"We Ought…to Take Our Bearings": The Topographies of Georges Perec

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Abstract
French writer Georges Perec compiled "Species of Spaces" in the study of his flat at 18 Rue de L'Assomption in Paris. Spatial concepts are integral to Perec's work, which centers on the construction of topographies: as a pedestrian that of the city in "An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris," a memory project using an itinerary that required him to return and repeat their descriptions at regular intervals to preserve them for a later experience; as an architect that of the fictional apartment building at 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier in *Life. A User's Manual*, a construction project that reverberates with the interrelated life stories of the building's past and present inhabitants using a literary constraint that regulates the reappearance of characters and recurrence of their flats' descriptions; and, finally, as sorter and organizer that of an accountancy project in "Think/Classify" and "The Infra-Ordinary" using an inventory to order objects of his private living space to retreat to and reiterate so that in his description they are arranged and returned to their proper place. These are the coordinates at the center of Perec's topographies of the habitual, the commonplace, the unassuming, and he favors the unpretentious list to gather objects or thoughts, stack them up, and tap down their affinities and alliances in the process. How fitting, then, that until he received the Prix Médicis, Georges Perec worked as an archivist and safeguarded, in its rightful place, the present for the future.

Keywords: the inventory, the itinerary, the ordinary

Introduction

When French writer Georges Perec compiled "Species of Spaces" at the writing desk in his study at 18 Rue de l'Assomption in Paris, he outlined in it a topography project called "Places": "In 1969, I chose, in Paris, twelve places (streets, squares…an arcade), where I had either lived or else was attached to by particular memories. I have undertaken to write a description of two of these places each month. One of these descriptions is written on the spot and is meant to be as neutral as possible. Sitting in a café or walking in the street, notebook and pen in hand, I do my best to describe the houses, the shops and the people that I come across…and in a general way, all the details that attract my eye. The other description is written somewhere other than the place itself. I then do my best to describe it from memory, to evoke all the memories that come to me concerning it….Once these descriptions are finished, I slip them into an envelope….I begin these descriptions over again each year….This undertaking, not so dissimilar in principle from a 'time capsule', will thus last for twelve years, until all the places have been described twice twelve times….What I hope for from it…is nothing other than the record of a threefold experience of ageing: of the places themselves, of my memories, and of my writing" (Perec, 1974/1997, pp. 55-56). It is a long way--on foot--from his flat in the 16th to Place St. Sulpice in the 6th arrondissement, but Perec works the pavement, settles in Café de la Place Saint-Sulpice and stays to take, as it were, a dictation from the location: he counts buses, as he says, "probably because they're recognizable and regular" (Perec, 2010, p. 22), notices that "[m]ost people are using at least one hand: they're holding a bag, a briefcase, a shopping bag, a cane, a leach with a dog at the end, a child's hand" (Perec, 2010, p. 8), or observes "[a] man who has just bought a pack of Winstons and a pack of Gitanes [and] tears off the…cellophane…envelope of the pack of Winstons" (Perec, 2010, p. 36). Perec halts and writes about the elemental "that which is generally not taken note of…that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds" (Perec, 2010, p. 3), and then calls us to do what is so plain to see: look and register your unassuming surroundings at any given moment, when we move along "the corridors of the…Métro" (Perec, 1974/1997, p. 5), or "open doors [or] go down staircases" (Perec, 1973/1997, p. 206), in whatever place "the everydayness of life comes to be inscribed" (Perec, 1974/1997, p. 12). Whether they be paths of habit or urgency, movement on foot "is a spatial acting-out of…place" (Certeau, p. 98), and so you might as well walk your city, as Perec suggests, "by preparing a careful, systematic itinerary….for example, find a route that would cross Paris from one side to the other taking only streets beginning with the letter C" (Perec, 1974/1997, p.63), or, alternatively, "[b]y using maps…work out an itinerary that would enable you to take every bus in the capital one after the other" (Perec, 1974/1997, p. 66) and in doing so meet the "element of duty in any itinerary, of a command obeyed and injunction satisfied" (Harbison, p. 128).

In this spirit, Perec charges himself with a novel, and he places the apartment building at the center of *Life. A User's Manual* at the fictional address 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier and maps the novel on "a rudimentary architecture" (Burgelin, p. 14), whose writing follows an extraordinary geometric schedule: "He conceive[s] the apartment building…as a grid of ten squares by ten….Using an exercise derived from the game of chess, Perec determine[s] the order in which he [i]s to describe the various apartments and their occupants" (Motte, p. 829); in other words, he employs a literary constraint that prescribes "[t]he spatial structure of events and the people that

inhabit them" (Emerson, p. 92), only to destabilize the construct by skillfully sidestepping the one-hundredth tabulated chapter in the end. Each of these is named after its tenant(s), whose rooms and their contents are then meticulously, even painstakingly described. And neither does Perec slight the communal spaces of cellar, foyer, lift, and staircase. To the latter, "where the life of the building regularly and distantly resounds" (Perec, 1987, p.3), Perec devotes twelve chapters, "[f]or all that passes, passes by the stairs, and all that comes, comes by the stairs: letters, announcements of births, marriages, and deaths, furniture brought in or taken out by removers, the doctor called in an emergency, the traveller returning from a long voyage" (Perec, 1987, p. 3). It is here that the grandson of Madame de Beaumont's piano-tuner patiently bides his time, as do all the objects lost and found there over the years; for example, "a radio alarm clock obviously destined for the mender's" (Perec, 1987, p.327), "a traveling chess-set, in synthetic leather, with magnetic pieces" (Perec, 1987, p. 328), or "a weekly season ticket for the inner circle (PC) rail line" (Perec, 1987, p. 466), and so it must be the space "that belongs to all and no one" (Perec, 1987, p. 3) where the past and present tenants' intertwined stories begin to unfold: between 1833, the birth of James Sherwood, a sepia-tint photograph of whom hangs in the entrance hall, and 1975, or, more precisely, eight p.m. on June 23rd, 1975, the moment when tenant (and man of leisure) Percival Bartlebooth dies, and "when every [other] character is situated, stationary, within various parts of the building, with the exception of [painter Serge] Valène who slowly climbs the stairs" (Emerson, p. 95). For him, the staircase exudes "on each floor…an…impalpable…memory" (Perec, 1987, pp. 61-62), for "he has lived in the building longer than anyone else" (Perec, 1987, p. 60) but dies only a few weeks after Bartlebooth "during the mid-August bank holiday. It was nearly a month since he had left his room" (Perec, 1987, p. 499), and it was Mademoiselle Crespi who found him there: "He was resting on his bed, fully dressed, peaceful and puffy, with his arms crossed on his chest. A large square canvas with sides over six feet long stood by the window, halving the small area of the maid's room in which he had spent the largest part of his life. The canvas was practically blank: a few charcoal lines had been carefully drawn, dividing it up into regular square boxes, the sketch of a cross-section of a block of flats which no figure, now, would ever come to inhabit" (Perec, 1987, p. 500). Valène had long listened for the resounding echoes of the building and intended to paint it with its façade removed in order to follow the space to its "infinite depths" (Perec, 1987, p. 227), but manages no more than a numbered record of "the long procession of his characters with their stories, their pasts, their legends" (Perec, 1987, p. 228), concluding with "# 179 Lonely Valène putting every bit of the block onto his canvas" (Perec, 1987, p.233). We are offered a list in place of a painting and a book in place of a building, a book with a fifty-eight page index, followed by a nine page chronology, and concluding with an "*Alphabetical Checklist of Some of the Stories Narrated in this Manual*" (Perec, 1987, p. 575). Sorted lists, such as these, which come "in tidily aligned rows" (Adair, p. 180) of "discrete" (Adair, p.186), entries are nominal, more often than not, and, without so much as a conjunction to join them, the embodiment of a persistent and unperturbable accountancy of words.

Most of the textual reckoning with *Life. A User's Manual* happens at Perec's writing desk in his flat at 13 Rue Linné. In a way, Perec debunks architecture in "Species of Spaces," when he observes: "Apartments are built by architects who have very precise ideas of what an entrance-hall, a sitting room (living room, reception room), a parents' bedroom, a child's room, a maid's room, a box-room, a kitchen, and a

bathroom ought to be like. To start with, however, all rooms are alike, more or less…they're never anything more than a sort of cube, or let's say a rectangular parallelepiped. They always have at least one door and also, quite often, a window. They're heated, let's say by a radiator, and fitted with one or two power points….In sum, a room is a fairly malleable space" (Perec, 1974/1997, p. 28), but this simple fact takes us to task: What does it mean to inhabit a room? How do we make it our own? When do we know we belong there? Perec finds that when "[t]he passage of time…leaves behind a residue that accumulates: photographs, drawings, the corpses of long since dried-up felt-pens…cigar wrappers…erasers, postcards, books, dust and knickknacks" (Perec, 1974/1997, pp. 24-25). Indeed, Perec "can attempt to exhaust the space of a desk at the moment that he is using it" (Clemens, p.14). One of his occasional pieces offers proof: "There are a lot of objects on my work-table. The oldest no doubt is my pen; the most recent is a small round ashtray that I bought last week. It's of white ceramic and the scene on it shows the war memorial in Beirut (from the 1914 war, I presume, not yet the one that's breaking out now)" (Perec, 1976/1997, p. 140). But regardless of where they have been set, objects are bound to be pushed around or scattered about, and so require regular picking up. For Perec, "[t]his consists of putting all the objects somewhere else and replacing them one by one. I wipe the glass table with a duster (sometimes soaked in a special product) and do the same with each object. The problem is then to decide whether a particular object should or should not be on the table (next a place has to be found for it, but usually that isn't difficult)….I…cling on to these activities of withdrawal: tidying, sorting, setting in order" (Perec, 1976/1997, p. 140). Perec wants for an intimate encounter with things, because it is in these that "the life of a flat is…most faithfully encapsulated" (Perec, 1987, p. 128): "at this precise moment, there are three ashtrays on my work-table, that is, two surplus ones which are as it happens empty; one is the war memorial, acquired very recently; the other, which shows a charming view of the roofs of the town of Ingolstadt, has just been stuck together again. The one in use has a black plastic body and a white perforated metal lid. As I look at them, and describe them, I realize in any case that they are not among my current favourites. The war memorial is definitely too small to be anything more than an ashtray for mealtimes, Ingolstadt is very fragile, and as for the black one with the lid, the cigarettes I throw away in it go on smoldering forever" (Perec, 1976/1997, p. 142). Standing on the side of things, such things you can reach your hand out for, urges you to let them stay, attach the memories they seize, and, in the course of time, show their inner strength. It is true, Perec wanted to write "the history of some of the objects that are on my work-table" (Perec, 1976/1997, p. 143), but then "turn[s]…to start off again" (Perec, 1974/1997, p. 81) with an adjacent space from a different angle, when he moves on to handle his books, whose arrangement presents the greater spatial challenge. Like the objects on his work-table, they, too, "are not dispersed but assembled" (Perec, 1978/1997, p.146) and when space has been secured, "*[r]ooms where books may be put"* and *"[p]laces in a room where books can be arranged"* (Perec, 1978/1997, p. 147), when they sit beside each other, spine next to spine, the need for order imposes itself: "ordered alphabetically, ordered by continent or country, ordered by colour, ordered by date of acquisition, ordered by date of publication, ordered by format, ordered by genre, ordered by major periods of literary history, ordered by language, ordered by priority for future reading, ordered by binding, ordered by series. None of these classifications is satisfactory by itself" (Perec, 1978/1997, pp. 148-149); however, it is only the first, alphabetical order, though arbitrary in itself, that no one ever calls into question.

Conclusion

All the while, at 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier, Albert Cinoc pursues an ancillary and peculiar occupation. "As he said of himself, he was a 'word-killer': he worked at keeping Larousse dictionaries up to date" (Perec, 1987, p. 287/288). "Cinoc read slowly and copied down rare words; gradually his plan began to take shape, and he decided to compile a great dictionary of forgotten words" (Perec, 1987, p. 289-290). As so many other things, words are summoned, assembled, and cited in remembrance of their iterability, and Cinoc's dictionary provides them with a new address. As for himself, he had "moved into Rue Simon-Crubellier in 1947, a few months after the death of Hélène Brodin-Gratiolet, whose flat he took over. He provided the inhabitants of the building, and especially Madame Claveau, with an immediate, difficult problem: How was his name to be pronounced? Obviously the concierge didn't dare address him as "Nutcase" by pronouncing the name 'Sinok'. She questioned Valène, who suggested 'Cinosh', Winckler, who was for 'Chinoch', Morellet, who inclined towards 'Sinot', Mademoiselle Crespi, who proposed 'Chinoss', François Gratiolet, who prescribed 'Tsinoc', and finally Monsieur Echard, as a librarian well versed in recondite spellings and the appropriate ways of uttering them, demonstrated that…there was a case for choosing from amongst…twenty pronunciations….As a result of which, a delegation went to ask the principal person concerned, who replied that he didn't know himself which was the most proper way of pronouncing his name. His family's original surname, the one which his great-grandfather…had purchased officially from the Registry Office of the County of Krakow, was Kleinhof" (Perec, 1987, p. 286-287). The name is accorded and inscribed at its birthplace, and "[t]his is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page" (Perec, 1974/1997, p.13), and in due course, writing becomes a dwelling, an elemental framework "with an up and a down, a left and a right, an in front and a behind, a near and a far" (Perec, 1974/1997, p. 81). When, in "Species of Spaces," Perec writes his way from "the page" to "the world," he reminds us that "the earth is a form of writing, a *geography* of which we had forgotten that we ourselves are the authors" (Perec, 1974/1997, p. 79). From the angle we take walking the corridor of our metro stop to the elbow room we need sitting at our work-table, "[n]ow and again…we ought to ask ourselves where exactly we are, to take our bearings" (Perec, 1974/1997, p. 83) about the spaces we inhabit and with the words we have on hand in order to acknowledge that, indeed, "we are here" (Perec, 1974/1997, p.5) and to remember that, as Perec lays out, "[t]o live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself" (Perec, 1974/1997, p. 6).

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