclopaedic project of the publishing house Seguí. At the beginning of 20th century, in 1907, they launched an ambitious edition for an illustrated encyclopaedia, with many images. It aimed to become *the* encyclopaedia of Spanish society, its flagship. However, they only published up to volume XII, to LB-LL. Thus the edition was left incomplete and they failed the thousands of

subscribers that had committed to the project. This is a very interesting unfinished project. I found it in the flea market and I have now the volumes that were actually published.”

Painting on the pages of the Seguí encyclopaedia, I toyed with their illustrations until they became paintings. Transforming stones, sticks and shells in a treasure deserving a portrait, transforming the image of a familiar object in the key of another Natural History... It was a systematisation that shapes (appearance) a proposal (the attempt) that is taking risks all along: this collection, open *ad infinitum* in which an object becomes an image, and its manipulation, image in motion; the image becomes painting and the painting, a page. It is all reversed, in the extent of what is possible with an archive that only aims at *presenting all the terms of a discourse*⁷.

Finally, writing this critique from the outside, the overall sensation is that Nuria Rodríguez’s work has grown highlighting the *exhibition value* of the objects (things) and their representation as ideas, unfolding a particular *mise-en-scène* of the media in their inventory, and only bracing that: its uncertain possibility in the shape of partial essays, perhaps the indications for a further volume, some pages from another volume in the very centre of the *theatre of fate* (tentative subspecies to finish up the world) of so many things to be collected.

And those yet to come.

7 Ver Hal Foster, “Archivos de arte moderno”, in *Diseño y delito y otras diatribas*. Madrid: Akal, 2004, page 65-82 and “An Archival Impulse”, *October*, no. 110. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004, page 3-22.