Notes on Nicholson Baker, *Room Temperature*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

The Idea of Second Rank Artists, and a Connection Between Similes and Autism

In older art history, artists were ranked first, second, third... this common practice in connoisseurship, in art instruction (in the French Academy) and in earlier 20th century art history. The practice has fallen out of use for obvious reasons -- it has no articulated relation with historical meaning, and it is detached from politics, identity, and context -- but it is implicitly a strong presence in the teaching of art and art history, because it helps determine which artists are taught. The same happens in music and literature.

In practical terms, a second-rank artist is one that doesn’t need to be taught or included in a textbook. Such an artist can be pushed out of the curriculum because of lack of space or time. In line with connoisseurial practices, such choices aren’t reasoned: they’re just made. It can be difficult, therefore, to know why certain artists, writers, or composers aren’t in a given textbook or seminar. For me, Nicholson Baker is a good example of the issue. He is, in my reading, a strongly, clearly second-rank author, by which I mean if I had to choose between teaching him and teaching Pynchon, Updike, DeLillo, or Wallace to represent the 1980 and 1990s, I’d reluctantly have to omit Baker. Of course this sounds horrible, but it is the sort of decision that’s made every day in classrooms and by editors, and it’s hardly a slight to say of Baker that he's solidly second-rank: he’ll be there, in every larger anthology and history.

What is it, then, that makes his second-rank status so clear? For me the entire notion of rankings comes up when I am distracted, in my reading, by thinking of the influences that shaped the author’s work. (Same for music and visual art.)

Baker’s influences

Baker’s wonderful book "U and I" gives the most eloquent possible testimony to his permanent state of infatuation with Updike, and to his equally affectionate, but oddly distanced, relation to Nabokov. Both authors are guiding spirits in "Room Temperature" in the literal sense of that expression: I can sometimes see Baker’s sense of them guiding his choices of words and turns of phrase. Updike is certainly the inspiration for "Room Temperature's" fidelity to the most commonplace subjects (the book is about the narrator bottle-feeding his infant daughter).

Other voices also speak over Baker’s shoulder: DeLillo, Pynchon, Barthelme, and further afield Dickinson, Hopkins, Wordsworth, even Tennyson. For me the most intriguing one -- even though I'm fairly certain this wouldn’t have occurred to Baker as he wrote -- is Raymond Roussel, especially the "New Impressions of Africa." Baker's trope of choice is the simile, and his rhetorical device of choice is the anaphora (formulas repeated clause by clause). He strings together similes: this is like this, and like this, and like this. Roussel's poem is the most drastic text I know in this regard: it's pathologically committed to endless, apparently disconnected comparisons. Roussel is present with uncanny exactitude in passages like this, which describes the shape of his baby
daughter's nostril:

"The Bug's nostril had the innocent perfection of a Cheerio... a tiny dry clean salty ring, so small, with the odd but functional smallness of the tires on passenger planes, or of the smooth rim around the pistil of the brass pump head you fitted over a tire's stem valve to inflate it..."

And this passage, describing the sound Bug's nostril makes when the air was released:

"...like the sound strong dogs made as they strained at leashes... or the faint, high, sonar-like suffix of sound that the expensive kind of textured rubber balls added to the prosaic bounce of external impact on concrete..." (p. 39).

All this is compulsively detailed and improbable, like Roussel, and despite its faithful attachment to the products of American manufacturing from the 1950s to the 1980s, it's also persistently faintly surreal.

Similes and Autism

Reviewers have liked to say that Baker's similes provoke a "smile of recognition" (that's from an endorsement on the back cover of my copy), and they do, especially for me: he and I are very close in age, and we spent time in the same parts of the States. I am in that respect his ideal reader, because I recognize every description and allusion in the entire book, from stacked checkers to Bic pen ads to individual diagrams in Time-Life books, and including even a science display he describes in Philadelphia, now long gone. But "recognition" doesn't make me especially happy, and I think I seldom smiled. For me, his allusions and similes are at their best when their precision forces their ordinariness into surrealism, or when they build to unexpected insights rather than connecting dots I hadn't seen were linked. But they don't seem often to do either.

Most of the time his preferred similes are to mechanical operations. I'm sure I'm not the first to say there's an autism about Baker's work. It's a mild autism, as they say: manifesting in a preference for mechanical operations. The most interesting autistic-spectrum quality, however, is the way Baker's narrator is always wondering what his wife Patty thinks of things. A general incapacity to understand people's feelings, coupled with an interest in experimenting to find out what people feel, is also part of autism, and it is happily on display throughout the book, most prominently when she saves some inspection papers he found in a pocket, and makes a mobile out of them to entertain Bug. "She'd saved them! She'd made permanent use of them!" -- has special resonance if it's thought of as part of the narrator's ongoing experiments. (p. 15)

From this perspective, too, the many similes and the recognition (the safety) they elicit are like millions of madeleines: they answer Proust's fetishism with a democratic nostalgia, which is nevertheless autistic in its potentially endlessness. Everything, eventually, will become an object of nostalgia: speaking of the latches that still close tray tables on airlines, he writes: "I felt pity and shame for American plane engineers who had failed to see that thirty years of improvements in the on/off switch, the suitcase closure, the cassette ejection system, the umbrella lock, the calculator button... were demanding that we dig deeper and find some subtler sort of click or even a clickless but convincing thumplet." (p. 46)

The best passage in the book, for me, is one toward the end in which he wonders why he makes a certain breathing sound when he smiles in bed, but not when he's up, and he suddenly concludes with an insight that he prints all in italics. It's homey, ordinary, and domestic, like everything else in the book, but it's also a bit fanatical, a little touched, and that's what makes it different than the many hundreds of other comparisons out of which the thought of the book is painstakingly constructed:

"No, the explanation had to be that smiles became more audible only at bedtime because toothpaste altered the chemical characteristics of one's saliva in such a way that encouraged an unusually loud, sticky effervescence along the gum line." (p. 106.)