

Singing the Everyday, Sign(al)ing the World. On Catalogic Poems

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Abstract: This article analyzes three poems: Jacques Prévert's "Tentative de description d'un dîner de têtes à Paris-France" (1931), Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row" (1965), and Jaume Sisa's "Qualsevol nit pot sortir el sol" (1975). They are interrelated examples based on the list concept and loosely interconnected as all of them elaborate lists of people that can be found in, or are related to a specific place. In these three poems we can recognize a mixture of Eco's distinction between the "poetics of everything included," and the "poetics of the etcetera." Similar to Proust's use of the enumeration, they establish relationships and divisions, and this has a therapeutic function. The three poems are written against the grain, opposing the mainstream thinking of the day, based on enumeration chaotically cataloguing, and with perceptual attention to the everyday: class differences and the monotony and beauty of working (Prévert); claiming a place where to live (Dylan); enjoying friendship, celebration and happiness as post-hippie values based on a magical childlike world (Sisa). Everyday life is filled with the unorganized accumulation of objects and beings and the unbearable inclination to make sense of it all. These are long catalogic poems that sing the everyday, signaling alternatives to the world, helping us reassess it.

Keywords: Everyday life, Enumeration, Catalogues, Poetry, Songs

Resumen: Este artículo analiza tres poemas: "Tentative de description d'un dîner de têtes à Paris-France" (1931) de Jacques Prévert, "Desolation Row" (1965) de Bob Dylan y "Qualsevol nit pot sortir el sol" (1975) de Jaume Sisa. Son ejemplos interrelacionados, basados en el concepto de lista y conectados entre sí ya que todos ellos contienen listas de personas que se pueden encontrar, o están relacionados con un lugar específico. En estos tres poemas podemos reconocer una mezcla de la distinción de U. Eco entre la "poética de todo incluido," y la "poética del etcétera." Al igual que el uso de Proust de la enumeración, en los textos se establecen relaciones y divisiones, y esto tiene una función terapéutica. Los tres poemas están escritos oponiéndose al pensamiento dominante de su día, basados en la catalogación, siguiendo la enumeración caótica, y con una atención a la percepción de lo cotidiano: las diferencias de clase y la monotonía y la belleza del trabajar (Prévert); reclamando un lugar donde poder vivir (Dylan); un canto a la amistad, la fiesta y la felicidad en clave post-hippie basado en un mundo mágico infantil (Sisa). La vida cotidiana está llena de la acumulación desorganizada de objetos y seres y la inclinación irresistible para dar sentido a todo ello. Estos son poemas largos "catalogicos" que cantan lo cotidiano, indicando alternativas al mundo, ayudándonos a reevaluarlo.

Palabras clave: Vida Cotidiana, Enumeración, Catálogos, Poesía, Canciones

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Le quotidien: ce qu'il y a de plus difficile à découvrir
Maurice Blanchot

In the final pages of Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *The Virgin Suicides* the narrator tries to solve the puzzle of the four Lisbon girls' death:

In the end we had the pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained, oddly shaped emptinesses mapped by what surrounded them, like countries we couldn't name... What lingered after them was not life, which always overcomes natural death, but the most trivial list of mundane facts: a clock ticking on a wall, a room dim at noon, and the outrageousness of a human being thinking only of herself. (246)

The sense of emptiness described in the paragraph brings forth both the puzzling mystery of the gaps of everyday life: a sensation compared to an unknown map; and at the same time the urgency of solving microscopic, almost hidden, problems. The disappearance of a group of young women creates this hollow space immersed in the incomprehensible absurd of little details that one can hardly perceive but that are at the same time poignantly full of meaning. From a similar perspective, Ramón Gómez de la Serna designates the geography of life's leftovers when discussing Madrid's *Rastro* market as a concept. What is essential about the *Rastro*—he wrote—is its condition of marginality, as some sort of refuge for discarded objects refuted by civilian life:

El Rastro es siempre el mismo trecho relamido de la ciudad, planicie, costanilla, gruta de mar o tienda de mar, que es lo mismo, playa cerrada en que la gran ciudad—mejor dicho—, las grandes ciudades y los pueblillos desconocidos mueren, se abaten, se laminan como el mar en la playa, tan delgadamente, dejando tirados en la arena los restos casuales, los descartes impasibles, que allí quedan engolfados y quietos hasta que algunos se vuelven a ir en la resaca. (Gómez de la Serna 74-75)

Consequently, the *Rastro* is a sort of beach where leftovers from a worldwide shipwreck surface, which are the “restos casuales, los descartes impasibles.” Watching the everyday, with its essential attention to minutia calls for an expert eye but also a detective who can picture abnormalities lagging under reality's surface. Both Eugenides and Gómez de la Serna point

to the unorganized accumulation of objects and beings and the unbearable inclination to make sense of it all.

Everyday life is filled with lists of things: what to do, what to buy, who to invite, where to go, and lots of unfulfilled New Year resolutions. Precisely, lists of people are a way to describe attendees to an event. A tedious casual activity such as making lists can turn into something more complex thus turning upside down practices and almost forgotten activities. I will analyze three interrelated examples that are based on the list concept and loosely interconnected as all of them elaborate lists of people that can be found in, or are related to a specific place: Jacques Prévert's "Tentative de description d'un dîner de têtes à Paris-France" (1931), Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row" (1965), and Jaume Sisa's "Qualsevol nit pot sortir el sol" (1975).¹ All three poems could be typified with the words that Michael Bishop used to describe Prévert's poem:

The anaphoric cascade of words is irresistible, contagious, witty, full of yet pertinent both general and specific allusions to social mores, punning, satirical, freely flowing. (9)

By focusing on such a unique selection of texts I will be able to reveal underlying trends within the common, almost ignored realities. As Hegel (quoted by Lefebvre) once wrote: "The familiar is not necessarily the known" (132). It is crucial to study this familiarity in apparently well-known spaces and situations. Georges Perec coined in 1973 the term *l'infra-ordinaire* (the infra-ordinary). He used it to describe those minimal aspects of reality on which he hoped to concentrate. He noticed our eyes are conditioned to scan the horizon of our habitat only for the unusual, thus paying more attention to the exceptional,

and forgetting about the anonymous *endotic*, a term which Perec used in opposition to *exotic*. To begin investigating the *infra-ordinary*, Perec invited us to ask what may seem, at first, to be trivial and futile questions, in order to provoke the necessary discontinuity between signs and habits of observations. De-familiarization, Perec noted, is a technique of inquiry that requires both perseverance and inventiveness and which must also resist systematization. As recognized by Maurice Blanchot it is extremely difficult to define the everyday:

Whatever its other aspects, the everyday has this essential trait: it allows no hold. It escapes. It belongs to insignificance, and the insignificant is without truth, without reality, without secret, but perhaps also the site of all possible signification.

Because the everyday escapes it makes "its strangeness—the familiar showing itself (but already dispersing) in the guise of the astonishing." Difficult to perceive because one has always looked past it; it is difficult to introduce into a whole or "reviewed," enclosed within a panoramic vision. The everyday is what we never see for a first time, but only see again (Blanchot 14). Besides its difficulty to be grasped, the everyday is ubiquitous. Michael Sheringham has summarized the problem in the following terms:

the everyday is a zone of opposition, intersection, or interconnection—of the accidental and the permanent, imagination and affect, the personal and the social. It is constituted by sequences of individual actions (dressing, eating, shopping, walking), but within a context of relations and interactions where the individual is actor as well as agent. The *quotidien* involves continuity but also change,

repetition but also variation and evolution. It is made up of routines, but major events (often long anticipated or long remembered) are also part of its fabric, as are festive moments, ‘mini-fêtes’. It is universal (through its link to the human condition in general) but also variable, inflected by climate, class, and gender. It is both independent of and marked by history. (Sheringham 300)

The poems I deal with in this article include instances of serialization or enumeration. They deal with regular events immersed in continuity and change, repetition and variation. Prévert’s poem “Tentative de description...” is a sardonic depiction of a state dinner. Bob Dylan’s “Desolation Row” has been described as a sort of Fellini-esque parade of grotesques and oddities featuring a huge cast of iconic characters. Jaume Sisa’s song “Qualsevol nit pot sortir el sol” is a long poem-song in which Sisa enumerates a long list of characters, real or from fictional sources, to recreate the parade of guests arriving at a night party. Before analyzing in detail these texts I need to discuss the issue of everyday life and seriality, because it is at the core of my reading of the three texts.

Seriality and the everyday

The use of this rhetorical device—enumeration—can be identified as a method of looking around to encompass the wide variety of actions and people that populate the landscape of the everyday. Umberto Eco made some extremely useful remarks in the context of a Louvre exhibition. As he puts it, there are remarkable pictorial solutions that artists have used for a visual representation of the list. Eco theorizes about the list’s fascination. He included verbal lists (from Homer to Pynchon) and visual ones (from

a fifth century Greek shield to Christian Boltanski installations). As a good cataloger he thrives with subdivisions. Thus the two major types of list are those that correspond to the “poetics of everything included,” and those expressing the “poetics of the etcetera” (Eco 7).² The first aims to complete and close, albeit temporarily: the old phone book is a list of phone numbers and also a quite exhaustive list of the inhabitants of a city. The second exploits the association ability of the human mind in constant motion, for instance, the section of the inventions of Professor Franz de Copenhague in the Spanish postwar magazine *TBO* (Tausiet). These inventions of *TBO* were small follies and pitfalls of imagination and had no physical boundaries. Noteworthy is the case of Marcel Proust, who fell asleep reading train timetables, and includes several lists of people’s names in the *Recherche*. In a famous chapter Proust combats insomnia with lists of names of towns he would like to visit:

mais j’avais beau les comparer,
comment choisir plus qu’entre des
êtres individuels, qui ne sont pas
interchangeables, entre Bayeux si
haute dans sa noble dentelle rou-
geâtre et dont le faite était illuminé
par le vieil or de sa dernière syllabe;
Vitré dont l’accent aigu losangeait de
bois noir le vitrage ancien; le doux
Lamballe qui, dans son blanc, va du
jaune coquille d’œuf au gris perle;
Coutances, cathédrale normande,
que sa diphtongue finale, grasse et
jaunissante couronne par une tour de
beurre; Lannion avec le bruit, dans
son silence villageois, du coche suivi
de la mouche; Questambert, Pontor-
son, risibles et naïfs, plumes blanches
et becs jaunes éparpillés sur la route
de ces lieux fluviatiles et poétiques;
Benodet, nom à peine amarré que
semble vouloir entraîner la rivière

au milieu de ses algues, Pont-Aven, envolée blanche et rose de l'aile d'une coiffe légère qui se reflète en tremblant dans une eau verdie de canal; Quimperlé, lui, mieux attaché et, depuis le moyen âge, entre les ruisseaux dont il gazouille et s'emperle en une grisaille pareille à celle que dessinent, à travers les toiles d'araignées d'une verrière, les rayons de soleil changés en pointes émoussées d'argent bruni? (388-89)

In this case to say the names, associating them with each other, establishing relationships and divisions, has a therapeutic function. Basically a list is an enumeration. But a list is also a story, what Eco calls the “rhetoric of enumeration” (45), which corresponds to the rhythm of sounds, associations producing a long list of words, as we can perceive in Marcel Proust's example.

There are other types of lists that may be used to organize the chaos of everyday life, categories, subcategories, annotations, that can go from the banality of a “shopping list” we jot down before going to the supermarket, to a list of things that need to change to improve our life, live more calmly, more consciously as the never achieved “New Year's Resolution.” Enumeration has been used since ancient times as a rhetorical device. It was known as “poesía catalógica” or catalogic poetry.³ They include instances of Talmudic rhetoric or the Dantesque world of medieval compendia (Brochu). Enumeration forces exhaustiveness, but it is not an easy task. As Perec puts it:

Rien ne semble plus simple que de dresser une liste, en fait c'est beaucoup plus compliqué que ça n'en a l'air: on oublie toujours quelque chose, on est tenté d'écrire etc., mais justement, un inventaire, c'est quand on n'écrit pas etc. (21-22)⁴

Seriality is a crucial device for many nineteenth and twentieth century poets and artists: Arthur Rimbaud used it in his poem “Bateau Ivre.” Other examples include Pablo Neruda, Jacques Prévert, André Breton's boxes, Salvador Dalí's prose poems, Georges Perec, Italo Calvino, Roland Barthes (with among other glowing examples his series “J'aime, je n'aime pas” in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*). It is worth mentioning that more contemporary lists share another feature. The lists written by James Joyce or Jorge Luis Borges, to name just a few, are very different of Homer's lists in his epics poems. These are lists constructed because:

they wanted to say things out of a love of excess, hubris, and a greed for words, for the joyous (and rarely obsessive) science of the plural and the unlimited. (Eco 137)

Thus we get close to the chaotic enumeration. Jaime Alazraki when dealing with enumeration in Borges' poetry asked: “But what exactly do enumeration enumerate in poetry?” In his own answer to this rhetorical question he made a distinction between Whitman and other cases. In Whitman, enumerations list the diversity or even chaos:

of a country, time, or people, in order to cluster that diversity into a unity: the poem renders that oriental bazaar of our unordered civilization—in the words of Spitzer—into ‘the powerful Ego, the ‘I’ of the poet, who has extricated himself from the chaos. (152)

Alazraki's point is that Borges uses enumeration in his poetry in a very different way than Whitman. Nevertheless he recognizes that:

Borges... has employed this particular type of enumeration, proper to pantheism, in his fiction, in the description of divine vision or theophanies in stories like "The Aleph,"... and "The God's Script." (152)

Lists are very close to chaotic enumeration, that kind of list that at first glance does not have unifying criteria. They summarize in a sort of expressionist and seemingly little articulated way the unattainable complexity of the world, or describe states of metaphysical suffering. A well-known Borges poem entitled "La suma" pictures this mixture:

Ante la cal de una pared que nada
nos veda imaginar como infinita
un hombre se ha sentado y premedita
trazar con rigurosa pincelada
en la blanca pared el mundo entero:
puertas, balanzas, tártaros, jacintos,
ángeles, bibliotecas, laberintos,
anclas, Uxmal, el infinito, el cero.
Puebla de formas la pared. La suerte,
que de curiosos dones no es avara,
le permite dar fin a su porfía.
En el preciso instante de la muerte
descubre que esa vasta algarabía
de líneas es la imagen de su cara.
(*Los conjurados* 41)

Borges' sonnet stresses meta-literary aspects. In this case the totality is the addition of little pieces and arbitrariness, a thought that is condensed in the second quartet: "puertas, balanzas, tártaros, jacintos,/ ángeles, bibliotecas, laberintos/ anclas, Uxmal, el infinito, el cero." In yet another text, *La biblioteca de Babel*, Borges highlights problems related to his profession as a librarian and the absurdity and impossibility of any attempt at classification:

De esas premisas incontrovertibles
dedujo que la Biblioteca es total y

que sus anaques registran todas las posibles combinaciones de los veintitantos símbolos ortográficos (número, aunque vastísimo, no infinito) o sea todo lo que es dable expresar: en todos los idiomas. Todo: la historia minuciosa del porvenir, las autobiografías de los arcángeles, el catálogo fiel de la Biblioteca, miles y miles de catálogos falsos, la demostración de la falacia de esos catálogos, la demostración de la falacia del catálogo verdadero, el evangelio gnóstico de Basilides, el comentario de ese evangelio, el comentario del comentario de ese evangelio, la relación verídica de tu muerte, la versión de cada libro a todas las lenguas, las interpolaciones de cada libro en todos los libros, el tratado que Beda pudo escribir (y no escribió) sobre la mitología de los sajones, los libros perdidos de Tácito. (*Narraciones* 109)

Borges, who enjoyed demonstrating the limits of reason, wrote a classification of animals that were found in an encyclopedia, that defies any logic:

En sus remotas páginas está escrito que los animales se dividen en (a) pertenecientes al Emperador, (b) embalsamados, (c) amaestrados, (d) lechones, (e) sirenas, (f) fabulosos, (g) perros sueltos, (h) incluidos en esta clasificación, (i) que se agitan como locos, (j) innumerables, (k) dibujados con un pincel finísimo de pelo de camello, (l) etcétera, (m) que acaban de romper el jarrón, (n) que de lejos parecen moscas.⁵ (*Prosa completa* 221)

One of the absurdities in this list is it is organized against the most basic principles of logic, and one of the terms is included

in the same classification (“(h) incluidos en esta clasificación.”)

According to Leo Spitzer’s clarification in *La enumeración caótica en la poesía moderna*, chaotic enumeration is a special version of what he called “estilo enumerativo,” which is characterized by a frequent use of anaphor and asyndeton. As he put it, chaotic enumerations are a sort of “catálogos del mundo moderno, deshecho en una polvareda de cosas, que se integran no obstante en una visión grandiosa del Todo-Uno.” He pointed to Walt Whitman’s poetry where this kind of enumeration was used very often:

acerca violentamente unas a otras las cosas más dispares, lo más exótico y lo más familiar, lo gigantesco y lo minúsculo, la naturaleza y los productos de la civilización humana, como un niño que estuviera hojeando el catálogo de una gran tienda y anotando en desorden los artículos que el azar pusiera bajo su vista; pero un niño que, siendo además sabio y poeta, extrajera poesía y pensamiento de una lista de áridas palabras; un niño genial, con el genio verbal de un Victor Hugo. (13-15)

Spitzer, in a curious coincidence with some of the theories put forth by Walter Benjamin (60) thought that the increase of attention to chaotic enumeration was directly linked to the growth of big stores in France and the US. These poems offer to the reader a sort of life’s catalogue bestowing an underlying on life’s most obscure aspects and connections. Actually in the three poems selected this is indeed what happens: the authors succeed in creating an immense catalogue, which is established by assembling lists of characters, mixing them up, establishing an appraisal of the world through a selection of

human invented or real beings. According to a Modernist approach these are not closed catalogues (“the poetics of the everything included”) but open ones, because chaotically, enumerations are a powerful device to reflect the uneasiness of being in the world, the unlimited things to grasp. The everyday implies a degree of repetition and, potentially, monotony. Gardiner states that:

[although] everyday life can display routinized, static and unreflexive characteristics, it is also capable of a surprising dynamism and moments of penetrating insight and boundless creativity. [The everyday is] ‘polydimensional’: fluid, ambivalent and labile. (6)

Here is where the eye of the artist and writer can help to distinguish between plain monotony and the *endotic* in everyday life.

Three poems, three views

Let’s go back to the three poems I mentioned above. The most noticeable aspect of these texts is precisely the irresistible “anaphoric cascade of words.” But at the same time each one of them has unique characteristics. The poems go from the politic to the overtly satirical, taking harsh political, critical stances, putting together an amalgamation of eccentric people, real and cartoon-like celebrities, through a technique close to what Leo Spitzer, as we have seen, used to define as “chaotic enumeration.” Prévert’s poetry aims to create a shock effect, the reader has to get off his or her hinges, has to break from habits of thought, reading automatism, and get rid of old sensitivity. However, it is poetry that is organized according to two main themes clearly defined, symmetry and antagonism.

Prévert creates a false sense of security for the reader, then immediately withdraws the intellectual armchair. His images are spectacular at creating conflict and incoherence based upon a well-calculated inventory. These first lines in his well-known poem “Inventaire” offer an excellent example of what Prévert did best:

Une pierre
deux maisons
trois ruines
quatre fossoyeurs
un jardin
des fleurs
un raton laveur. (Prévert 208)

As stated by Pierre Weisz, in the poem “Tentative...”

C'est encore la technique de l'instantané, mais non plus celle du spontané. Les images se juxtaposent, se bousculent, se multiplient, mais nous sommes loin du réflexe viscéral. (36)

In fact Prévert's poetry has coined an expression which is crucial for my purpose, “inventaire à la Prévert.” This is a list, an heteroclitic enumeration, an inventory that apparently has neither beginning nor ending. This is precisely what the poems I have selected have in common: they create an “énumération burlesque d'éléments sans rapport entre eux, dans un but poétique ou ludique” (*Dictionnaires*). Even though they are very similar Spitzer's chaotic enumeration, these examples include a proximity to religious forms such as the litany.

The poem “Tentative...” pays attention to the everyday. It was published as the first poem in the book *Paroles* (1949).⁶ A comment by the publisher stresses this fact by mentioning that the cover in the first edition

was “un graffiti urbain photographié par Brassai et maculé de lettres capitales écarlates peintes à la hâte. Le signal était puissant, choisi: marginal dans la vie et dans les arts” (“*Paroles* de Jacques Prévert”). Other critics emphasized the fact that Prévert was attentive to everyday life. According to Maurice Naudeau, Prévert's popularity was based in his ability to reproduce a down-to-earth “lyrisme de la vie quotidienne.” He is the only poet of the time who can “sans tomber dans le prosaïsme. ... exprimer notre univers matériel, le reconstruire sous nos yeux” (Prévert *Œuvres* 999-1000). It is remarkable what Bataille wrote about Prévert's poetry. He derides pure poetry of the time (Valéry & co.) and defends that in *Paroles* “l'événement est le thème de la poésie” as opposed to a “poésie poétique.” He adds:

Je puis dire aussi de la poésie de Jacques Prévert qu'elle est en même temps la fille et l'amante de l'événement. ‘Elle change. Elle change tout et tout la change. Pas une parcelle immobile, pas de place accordée au repos, au regard en arrière, au *c'est bien ainsi, j'attends la récompense...*’ C'est ce qu'on peut dire de cette poésie, et peut-être aussi est-ce là qu'il faut dire de la poésie entière, qui n'est qu'à la condition de changer. (Prévert *Œuvres* 1007-08)

Another feature of the book is its political commitment, René Laporte wrote an article titled “Gravé sur les murs de tous les jours—Jacques Prévert: *Paroles*,” which pays homage to the front page of the first edition. He sees in *Paroles* “de quoi armer les rêves de toute une génération [...] une poésie de combat, ‘against’ la bêtise, contre les préjugés,” expressing “un état de révolte permanente.” In his mind the book:

aura sur beaucoup de lecteurs l'effet d'une explosion [...] graffiti vengeurs et désespérés" that Prévert, à la pointe du couteau [...] gravait sur les murs de la nuit. (Prévert Œuvres 999-1001)

and that they will make:

l'épopée d'un temps où ce n'est pas toujours très drôle de vivre [...] Prévert ne tire pas ses coups de feu au hasard. Il vise avec soin et il connaît ses cibles. (Prévert Œuvres 999-1001)

The book belongs in the streets, uses plain language and is extremely provocative, incompatible with pure poetry (i.e. Valéry).

The text was extremely popular. André Breton included a large excerpt of it in his 1939 *Anthology of black humor*. Gaëtan Picon stressed his "extraordinaire puissance d'invective et de violence vengeresse." He even compared his attacks to Daumier's drawings (Picon 231). At the time the volume was published, many critics stressed its commitment to social issues. Jean Rougel, for instance wrote:

Toute cette vision poétique de l'univers s'encadre [...] dans une conception très précise des rapports humains. Prévert est solidement révolutionnaire, non par théorie, mais parce qu'il perçoit, avec une sorte d'inafaillible instinct, les mouvements divers de la lutte des classes. (Prévert Œuvres 1000)

Bataille pointed to "le pouvoir d'exprimer comme nul autre [...] les drames et les bonheurs du quotidien" (Prévert Œuvres 1000).

The poem opens on a litany with a list of participants and the proceedings of their actions. From the incipit, Prévert associates in the same information, the bigots, the well off and the nationalists. It can be read as an

ironic pastiche of society journalism, and a pamphlet in which he declares his artistic and social freedom. Every line is filled with political, literary associations. After building his text on appearance–reality antithesis, he may also want to show that we should not rely on the first appearance of the works. He begins by attacking the literature both through writers he loves (Hugo, Baudelaire), and not at all (Peguy). Both the litany and the poem end with the evocation of the sadness in workers' life whose only day off is tempered by the prospect of boring days of work ahead, something one experiments when there is little time to rest and most of the time is devoted to work.

In the poem there is a clear distinction between those who have been invited and those who have not. Prévert takes sides in favor of the have-nots as some sort of vendetta against "Ceux qui pieusement.../ Ceux qui copieusement..." (François 74). Prévert denounces "des profiteurs de 1930, de ceux qui vivent de la patrie, de ceux qui s'engraissent aux dépens du peuple, des heureux du jour" (Prévert Œuvres 1010). In his long enumeration of invited and non invited people to the State dinner Prévert makes a shrewd distinction between both groups with the use of a capitalized "Ceux" or non capitalized, "ceux" in the last part of the poem. There is also a clear distinction between the President's speech and that of the poet. The first one:

parle par des associations d'idées, lieux communs ou réminiscences culturelles éculées. Cette parole, insensée dans son automatisme dérisoire, tourne à vide et ne rencontre que le vide. (Prévert Œuvres 1011)

Whereas the second speaker "[c]'est une parole foudroyante qui fait peur et qui déplaît" (Prévert Œuvres 1011).

Prévert's poem can be read in many ways: as an ironic pastiche of "fait divers" (local news) journalism, a political pamphlet, a declaration of artistic and social conformism, a philosophical poem (Prévert *Œuvres* 1013). It is a poem that can be easily divided in seven sections, which correspond to significant moments of the event:

1. Enumeration of disguised guests arriving to the Elysée Palace.

2. Description of the comic looking 'têtes' of 'grands hommes,' with reminiscences of a carnival situation, the big-heads (*cabezudos* or *capgrossos*). These are figures that feature an oversized, carton-pierre head. The heads are worn with a matching costume.

3. President's speech, where he makes fun of himself and stresses the obvious as he wears a 'sompueuse tête d'œuf de Colomb' that allows him to declare: 'C'était simple, mais il fallait y penser.'

4. Interruption by a little girl: 'la musique s'est calmée et la mère à tête de morte en a profité pour pousser sa petite fille à tête d'orpheline du côté du Président.'

5. Arrival of a man with 'à tête d'homme.' In the middle section a poet who has not been invited to the State dinner, and that interrupts the celebration, creates a situation of terror: 'Mais soudain tous de trembler car un homme avec un tête d'homme est entré, un homme que personne n'avait invité et qui pose doucement sur la table la tête de Louis XVI dans un panier.' He makes a long speech that is interrupted by someone who throws him a carafe and kills him. His speech is a vindication of simple non-duplicitous life.

6. A carafe is launched killing the poet 'avec un tête d'homme.'

7. Beginning of a new day, as a way of asserting that 'life goes on,' but paying attention to inequalities among citizens: 'Le jour se lève, mais le soleil ne brille pour tous...'

In this last section of the poem we reconnect with the first one. As indicated earlier Prévert emphasizes social issues of the day, but he also depicts boredom in minute detail, the foundation of the everyday. Both the first and last section sound as some sort of litany. Life returns to normal, that is to its everyday boredom and routine, with an emphasis on those human beings and the bottom of the social ladder. It is not a coincidence that Prévert in the last section of the poem, consisting of another long enumeration of characters who work (as opposed to the ones in the first section), uses it to assert workers rights, and he does so with lines such as: "ceux qui fabriquent dans les caves les stylos avec lesquels d'autres écriront en plein air que tout va pour le mieux." The everyday work of the poet is consistent with a condemnation of certain ways of life. The days of the week are enumerated in the final verse, a signal to the utmost presence of everydayness. Normal lives are forgotten in the minutiae of not seen characters and jobs, as opposed to the fake world introduced in the first part of the poem.

In a review of the *Highway 61 Revisited* album for *The Daily Telegraph* (1965), Philip Larkin described "Desolation Row" as a "marathon," with an "enchancing tune and mysterious, possibly half-baked words" (151). On the other hand for Dylan's critic and biographer Andy Gill described the song as:

an 11-minute epic of entropy (decline, degradation, decomposition,

breaking down, collapse; disorder, chaos), which takes the form of a Fellini-esque parade of grotesques and oddities featuring a huge cast of iconic characters. (89)

Both critics stress two distinctive characteristics of the song: its chaotic length, and the accumulation of marginal and iconic characters is this “row,” a word in the title that can be read in several ways, most particularly as a number of people or things in a more or less straight line, or a street with a continuous line of houses along one or both of its sides. Desolation can be understood as a state of complete emptiness or destruction. “Desolation Row” can be understood as a counter-culture destination, both a state of mind and a real place. The name could derive from the combination of two titles: Jack Kerouac’s *Desolation Angels* and John Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row*. A friend of Dylan, musician Al Kooper, who played electric guitar on the first recordings of “Desolation Row,” suggested that Desolation Row is in Greenwich Village in New York City, “an area infested with whore houses, sleazy bars and porno supermarkets totally beyond renovation or redemption” (Polizotti 133). Place, emotion and people are crucial in my reading of this text.

Bob Dylan released this epic song in August 1965 as the final piece in the album *Highway 61 Revisited*. Bob Dylan is one of the most significant poets and songwriters of the twentieth century and this piece by itself might be his claim to fame (Gilmour 24). “Desolation Row” is the only acoustic/folk song on the record, a strong departure from Dylan’s earlier albums. It is a song based on depth of metaphor, with carefully structured depth and allusions to real life and fictitious characters. In his day Bob Dylan challenged conventional values and

was perceived as dangerous figure, a leader of the civil rights movement in the US. Similar to what T.S. Eliot did in *The Waste Land*, Bob Dylan refers to a world in disorder. It is not a coincidence that Eliot is one of the poets mentioned in the song. He portrays the state of the world through metaphors, reacting against flawed philosophies such as materialism, religion, or science. Above and beyond an immense pessimism, he claims a new enlightenment and responsiveness, through the use of a number of unrelated sketchy sections where each adds depth to his central theme. Dylan describes negatively what he can see particularly the chaos, corruption and a general feeling of emptiness. By the end of the song he reveals that he is in great contentment in Desolation Row witnessing peacefully all of this destruction. The song was written during the Cold War, at a time of great political upheaval, when young people were beginning to declare their opposition to a worldview and moral principles that they felt were obsolete.

The song is organized in ten stanzas, each one dealing with different personalities and situations. It creates “a kaleidoscopic hodgepodge of elements from this muddled up, truth-seeking, topsy-turvy world that we all pass through on our journeys of life” (Wright). It includes historical characters (Einstein, Nero), biblical (Noah, Cain and Abel), fictional (Ophelia, Romeo, Cinderella), literary (T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound), and some invented ones such as Dr. Filth (Freud?) and his suspicious nurse. One of the clues to read the song may lie in the final stanza, where he refers to a letter. The song is essentially his reaction to a letter that he received from someone who we may infer it is a woman. Stanza 1 focuses on the postcards being sold, which is a reference to an event that occurred in Minnesota, where two black men were lynched and hung, and photographs

of their hanging were put on postcards. The last two lines indicate a location where the voice (and his Lady) is: "As Lady and I look out tonight/ From Desolation Row." Stanza 2 introduces Cinderella and Romeo, mixing two dramatic characters from fairy tales and Shakespeare. She cleans the place: "Is Cinderella sweeping up/ On Desolation Row." Stanza 3 continues the mixing of characters, in this case from biblical figures Cain and Abel (who have been banished to Desolation Row) and the Hunchback of Notre Dame. The Good Samaritan is visiting: "He's going to the carnival tonight/ On Desolation Row." In other stanzas Dylan includes Ophelia (from *Hamlet* or the woman who wrote the letter), Einstein disguised as Robin Hood, "he was famous long ago/ For playing the electric violin/ On Desolation Row." Also appear the Phantom of the Opera and Casanova: "And the Phantom's shouting to skinny girls/ Get Outa Here If You Dont Know/ Casanova is just being punished for going/ To Desolation Row." Stanza 9 includes the Titanic and real-life writers T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound: "Titanic where lovely mermaids flow/ And nobody has to think too much/ About Desolation Row." The final is the most important stanza, and it is separated from the rest of the song by a long harmonica solo. It is where the voice reveals that he received the letter, in which the sender discusses her life, friends, and various circumstances of trivial nature. The voice cannot relate to her because they have come apart and does not recognize anymore people from the past ("All these people that you mention/ Yes, I know them, they're quite lame/ I had to rearrange their faces/ And give them all another name") thus concluding: "Don't send me no more letters no/ Now unless you mail them/ From Desolation Row." This final declaration seems to make very clear that Desolation Row is a metaphorical place, not a physical location.

The song is a powerful mixing of cultural figures, politicians, literary characters, but in the end they all come to the idea of entropy (decline, degradation, decomposition, breaking down, collapse; disorder, chaos). The final letter has been considered a reference to the "Open Letter to Bob Dylan" written by Irwin Silber in *Singout Magazine* condemning Dylan for betraying the left-wing cause (Tuffley). While this reading may be close to the truth, the final stanza is a significant departure from the tone in the rest of the poem. Instead of a mixture of characters and times and situations here there is a reference to time past, to not recognizing or not being close anymore to the sender of that letter. In fact, he begs the sender, who belongs to a past with faces he does not recognize any more, to become a part of Desolation Row, thus making it a very positive place:

Yes, I received your letter yesterday
 (About the time the doorknob broke)
 When you asked how I was doing
 Was that some kind of joke?
 All these people that you mention
 Yes, I know them, they're quite lame
 I had to rearrange their faces
 And give them all another name
 Right now I can't read too good
 Don't send me no more letters, no
 Not unless you mail them
 From Desolation Row

Any listener to the song quickly recognizes the repetition of words from the title in the last verse of every stanza: From/On/Into/To/About Desolation Row. The song makes one think of the Shanghai back alleys that connect lines of depressed two story houses. It is a space in the present without a future, an island, and a sort of echo from a long time gone past. In Dylan's text he takes us a step further in Augé's non-places, constituted by imaginary collage assembled places, where a

confluence of people from different lineages, and entities occur.

In the song, the chaotic enumeration creates a surreal atmosphere related to this unappealing Desolation Row. Dylan claimed that the song:

is a minstrel song through and through. I saw some ragtag minstrel show in blackface at the carnivals when I was growing up, and it had an effect on me, just as much as seeing the lady with four legs. (Gunderson)

The everyday is introduced by the reading of a letter. It makes the surreal collapse and takes us back to reality. By contrast with the bizarre, which is the core of the song, makes everyday life more present. The list of characters that inhabit Desolation Row—that can also be linked to “death row”—may represent an alternate way of looking at the world. They are substitutes for the faces that he does not recognize anymore: “I had to rearrange their faces/ And give them all another name.”

Singer and composer Jaume Sisa struck a gold mine with his 1975 song “Qualsevol nit pot sortir el sol.” It became extremely popular and was instantly perceived as a sort of hymn that encapsulated a moment of profound transformation in Catalonia and Spain. Although some music critics underscored its naïve aspects, others were delighted with the political reading it offered. An early reading of this song stressed one of the main features of it, the fact that it mixes objects and characters, styles and referents which do not allow to configure a stable identity:

amb uns procediments emparentats amb el kitsch, buscant unes formes expressives noves i originals, d'una aparença barroera i fins i tot xarona, gairebé com a resultat de la superació de l'educació sentimental de l'autor

mitjançant uns mètodes clarament revulsius, que guanyen en profunditat. (Garcia-Soler 62)

Mercè Picornell with a keener eye and some distance defines the song in perceptive terms: “aprofita bagatges inconnexos per construir representacions que no són més que collages i simulacres” (215). According to Picornell this mixture should be related to “l'apropiació avantguardista del kitsch que genera una nova sensibilitat moderna: el *camp*” (215). According to Teresa Vilarós this song is a “larga, cálida y triste letanía” (206). She claims that the party has been organized to celebrate the end of Franco's dictatorship and therefore she misses names of left wing characters, authors, or politicians. In her obstinate reading she complains that

los que van llegando no son aquellos que esperábamos encontrar, nombres y personas más o menos comprometidas políticamente con grupos de izquierda y por tanto dispuestas al final de la dictadura. (206)

She even declares that the house where people have been invited to party is a metaphorical representation of Spain. Picornell insightfully corrects her, because it is not a real house, but “la casa imaginària i amb els balcons que apareix recurrentment en les seves cançons” (229).

The song provides a message of hope (“de les tristors en farem fum”), and is a great ode to friendship and to sharing (“només hi faltes tu... tu també pots venir si vols”), and thus it could be read as a sort of chant to hippie and communal living. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is a long poem-song in which Sisa enumerates and mixes up a long list of characters from children's short stories, classic children's literature, folk tradition, film and comics that belong to his

childhood memories shared with listeners of the song. As Sisa himself declared:

Mi casa no existe en la Tierra, o dicho de otro modo, la casa que existe en la Tierra no es exactamente mi casa. La mía es la casa de los sueños, la casa de la poesía, la casa de un ideal abstracto de belleza, de emoción, de alegría, de fiesta. (Paisse)

He combines a fantasy world with reality, enticing the listener to participate in his imaginary party.

If we reorganize the apparently chaotic list of names, we come up with five series of spheres from where the characters come:

Children's stories	Blancaneus, Pulgarcito, Els tres porquets, Peter Pan, Patufet, Pinotxo, Guillem Brown, La caputxeta vermella, llop ferotge.
Popular literature	Sinbad, Ali-Babà, Gulliver, Barbablava, Frankenstein, Dràcula, Tarzan i Chita, Superman, King Kong, Moby Dick.
Cartoons	Tom i Jerry, Bambi, Cocoliso, Popeye.
Comic books characters	Snoopy i el seu ocell, Doña Urraca, Carpanta, Pato Donald, Astèrix, Roberto Alcázar i Pedrín, La família Ulises, Capitán Trueno, Mortadelo i Filemón.
Religious and popular figures	Jaimito, Home llop, Marieta de l'ull viu, Reis Mags d'Orient i el Pare Noel, l'home del sac, ⁷ la dona que ven globus, la bruixa Calixta, Charlot (Charles Chaplin), La Monyos, emperadriu Sissi, Guillem Tell, El caganer, ⁸ Pepa Maca, ⁹ En Pasqual. ¹⁰

The song is witness to Sisa's pseudo surreal approach to reality. After experimenting with rock music and folk groups. "Grup de folk"

imitated singers such as Pete Seeger, Arlo Guthrie, and Bob Dylan. Sisa found an original surrealist way to become a singer and composer (Soldevila 271-72). He defined himself as a "transcantautor galàctic" ("Qualsevol nit pot").

It is very obvious that the song is built around a list. When Sisa wrote the song he started writing a list of characters reminiscent of his childhood readings, but he did not know what to do with all of them. He declared on a TV special devoted to the song: "it seemed a phone book" ("Qualsevol nit pot sortir"). Consequently he decided to invite them to a party and to make groups with the characters. Here we have the two ways of reading the song: children listen to it as a collection of characters that belong to their imaginary world. Adults pay more attention to nostalgia, remembering when they were children, and also in accordance with a hippie mentality, welcoming everybody to the house.

In other similar songs such as "El setè cel" Sisa presents lists of realities. In that song he describes a non-astrological or religious version of the Seven Heavens, the seventh being the ultimate state of bliss, a place that harks back to the days before Copernicus, and exists also in Islamic writings. In "El congrés dels solitaris," establishes lists and categories of lonely people accumulating chaotic and non-related characters: "La vídua del Baró Rampant, la veu de la senyora Francis, / un latin lover un pèl ranci i una lectora de Cioran."¹¹

Sisa's "Qualsevol nit..." epitomizes a common everyday situation: making a list of guests to invite to a dinner/party. In compliance with his "transgalàctic" view of the world, introduces an impossible list of guests and helps the listener of the song recreate a surreal aspect of the everyday where we belong. The song title and the refrain

“Qualsevol nit pot sortir el sol” (“Any night the sun may rise”).

Oh, benvinguts, passeu passeu, ara
ja no hi falta ningú,
o potser sí, ja me n’adono que tan
sols hi faltes tu.
També pots venir si vols, t’esperem,
hi ha lloc per tots.
El temps no compta, ni l’espai,
qualsevol nit pot sortir el sol.

The final stanza announces the sense of inclusion, inviting the listener to be part of the celebration, in a no-time and no-space, where the sun may rise at night.

Singing, signaling

All three song-poems are closely related to moments of decadence and crisis. The three authors use some sort surreal approach to alleviate the situation, and they all make a gifted and obsessive use of enumeration in their compositions. Catalogues are linked to epic rhetorical devices. They are used to enumerate. Catalogues are a truthful literary form that can be found in different eras. In archaic and classical times we find political texts trying to link two registers, always by the same verb:

in the genealogy of gods with the state of affairs in the Theogony or the genealogy of heroines and the actual establishment in the Catalogue of women the verb is ‘giving birth.’ Cities are linked to the Trojan War in the Homeric catalogue of ships, but we can also find small killing catalogues in the Iliad, or argumentation catalogues in Parmenides’ poem ‘On Nature’ or season catalogues in Thucydides. (Steinrück 6)

On the other hand, anti-epic approaches may be associated with the everyday where perpetual change creates sameness, and within this sameness, there is direction, pattern, and constancy.¹² It is a way of stating that in a world of perpetual change, there is an essential constancy of being. In these three poems we can recognize a mixture of Eco’s distinction between the “poetics of everything included,” and the “poetics of the etcetera.” Similar to Proust’s use of the enumeration, they establish relationships and divisions, and this has a therapeutic function.

It is also significant how Prévert, Dylan and Sisa organize the poems. They refuse a feature of advanced societies. According to Eco, in advanced cultures, with a more in-depth and sophisticated knowledge of the world, it is mandatory to describe their surroundings in a hierarchical manner, with a specific form; whereas primitive cultures, having only a vague idea of the universe, will favor the informal list, never finished, never closed, aspiring to infinity. In fact, what cannot be counted, it is if not inexpressible at least not possible to be counted.

Everyday life can be represented as something utterly routinized, static and unresponsive, while at the same time providing pungent insight, startling dynamism and ceaseless creativity. Everyday life integrates a form of “in-depth” reflexivity, which is related to the ability of human beings to adapt to new situations and survive life’s challenges. Concurrently, daily life implies mammoth cross-cultural and historical situations of unpredictability. As observed by sociological approaches, which pay particular attention to ethnographic, empiricist aspects, everyday life is construed as a perpetual and distinctive feature of the social world, and as such it

remains an essentially non-problematic component of social existence (Gouldner). By contrast, other theorists much closer to a humanities approach ponder whether everyday life does have a history intimately related to the dynamics of modernity. It is plagued by abundant contradictions and marked by a considerable degree of internal complexity (Crook).

The three poems analyzed here are written against the grain, opposing the mainstream thinking of the day, based on enumeration chaotically cataloguing, and with perceptual attention to the everyday: class differences and the monotony and beauty of working (Prévert); claiming a place to live (Dylan); enjoying friendship, celebration and happiness as post-hippie values based on a magical childlike world (Sisa). Prévert and Dylan write poems that are extremely provocative and denounce a political and moral status quo at a time of harsh political realities: the rise of communism and fascism, the Vietnam War. "Tentative de description..." opposes the Elysée fake power and regally to that of the lay people. "Desolation Row" shows a back alley, almost a hidden place, filled with celebrities, performing an unusual task that serves as refuge for outcasts. "Qual-sevol nit" legitimizes the party, a special night, mixing a huge collection of comic books, and adolescent novels characters. All three excel with puns and ironic turns. They are not a tedious taxonomy of the everyday but a sort of wake-up call, an invitation to see the everyday under a different perspective. These are long catalogic poems that sing the everyday, signaling alternatives to the world, helping us reassess "le quotidien: ce qu'il y a de plus difficile à découvrir."

Notes

¹ This very teeny selection of poems deals with events in everyday life, parties, and dinners, which are presented as moments of chaos, always introduced from the perspective of chaotic enumeration. Nevertheless it is surprising that three poems in three languages and from rather different historical moments have much in common. One cannot help but think about so many other examples: Apollinaire's "Zone," Joan Salvat-Papasseit's "Tot l'enyor de demà," Rafael Alberti's *Roma peligro para caminantes* ("Si proibisce di buttare inmondezze," "Cuando Roma es cloaca"), and Gonzalo Rojas' "Materia de testamento." In *Orientalism*, Edward Said discusses the nature of scholarship as an instrument of domination. To do so he excoriates scholars of the Middle East for dividing into categories, classifying, indexing, and documenting "everything in sight (and out of sight)" (Said *Orientalism*, 86). The kind of classification I am discussing here proposes a reverse organization of the world, one critical and anti-system, against the grain. Foucault rightfully stated that "no power can be exercised without the extraction, appropriation, distribution or retention of knowledge. On this level, there is not knowledge on one side and society on the other, or science and the state, but only the fundamental forms of knowledge/power" (Foucault, quoted in Sheridan 283).

² For a discussion of the list as a paradigmatic form of non-narrative inscription see Young.

³ Something catalogic is a list or record of items systematically arranged and often including descriptive material. According to the Treccani dictionary:

Forma della poesia epica greca che ha per oggetto l'elencazione di persone o cose pertinenti ai fatti del ciclo epico: il Catalogo delle navi, nel secondo libro dell'Iliade; il Catalogo delle donne nel libro 11 dell'Odissea; il Catalogo delle donne attribuito a Esiodo, in 5 libri, con cui si identificavano le Eee o Eoie, elenco di miti riferiti al nome delle eroine uniti fra

di loro con la formula di transizione o η “o quale.” (Treccani)

⁴ Il y a dans toute énumération deux tentations contradictoires; la première est de TOUT recenser, la seconde d’oublier tout de même quelque chose; la première voudrait clôturer définitivement la question, la seconde la laisser ouverte; entre l’exhaustif et l’inachevé, l’énumération me semble ainsi être, avant toute pensée (et avant tout classement), la marque même de ce besoin de nommer et de réunir sans lequel le monde (“la vie”) resterait pour nous sans repères: il y a des choses différentes qui sont pourtant un peu pareilles; on peut les assembler dans des séries à l’intérieur desquelles il sera possible de les distinguer. (Perec, *Penser/classer* 167)

⁵ It is also worth mentioning Borges’ description of the universe in *El Aleph*:

Arribo, ahora, al inefable centro de mi relato, empieza aquí, mi desesperación de escritor. Todo lenguaje es un alfabeto de símbolos cuyo ejercicio presupone un pasado que los interlocutores comparten; ¿cómo transmitir a los otros el infinito Aleph, que mi temerosa memoria apenas abarca? (...) Por lo demás, el problema central es irresoluble: La enumeración, si quiera parcial, de un conjunto infinito. En ese instante gigantesco, he visto millones de actos deleitables o atroces; ninguno me asombró como el hecho de que todos ocuparan el mismo punto, sin superposición y sin transparencia. Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es. Algo, sin embargo, recogeré. (*El Aleph* 42)

⁶ I am quoting “Tentative de description d’un dîner de têtes à Paris-France” according to the *Pléiade* edition (Prévert Œuvres 3-12). The poem was published for the first time in 1931 in the

journal *Commerce*, edited by Léon-Paul Fargue, Paul Valéry and Valéry Larbaud. Subsequent editions saw the light in 1935, 1946 and 1947. It was Saint John Perse who pushed for the publication of a polemical poem; he had to do some arm-twisting as he explained in a 1949 letter:

un signe de présence de Prévert me ferait vraiment grand plaisir. J’ai aimé ses *Paroles* et je souris encore au souvenir du petit coup d’État qu’il m’avait fallu effectuer à *Commerce*, en 1931, pour imposer son “Dîner de têtes” contre l’avis de mes trois Aînés, les Conseillers en titre. (Là encore, j’imagine, nos pensées secrètement devaient se rejoindre). (Prévert Œuvres 1010)

⁷ The boogeyman, literally “the man with the sack.”

⁸ A scatological Nativity figure.

⁹ Pepa Maca comes from a sardana “La Pepa Maca.”

¹⁰ This character comes from a cuplet, “El vestit d’en Pasqual” and from a comic book character “Pascual criado ideal.”

¹¹ Lists of characters are not alien to pop songs. In a Vinicius de Moraes tune, “Samba da Bênção,” the poet manages to introduce a long list of samba musicians who preceded him and blesses them using a quasi-religious line: “A bênção, Pixinguinha/ Tu que choraste na flauta/ Todas as minhas mágoas de amor/ A bênção, Sinhô, a bênção, Cartola.”

¹² Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* are very different from Homer’s *Odyssey* or *Iliad*. In Ovid’s epic, which lacks both linear narrative and protagonist, inspiration comes from patterns much more fundamental to the human condition than narrative archetypes.

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