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Astrid Lorange, *Eating and Speaking*

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Astrid Lorange's recent publication, *Eating and Speaking*, is an homage to the particular and the multiple. It is also a gripping mode of address, almost an accosting, but not quite. It has something to do with being welcomed and being farewelled in the middle of an event, rather than at either end; this kind of emphasis, this kind of talking to.

The first thing one begins to wonder about is chips, with which the various pieces, piles, stacks, wasps, ants, tiles, teeth, sperm, seeds, cells and swarms are synonymous. Things are being broken up, parcelled out: one is tempted to call this an atomistic collection, atomism and affect. How does one consume? How does one embody the particulate and the many? It seems through keeping one's mouth full while talking.

Certain convulsions, stuffings, splutterings, squelchings and interferences make their presence felt. But Lorange's collection is anything but sinister or rude. The tradition or the mood, to which it stands in an antagonistic relation, is that of the self-congratulatingly obscure, the poet as the creator of a murky and intriguing identity, the dark and perplexing soul. Lorange's poems are about energy rather than identity, about transfers, entertainments, temptations, reproduction, dressing up, chattering, laying out, snatching, giving back. It's about learning manners as though it were the

best thing in the world, and a bit of a joke. And it's about mess: the possibilities of, what mess could be, who makes it, who owns it, in what space; mess and dirt and the travelling groups of which they are a variety.

It is also about surfaces. About the skins and hides and contours of things and about how a surface, that is to say an exterior, can become an inside: what is the relationship between the surface of the inside and contact? How do we and other things touch our insides through eating? How does this transfer of energy relate to the intimacy of the internal, impersonal self, and to finding the right expression? What is an animal's mouth? What kind of animals are we? What is the nature of our exchanges?

Lorange seems to be asking us to imagine a different tradition for consumption. Think about exactly what it means to have a plate of things before you. What kind of relation is this: what am I about to eat? What kind of perceiving is eating, as part of a greeting or as an appetite? How does this moment, this spacing and mixing of matter, propose a connection? Everything is made from everything else, packed full of difference.

Maybe this is updated Baroque. Baroque without its gloomier connotations. I say Baroque because of the swarming discrete events that change relations and re-ornament themselves throughout Lorange's poetry. There are all types of fittings together, shifting relations, containments, bulgings and restings. I say Baroque also because rather than favour the representative function of language, Lorange avidly celebrates its opacity, it's shimmering, expressive affect.

In reading Lorange's collection one imagines a kind of ur-writing, where operations of filtering, selecting, screening, sifting, parsing and arranging are digitally (that is to say indexically and tactfully) involved. Words are nuggets and knuckles of

things that connect in with openings and contours and pockets. One feels themselves being induced into speaking a similar way, singing to themselves, buttering, bobbing like a head on a spring, emphasising, twisting and listing.

These poems take as their object the conditions that make it possible for us to read them, and for writing to be written. In this sense they are modernist in their vocation. But modernism must have a long history. One thinks of the impossible efforts of Leibniz's *characteristica universalis* as much as they do the poetry of Gertrude Stein. One thinks of theories to do with noise and matter and communication and different varieties of being and what sustains them, as taken up in the work of Michel Serres, who features in one of the book's epigraphs.

Perhaps Lorange's poetry can be read as a kind of arithmetic or calculation. Take for example the following sequence in the poem "Wolves are Swarms":

They appear to be fighting, they are swarming up skirts. It's warm up there. The skirts are warm, the whole swarm is equal to faking. Doing faking being warm in faking all the skirts are equal to beauty equal to production equal to representation my hand is up a skirt they appear to be fighting, they are leaning on a swarming, it is warm and they are faking, I just said hand inside skirts swarming, they aren't nothing, they are interference covering leaning...

Ideas pass through suggestive filters. Inputs are not equivalent to outputs. Lorange's poetry is always a kind of listing, but a it is a listing impulse that is elastic, that stretches and then contracts, it is the movement from paradigmatic to syntagmatic relations rather than permanently adopting one or the other.

This flexibility gives Lorange's writing a sense of directness and immediacy, we are always at the cusp of comprehension, never getting too far ahead of ourselves, never witnessing Lorange possess her ideas before they are expressed. Lorange

manages to engage us both at the level of meaning making, and more importantly, or at least more rarely, at the level of expression, that is, where the opacity of the writing plays an integral and active role in the cognitive, affective, compositional process. To be sure, considering the two as separate is always a move of abstraction, but it is a worthwhile distinction to make because the latter is regularly neglected.

Suggesting, as Lorange does in the above excerpt, that “skirts are/ equal to beauty/ equal to production equal to representation...,” enables us to appreciate the idea of things participating in each other’s nature. How the word focus, so often limited to vision as abstract from the causal efficacy of things, might also mean an absorption, a partial consumption, an intermixing: in being beside each other things are connected, they resonate. Skirts are not in service to an idea of the beautiful, but the skirts themselves are partially emphatic with regards to the notion of beauty they produce or create. Representation is not an outside perspective on this process, after the event, but is internal, one element within the event that opens up, consumes, hardens, hangs about, then fades into something else. This is what Lorange enables us to appreciate in the movements of her language, in the internal connectedness instanced between thinking and writing. When she tells us, “I just said hand/ inside skirts swarming”, we catch ourselves in sympathy with the speaking position of the poet, internal to the writing, “I just said,” as though each time one reads and writes this surprise is reactivated.